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## BUILDING A STRONG CHICANA IDENTITY: YOUNG ADULT CHICANA LITERATURE

Rocio Janet Garcia  
*California State University - San Bernardino*

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YOUNG ADULT CHICANA LITERATURE

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A Thesis  
Presented to the  
Faculty of  
California State University,  
San Bernardino

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In Partial Fulfillment  
of the Requirements for the Degree  
Master of Arts  
in  
English Composition

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by  
Rocio Janet Garcia  
December 2018

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Approved by:

Yumi Pak, Committee Chair, English

Jason Magabo Perez, Committee Member

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## ABSTRACT

This thesis considers the use of Young Adult Chicana Literature in the classroom to help young Chicanas work through their process of finding their identities. It begins by making the case that Chicana identities are complex because of their intersectional borderland positioning between Mexican and U.S. American cultures, which makes the identity formation process more difficult for them than others. By relating these complex issues facing young Chicanas to literature that is more relevant to them and their struggles, it is argued that teachers can help ease some of the tensions that exist within their students and help them work more easily through the identity issues they may be facing.

This text engages in an analysis of two pieces of Young Adult Chicana Literature, Sandra Cisneros' *The House on Mango Street* and Isabel Quintero's *Gabi, A Girl in Pieces*, through the critical lens of *autohistoria-teoría* to argue that because the forms of these novels follow this pattern of theorizing through experience and reflection, they can be of critical assistance in helping young Chicanas work through their own experiences and issues.

Finally, this thesis moves into my own *autohistoria-teoría* in which I reflect on my own experiences with the identity formation process and how recognition of myself in literature played a critical role in my own process, and how the overwhelming lack of this type of literature stunted my identity formation process.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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Last, but definitely not least, I want to acknowledge my parents and family; Justo y Griselda Alvarez, *ustedes siempre han creído en mí y han querido lo mejor para mí. Gracias por todo su apoyo y amor; espero que se sientan muy orgullosos de mí. Aunque este título sea mío en papel, el título les pertenece a ustedes también por a verme apoyado durante toda mi vida. Los quiero mucho.* To my siblings, Yadira, Chris, Daisy, and Delia, thank you for always believing in me. It is your belief in me and my abilities that has pushed me this far and will continue to push me in my future endeavors.

## DEDICATION

This thesis is dedicated first and foremost to the *Mexicanas* who made it possible for me to pursue this project in the first place. *Nina Micaela Gonzalez y Nina Juana Gonzalez, les dedico este trabajo porque por sus esfuerzos con sus hijos y con migo fue posible que yo pude completar mi estudio y este trabajo. Gracias por ser las mujeres fuertes que yo conozco y admiro.*

I also dedicate this thesis to my students who inspired this project and push me to be the best I can be every day. You all inspire me to try my hardest to make a difference and to teach my heart out every chance that I get. In creating this project I hope that it will begin to make a difference in our education system that will lead to a more inclusive curriculum that does not ignore or erase our histories. My students, in turn, I hope I have inspired you to make your voice heard, however you choose, in order to build a more open and inclusive community. Remember to always be your best and never forget your roots.

*Con mucho amor / With much love,*

Mrs. Rocio Janet Garcia

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## CHAPTER ONE

### INTRODUCTION: *EL POR QUÉ* /THE WHY

#### Our Histories Help Define Our Futures

I understand why some of us have trouble being proud of our heritage.

We've grown up in an America that sees us in terms of negative stereotypes or doesn't see us at all. And it doesn't matter how much our families hammer on about "ethnic pride" either. At some point or another we start to doubt that our heritage is all that great. (Guzman 8)

Adolescence is a time of inner turmoil and questioning. It is a time for questioning and figuring out who one wants to be and how best to pursue and project that image. From personal experience, and from my work as a high school teacher working with at-risk minority students, many of who are of Mexican and/or other Latino descents, I have seen a common thread weaving through our stories as we each grapple with this thing called "identity." I see that we have struggled with situating ourselves within our families and communities, as well as in larger U.S. society as a whole. We have often questioned our role(s) as daughters in Latina/o families, as girls or young women in our schools and classrooms, and within the larger framework of the United States.

While the political and extrajudicial oppression of people of color is deeply rooted in the history of our country, over the past few years the political representations of immigration and immigrants have unearthed an overwhelming

amount of discrimination and hate, especially toward those immigrants coming from Mexico. The rhetoric used by the current United States president when referring to Mexican immigrants as people “that have lots of problems...bringing drugs,...crime. They’re rapists. And some, I assume, are good people” (Trump) and when objectifying women by continually referring to them with words like “ugly,” “fat,” or “bimbo,” has inspired many of my students to dig deeper into who they are as individuals in order to more clearly vocalize their perspectives surrounding the politics of race and gender in our society in hopes of wiping out discrimination and oppression and creating positive change in their community. These discriminatory statements and political movements have sprouted a new quest for identity within the young women with whom I work in order to push back against the racist and misogynist rhetoric that attack their identities in order to reclaim what is rightfully theirs to define. While this type of search for identity has been an ongoing struggle and process for individuals throughout history, it has been revitalized and reframed in recent years to include a more intersectional identity politics. It is because of this political search for personal identity that I feel a great sense of duty to help my students reach a sense of clarity about their positioning in this world. As an educator, my commitment is not only to teach my students English; I also have a pedagogical commitment to prepare my students for the world they experience outside of the confines of our school, and to empower them to exercise their political rights in this country.

In this thesis, I focus on two major identity categories: Chicana and adolescent. I choose to focus on Chicana identity (i.e. Mexican-American and feminine), not only because it is an identity category that I, myself, have recently come to claim as part of my own identity, but also because as an educator, I work to serve as an example of what this identity category could embody for my adolescent students. Similarly, I choose to focus on adolescent identity, because having journeyed through this identity building period myself, I recognize the pain, confusion and discomfort associated with it, and given that my students are generally between the ages of twelve and eighteen, I work to help ease some of these unsettling feelings and emotions through our engagement with the content we cover.

While I do focus on these two identity categories, I do not mean to create exclusionary binaries through my work; by “Chicana” I do not mean to suggest that I only refer to biologically female and cis-gendered individuals, but really anyone who identifies Chicana as a political or ideological part of their identity; similarly, by adolescent, I do not mean to exclude anyone who may not meet the limited age constraints of this categorization, but rather I mean to include anyone who identifies oneself as an adolescent. Just as this thesis focuses on the concept of identity as an individualized yet intersectional and ongoing process, the identities presented within it should also be considered as such. Here, I discuss identity in similar terms as Stuart Hall, a Jamaican-born Black British cultural theorist, who asserts that “identities are never completed, never finished;

that they are always as subjectivity itself is, in process” (Hall 47); by regarding identities as always being in flux because they are always becoming and never static, always multiple, the complexity of Chicana identities is and always will be a complex process of becoming and never the simple action of being. In addition to this, Hall argues that our identities are constructs created by the histories that come before us, and that we accept and reject those histories that we deem necessary as we work toward creating ourselves; in acknowledging that identities are constructed through the histories and societies that create our subjectivity, we are empowered to question and resist the oppressions that may be ingrained within them.

Generally speaking, adolescence is a time of identity searching through which role models serve as guides to figure out acceptable ways of being and acting in our society. For Chicanas, however, it’s not always as simple as turning to their role models for guidance because they don’t always have role models available to turn to. Because of this, literature that highlights their situations, perspectives, and identities is key to helping them come to terms with issues they may be facing. While it is important that Chicanas have access to this genre of literature in the classroom, it should be noted that mere representation is not the solution to this issue; yes, it would help increase the relatability of literature for this demographic of students, but the larger goal of purposefully using Young Adult Chicana Literature in the classroom is to decolonize the current curricula. In her article, “Ethnic Identity and Chicano Literature: How Ethnicity Affects Reading

and Reading Affects Ethnic Consciousness” (2005), Jessica M. Vasquez argues that “reading possesses the potential for self-discovery,” in that it gives us a chance to learn about ourselves while learning about the text (Vasquez 905). While this is undoubtedly one of my favorite effects of reading literature, my experiences in public education have taught me that most assigned readings are usually comprised of canonical texts—by which I mean texts largely written by white American men—which do not necessarily highlight the experiences of marginalized individuals. In effect, this creates a conflict between assigned literatures and students who identify as minorities because the potential for self-discovery is not wholly present for them. In this sense, the United States education system remains largely (if not entirely) colonized, because it defaults to incorporating white perspectives and literatures while ignoring the perspectives of minorities and people of color or merely including them for inclusion’s sake; these literary selections may fall into the genre of postcolonial literature, but that does not mean that it is no longer colonized. It is not enough for literature curricula to be postcolonial, because it necessarily needs to be decolonized; literature curricula needs to be, at its core, about mentally and culturally liberating from colonization and its effects. By overwhelmingly selecting a large body of texts written by white men over literatures written by women, people of color, or both, our education system perpetuates the oppressive perspectives of colonization.

Reflecting on these experiences, I see the critical impact that Young Adult Chicana Literature could have had on my own adolescent identity formation

process, which pushes me to include literature about marginalized characters within the English classes that I teach. For the purposes of this project, Young Adult Chicana Literature is defined as literary writing intended for young adult Chicana, or Mexican-American, readers that have been written by Chicana authors (e.g. *The House on Mango Street*, by Sandra Cisneros). The question may arise about what the difference between Chicana/o and Mexican-American is; according to the entry “Chicana, Chicano, Chican@, and Chicanx” by Sheila Marie Contreras in the book, *Keywords for Latina/o Studies* (2017), in most cases, “Chicana and Chicano studies scholars tend to use ‘Mexican American’ and ‘Chicana/Chicano’ interchangeably,” but she goes on to distinguish a Chicana/o from a Mexican-American as someone who is aware of the histories of their blended cultures (Contreras 32). In addition to this, Contreras goes on to argue that many Mexican-Americans do not become Chicanas/os until they reach college, where they begin to gain awareness of the politicization of their cultural positioning and learn more about the realities of our histories (Contreras 33).

This distinction is important to this project, because it highlights yet another issue that Chicanas struggle with: identifying as Chicana or Mexican-American, or a combination of the two. While it is probably safe to say that many young Chicanas have not been educated about their histories in through their formal education in United States schools, for it is true that many aspects of their Mexican histories are not touched upon in these classrooms, I will regardless

refer to them as Chicanas throughout this project, for formal institutional education is not the only form of education available, and they may have been educated on such matters in their homes and communities by their parents, grandparents, and other forms of communities.

Here, it is also important to discuss the alternative spellings of “Chican@” and “Chicanx” and their particular significance for this community. The term “Chican@,” is most simply defined as a “part aesthetic response to the cumbersome punctuation of [Chicano/a], part recognition of emergent digital identities, and part as an instance of queering or making queer” (Contreras 35). “Chicanx,” however, is a bit more complicated; here, the “x” signifies fluidity and mobility, setting aside the conventions of ideological, philosophical, and medical binaries that assign humans to one gender identity out of two when they are born...[it] is nonbinary; it acknowledges self-determinations that refuse immovable assignments of identity” (Contreras 35). While both of these terms would serve my project well, I choose to use the traditional spelling of “Chicana” in order to signify that our work and our study has always already been queer because of our unique borderland positioning that affords us the ability to view the world differently and question its oppressive structures. I do not mean to delegitimize either of these two terms, but rather, I aim to re-inscribe in “Chicana” the power afforded to it through its pain and suffering in order to lead us to new ways of knowing.

In preparing for this project, it became clear that there is a scarcity of scholarship that analyzes the importance of including the specific genre of Young Adult Chicana Literature in English classrooms to aid in the formation of Chicana identities. While scholarship in this domain has not been abundant, there are some pieces that, while not directly linked to this project, are relevant to different focuses of it that are able to be blended together, much like Chicana identities, to create a unified understanding of Young Adult Chicana Literature's role in the classroom. In this thesis I argue for the decolonization of our schools' literary curriculum and purposeful inclusion of Young Adult Chicana Literature in classrooms in order to help students more clearly develop their own identities.

The theoretical and intellectual frameworks of women of color feminisms, and Chicana feminism specifically, provide the backbone of this project. What propels my argument is the concept of *autohistoria-teoría* (literally "autohistory-theory"), which pushes writers into a space of theorizing through experience and reflection. In her book, *Light in the Dark/Luz En Lo Oscuro: Rewriting Identity, Spirituality, Reality* (2015), Gloria Anzaldúa argues that writing is a reflective and creational process that allows writers to transcend boundaries and create new meaning for themselves and their readers; through *autohistoria-teoría*, which she describes as "a way of making knowledge, meaning, and identity through self-inscriptions," Anzaldúa suggests that Chicanas have a special borderland positioning that allows them to be able to theorize the larger concepts at hand by reflecting on the personal (Light 6). She argues that *autohistoria* and *autohistoria-*

*teoría* are useful meaning, knowledge, and identity making strategies that use personal reflection coupled with theoretical frameworks in order to push for a writing genre that highlights minority awareness but does not conform to or reproduce dominant structures (i.e. those of colonization). A key aspect of *autohistoria-teoría* is that it considers “various aspects of craft: narrative technique, use of language—when Spanish is appropriate, theoretical language pertinent, vernacular language suitable” (Light 6). What Anzaldúa argues by presenting this concept is that it is through narrative forms (i.e. the *autohistoria*) that we are able to theorize (i.e. the *teoría*) the world around us and come to understand and explore truth.

Theory does not need to come in a purely academic package riddled with the jargon of the academy and printed in theoretical journals; theory takes many forms, and the theory of Chicanas and other marginalized groups tends to come in forms not recognized as theory. Similarly, in her essay “The Race for Theory” published in Anzaldúa’s edited collection, *Making Face, Making Soul/Haciendo Caras: Creative and Critical Perspectives by Feminists of Color* (1990), Black Studies scholar Barbara Christian argues that:

people of color have always theorized--but in forms quite different from the Western form of abstract logic...[it] is often in narrative forms, in the stories we create, in riddles and proverbs, in the play with language, because dynamic rather than fixed ideas seem more to our liking. (Making Face 336)

In acknowledging the narrative work that these groups of individuals have always done and re-claiming it as theorizing, Anzaldúa and Christian along with women of color feminisms complicate the meaning of “theory,” while simultaneously giving these thinkers a power that has historically been denied to them; they empower them the with ability to theorize their own ways of being in the world that are pertinent to them and their communities.

First, in the chapter, “Young Adult Chicana Literature and Building Identities,” I critically engage with Chicana Feminist Theory and Anzaldúa’s description of borderland identities to argue that this type of struggle to find one’s own identities is familiar to Chicanas and plays a critical role in decolonizing literary curriculum. In addition to this, I will argue that introducing young Chicanas to literary texts that exemplify this struggle can help them understand their special positioning in society and their multifaceted and interwoven identities. By viewing both Chicana identities and Chicana literature as these complex intersectional and interdisciplinary concepts and frameworks of analysis, we are able to understand the deeper struggles that Chicanas constantly face.

Next, in the chapter, “Young Adult Chicana Literature as Autohistoria,” I will analyze two pieces of literature from this genre in terms of the qualities associated with *autohistoria* and *autohistoria-teoría* in order to produce a more critical understanding of the importance of this type of literature and how it can be used in the classroom to decolonize the teaching of literature in United States English classes. I will discuss the affordances that emerge from analyzing *The*

*House on Mango Street* by Sandra Cisneros and *Gabi, A Girl in Pieces* by Isabel Quintero through the lens of *autohistoria-teoría*, and how these analyses allow for an introspective critique of Chicana identities and the daily roles Chicanas play in their varied groups and communities.

Finally, in the chapter, “Chicana Reflections,” I offer a form of Christian’s theorizing by coupling theory with my personal experiences as a Chicana adolescent, student, teacher, scholar, etc., I will reflect on my struggles with identity formation, and discuss the important roles that education and literature have played, and continue to play, in helping me make meaning out of these struggles; more importantly, I will discuss the lack of Young Adult Chicana Literature in my English/Literature classes and how it negatively affected my identity creation process since I did not have any relatable materials to refer to. As a Chicana whose life experiences have been shaped by her multifaceted identities, I write my *autohistoria-teoría* to theorize Young Adult Chicana Literature’s special positioning in literature classrooms as a key component in breaking through the wall of colonization in our literature curriculum, as well as in young Chicanas’ search for identities and the identity building process.

Overall, this project aims to discuss some of the various aspects that are at play within Chicanas’ search for identities and how Young Adult Chicana Literature can be used to help these Chicana Adolescents navigate through their tumultuous identity searching processes. By reading Young Adult Chicana Literature as *autohistoria* and *autohistoria-teoría*, these texts become guides for

young Chicanas that exemplify the identity searching process and ease the readers' own tensions and issues with identity formation. By reading and teaching Young Adult Chicana Literature through this lens, we allow it to have the deeper significance it was meant to have, and we empower our Chicana students with the ability to strengthen their confidence and build stronger foundations for their identities. So, if you ask, *¿Por qué es importante que hagamos esto?* Why is it important that we do this? The answer is simple: for our future as Chicanas.

## CHAPTER TWO

### YOUNG ADULT CHICANA LITERATURE AND IDENTITIES

#### Identity Building through Reading and Engaging

“Since adolescence is marked by the storm and stress of the never-ending quest for self-understanding, studying identity issues as they relate to young adult literature is most appropriate. “(Kaplan xix)

Identifying as a Mexican-American is complex for a variety of reasons. Not only does identifying as “Mexican” suggest already mixed or *mestiza* identities because of Mexico’s history of conquest, but identifying as “American” similarly brings up ideas of meshing cultures and identities together through the United States’ histories of immigration, expansion, and chattel slavery. These two always already blended nationalities blend with each other to create a so-called singular “Mexican-American” identity; the place where this identity category is created is a place of discomfort, to say the least, because within this borderland lie the troubled histories of colonization, discrimination, and hate that exist between the United States and Mexico. Anzaldúa’s definition of a borderland as a “vague and undetermined place created by the emotional residue of an unnatural boundary” (*Borderlands* 25) is helpful to understanding the unnatural boundaries that exist within the concepts of “Mexican-American” or “Chicana” as being both “American” and “Mexican,” and what it means to identify with both groups simultaneously. The struggle of embodying both of these always already

blended cultural identities while also struggling with the difficult process of searching for the self that takes place during adolescence, makes this period of time in Chicana adolescents' lives particularly difficult. For the "typical American teenager," those who are generally represented in curricular readings and/or assignments, the search for identity is still complicated, but it is easier for them than for their Chicana classmates because they have an easier time of finding themselves in the literary curricula. For Chicana adolescents, their borderland positioning complicates their identity searching because they struggle to create the perfect balance of cultures and languages that should be embodied within them, but in creating this balance, they must make conscious decisions to accept and/or reject certain aspects of themselves and their culture(s). While this may seem simple enough on the surface, this process takes a great toll on the individual because she is constantly having to tear herself apart in order to patch herself back up into her new identities. This is similar to the identity formation phenomena as articulated by Hall; for him identity is "constructed through splitting. Splitting between that which one is, and that which is the other" (Hall 47-48). Through this process, we are constantly comparing ourselves to what we believe we are and what we believe we are not in order to more fully understand ourselves.

Anzaldúa similarly describes this process in her description of border cultures when she writes:

The U.S.-Mexican border es *una herida abierta* where the Third World grates against the first and bleeds. And before a scab forms it hemorrhages again, the lifeblood of two worlds merging to form a third country—a border culture. Borders are set up to define the places that are safe and unsafe, to distinguish *us* from *them*. (Borderlands 25)

This open and festering wound she describes as the place where these two worlds meet concretizes the idea that this “border” that was created between these two countries was done so without any consideration of the inhabitants of the area; this border was in fact created through a hostile act of colonization. The creation of this border was an act of power by the United States government, but in reclaiming this area as their own, the inhabitants of the borderland become empowered. The people who call the borderland their home know the insecurity that is attached to this dwelling place, because they are considered to be both a part of and apart from the us and them groups that the border sets up; those North of the border view these borderland dwelling people as invaders, and those South of the border view them as traitors for having deserted their homeland. But in reality, they are part of both groups simultaneously even if they are separated by this “border.” The problem that arises in these sentiments is the fact that these people must painfully struggle to make their way through life amidst these condescending perceptions of themselves. These negative perspectives affect the identity creation process by making individuals hyper-aware of the perceptions of others toward the self, and making the individual more self-

conscious about the ways in which their identities are being perceived and (mis)understood, and which leads to more tearing apart and rebuilding of their identities.

One problem with this is that identities, themselves, are in a constant process of reconfiguration. As we navigate through the world and live new experiences our identities are affected, and they change to better suit our needs as individual subjects in the world around us. The issue of these constantly changing identities is that for young Chicanas this is an extremely intense and violent process; every time she shifts her identities, she must make another tear in her sense of self and stitch her new identity characteristic(s) to the core of her identities. This process is exhausting and leaves behind scars and feelings of anger, resentment, and frustration at not knowing how to fully be and embody herself.

Another problem with this process is that identities are not singular; they are in fact multifaceted. In discussing this aspect of identities, Kimberle Crenshaw's foundational work on intersectionality in her piece, "Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory and Antiracist Politics (1989), is key to understanding how these multiple identities within an individual intersect and interact with each other. Though her piece focused specifically on Black women, her concept is useful here in that it describes the ways in which multiple oppressions not only

coexist with, but depend upon, each other; in discussing the unique position of Black women in oppressive systems, Crenshaw argues:

These problems of exclusion cannot be solved simply by including Black women within an already established analytical structure. Because the intersectional experience is greater than the sum of racism and sexism, any analysis that does not take intersectionality into account cannot sufficiently address the particular manner in which Black women are subordinated. Thus...the entire framework that has been used as a basis for translating “women’s experience” or “the Black experience” into concrete policy demands must be rethought and recast.” (Crenshaw 140)

Crenshaw’s argument is that in order for Black women to be given a fair trial, our entire system must be restructured in such a way that does not pit oppression against oppression; a Black woman should not have to choose between being a woman or being Black because these are both integral parts of her identity. By forcing her to choose between these identity categories, the system of oppression pits her against herself and exponentially increases her own oppression by violently stripping her of her power to identify as herself in whatever compound and complex identity she would otherwise choose. Similarly, within her a Chicana carries a variety of struggles and oppressions that help to define who she is because of the histories that came before her. She simultaneously embodies the conflicts and pain between “Mexicans” and “Americans” over land and territories, language, and immigration. She embodies

the tumultuous process of adolescence through which she comes to know her histories of struggles and oppressions and how they have come to shape her realities, and she emerges into an awareness not only of how she is affected by her environment, but also how she affects her environment as well.

These types of complex ideological inner struggles created by the multiplicity of identities are mirrored by the intersectional identities of Chicana characters like Esperanza from *The House on Mango Street* by Sandra Cisneros, and Gabi from *Gabi, A Girl in Pieces* by Isabel Quintero. By reading these types of texts that highlight some of the struggles they are familiar with, Chicana adolescents are able to experience a sense of recognition, which Rita Felski highlights as one of the key uses of literature. In her book, *Uses of Literature* (2008), Felski argues for the importance of reading and teaching literature by discussing the affordances that it provides for readers; the first affordance she discusses, that of recognition, relates to the ways in which readers see pieces of themselves reflected in the literary text(s) they read. Recognition becomes a key player in identity formation, according to Felski, because as

selfhood becomes self-reflexive, literature comes to assume a crucial role in exploring what it means to be a person. The novel, especially, embraces a heightened psychological awareness, meditating on the murky depths of motive and desire, seeking to map the elusive currents and by-ways of consciousness, highlighting countless connections and conflicts between self-determinations and socialization. (Felski 25)

In other words, by reading novels with characters in which the reader is able to recognize some aspects of herself, she then becomes capable of relating the experiences of the character to her own life and situation, and can learn the same lessons alongside the character. What's significant about this in terms of identities for Chicana adolescents is the ability to vicariously try on various aspects of identity by witnessing the character do so without having to try it out herself and tear apart and put her own identities back together. This sense of cognitively trying on identities through the experiences of the character allows the reader to know the feelings and reactions to a particular identity without having to experience it all first-hand. Granted, a character's experiences in a novel may not exactly translate into the specific lives and circumstances of an actual living and breathing reader; however, the character's experiences can be a valuable starting point from where the reader can begin to extrapolate meaning and apply it to her own life for further significance. Reflection is the key to making this happen; by reflecting on their own circumstances and those of the characters in the novels they read, readers have the ability to consider a greater variety of possible outcomes, and are therefore better equipped to make well-informed decisions about the multiplicity of their identities.

For Anzaldúa, this reflective identity building process does not only occur within the reader, but within the writer at the point of writing as well. In her description of the writing process, Anzaldúa describes liminal spaces between the conscious and the subconscious that allows for this type of reflective process

to occur within the writer; she calls these liminal spaces, *nepantlas* (Light 2). For Anzaldúa, it is the act of living in these *nepantlas*, or giving-in to the conflicts created by these unnatural boundaries that allows for identity creation to occur, because “[i]dentity formation...is an alchemical process that synthesizes the dualities, contradictions, and perspectives from these different selves and worlds” (Light 3). By identifying the self in each of these environments and setting these selves in opposition with each other, the individual can begin to decipher a new and more complex borderland sense of self that encompasses the selves from either side of the border. The writer learns to live within this borderland in order to truly experience the struggles that hide beneath her identities and that may not be easily observable to the untrained eye. She lives in this borderland, experiencing the dystopian rhythm of the dissonant and opposing realities, and she feeds off of the blood and residue left behind by the clashing of these two worlds. It is through this process by which the Chicana writer is able to come to terms with her own identities in order to create new ways of seeing and knowing in the world she inhabits.

This writing process phenomena that Anzaldúa describes is similar to one described by Quintana in her argument that Chicana literature should be considered through an interdisciplinary lens. In her book, *Home Girls: Chicana Literary Voices* (1996), Alvina E. Quintana argues that Chicana literature should be analyzed interdisciplinarily because Chicana identities, themselves, are multifaceted and varied. She defines her book as an attempt to analyze Chicana

literature in this manner, as a way to reflect on a Chicana “identity politics that mediates between race, class, and gender” (Quintana 12). Her purpose is to highlight the parallel between interdisciplinary study and Chicana identities in order to argue that there is no single Chicana identity and to consider what is at stake in claiming “A Chicana Identity” or “A Chicana Experience” without acknowledging the differences that exist within this identity category. Quintana explains how “Chicano literature provides writers with the opportunity to appraise cultural hybridity, or, in Gloria Anzaldúa’s terms, to explore ‘the Borderlands.’ Although many critics regard Chicano literature as an inclusive or...homogeneous category of protest and resistance,” it is important to consider who gets left out of this categorization, and when the focus is Chicano literature, it is often, unfortunately, Chicanas who are left out (Quintana 16).

The issue with discussing literature in terms of these categorizations and binaries, however, lies in the fact that the issue will be “resolved” by merely adding in Chicana literature here and there—almost as an afterthought—and showing that Chicanas are being represented. By this logic, focusing on Chicana literature highlights the tendency of the Spanish language to focus on the masculine in order to make a conscious effort to focus on the feminine; however, this is not enough. This perspective is merely additive and not at all intersectional, which it necessarily needs to be, and it reinforces the always already intersectional nature of Chicanx identities and politics for Chicanas. Merely using a putatively representative text does not allow for a more complex

understanding of Chicana experiences; it may speak to a beginning, but it definitely should not be an end. Chicana literature should be given as much consideration as canonical literature for the stores of cultural significance contained within it.

For Chicana writers, it becomes a difficult and daunting task to write themselves into being by addressing and challenging the marginalization that has been imposed upon them;

[b]ecause Mexican and American cultures eclipse Chicana subjectivity, both contribute to a loss of self that fuels the Chicana writer's urgency to reject 'old' contradictions in order to create 'new,' relevant identity affiliations. This tenuous stance between opposing ideologies unleashes the writer's need to understand the relationship between different histories—to take into account the totality. (Quintana 22).

What Quintana means by this is that in writing, Chicanas invoke the histories and pasts that exist on both sides of the U.S./Mexico border and within the multiplicities of their cultures in order to acknowledge that neither of these histories necessarily correlate with the identities of a Chicana subject. To enact Chicana-ness, in a sense, is to both reject and accept Mexican and U.S. American cultures simultaneously to forge new identities, but in order to do so, the Chicana writer must understand the histories of these cultures and how they relate to and intersect with each other within herself. According to Quintana, these are reflective processes that Chicana writers are always already engaging

in when participating in the writing process, which affords this genre its special positioning to aid in decolonizing literary study.

The literature produced by these Chicana authors is of critical importance for Chicana adolescents, because it allows them to have a glimpse into the perspectives of someone who looks, talks, and thinks like them, which unfortunately is not usually the case for them. The issues of the effects of colonization on current literature instruction practices that arise around this literature, however, are two-fold. The first issue is that Chicana adolescents who may not have already been introduced to this genre may not even know it exists, and the second issue is that those that have been introduced to it in an educational setting may have had negative experiences with it because it was taught in a way that tried to universalize the concepts covered in it rather than allow for Chicana ownership of them. Both of these issues can be addressed within the confines of the classroom, but the teacher must know how—and be willing—to do so.

In order to address the first issue, it is important for adults, mainly teachers and librarians to make this genre known and available to their students. By spreading this awareness, and encouraging Chicana adolescents to read these texts, educators can help foster in these students a lifelong love of reading, while also helping to increase participation and interest in classroom activities and discussions. While Young Adult Literature, in general, has the reputation of something that is usually read for fun and does not have a place in an academic

classroom, this is not an accurate portrayal of the value that it holds. In the article, "Multiple Selves and Multiple Sites of Influence: Perceptions of Young Adult Literature in the Classroom" (2011), Angela Beumer Johnson argues that by using literature that relates to the lives of our students in academic manners, we can help them to make connections between what is learned in class and what they know and do outside of school. It is through providing relatable texts to students that teachers are able to have a more lasting effect on the lives of their students; the connections teachers facilitate students to make to their lives outside of school will likely have more of an impact on their futures. Furthermore, in citing work by Ronfeldt and Grossman, Beumer Johnson points out that Young Adult Literature allows "possible selves [to] serve as incentives for change and as touchstones for evaluating current selves" (Beumer Johnson 218). What is meant by this is that by reading about characters that they can relate to, adolescents are able to consider possible identity categories for themselves and possible outcomes to actions without necessarily having to live the actual experience. This is particularly significant to Chicana adolescents because it allows them to gain a deeper understanding of themselves as individuals in their particular circumstances.

In order to address the second issue, we must delve deep into the origins of the issue and the reasons why teachers have or have not included Young Adult Chicana literature in their classes to begin with. It is an unfortunate case that often when these types of texts are used in classrooms throughout the

country, they are used to supplement the canonical materials and texts being covered and are not given as much value or time as these other texts. This phenomenon of these texts being treated as mere “additives to curricula in a process of inclusion without influence” is elaborated upon by scholar Delia Poey in her book, *Latino American Literature in the Classroom: The Politics of Transformation* (2002); she argues that by merely adding to the set, or colonized, curricula with literature by Latino Americans, nothing really gets accomplished. The finished syllabus looks as though it reflects a commitment to diversity because it has these different aspects added to it, but in reality the product itself didn’t change; Latino American Literature, or in our case Young Adult Chicana Literature specifically, does nothing to affect the actual outcomes of the course if it is not meaningfully incorporated within the course and its objectives. This literature cannot merely be added in to check off the “Cultural Diversity” box of the curriculum checklist; it needs to be accompanied by a curriculum that values the theories and perspectives that it presents. By decolonizing literature instruction and incorporating the literature in the curriculum with more meaningful intentions, we change the ways our students interact with it and transform how they perceive the literature, themselves, and the world. By using this literature as integral parts of the lessons, the teacher transforms the classroom into an environment where all voices and experiences are heard and valued.

It is important to remember that mere representation is not enough to change Young Adult Chicana Literature’s position on the outskirts of the

curriculum; instead, these texts should be used consistently in classrooms throughout the school year, and should be used as major texts within the lessons taught. I am not arguing for removing non-Young Adult Chicana Literature canonical texts, like *The Catcher in the Rye* or *To Kill a Mockingbird*, from the curricula, for I agree that these texts also contain meaning that are relevant and important to our youth; however, I do argue for an analysis of which texts get taught, when they get taught, and why they get taught, in order to lead to a more enriched and purposeful curricula. It is important for teachers to analyze the overall effect they are trying to have on their class and what the overall learning outcomes for the course are; oftentimes, Young Adult Chicana Literature can do just as good a job at helping students meet the standards they are being measured against, if not a better one.

If teachers are not purposeful in their inclusion of Young Adult Chicana Literature in their classrooms, they run the risk of exploiting these works as mere tokens of a “different” type of literature. In merely introducing this genre to their students but not discussing its literary, historical, or possibly personal significance, the overall effect of the literature is lost and becomes easily appropriated by those who may not understand its greater significance. As teachers of Young Adult Chicana Literature we must realize the position of power we hold over the content and our students. The power to select the content, to frame it in particular ways, and to guide our students through the meaning-

making process lies with the instructor, and charges them with the responsibility to teach such material with integrity.

## CHAPTER THREE

### YOUNG ADULT CHICANA LITERATURE: AUTOHISTORIA

#### Autohistoria: Writing Oneself into Being

Because our bodies have been stolen, brutalized or numbed, it is difficult to speak from/through them. *No hables de esas cosas, de eso no se habia. No hables, no hables. ¡Cállate! Estate quieta.* Seal your lips woman! When she transforms silence into language, a woman transgresses. (Making Face xxii)

As previously stated, writing as a Chicana author brings with it an introspective and reflective quality that allows her to view her simultaneous positioning as both an outsider and an insider. Chicanas' intersectional identities give them the ability to analyze circumstances through a variety of lenses and perspectives in order to imagine varying outcomes and alternate scenarios that then can provide a deeper understanding of herself and her work. As articulated by Helena María Viramontes, in her essay "Nopalitos': The Making of Fiction," published in *Making Face, Making Soul/Haciendo Caras: Creative and Critical Perspectives by Feminists of Color* (1990), "the power of the imagination, [is] peeking beyond the fence of your personal reality and seeing the possibilities thereafter" (292); this process invokes the concepts of separation and exclusion through the metaphor of the fence in order to highlight the notion that perspective(s) are subject to one's special positioning in an environment (i.e.

which side of the fence is one on? How does this side of the fence differ from the other, and how does this positioning affect understanding and thought?). It is through this process of scrutinizing the true and the imaginary that the Chicana writer harnesses her voice and theorizes herself into being for the review of her readers. She questions and critiques the notion of universal “truth” in order to find a personal “truth” that better suits her special positioning on her side of the metaphorical fence and speaks to her struggles and experiences.

The struggle to blend her often conflicting Mexican and American cultures is similar to what W.E.B. Du Bois who was a writer, sociologist, and civil rights activist, refers to as “double consciousness;” his seminal 1903 work, *The Souls of Black Folk*, focuses specifically on how African-American identities are created by merging together the two oppositional identities that they name, and how through this tumultuous process, the individual is gifted with a “second sight” with which they are given the power to see situations and circumstances in a way that transcends the physical embodiment of them (Du Bois 194-195). Similarly, it is through this type of double consciousness, or *nepantlas*, as Anzaldúa would call it, that a Chicana is able to further question how the duality of her roles is constantly at play within her life and identities, and when she uses her voice and is able to speak out against the injustices in each of her seemingly separate cultures she theorizes new ways of becoming and being Chicana, which is the starting point for writing *autohistoria-teoría*. In this chapter, I argue that Young Adult Chicana Literature is a form of *autohistoria* and *autohistoria-teoría*; by

analyzing it through this lens, I argue against the appropriation of Young Adult Chicana Literature's significance by dominant white educational cultures.

Before this analysis can begin, however, it is important to note that both of the literary authors discussed in this chapter, Sandra Cisneros and Isabel Quintero, have stated that part of their inspiration for writing their texts came from their own experiences and experiences that others have shared with them. The basis of each of their works is strongly rooted in true lived experiences, but is then transformed by the imagination into "fiction;" the quotes placed around the term "fiction" in this case serve the purpose to distinguish between fiction as completely made-up and fabricated stories and these "fictions" that have their major origins rooted in reality. In interacting with these texts it is important for readers to analyze their own experiences with and interpretations of the texts, but it is also important to remember to reconceptualize these texts within the framework of their original theorizer (i.e. the author). By bringing these various analyses together, readers are empowered to see more of the complexity these texts hold within them, and are able to more clearly pull meaning and understanding from them.

*Autohistoria* is a way of looking deeply into a writer's being. It is a Chicana's embodiment of herself in textual form, in which she exposes her entire being to her reader; this exposure does not make her vulnerable, instead, it gives her strength and power. These feelings of unequalled strength and power are then transferable to the audience through the act of reading; it is for this reason

that Young Adult Chicana Literature and *autohistorias* are best read co-creationally, as the worlds of the author, the text, and the reader(s) blend together to create new meaning and ways of becoming and being Chicana. This is particularly important to remember when teaching literature, because education should also be a co-creational process. As described by bell hooks in her book, *Teaching to Transgress: Education as the Practice of Freedom (1994)*, education should be a mutual labor in which classrooms are a place “where teachers grow, and are empowered by the process. That empowerment cannot happen if we refuse to be vulnerable while encouraging students to take risks” (21). By placing ourselves in the position of co-creators of knowledge alongside our students, we are able to grow with them, and they are able to more clearly see their own value within them; they see that we all hold valuable insights that are particular to ourselves and that are distinct to our own lived experiences.

In the introduction to *The House on Mango Street (2009)*, Cisneros discusses her writing process for this series of vignettes and describes her characters as being based in reality. She mentions that her inspiration for her characters in the novel come from real people, but that “sometimes three real people would be braided together into one made-up person” (Cisneros xxii); further, however, she explains that emotions “can’t be invented, can’t be borrowed. All the emotions [her] characters feel, good or bad, are [hers] (Cisneros xxiii). Similarly, Isabel Quintero points out in an interview with Rodrigo Joseph Rodriguez that while her novel is not autobiographical, there are

resemblances between Gabi and herself, and “[s]ome of the characters are based on real folks but they are ALL amalgamations of several people at once—even Gabi” (Rodriguez 91). These creative practices described that allow these Chicana writers to piece together portions of their realities and highlight structures of oppression that are faced by multiple people in order to create stories that their readership can easily relate to are part of what *autohistoria* is all about. This process of blending the real with the fictional and creating a pastiche of what it means to be Chicana and how Chicana-ness is embodied allows for a wider sense of recognition, in which “Chicana” becomes more than just an identity category; it becomes a way of thinking, a way of knowing, but above all, it becomes a movement that pushes back against oppression, hate, and other issues, not just socially, but personally within the individual as well. Engaging with Chicana Young Adult Literature in the classroom and analyzing it through the varied perspectives that students and teachers bring with them allows for a deeper understanding of Chicana experiences and highlights the complexity of our borderland identities.

*Autohistoria* is about deeply reflecting on our realities as complex individuals in our complex societies in order to better understand ourselves and others in order to create change that pushes past acceptance of differences toward the valuing of differences and individuality, giving every Chicana the ability to be known, heard, and loved. By acknowledging that their works are grounded in realities of their own and of others, which they have altered to better

express their meaning, Cisneros and Quintero make it possible for the lenses of *autohistoria* and *autohistoria-teoría*, and in relation to Christian's concept of reflections that lead to theorizing, to be critically applied to their works. What is particularly interesting to note about each of these texts is that they are both written in a style similar to journal or diary writing, which is a form that is usually attributed to young women; by writing their novels in this format, the authors give their narrators, these "fictional" adolescent Chicanas, the platform to write their own *autohistoria-teorías* by participating in their own reflective practices and embodying their own *nepantlas*, as described by Anzaldúa.

Regardless of the specific issues that these girls face in terms of their appearance and identities, they both find their way out of their circumstances through the same medium: writing. Both of these narrators present these novels as journal-type writing; for Esperanza, her journal is presented somewhat chronologically but is separated into specific stories, moments, or instances, whereas for Gabi, her journal takes on the more traditional journal form and is chunked by dates. The fact that both of these texts are written in journal or diary form suggests that at the time of writing their thoughts, each narrator engaged in acts of reflection—i.e. they are writing their own *autohistoria*. Through this reflection, they gazed into their own *nepantlas* in order to give meaning to the experiences they have lived and to find ways to express this newfound knowledge. These personal writings become a way for the audience (in reality us, but theoretically for Esperanza and Gabi, themselves as well) to more deeply

understand what it means to be Esperanza and Gabi. These writings represent their struggles and triumphs and their processes in becoming Chicana, and in delving deeper into their understandings and struggles, their *autohistorias* become *autohistoria-teorías*.

In addition to the personal writings they create, both narrators describe a deep interest in poetry. Esperanza likes to read poetry, and she also likes to write her own poetry. In a few different vignettes, she discusses how she would share her poems with others as an indication of how invested she was in her writing. By the end of the novel, it becomes clear that this is the future she sees for herself, as a writer and a poet, and this is her ticket out of Mango Street. In the last vignette, "Mango Says Goodbye Sometimes," Esperanza writes her own future story by saying that "One day [she] will pack [her] bags of books and paper. One day [she] will say goodbye to Mango" (Cisneros 110). This act of packing up her most valuable possessions, "books and paper," is an act of resistance against materialism and the overbearing nature of Mango Street and her community. Esperanza realizes that in order to grow as an individual she must forget about her materialistic possessions and rely on her mind, writing, and theorizing; she must leave her community, but she must also not abandon them. She plans to return to Mango Street to help her family, friends, and neighbors that she leaves behind, "[f]or the ones who cannot out" (Cisneros 110). She has the knowledge, consciousness, and ability to leave, but she also acknowledges her privilege because not everyone can do the same. In theorizing her writing in this manner,

Esperanza makes the case that her community raised her and helped her become successful, so she cannot forget about them when she makes it out because she owes her entire being to Mango Street. Her understanding is such that we are all products of our environments, and we must acknowledge the ways in which our environments shape and mold us as we create our identities. Esperanza acknowledges her positioning on this borderland of poverty and success and she has the mind to realize that the struggles of those around her are her struggles as well. She understands that as long as her community suffers, she suffers alongside them, for oppression does not affect the individual, it affects the group.

Poetry plays a similar role in Gabi's life; it helps her get her feelings out and cope with particular situations that she is going through. She theorizes through her poetry and creates new understanding about pain, suffering, and loss through the creation of new poems. Throughout the novel, she shares many of her poems with her readers, those who actively read the novel, as well as with classmates and coffee shop audiences within it; these poems cover a variety of subjects that range from death to drugs to dating, and when reflecting on her writing she states that "[w]riting when you're sad is so much easier. And it makes you feel a little better" (Quintero 101). While a seemingly simple observation, this makes all the difference to Gabi, because this is what helps her get over her major heartaches (i.e. having her heart broken and finding her dad dead from an overdose). Through writing, she acknowledges her emotions and the ways in

which her environment has affected her, and through these acknowledgements she is able to figure out the specific meaning that these events have on her and her life and how she can control the overall effect they have and the significance they hold for her. In coming to this realization, Gabi strengthens her identities finding a way into her *nepantla* that allows her to assess her situations as both an outsider and an insider simultaneously, and will help her in her future struggles through life; in this moment, writing becomes an integral part of her identities that she will forever be able to turn to when she needs an extra reflective push. Her journey into this *nepantla* enlightens her on the realities of life and show her how to push past her suffering to a state of resistance.

In both of these instances, these narrators are engaging in theoretical practice by reflecting on their own experiences and the experiences of those around them in order to create their own identities, and they use writing as their vehicle to express it. The conclusions they make about their identities being strongly linked to their communities, families, and histories are strongly tied to Hall's conceptions of identities as an amalgamation of all of these things from our past and present experiences. In putting their pens to paper, these narrators make sense of the "imaginary political re-identification, re-territorialization, and re-identification" that Hall describes as the process of searching for our roots and finding and embodying them through a process that recovers our "lost histories" outside of the academy because they are not recognized as histories (Hall 52-53). These narrators do not rely solely on their institutional education to make

meaning of themselves; instead they look to their communities for their histories that have been hidden and oppressed in order to push back against the streamlined identities prescribed by society, and they catalogue their processes in their writings.

These *autohistoria-teorías* presented through the perceptions of young women of color can be used by teachers as part of English curriculum and present the opportunity for a different perspective to enter into the classroom and affect the ways in which students interact with the material. By theorizing in narrative form, it becomes apparent that the theorizing they engage in becomes a process that young readers can engage in and make meaning from. Exposure to this type of literature that exemplifies the process of inner reflection teaches students that it is a healthy process to question ourselves, our homes, and our surrounding communities in order to understand the circumstances that got us where we are in the moment, to analyze where we want we want to go in the future, and to plan accordingly. For many adolescents, this is a process that is never really afforded to them, so they are unaware of the potential that lies within them. Through engaging with texts like *The House on Mango Street*, and *Gabi, A Girl in Pieces*, Chicana adolescents can begin to discover the potential that they hold within them, and they can learn to harness it appropriately for their specific purposes.

One aspect of Chicana identities that is constantly under duress is that of body image, a specifically misogynist labeling of women's value. Lately, all over

the media, the push toward body positivity has been on the rise, but this has not always been the case. The urge to be dissatisfied with our own bodies has been a normal sentiment felt by women of varying ages over the course of decades, and it is one that is particularly familiar to Chicanas and other women of color. This love-hate relationship we have with our bodies and our appearance is a direct outcome of the patriarchal and misogynistic nature of mass media and the information it presents to us. While these degrading messages about body image affect everyone, they have a more scarring effect on women of color. The unfortunate truth is that because Chicanas and other women of color are regarded as the “other,” and they have often been looked down upon, it is a cultural rule that stems from respectability politics that if they are going to go out, they must look their best. This rule is echoed in the reminder that Elba Rosario Sánchez describes in her chapter of *Chicana Feminisms: A Critical Reader* (2003):

Aquí la gente piensa que los mexicanos somos cochinos, unos flojos.  
Siempre que salgas a la calle, tienes que salir bien vestida y pórtate bien.  
¡No quiero que nadie te diga nada nunca! [Here people think that  
Mexicans are dirty and lazy. You must always dress and behave well  
when you are out. I don't ever want anyone to say anything to you!]. (31)

Similar advice is given to Chicanas throughout the United States on a daily basis, because these women want to present themselves and their families as “the model minority,” so that they will not be viewed as a threat, or as trouble-makers

that will tear the community down. While this term was coined during the United States' internment of Japanese Americans in World War II to describe individuals from this community who abandoned all ties to their Japanese heritage in order to fully assimilate into American society, in the hopes of being fully accepted into American society as Americans. This term and the standards it sets is continually used to assess the assimilation of other minority groups as well; the better the group is at assimilating, the more mainstream America approves of them, but if they begin to slip, they lose all hopes of being accepted. The characters and perspectives presented in literature that make up the American canon serve as examples of how to enact "Americanness" and by only teaching texts from this canon, teachers help perpetuate the discriminatory ideas of American superiority. These minority groups buy into the repressing and misogynistic idea that their natural looks are not enough, so they feel the need to work extra hard to make their appearance match that of the social standard. But as theorist Andrea Canaan, expresses in her essay "Brownness" published in *This Bridge Called My Back*, "no matter how good, how clean, how pious the brown, they could not equal or reflect the ultimate good and right-white" (232). Even though this thought is constantly in the back of minority individuals' minds, they continue to hope that by being presentable at all times the stigma surrounding people of color can be lessened, and we can more easily blend in with dominant white American culture, but ultimately these attempts to blend in always fail.

While dressing nicely and looking presentable is one aspect of Chicana aesthetics, for adolescents who have low self-esteem, this is not enough to help them recognize their own beauty because these aesthetics are determined through external pressures. In *The House on Mango Street*, the narrator, Esperanza, takes up many issues related to body issues and being presentable in interesting ways. In the vignette “Marin” she discusses a neighbor, who is slightly older than her and is from Puerto Rico but is staying with family on Mango Street. In this vignette, Esperanza mentions various things she learns from Marin about womanhood, like “how Davey the Baby’s sister got pregnant, and what cream is best for taking off moustache hair and if you count the white flecks on your fingernails you can know how many boys are thinking of you” (Cisneros 27). It is clear that Esperanza looks up to Marin for advice about how to be a young Chicana who presents herself well. As a more mature influence, Marin is placed in the position to teach her young friend about life in ways that others either can’t or won’t; she gives Esperanza tips and tricks that she has learned over the years in order to help her grow into a beautiful and strong Latina, and Esperanza values the advice she receives from her. At the end of the vignette, Esperanza further reflects on Marin and hypothesizes how her future will play out by writing that she envisions “Marin, under the streetlight, dancing by herself, is singing the same song somewhere. I know. Is waiting for a car to stop, a star to fall, someone to change her life” (Cisneros 27). This depiction of Marin ambiguously describes her future in terms that suggest that she is engaging in

prostitution. Esperanza's ambiguity in writing about Marin could be due to the fact that she still looks up to Marin and does not want to label or judge her actions. By inserting the simple sentence, "I know," in the middle of that section, Esperanza not only hints at the idea that she has always known this truth about Marin, but that she, too knows the ways of this line of work. Marin and Esperanza have discovered the commodity that is their own, their bodies, and it is one that they can control. What is interesting about the ending to this vignette is that Esperanza chooses to include this observation about Marin, which suggests that perhaps she is not the best person for young girls to go to for advice. My argument is not that Cisneros criminalizes sex work, but rather that Esperanza engages in a theorizing about role models and self-image that revolves around the idea of empowerment and self-worth.

This sentiment is expanded upon in the vignette, "The Family of Little Feet," in which Esperanza and her friends are given some sets of high-heeled shoes from a local family and are excited about finally getting to wear women's shoes rather than little girls' shoes. The excitement of the shoes is simultaneously exhilarating and terrifying for Esperanza, because she points out that "it is scary to look down at your foot that is no longer yours and see attached a long long leg" (Cisneros 40). In putting these shoes on, these little girls transform into women and are treated as such; during their strut around the city, a drunk man outside a bar solicits them for a kiss. This unwanted attention shocks them into realizing that they are not ready for this type of physical

attention, so they run home and get rid of the shoes. Through her reflection on this experience, Esperanza theorizes about trying to grow up too quickly by highlighting the differences in the types of attention afforded to women versus the types of attention afforded to little girls; in this misogynistic and patriarchal society we inhabit, women get objectified, whereas little girls more commonly get protected. In this vignette, Esperanza complicates the role of Chicanas' physical appearance; by juxtaposing the vignettes "Marin" and "The Family of Little Feet," Esperanza creates an evolution of her theorizing of appearance. By placing the empowering feelings associated with appearance in Marin's vignette in contrast to the feelings of fear she clearly feels in this vignette, Esperanza begins to theorize the troubling role that physical appearance plays in her life. She recognizes the power she can wield through her appearance, but she also acknowledges the power that can be utilized against her in a misogynist society that would not come to her aid if she found herself in a situation of rape. She begins to theorize the power and the vulnerability that lies within her embodiment, and at this moment in her reflections she acknowledges her limitations as a girl who has not matured enough to be able to fully control her power. In these two vignettes, it is as if Esperanza is trying to figure out her role as a woman in her community, but cannot quite fit into any of the roles that are currently prescribed for her, so she must learn to forge her own path and her own identity role.

Later in her reflections Esperanza's thoughts and feelings around appearance begin to shift. In the vignette, "Chanclas," she begins feeling extremely self-conscious about having to wear her old school shoes with a new dress to a baptism party because her mother hadn't had time to buy her a new pair of shoes. She is so self-conscious about her appearance that upon arrival she decides to pick a seat and remain posted there for the remainder of the party. When her uncle leads her to the dance floor, she is initially stunned and believes everyone will make fun of her over her shoes, but as she loosens up and has fun dancing with her uncle, "everyone says, wow, who are those two who dance like in the movies, until [she] forget[s] that [she is] wearing only ordinary shoes" (Cisneros 47). In that moment, Esperanza realizes that more important than her appearance is the way she carries herself and how she allows others to perceive her. Her thoughts change when she realizes that "the boy who is a man watches [her] dance," (Cisneros 48), and this time, this becomes welcomed attention. On this occasion, Esperanza likes the looks she is getting, because she is able to control the gaze upon her; in the previous example, she was unprepared for the reactions her appearance would solicit, but in this example, she has control over these reactions, and she has control of the whole situation.

This scenario is particularly interesting when analyzed through Laura Mulvey's work on scopophilia and the male gaze as presented in her work "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema" (1999); in this piece, she breaks down

cinema as a spectacle that flourishes on the production of the subjection of women. She argues that because our world exists in a state of “sexual imbalance,” the cinema is able to capitalize on the “active/male and passive/female” dichotomies related to looking; she argues that in “their traditional exhibitionist role women are simultaneously looked at and displayed, with their appearance coded for strong visual and erotic impact so that they can be said to connote *to-be-looked-at-ness*” (Mulvey 837). In making this argument, Mulvey brings attention to the ways in which women are objectified through the male gaze; even though the camera, which itself is gendered masculine, ultimately decides what shows up on the screen, the power of the gaze remains with the audience. What is particularly significant in this vignette, however, is that Esperanza does not seem to feel objectified at all; she notices the male gaze upon her, and she feeds off of it in order to empower herself. She does not allow herself to be passive and objectified by the male gaze; instead, she returns the gaze and controls the way it looks upon her. This moment of fighting back against the patriarchal norms of male and female interactions empowers Esperanza to regain her confidence and realize the strength and power within her.

As she continues with her written reflections, Esperanza further develops her theorizing on the male gaze when she begins to define her future on her own terms. In “Beautiful & Cruel” Esperanza continues her theorizing of appearance by proclaiming that she is “an ugly daughter” who will probably never marry

because of this, but that is not the future she wants for herself anyway; she finds inspiration for her future in movies she watches. While she still acknowledges the socially constructed ideals of beauty by naming herself “ugly,” Esperanza does not give in to their pressures because she knows their superficiality and she understands the power of womanhood. She is inspired by the “one with red red lips who is beautiful and cruel. She is the one who drives the men crazy and laughs them all away. Her power is her own. She will not give it away” (Cisneros 89); this is the future Esperanza envisions for herself. A future where she is in control of not only her body, but of her entire self and being. She theorizes the power a woman holds, and she sees the value in being able to choose one’s own future instead of having it be chosen for her. By acknowledging her “ugliness” and her beauty, Esperanza engages in a process that Gloria Anzaldúa describes as “rejecting identification with a single position” (Light 82). In describing this rejection, Anzaldúa argues that we are “no longer locked in the outsider/other/victim place...[t]he nepantla mind-set eliminates polarity thinking where there’s no in between, only ‘either/or’; it reinstates ‘and’ (Light 82). What both Anzaldúa and Esperanza seem to be arguing is that two seemingly contradictory states can co-exist simultaneously. Because ideals of appearance are socially and culturally created, Esperanza realizes that she can be both ugly and beautiful at the same time; all she needs to do is learn how to make her appearance work for her, much like her friend Marin had already begun teaching her. She comes to the conclusion that through appearance comes power, and

through power comes independence; in the end, it is independence from the patriarchal society she lives in that she yearns for.

In contrast to Esperanza, Gabi, from Isabel Quintero's novel, *Gabi, A Girl in Pieces*, is older, and her thoughts around the subject of appearance are a bit more developed. Just by looking at the novel's cover, it becomes clear that Gabi's appearance is important to her, because where the title appears, it appears as "~~Gabi A Gordita A Fatgirl~~ A Girl in Pieces;" from this moment, it is clear that Gabi's appearance, and her weight specifically, is important to her. This becomes clearer a few pages into the actual text of the novel, when she writes a note to herself to "lose some weight. It is senior year, after all" (Quintero 9). Gabi, however, seems to understand where her negative feelings about her weight stem from, because she notes that her mom often makes comments like "No comas tanto. You're getting fatter than a pregnant woman" (Quintero 26). Even though she knows her negative thoughts stem from her mother's respectability politics, she is not able to control them at all times. Gabi is aware that controlling what she eats is her mother's way of ensuring that Gabi fits in more easily as an example of the model minority and will therefore be more easily able to assimilate into U.S. American society without question. Throughout the novel, Gabi writes about her hiding places for all of her favorite snacks that her mother will not let her have. These actions to consciously store and hide food suggest that Gabi rebels against her mother's ideals for appearance and

assimilation by hiding and eating the food that she wants and that will keep her weight where it is (or make it rise).

Toward the end of the novel, her boyfriend suggests that they start going for runs together in order to help her work through her depression that began when she found her dad dead from an overdose. While the thought of experiencing the feeling of a runner's high intrigues her, she is not completely convinced that running is for her; she presents the inner conversation she has within herself between who she calls Good Gabi and Bad Gabi:

My good-Gabi Side, the one who wants to get fit and healthy and doesn't want to be depressed anymore says..., 'Focus on your goal and get to gettin'.' But the bad-Gabi, the one who doesn't give a shit about anything, says, 'Run? What are we, athletes? Ha! Don't worry about that, love yourself for you.'...For some reason, Bad Gabi has a lot more to say than Good Gabi. And she is usually a lot louder and a lot more convincing."

(Quintero 171)

This inner turmoil that pulls Gabi from wanting to improve her health to not having a care in the world and just giving in to her desires is an example of what Anzaldúa would call *mestiza* consciousness, which is a "consciousness of the Borderlands'...a holistic, both/and way of thinking and acting that includes a transformational tolerance for contradiction and ambivalence" (*Light* 245). In other words, *mestiza* consciousness is a way of knowing that is specifically available to *mestizas* because of their clashing identities; by acknowledging the

ways in which their identity politics clash within them, they are able to better understand their particular circumstances and develop new philosophies of becoming themselves.

By expressing her *mestiza* consciousness in these very clear terms as a conversation, Gabi has personified her emotions and makes it clear that some of these emotions are clearly better for her and others are clearly more toxic. By presenting them in this way, Gabi theorizes a process of entering into a new *mestiza* consciousness by naming the contradictory identity politics that are at play and identify their roots in order to take appropriate action that will have better effects for herself in the long-run; in this case, she decides to start running with her boyfriend, and she really does feel better after they are finished. While she still has a love/hate relationship with her body's appearance, because she can be happy about being a fat girl but also wants to change her body to make her more appealing, in this moment she made a decision that helped with her body positivity while also contributing to her health.

In addition to Gabi's issues with her weight, in terms of appearance, she is also self-conscious about the fact that because her family struggles financially, she cannot always have all of the brand-name clothing that make other adolescents popular. This is exemplified when Gabi describes her relationship with her supposed friend, Sandra, who consistently makes fun of her clothing. Gabi describes this relationship by saying that, Sandra would remind her "that when you're a Gabi, price always matters. No name brand here, only generic,

and that is okay until Sandra tells you that it is not okay” (Quintero 32). In this reflection, Gabi uses Sandra not only as a representation of commodity culture in the United States, in which subjects must always strive to have the best and newest things in order to be socially accepted—in other words she represents the evils of materialism—but also as the embodied commodification of women in our misogynistic capitalist society, through which products and goods are marketed specifically for their femininity and societal gender roles. While Gabi initially gives in to the peer pressure that she feels from Sandra and spends a ridiculous amount of money on clothes that she did not particularly like, she ends up realizing that where her clothes comes from does not matter and that all that matters is how she feels in them. By rejecting the dominant adolescent notion that price and brand matter, Gabi defines herself as someone who lives within her means and finds meaning beyond the superficial and material. Ultimately, she resists the materialistic pressures and realizes the frivolity of the entire commodity culture system.

Another aspect of Gabi’s appearance that has a profound effect on her identities is the fact that she is a light-skinned girl of Mexican descent. Early on, she describes this aspect of herself as a curse, because others cannot easily identify her as Mexican and consequently assume that she is white and that she does not speak or understand Spanish. She compares her experience as a light-skinned Mexican to that of her Mexican friends with darker complexions, and says that one benefit they have is that “[p]eople never say racist things around

them...[because] they carry their culture on their skin like a museum exhibit;” whereas she has “[s]kin that doesn’t make [her] Mexican enough” (Quintero 35). Her skin color marks her as more U.S. American than it does Mexican, but she does not agree with this distinction. In most cases, Gabi’s skin would be considered a privilege that would allow her to blend in with the dominant white culture, but this is not what she wants. Gabi yearns for her *india* ancestors and heritage to be fully present in her being in order to feel absolutely connected to her indigenous roots in Mexico; she strongly believes in her Mexican-ness and is not willing to give it up or to let others discount her merely because her skin does not quickly give her identity away.

Gabi’s distinct perspective on skin color is particularly interesting when considering that racism is linked to colorism: the belief that “white is better than brown—something that some people of color *never* will unlearn” (Anzaldúa, Bridge 202). The investment that exists in this color hierarchy relates to the larger issues of historic and systemic oppression; in her essay, “La Güera,” Cherríe Moraga articulates that what the oppressor truly fears is not difference, rather, it is similarity (Bridge 27). By recognizing similarity, the oppressor will no longer be able to deny the fact that those they have oppressed are living and breathing human beings who have feelings as well, and they will no longer be able to justify the pain and suffering that the oppressed have endured because of their supposed inferiority. Gabi’s hatred of her pale white skin is a condemnation of the oppression it has historically caused to her indigenous ancestors, and it can

be considered a sort of reverse colorism. Gabi gives readers the perspective of a person who has the perceived preferred skin tone, yet yearns for the acceptance that comes with the darker skin tone. By shifting the perspective in this manner, Gabi theorizes what it means to have privilege, because in U.S. American society it is usually considered that privilege lies with whiteness, but Gabi decentralizes the notion of privilege by pointing out that people of color, whose skin color shows their status as such, have other privileges tied to their indigenous and/or minority cultures instead. In highlighting these varieties of privilege, Gabi destabilizes the notion of white superiority by assigning more value to her indigenous culture. She pushes her audience to consider what privilege really looks like on a daily basis and to question the privilege they see around them.

The theorizing that both of these young Chicanas engage in around the concept of appearance is particular to Chicana experiences, because they each discuss their appearance in terms of their family and community cultures. Both of these adolescents work through the issues of how their identities are affected by their physical appearance, and they theorize how they want to be perceived. For Esperanza, her appearance affects her identities because she wants control over both, and for her the only way she can fully control her identities and become an independent woman who calls her own shots is to control her appearance and portray herself as a strong and beautiful woman. By putting on this performance of her appearance, she is able to embody the strong and powerful identity that she yearns for. For Gabi, her appearance affects her identities because most

everything she does is affected by her weight. She struggles with the way that she looks and the way that she feels about how she looks, and even though she tries to portray this strong and body-positive persona, she does not completely believe it herself. For her, the theorizing about body image and appearance revolves around the idea of health rather than physical appearance. She learns to actually like her body and work through her body issues by focusing on becoming mentally and physically healthy instead of focusing on her weight. By focusing on herself in this manner, she is able to shift the focus from something negative to something that could positively impact her life, and she is able to build her strong identity through working toward a healthy self.

CHAPTER FOUR  
REFLECCIONES CHICANAS/CHICANA REFLECTIONS

Until I am free to write bilingually and to switch codes without having always to translate, while I still have to speak English or Spanish when I would rather speak Spanglish, and as long as I have to accommodate the English speakers rather than having them accommodate me, my tongue will be illegitimate. (Borderlands 81)

Mi Identidad Mesclada / My Blended Identity

My skin is brown and will always be brown. When people see me, *me ven el nopal en la frente*, they see the prickly pear cactus on my forehead, and they know that I am Mexican. They look at me, and because of my skin color, they assume that I speak Spanish, and while I do, it is not the formal Castilian Spanish spoken in Spain, or even any of the dialects spoken in Mexico; I speak a form of Chicano Spanish that is a mix of Mexican Spanish with English that melds together to create a sense of meaning and understanding for me and those like me. More commonly known as Spanglish, this language is so much more than a mere mixing of two languages where a speaker switches back and forth between English and Spanish; it is this, yes, but it is also the use of “anglicisms, words borrowed from English...[and] Tex-mex argot, created by adding a Spanish sound at the beginning or end of an English...[which] is the result of the pressures on Spanish speakers to adapt to English” (Borderlands

79). Chicano Spanish is a fusion of our two languages that creates a sense of common identity through common understanding with other Chicana/o individuals.

While Chicano Spanish has the ability to bring people together, it also has the ability to tear relationships apart; because it is not considered “proper” Spanish, those who do speak “proper” Spanish often look down on Chicano Spanish speakers and criticize their inability to fully express themselves in Spanish. Perhaps the most well-known example of this is in the explanation given by Abraham Quintanilla (played by Edward James Olmos) to Selena (played by Jennifer Lopez) and Abie Quintanilla (played by Jacob Vargas) in the 1997 movie *Selena*, which follows the life and musical career of the extremely talented performer whose life was cut short on March 31<sup>st</sup>, 1995 when she was shot and killed by her fan club manager, Yolanda Saldivar. In the movie, *Selena*, during the scene when Selena, Abie, and Abraham discuss the possibility of taking Selena’s Mexican-American musical career across the border to Mexico, Abraham expresses his concerns by discussing the difficulty of living in this in-between identity state. He explains that one of the reasons why he does not think going to Mexico is a good idea is because Selena’s Spanish isn’t the best; she “speak[s] Spanish funny,” and because of this, he says the Mexican press would have a field day. He continues to describe the struggle of being Mexican-American by pointing out the expectations that come along with it. Mexican-Americans have to be “more Mexican than the Mexicans and more American

than the Americans;” this is the daily struggle that the Chicana/o community faces on a daily basis (*Selena* 00:58:03-1:00:10). We walk the thin tightrope of being judged by those on either side of the border, and neither side really wants to claim us as their own. In a sense, we are “mutts;” while our heritage and family lineage traces our roots back to Mexico, our immersion in the United States and American culture entwines with these roots on various levels and (depths) and creates our Mexican-American culture. For me, and for many other Chicanas/os I imagine, this was the first encounter with something that spoke to who I am and what it means to live in this in-between culture; *Selena*, the movie, spoke to me, just as Selena’s music had spoken to me before.

#### Las Apariencias / Appearances

As Chicanas we get judged not only by the way we speak our language(s), but also by our appearance and the way we present ourselves to others. Growing up, I was acutely aware that my family could not afford to do all the things other families did, or have all the things other families had. We were a single-income family, my dad worked hard outside the home every day while my mom worked hard inside the home every day, and there were seven to eight of us by the time my little sister was born, depending on whether or not my *nina*, grandma, was staying with us at the time or not. While we weren’t poor, we could definitely have used a bit more money to help us live a bit more comfortably. All of the trips we took to amusement parks for single days and other longer vacations to destinations like Las Vegas were usually provided to us by my dad’s

employer who would sometimes send us with him when he was sent to review some of his completed work, or work on some multi-day projects, so if we had trips, they were few and far between. Our clothes, shoes, school supplies and other everyday necessities were usually hand-me-downs from my older sisters, or from the local swap-meet where we could get more for less; I loved going to the swap-meet with my dad on the weekends to find new bargains, but there was always a stigma attached to the swap-meet that made me feel badly about going there.

Oftentimes, when people would ask me where I got my cute clothes or my favorite Pocahontas backpack, I would simply tell them that my dad bought them for me at the swap-meet. I never saw this as a problem until one day my dad overheard me having a similar conversation with one of my cousins. Once we were no longer with my cousin, he jokingly said, "*Mija, no andes diciéndole a la gente que tus cosas son del swap-meet. Diles que son de la Robinsons May.* Daughter, don't tell people your stuff is from the swap-meet. Tell them it's from Robinson's May," but somehow I knew that he wasn't really joking. I could sense there was something "wrong" about shopping at the swap-meet that he didn't have the heart to tell me about, but I wasn't experienced enough to know what that was. I realize now that he was ashamed of having to shop at the swap-meet, and even though it is one of his favorite pastimes, he would have preferred to be able to afford to shop at department stores like Robinson's May. Even though I was only talking to my cousin, who I accurately estimated was in a similar

financial situation, it was considered inappropriate for me to let anyone know that our family's means were not really as they seemed; from that moment on, I was charged with keeping up the façade for my family's sake. I would do anything for my family, who taught me to live, and this was only one of the smaller façades I would be maintaining in my future.

### Mis Herencias / My Cultures

When I was in elementary school, I knew that I was Mexican. While I didn't speak much, if any, Spanish because I nearly lost the lingual ability when I started school, I could still understand it, and I still had deep ties to this language and the culture it represented. I loved listening to the Spanish radio station, K-Love, that played all of my mom's favorite artists and songs; from the rock songs of Gloria Trevi and Alejandra Guzmán, to the love songs of Chayanne and Conjunto Primavera, to the *rancheras* of Vicente Fernández and Antonio Aguilar, these sounds made up our daily listening whether we listened while we cleaned or while my mom made dinner, it was always fun to sing along and to break out and dance when a favorite would come on. I loved the homemade Mexican food that my mom always had prepared fresh daily when my dad got home from work; the *enchiladas*, *sopitos*, *caldo de res*, *pozole*, along with many other dishes that she has prepared for our family over the years, have etched their essences, flavors, and fragrant scents into my mind and being. Perhaps my favorite ties to this language and its culture is found in *los cuentitos* (the little tales) my parents and grandparents would tell me, usually, but not always, when I was getting

ready to go to sleep. I would lie in bed cuddling with one of them, and they would share these *cuentitos* with me. Some *cuentitos* had been told to them many years ago and they were passing on to me, others they made up; there were some that were favorites that were retold many times, and others that made enough of an impression the first time that they didn't need to be retold to not be forgotten. These *cuentitos* were the literature of my youth; they were my first encounter with storytelling, and they were what first enticed me to learn more about my culture and myself. While I did not realize it then, many of these *cuentitos* spoke of themes of family ties, faith, and immigration and border crossing. Each of these themes was an integral part of my life and my family's lives even though I was not conscious of them. These traditions of music, food, and oral storytelling are integral pieces that tie me to my Mexican heritage and remind me that I am Mexican. My roots are Mexican, and even though I did not grow up in Mexico, I still know its important role in creating me as a person and continuously influencing my identities. I am so deeply tied to these roots and histories that I have found the urge to re-discover my Mexican heritages and to uncover the truths of my history. By becoming my identities and participating in this process described by Hall, I am able to re-define myself according to the truths and the histories I uncover, and I am better able to resist the pressures to conform to dominant society.

## Mi Nombre / My Name

While I loved my Mexican culture, I knew that it wasn't all that was at work around me. After all, my name is Rocio (pronounced *roh-SEE-oh*), and I knew that it wasn't a traditional U.S. American name, because my teachers always pronounced it funny. On the first day of class every year, and whenever we would have substitutes, I would always be called "Rosario," "ROW-she-oh," or "ROW-see-oh," which I felt was kind of close to the actual the pronunciation of my name; this last pronunciation became my go-to whenever I was asked to pronounce my name for non-Spanish speakers, until I got tired of not hearing my name that way it was supposed to be pronounced, and I started to have people call me "Rosy." My parents and family already called me "Roci" (pronounced *ROH-see*), so I still felt as though it related well to me. At the same time, however, I felt like I was selling-out and shoving my home language and culture aside in favor of the United States culture and language that surrounded me at school and in our community. I didn't know how to perfectly blend these two parts of me into one balanced self that was accepted by both sides of my culture, so I began to allow people to pronounce my name whatever way was easiest for them, as long as it had some semblance to my actual name; but I still refuse to let people call me Rosario, since that is not my name.

Regardless, I feel like this freedom I have found within my name has empowered me to take control of my identities because it shows that I am different from others because of it. By allowing others to speak my name in their

own accents, I recognize that not everyone has the ability to pronounce my name with a Spanish accent because not everyone grew up speaking or hearing Spanish like I did. I know that I try my best to pronounce peoples' names properly, but there are certain phonemic sounds that I cannot recreate, so I do my best, and that is all I ask of others who try to say my name as well. By becoming more linguistically aware in this manner, I have also begun to be more culturally aware, which has afforded me the ability to see the cultural sensitivity/insensitivity that surrounds me. This awareness allows me to plan my lessons with cultural sensitivity and social justice as some of the key concepts that we cover and discuss in order to try to ensure that my students don't feel left out and are able to relate to the information presented. I plan my lessons in this manner because I know what it feels like to be given an assignment that is not culturally relevant, and that excludes particular perspectives. In my classroom my students and I create a transformative space in which we all participate in creating new knowledge and sharing experiences with each other as co-creators of knowledge; we each bring something unique and important to the table, and we would be foolish to ignore these unique perspectives.

### Shock de Identidad / Identity Shock

My first conscious realization that I was not "fully" American, came in the form of a homework assignment in the year 2000, during election season. My fifth grade teacher was teaching us about politics and government and how elections worked, and as an assignment, she asked us all to go home and ask

our parents who they were going to vote for in the presidential election between, George W. Bush, Al Gore, and Ralph Nader; she wasn't going to have us share our responses, but she wanted us to be aware of the political stances of our families. The assignment, itself, was innocent enough; she just wanted us all to begin to be more politically aware about the issues around us, but what she didn't necessarily consider was the fact that her students' parents may not all have the right to vote. As the good student that I have always been, since my parents instilled in me the importance of education, I went home that day eager to complete my assignment. That night, as my mom was cleaning up after dinner, I asked her who she was going to vote for in the election. At first she was a bit taken aback by my question; why would a ten-year-old be asking about politics? I explained my assignment, and she was a bit hesitant, but she said she wasn't sure who she would vote for yet, but that she was pretty sure she was going to vote for Al Gore because he was the democratic candidate and she had registered as a democrat. That was easy enough, so I then went on to ask my dad who he would be voting for, but little did I know that my entire life and sense of knowing and being in the world was going to change because of that one seemingly "simple" question.

When I asked my dad who he would be voting for and he told me that he wasn't going to vote, I started explaining to him the importance of voting and making your voice heard, and presenting all the information I had learned in school. He let me finish my explanation and then told me that it wasn't that he

didn't want to vote, but that he couldn't vote because he wasn't allowed to. I told him I didn't understand, and that's when he explained to me that he wasn't a U.S. citizen; he was a Mexican citizen in this country with a worker's permit and was not provided the right to vote. He explained to me that my siblings and I were all born in the United States, so we were U.S. citizens by birth and would have the right to vote when we turned eighteen; that my mom was a naturalized citizen because she was born in Mexico, but had taken classes, studied, and passed her citizenship exam, which granted her U.S. citizenship, and that is why she had the right to vote; and that he was born in Mexico and immigrated to the United States, but that he had not studied for nor taken the citizenship exam, and because of this he was not eligible to vote.

*¿Cómo puedo creer esto?* How could I believe this? My dad, who had lived and worked in California for as long as I knew was not a U.S. citizen and did not have the right to vote. This was something that my teacher did not teach us or prepare us for. While she did teach us that U.S. citizens had the right to vote, she did not teach us the qualifications for being a U.S. citizen, and did not even mention the possibility of not being a U.S. citizen. In our lessons, I just took it as a given that if we lived here, in California, in the United States, that we were U.S. citizens. I was greatly mistaken, and this experience left me confused about what it meant to be me. What did it mean for me that my parents were not born U.S. citizens—that my mom was a naturalized citizen, and that my dad wasn't a U.S. citizen at all? Did that make me any less of a citizen? Was I not a full U.S. citizen;

was that even possible? All of these questions started whirling around inside of me, and I felt like I had no one that I could ask for the answers. I did not want to upset my parents, so I could not ask them, and I did not think my teacher knew these answers since she had not even mentioned these types of circumstances to begin with, so I did not want to go to her. Instead, I just kept these questions and all of the turmoil associated with them inside of me, and I continued to consider how this knowledge affected me. I did not have much, if any, knowledge about immigration laws or even of deportations, so I was ignorantly privileged in that sense, because I did not have to go through the fear of knowing that my dad could be taken away from our family at any moment.

It didn't occur to me until many years later that many of my classmates probably went through a similar experience on that night as well. My school was mostly made up of students of Latin American descent with minority populations of students from white, African American, Asian, or other ethnic groups. Considering this breakdown, it is baffling to me that my teacher, who was a white woman, did not seem to consider her students' ethnic backgrounds in planning our instruction. Looking back on this situation, I consider myself lucky and privileged, because while I found out that my dad was not a U.S. citizen, my own citizenship was confirmed since I had been born in the United States, but I now wonder how many of my classmates found out the reality that they were not U.S. citizens; that they were born in Mexico (or elsewhere) and brought to the United States as infants or small children and that because they were not born in this

country they would not be given the right to vote. How many of them were told that they were undocumented, or “illegal,” and began to worry about their own status in this country, a status that they had no control over?

While I was just a child then, and I didn’t understand most of the language, prejudice, and rhetoric surrounding these issues, I wonder if it could have made a difference if I had talked to my friends about what I had found upon completing my homework that night. Could we have built a stronger connection with each other over this common struggle? Would it have made a positive difference if I or we had discussed this with the teacher? Or would our families have been jeopardized by revealing these truths? This is a very delicate line we balance on, and while I am relieved that my family doesn’t have to worry about this anymore, since my dad received his legal residency a few years later, and is now considered “safe,” I know that this is not the case for many immigrant families who have family members who still remain undocumented despite many years of residing within these borders of the United States, and not for lack of trying to get their *papeles*, papers/green card. The anti-immigrant rhetoric that is reemerging in today’s society was also a key player in U.S. society of the 1990s and early 2000s, and it creates a fear in families that affects their sense of safety and overall well-being.

In order to combat this, it is important for students to feel safe in the classroom; since I was not comfortable asking for help or clarification from my teacher about this, what stemmed from this issues was my own philosophy of

teaching in which I don't ever want my students to feel the same way about me. I encourage my students to open up to me about their lives and issues and I share my experiences as well. I am vulnerable with my students to show them that there is strength in vulnerability, and there is value in working through issues with others.

### La Literatura de la Educación / Education's Literature

When I was in high school, I took Honors and Advanced Placement (AP) courses that I thought were preparing me for my future better than the "College Preparatory" (CP) courses were preparing my schoolmates for their futures. I knew that in taking these more difficult courses, I would be grappling with more difficult concepts and reading more advanced literature because these classes were meant to introduce students to the level of courses they would take at the college and university level. While I was a little afraid that these classes would prove to be too difficult for me, I was excited and eager to take on the challenge every single time. I've always been called "the smart one" by my family, both immediate and extended, and that has always given me the confidence to take on new challenges.

In my Honors and AP English classes I was introduced to the works of Shakespeare, Austen, Bradbury, and many other canonized writers, but never was I introduced to Sandra Cisneros. I had heard of *The House on Mango Street* from my three older siblings who had all read it in their CP English classes, and when they asked me if it was on my course reading lists because they thought I

would love it, I told them it wasn't and explained what I understood to be the reason, which was something along the lines of—*that type of literature is not as academically challenging or valuable as the literature that I'm reading in my classes*—I was such a snob. While I was intrigued by the author's name, which had a pleasantness to it because it reminded me of my Mexican/Spanish roots, I was never intrigued enough by it to actually give it much thought.

By the time I graduated from high school, I thought I was set to go out and “take the world by storm,” like the old cliché, but hidden deep down inside of me was the fact that I was scared. I was scared that I wasn't good enough. I was scared that I would fail in life. I was scared that I wouldn't do well in college. I was scared that I would let my family down. Really, what it all came down to was that I was scared that I hadn't actually been prepared enough for my life outside of high school.

The first two years of my experiences at the university working on my B.A. in English Literature, passed uneventfully; I took many classes and read many of the same authors I was already used to, but in Spring 2010, I enrolled in a Women Writers class that changed my perspective on the value of literature. On the first day of class, I was surprised to find *The House on Mango Street* by Sandra Cisneros, in its entirety, on our course syllabus. I was puzzled; how could this lower level literature be included in a university class as an actual piece of coursework? I was intrigued.

We didn't cover this novel until later in the quarter, but I remember anxiously waiting to get to it, because I wanted to see how this type of text could be discussed and analyzed as important literature. When I first sat down to read it, I was instantly enthralled by it. The narrative style of it moved along really quickly, and I found myself reading it all the way through in one sitting. I saw myself in the words that were printed on the pages, and while I wasn't physically in the story, I not only felt like I knew the characters, but I felt that they knew me too. I had experienced something like this before, so I kept thinking back to my previous experiences trying to find something that was remotely similar. It was then that I remembered having read *In the House of the Spirits* by Isabel Allende toward the end of my high school career; this experience, however, was different.

With Allende's novel, I was able to feel a connection to some cultural portions of the text, like the spirituality, but I was not able to fully envision the realm encapsulated in the novel. It was still distant to me. With Cisneros' novel, I felt like Esperanza was a relative or neighbor of mine, and I felt that we could learn from each other. I could not believe that I had looked down upon that text for so long without ever even giving it a chance to change my mind; I felt stupid, because *The House on Mango Street* was the missing piece that would have helped me understand my positionality better, and would have helped me find the self-confidence that I so desperately lacked. I felt foolish for being prejudiced against this book that spoke so clearly to my Chicana experience. While our circumstances were nowhere near the same, I could see glimpses of me and my

family and my culture within Esperanza's reflections, and I wished that I had just picked this book up and read it for myself in high school.

### Mis Alumnos / My Students

At this point in my life, I have been a High School English Teacher for six years at a charter school that serves underprivileged and at-risk youth. I have met many individuals who have had an impact in my life, and I can only hope that they can say the same about me. While my job, on paper, is to teach them the content of English, in reality it is to teach them how to get through life and prepare them as best as possible for what lies ahead of them. Many of my Chicana students come to our school because they are pregnant or parenting, or have made some sort of mistake that caused them to fall behind; oftentimes, these young girls do not believe they belong in the world of education, and they only attend school to in order to avoid having to pay a government fine. Through my classes, I teach English content, but I also empower all of my students, not just my Chicanas, to find what makes them special and identify their motivation to succeed. Through my classes, I introduce my students to characters like Esperanza, and I encourage them to look deeper into her situation and their own, and to consider alternate endings that could be possible for each of them. By considering their current situations and considering various options available to them, these students are able to see a vast array of possible paths and destinations for their life journey. They are able to evaluate where their lives are currently headed and compare these paths to where they would prefer their lives

to go; they take control of their lives and make decision that they thought were denied to them, and they move toward success step by step.

While this Young Adult Chicana Literature has had a positive impact in my classes and on most of my students, I acknowledge that not all of my students respond well to this type of literature and that is OK. For some students, this type of literature hits too close to home, and they would rather shut down and ignore it completely, whereas other students cannot relate because they may be stuck in a selfishly privileged mindset, which is perhaps to be expected for adolescents, and they do not have the ability to look outside themselves to make connections and look for deeper social significance. I understand that these types of scenarios are possible, and I know that I will not be able to change every one of my students' lives by teaching Young Adult Chicana Literature in my classes, but I do know that this literature has the power to bring about change and understanding, and as long as it extends this power to one of my students, my effort is worth it; because like bell hooks, I aim to teach my students to transgress—to push past the limitations prescribed by society and create their own true existence. By affecting one student, I begin to create a ripple that will continue to grow as that one student continues her progress through life. Who knows? Maybe she will become a High School English Teacher who teaches *Gabi, A Girl in Pieces* to her students and creates another ripple that endlessly extends into the future.

## CHAPTER FIVE

### CONCLUSION: A *DONDE VAMOS* / WHERE WE GO

#### Crossing the Border to Decolonize Literary Education

And finally, to move past the use of texts as representative, we must simply include more border crossing and border dwelling texts. By reading a multiplicity of diverse voices and perspectives, students are better able to resist taking a single text, or a single voice, as metonymically standing in for a heterogeneous, internally diverse group. (Poey 96)

Although not much scholarship has been published about the value of Young Adult Chicana Literature on Chicana adolescents' identity formation, this genre offers valuable insight into this process for Chicana adolescents. The work done by Chicana and Women of Color Feminists in terms of identity formation generally begins with the fact that it is not an easy or pretty process; identity formation is a highly politicized action, because one is always choosing an identity in relation to another (i.e. identity is relational). Chicana feminism specifically focuses on the idea of borderland identities: oppositional yet blending cultures that coexist within the identities of a single person (i.e. Mexican and American cultures). It is through understanding how these borderland identities are worked through and built upon that young Chicanas can begin to understand the process of situating themselves in their various roles.

While the theories and criticisms carry a great wealth of knowledge, these types of texts are hardly ever accessible to young Chicana adolescents in general because of theory's reputation for being highly academic and full of esoteric jargon. Because of this, Young Adult Chicana Literature is a crucially beneficial resource in classrooms. While usually regarded as simple and fun literature that is like candy, this literary genre is able to take serious content and turn it into information that is easily accessed, processed, and understood by its readers. This type of literature is actually theoretical in and of itself, but it is theoretical in a way that is not usually viewed as such by the academy. Through Barbara Christian's argument that theory can come in narrative forms and Gloria Anzaldúa's concept of *autohistoria-teoría*, the value of Young Adult Chicana Literature as not just narrative but as theorizing that is accessible to all groups, becomes clearer for the larger framework of education. It is because of this quality of accessibility that Young Adult Chicana Literature is one of the best ways to help guide young Chicanas in their search for identities. While this thesis provides a glimpse into the usefulness of this genre, future scholarship in this field can still be done on the specific effects of using Young Adult Chicana Literature in the classroom and how it affects young Chicanas' sense of identity and belonging in more of a quantitative study.

Overall, it is clear that writing and reading are reflective processes that ask each of the participants to consider their current place and beliefs in order to affect some sort of change for their futures. Writing and reading are reflective and

healing processes; through writing, Chicanas can reflect on their experiences and face their issues head-on; through reading and interacting with those written texts, young Chicanas can begin to understand the roles they want to create for themselves in their present circumstances and in their futures.

As teachers of young Chicanas in today's society, it is our responsibility to help them realize that, contrary to popular political belief, they carry within them great power and worth and the ability to create positive change in their lives and their communities. By helping them foster reading and writing skills, we aid our students in creating life-long habits that will continue to aid them throughout their futures whenever they find themselves struggling. Through reading, they will have the affordance to find literature that speaks to them and that they can relate to in any manner of ways; their lives will be opened up to a wider variety of literary genres that they can explore to their hearts' content and browse through the different lessons that each has to offer them. Through writing, they will be able to find an outlet to productively reflect on their emotions in order to create a path toward healing and a renewed sense of self. They will be given the tools and the knowledge to understand how theorizing happens, and they will be able to give in to their own powers of theorizing in order to make new meaning for their lives.

Through the purposeful incorporation of Young Adult Chicana Literature in the classroom that works to dismantle the colonization that exists within literature instruction, in ways such that it is used as integral and not additive in the

curricula, teachers will be able to affect greater change in the world around them through their students. Particularly important in schools and classrooms where the majority of students are of Mexican or other Latino descent, but also in classrooms with low or non-existent enrollments of these ethnic backgrounds, Young Adult Chicana Literature is a necessary piece that needs to be included and meaningfully taught in order to address and challenge the histories of complicated histories of oppression and colonization that exist between the countries on either side of the U.S./Mexico border.

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