

ESCAPING THE CHICANO PATRIARCHY: CHICANA AND QUEER CHICAN@
IDENTITY STRUGGLES IN THE CHICAN@ NOVEL AND IN AMERICA

by

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DEDICATION

I dedicate this work to Alicia and Richard “Boomer” Mendoza, my greatest hopes and among the ones I write this thesis for. Follow your paths, and form your own identities, no matter what may try to stop you.

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ABSTRACT

While efforts have been made to include Chican@ literature into the North American canon, works by Chicanas and queer Chican@s remain underrepresented. Meanwhile, Chicanas and queer Chican@s themselves still face racial, gender-based, and sexual oppression from dominant, hegemonic American social forces and from some heterosexist male members of their own ethnic group.

This thesis is an exploration of how Chicana and queer Chican@ authors present within their novels their struggles to form and assert autonomous identities. It also serves as a discussion of how these ethnic subgroups have historically faced such identity formation obstacles. This examination leads to a suggested pedagogy that will engage and promote the academic success of such oppressed individuals, thus ensuring their representation in the educational field and aiding in their identity formations despite the limiting cultural expectations that they constantly face

CHAPTER I

Oppression at the Intersections of Race and Sexuality

One is astonished in the study of history at the recurrence of the idea that evil must be forgotten, distorted, skimmed over. We must not remember that Daniel Webster got drunk but only remember that he was a splendid constitutional lawyer. We must forget that George Washington was a slave owner ... and simply remember the things we regard as creditable and inspiring. The difficulty, of course, with this philosophy is that history loses its value as an incentive and example; it paints perfect men and noble nations, but it does not tell the truth. (DuBois, qtd. in Duncan-Andrade 593)

I have not yet unlearned the esoteric bullshit and pseudo-intellectualizing that school brainwashed into my writing. (Anzaldúa, "Speaking" 79)

Chican@s, Chicanas, and Queer Chican@s

As a Chicano student and educator who has witnessed historical and contemporary racialized suppression of my people's voices, I aim to bring Chican@ literature further into the academic forefront.¹ As a queer Chicano, I also aim to critique Chican@ literary and cultural studies and, in the process, strengthen my rhetorical voice which is in danger of being subsumed by the dominant social and intellectual forces of the academy.² Yet, if I write merely as an oppressed individual, I am guilty of self-reduction and of denying my intersectionality, which rhetorician David L. Wallace defines as the concept "which argues [that] we must get beyond binary notions of identity" (5). He goes on to credit queer theorists as "hav[ing] argued for a notion of identity as multiple and operating in complex interactions that [for example] make being an Asian American different from being an Asian American woman and different still from being an Asian American lesbian" (6).

Considering this matter of a more complex intersectionality, I must acknowledge that I occupy sites of oppression (as a member of American “minority” groups) *and* of power (due to my education and gender). Obviously, I can create this work because I have the privilege of studying for a master’s degree at a recognized university, yet I nevertheless feel the need to create this work due to my oppressed status as a member of “othered” ethnic and sexual groups. I thus urge readers to bear in mind that this thesis is not simply an outcry from the margins of literary studies. It is also an investigation in which I aim to examine my own complex intersectionality (thereby holding myself complicit in maintaining dominant systems of oppression) and offer a fair and honest evaluation of multiply oppressed Chican@s’ positions in literature, academia, and American society.

I anticipate that employing what Wallace calls an alternative rhetoric puts this thesis in danger of not meeting the criteria of standard academic work and may even prevent some readers from taking it seriously. However, I also anticipate that employing an alternative rhetoric will free me from the jargon and conventions of academic literary writing. Because I am writing about pressing issues that are by no means limited to an academic environment, I cannot afford to couch my writing in comfortable academic lingo that restricts information to a limited academic audience. In other words, I do not wish simply to use dominant academic discourse as an entry point for my work. Rather, I hope to enter my thesis through an alternative rhetorical approach and, as Gloria Anzaldúa did throughout her writing career, put the dominant establishment on notice while acknowledging my accountability for contributing to oppressive societal structures.

The oppression of Chican@s, according to Anzaldúa, arguably began “on February 2, 1848 with the signing of the Treaty of Guadalupe-Hidalgo. It left 10,000 Mexican citizens on this [the American] side annexed by conquest along with the land. The land established by the treaty as belonging to the Mexicans was soon swindled away from its owners” (*Borderlands* 29).³ Since the establishment of this treaty with its sweeping divisive efforts, people of Mexican descent in the U.S. had little choice but to begin building an autonomous cultural sense of themselves on the U.S. side of the Mexican border. These “new” people, however, could not ignore either part of their culturally bifurcated selves—neither the conquering Anglo-American side nor the native Mexican Indian side. They would eventually form a new collective cultural identity, one expansive enough to encompass the seemingly contradictory parts of their existence—a Chican@ identity.

This emerging culture of Chican@s had to find ways to express itself, for “[c]ultures,” as Toni Morrison reminds us, “whether silenced or monologicistic, whether repressed or repressing, seek meaning in the language and images available to them” (132). Not surprisingly, then, these “new” people sought ways to portray their struggle so as to create a place for themselves in politically unfamiliar, unfriendly circumstances, eventually giving rise to—among other art forms—a distinctive Chican@ literature. The Chican@ novel eventually emerged from this literary tradition, ideally investigating and analyzing the large matter of identity formation without ignoring or reducing its complexities. For the novel is a spacious enough genre to represent grand notions alongside more minute and intricate particulars, because, as Ramón Saldívar claims,

It expresses a continuing desire for types, for monological readings, for an anachronistic mythos of common understanding and a shared universe of meaning. And yet in the same breath, the novel never ceases to express the dazzling conceptual maneuvering that we all must perform in order to conceive reality, indeed to shape reality, in ways that will make sense to the human mind. (*Chicano Narrative* 206)

With such required attention to content and form, the novel allows Chican@ authors not only to present the Chican@ experience through stories, but also to “shape reality” by eventually challenging the American literary canon to include that experience as part of its own national identity.

To Serve Man

Within this Chican@ group, however, are subgroups who face additional double binds of oppression, namely Chicanas and queer Chican@s. Chicanas, for example, have been oppressed and omitted from the Chican@ movement’s dominant narrative since its inception. Jacqueline Martinez claims that Chicanos in the movement fell victim to

[a] danger encountered in all liberation struggles[, which] is the tendency to assert that one knows what is unknown ... and therefore what is necessary to learn in order to achieve liberation. Many men of *El Movimiento* ... asserted a knowingness that precluded acknowledging what was unknown to them—namely, the ways in which their own sexist attitudes and beliefs actually hindered a genuine and common struggle with Chicanas for liberation and transformation. (110)

By attempting to subordinate women while pursuing a liberatory agenda for (supposedly) all Chican@s, Chicanos in the movement ultimately blinded themselves to the fact that they were replicating the very system of oppression they had sought to resist. Meanwhile, they also stunted the very movement they struggled to create by preventing the “genuine and common struggle” that could have occurred had Chicanas been allowed to take their place side by side with them within the movement.

As a specific example of this Chicano blindness, in 1971, Armando Rendón published *Chicano Manifesto*, a prominent Chicano movement text that serves as a defiant challenge to Anglo America as well as a call to Chican@s to recall their pre-Colombian ancestry. In *Manifesto*, Rendón invokes indigenous Mexican history to define Chican@s as the rightful heirs of the American Southwest. However, he also reveals and reinforces blatantly misogynistic tendencies of the male-centered Chican@ movement.

A key passage from the *Manifesto* reveals much of the movement’s hostility toward Chicanas who would dare pursue their own liberation:

We Chicanos have our own share of Malinches, which is what we call traitors to la raza, after the example of an Aztec woman of that name who became Cortez’ concubine under the name of Doña Marina, and served him as an interpreter and informer against her own people.... In the service of the gringo, malinches attack their own brothers, betray our dignity and manhood, cause jealousies and misunderstandings among us, and actually seek to retard the advancement of Chicanos, if it benefits themselves. (qtd. in Contreras 108)

This passage begins by feminizing betrayal. When Rendón states that Chicanos “call traitors” “Malinches,” he invokes the legend of the woman blamed for centuries for the downfall of the Aztec empire and the subsequent subjugation of its people. Like the biblical Eve, she bears sole responsibility for the loss of Aztec prosperity and the resulting conquest at the hands of the Spanish invaders. By citing this legend, Rendón perpetuates the old tradition of blaming women for the social problems plaguing society, pinning on them any potential failures of the Chicana@ movement. Secondly, Rendón claims Chicano as an exclusively male domain when he states that “Malinches” are to blame for “attack[ing] their own *brothers*, betray[ing] our dignity and *manhood*” [emphasis added]. By claiming that the Chicana@ movement is a brotherhood, Rendón not only makes women the servants of men and their social advancement, but he marks women as “others” and denies them any social space. Nor are they part of hegemonic Anglo America or of the domain of mainstream feminism, which would arise approximately a decade after the 1971 publication of Rendón’s *Chicano Manifesto*.

Most important for my examination of identity formation, however, is the last part of the previous passage, in which Rendón claims that these “Malinches” “seek to retard the advancement of Chicanos, *if it benefits themselves*” [emphasis added]. In other words, a Chicana will sell out her brother, father, or even her son to pursue her own advancement. As Sheila Contreras succinctly states on her interpretation of Rendón’s manifesto, “[i]t is self-interest ... that propels acts of race traitorship, in that such treachery is initiated in the quest for personal gain” (108). Thus, Chicano achievement becomes the norm while Chicana advancement is placed beyond that acceptable norm and is therefore forbidden. The only purpose a Chicana can serve within Rendón’s

framework, then, is silently to provide to Chicanos whatever services they may need in their struggle for male advancement. Under such limitations, how could Chicanas even begin to form autonomous identities? What choice of roles was provided them in place of autonomy?

Anzaldúa writes about these limited female roles in *Borderlands*, stating that “[f]or a woman of my culture, there used to be only three directions she could turn to: to the Church as a nun, to the streets as a prostitute, or to the home as a mother” (39). These limited choices constitute the well-documented virgin/whore female dichotomy (or, as Anzaldúa labels it, the “*virgen/puta* dichotomy”) which allows no room for women to be anything but either hypersexualized or virginal (53). Sonia Saldivar-Hull also writes about this stifling dichotomy, stating that “for ... women in my family, there was no liminal stage of innocent girlhood” (7). Anzaldúa goes on to claim, though, that at the time of her writing, “some of us [Chicanas] have a fourth choice: entering the world” (39).

Lingering Chicana Oppression

The limiting of Chicanas to narrowly defined social roles did not end with the decline of the Chicana@ movement or with the publication of *Borderlands*. More contemporary literature, such as Aída Hurtado’s collection of Chicana testimonies, reminds the reader that “[t]o be ‘a good woman’ is to remain a virgin until marriage and to invest devotion, loyalty, and nurturance in the family, specifically Chicanos’ definition of family, which includes extended networks of kin as well as friends and parts of their communities” (15).⁴ According to this accepted “traditional” path toward Chicana maturation, a young Chicana’s development is stunted if she does not remain a virgin

until marriage because that virginity is a prerequisite for taking care of family. Thus, if a Chicana chooses to have sex before meeting her husband, she has betrayed her race by not being able to fulfill her culturally prescribed ethnic duty.

The alarming aspect of this gender-based restraint is that it is imposed not by mainstream white America but by Chican@s on their own women. For example, Hurtado writes that Chican@ parents are complicit in maintaining such archaic views of gender, for “many of the respondents [to Hurtado’s questions] stated that the assumption, however unrealistic and nonsensical on the surface, was that ... they would go from living in their household under the supervision of their parents directly to some mythical husband who had never crossed their home’s threshold before” (41). Apparently, Chicanas cannot be trusted to make wise decisions and certainly cannot be allowed a path for “entering the world.”

When Chicanas do try to make their way in the world by gaining an education that prescribes beliefs that go beyond their home culture, they often find themselves ostracized by their cultural peers or, at the least, surrounded by people who no longer know how to deal with them. Dolores Bernal, for instance, presents the testimony in Hurtado’s collection of one young Chicana university student who used to be in a gang with her brother in Los Angeles:

I do feel out of place sometimes and I have realized that even though Jose and Lalo are my brothers we are so different and I think it’s because I’m getting an education and I’m learning so many things and I wish we could sit down and talk. But somehow like I don’t know I guess either I don’t fit

in their world or they don't fit in my world. I feel that we cannot connect
'cause we no longer share the same ideas. (qtd. in Hurtado 631)

From this testimony, it seems that in order to form and assert autonomous identities, Chicanas necessarily have to leave behind the comforts of their physical and cultural homes and pay the price of no longer being able to relate to the people closest to them.

It is this very denial of Chicana autonomy that has led Chicanas to form their own theories and practices of liberation. Like Anzaldúa's "cactus needle embedded in the flesh" that causes her to write and thereby relieve her discomfort and ambivalence toward her own people (95), "Chicanas recognized the need to move against racism and sexism simultaneously. Chicanas' recognition of their paradoxical situation within Chicanismo formed the basis for the development of what we have come to know today as Chicana feminism" (Martinez 109). In short, the injustices Chicanas faced led them to Chicana feminism, which gives them a platform from which to expose and challenge these dominant, chauvinistic views of Chicana womanhood and provides them their own space in which to integrate the multiple parts of their identities and successfully come through the "*Coatlicue* State," an identity-formation concept invented by Anzaldúa that I discuss further in the next chapter.⁵

Escaping the Tribe

Like Chicanas, queer Chican@s find themselves oppressed by the heterosexist male hegemony, making them painfully aware that there is a price to being a member of a tribe: One must adhere to its norms or risk expulsion. Pressure to conform to traditional norms is understandable when a tribe is in danger of extinction and needs to form an insular, self-protecting unit. For as Anzaldúa writes in *Borderlands*, "Tribal rights over

those of the individual insured the survival of the tribe and were necessary” (40). Once a tribe is no longer in such danger, however, its norms often become needless. Joane Nagel writes that despite patriarchal attempts to maintain sexual norms, “[m]ale and female bodies do not automatically result in socially meaningful ‘men’ or ‘women.’ Rather the gender identities, meanings, cultures, and social divisions between men and women are social constructions, arising out of historical conditions, power relations, and ongoing social processes” (114). In other words, these “identities, cultures, and social divisions” over time become mere appendages of a blindly patriarchal society, more often than not doing its members more harm than good.

How, then, do those who do not fit their culture’s norms form and assert autonomous identities? More specifically, how do Chican@s who do not fit gender-based expectations resist being subsumed by those expectations? According to Nagel, sexual norms are common to ethnic cultures especially and serve as an important way to evaluate groups:

[C]orrect heterosexual masculine and feminine behavior constitutes gender regimes that often lie at the core of ethnic cultures. Our women (often depicted as virgins, mothers, pure) v. their women (sluts, whores, soiled). Our men (virile, strong, brave) v. their men (degenerate, weak, cowardly).... Because of the common importance of proper gender roles and sexual behavior to ethnic community honor and respectability, a great deal of attention is paid to the sexual demeanor of group members (by outsiders and insiders) in inspection and enforcement of both formal and informal rules of sexual conduct. (113)

It is in the best interests of the tribe to hold its members to its sexual standards in order to maintain its “pure” women and “virile” men, leaving no room for queer tribal members who do not fulfill the cultural requirements of “masculine” and “feminine” behavior.

Not surprisingly, contemporary queer Chican@s have often had to escape the tribe in order to exist free of enforced (and increasingly arbitrary) social conventions. In *Borderlands*, for instance, Anzaldúa writes that “I had to leave home so I could find myself, find my own intrinsic nature buried under the personality that had been imposed on me” (38). Similarly, many queer Chican@s have had to leave their homes, their families, even their communities in order to lead autonomous lives. John Preston writes about queer individuals leaving home to gain personal autonomy in the preface to his collection of gay writers writing about leaving their hometowns:

They follow, in one way or another, a basic outline. It begins with the sense of exile from the original hometown, an expulsion that was either delightful, because of the freedom it presented, or painful, because of the abandonment it stood for. The hometown of their birth was either the writer’s worst nightmare or an Eden that still has its appeal. From there, the gay man moves on to his new place in the world and explores it. (xiii)

Preston also writes about his desire to leave his hometown of Medfield, Massachusetts in his own testimony: “When it came time to pick my college, I chose one in Illinois, the far horizon of my family’s worldview, as far away as they could ever conceive of me going” (8). One may wonder what gives someone such a strong desire to leave home. Queer individuals, upon realizing how different they are from the “normal” heterosexual people around them, often feel that they have no choice but to go elsewhere

in order to form their identity free from normalized expectations. Indeed, Preston felt this way about his hometown, realizing that despite how close he felt to his hometown and the people there, “I was no longer one of them. I had become too different” (8). Several of the other authors in Preston’s collection also express strong feelings of no longer belonging in their hometowns and their equally strong desires to leave in order to become themselves.⁶

Once away from home, however, a queer person’s autonomous identity formation is not assured, for the effects of repression and isolation run through the queer individual’s identity formation. Many queer men internalize the heterosexist expectations others have of them and begin policing their own behavior and later expect “masculine” behavior from other queer men. Like the Chicanos who subordinated women during the Chicano movement, these queer men stunt their own and their communities’ growth by replicating the systems of oppression they tried to resist by leaving. Francisco Sánchez and Eric Vilain performed a study measuring the degree to which queer men monitor their own behavior compared to heteronormative masculine standards. Interestingly, their data revealed that “[o]n average, the men wanted to be more masculine in both their looks and behavior than they perceived themselves to be.... Conversely, the men wanted to be less feminine in both their looks and behavior than they perceived themselves to be” (116). Beyond self-monitoring, however, queer men also avoid men they deem too “feminine”: “survey studies with gay men have yielded results that support the idea that gay men scrutinize gender roles in themselves and in other gay men. For instance, gay men report negative attitudes towards gender atypical gay men” (112).⁷ Thus, despite the

grief they experienced from having others expect them to behave in a certain way, queer men project those ultimately meaningless standards onto other men and themselves.

The result of all these expectations is a queer world that, even when free of heterosexual men, is just as closely regulated as any heterosexual community. The resulting “community” is one in which the queer man still does not feel he belongs and may feel the need to suppress his own identity in order to be accepted. John Champagne writes bluntly about this regulated queer society:

If gay liberation involves some kind of freer expression of one’s identity, there was nothing “liberating” about The Red Baron or the other discos. I always felt in these bars as if the whole place was watching me. One false move, and everyone would be laughing at the little kid pretending to be an adult. It actually felt quite similar to life in Greenfield, where one wrong move—a gesture, a word, a sound—would reveal the secret effeminacy I never recognized, yet had to struggle constantly to conceal. (78)

It is striking—and tragic—that Champagne would feel the need to compare the more liberal Milwaukee to the confinements of his hometown of Greenfield, Wisconsin, which he had so longed to escape. Rather than finding liberation, he simply found another society in which he was expected to squash his own identity in order to fit a collective one. If there is any doubt of his feelings about the queer world he had found, he eliminates it when he writes retrospectively: “What strikes me today about my experience of being called a fag in Greenfield and my efforts to ‘fit in’ to gay life in Milwaukee is in fact that similarity of the two experiences. In neither case was I encouraged to share with

others the things I most valued in myself” (78). Simply put, he was never allowed to be himself in light of the expectations surrounding him, even among “his own people.”

This distaste for the “feminine” and queer men’s inability to accept each other’s unique identities ultimately creates greater difficulty in coming together to create a movement against male heterosexist norms. While such a movement does exist and queer Americans have gained rights that they did not have only decades ago, I wonder what strength and impact such a movement would have if queer Americans were able to unite without the desire to either push each other away or crush one’s individuality based on an arbitrary set of behavioral codes, heterosexist or otherwise.

Life and Literature

A cultural group’s social visibility can often coincide with its literary visibility. This relationship is not a simple, direct correlation, however. Just as repressed groups in the U.S. must consciously recover their autonomy from the dominant group of society, their literature must force its way into the established North American canon. Such national literary canons do not form without some impetus. Susan Gallagher writes that one important route to canonization is through a work’s material availability, which implies not only that a publishing house has seen fit to publish a text, but that the writer is working under materially safe conditions favoring his or her literary work (57). Such conditions already favor Western middle-class writers, especially those working in academic environments that afford them resources for such work. One can deduce that if a group of people struggles to gain even social ground with dominant social or cultural groups, that struggling group does not enjoy the same conditions amenable to entering the established canon.

Once the work is available in print, however, if it happens to arrive “on an instructor’s radar screen, [it] may be adopted for a variety of reasons” (Gallagher 57). If that work’s value is then spread to or seen by other teachers, “[s]uch choices made by numerous instructors may eventually nudge the text into the imaginary [or common] canon” (57). Chance also plays a part in the canonization of a text. Gallagher reminds us that when unknown authors publish their texts, it is unlikely that instructors will read a review essay concerning that work. There are other venues through which a text may meet new readers, such as “conferences, journal publications, book exhibits, and lectures” (59). In fact, Gallagher found the South African author Tisitsi Dengarembga’s novel, *Nervous Conditions*, at a conference and then made it a part of her “personal pedagogical canon,” the set of books she regularly teaches and places on her syllabi (59). After using the novel in her class, she then recommended the novel to various colleagues, helping establish academic value for *Nervous Conditions*.

As a text like *Nervous Conditions* gains more academic notoriety, it may enter the conversations of those who are the gatekeepers of literary awards. Even if a text does not win an award, there is no doubt that a sticker will end up on the text’s front cover, alerting potential readers that it was “a finalist” or was “shortlisted” for one of these awards. This path to canonization suggests that value begets value. Once a text finds the correct conditions for creation and publication, what begins as a trickle of buzz can become a windfall of recognition if, as Gallagher reminds us, “the complex relationship among material conditions, accidental encounters, disciplinary practices, and value-laden choices” aligns just so (60).

One may wonder what bearing this discussion of the mechanics of canonization may have on Chicana and queer Chican@ literatures since many consider the canon wars “over.” Instructors who carry this belief, such as English professor Jerry Insko, are content to claim that “it may be time to move beyond the sixties content of the culture wars and talk more about the ‘fruits’ of canon reform” and “the broader social function of what we do as teachers of literature” (352). But ignoring *what* we teach and enjoying the “fruits” of the canon wars imply that efforts by canon reformers are no longer needed and that the culture wars are indeed “over,” with no further threats of repression existing to marginalized literatures.

In 2010, however, the state of Arizona, through a legal edict, banned Mexican American studies in public high schools, a move which caused the Tucson Unified School District to ban such books as Rodolfo Acuña’s *Occupied America: A History of Chicanos* and Bill Bigelow and Bob Peterson’s *Rethinking Columbus: The Next 500 Years*. This ban left teachers and students with only whitewashed views of history (Biggers). Such institutionalized book bans are in line with the racialized efforts of the Arizona state superintendent of public instruction, John Huppenthal, whose stated goal is to “stop la raza” (qtd. in Biggers). If we allow such attempts to ban Mexican American studies to succeed while pretending the culture wars are over, the result will be—and in Arizona indeed is—the removal of a large number of literary works by Chican@s from public schools.

Although these bans are not yet taking place at Arizona universities, where canon debates have more significance and a deeper impact on the broader culture than they have in high schools, one cannot ignore or underestimate the magnitude or repercussions of

such an attack on Chican@ literature. Beyond the alarm of the attack itself, Mexican American public school students, as well as other students, will enter universities without knowledge of any historical or literary contributions by Chican@s. Without exposure to their own people's contributions, Chican@s may internalize the normalization of White European ideologies and be reluctant to study ethnic literatures at the university, since they have been taught that such literature, through its overt exclusion, has no place in the classroom. With such transparently racist and oppressive measures taking place and accepted under the guise of law, how can Chican@ scholars at any level ignore them and not wonder whether such measures will reach and restrict epistemological knowledge formation and dissemination in American universities? And if Chican@ literature as a whole is under attack, how can we expect Chican@ literature to emerge through the cultural smoke?

Jeffrey Insko goes on to write directly about the practical value of canons, stating that "one thing that canons do is to serve as our shared core of knowledge and provide examples of the values we hope to instill in our [university] students" (355). He also states that literature teachers must "provide ... inducements" for students to read and appreciate literature and convince them that "what we have to impart does, in fact, have what [William] James liked to call 'cash-value'" (353).⁸ To both of these statements, I respond with a question: How can we convince students of the importance of what we teach and how do we pass values on to them through the American canon if it does not include authors that represent those students? Teachers of literature at all educational levels have a duty to urge and help create an inclusive American canon, not because it's simply "the right thing to do," but because, as Insko claims,

we can more effectively produce the kinds of citizens I have described by teaching a canon that better reflects a wide variety of voices and experiences. But I believe this not simply because I think that it is “right” or closer to the truth or that it will automatically lead to my preferred vision of the future. Rather, knowing that many social groups have always had a hand in making America can help students recognize the claims that these groups have on all of the benefits and protections that our democracy is meant to afford. (356)

If we strip a people of their literature by excluding their literature from the national canon, we consequently deny that people its “hand in making America” and thus perpetuate the myth that only white Europeans formed and developed our country.

In *Chicano Narrative*, Saldivar quotes Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels concerning the effects of dominant thought, reminding readers that “the individuals composing the ruling class ... rule as a class and determine the extent and compass of an epoch ... [;] it is self-evident that they ... rule also as thinkers, as producers of ideas, and regulate the production and distribution of the ideas of their age” (208-9).⁹ As suggested by Marx and Engels’ salient statement, no matter how much people may want to believe in independent thought, their ideologies (and the identities people build based on those ideologies) are constructed and delivered to them by a select group of people in order to perpetuate the dominant ideology’s accepted norms. But groups dominated in this way can gain their autonomy by shedding their pre-critical beliefs—elements of the dominant ideology that they accept as truth until they reach self-awareness and begin the consequent journey toward autonomy. Thus, whether we are discussing one person’s

struggle for self-determination or the continuing work of canon inclusion, we must keep in mind that moving beyond pre-critical ideologies requires *action*, an intentional contesting of pre-critical thought.

In order to recognize the power and reach of ideologies fully, one must recognize that an ideology is more than a bank of beliefs for individuals to choose from; it also acts as a regulating agent by which individuals are judged and sorted. In fact, Saldívar, quoting Terry Eagleton, defines “ideology” as “much more than the unconscious beliefs a people may hold; it is more particularly ‘those modes of feeling, valuing, perceiving, and believing which have some kind of relation to the *maintenance and reproduction of social power*’” (qtd. in “Narrative” 210; emphasis added).¹⁰ With this definition in mind, one cannot ignore the potential dangers of a “dominant” and imposing ideology that casts a wide net over a society’s broad policies and that also polices the behaviors of the individuals that make up that society.

A dominant ideology by its nature is also self-sustaining, for it necessarily marks all contrary thoughts and beliefs as “other,” making them easier to compartmentalize as “inappropriate” or, at the least, unsuitable for the present moment. Also, by “othering” contrary thoughts and beliefs, a dominant ideology marginalizes them and confines them to the proverbial closet, preventing them from entering the public sphere freely. Saldívar gives an example in *Chicano Narrative* of the effects of early Puritan ideology that “did not simply exclude Native Americans from the colonists’ consensus about the new world being fashioned from the wilderness. The native inhabitants were seen as the very embodiments of the evils most threatening to the creation of the New Jerusalem” (210). This American example illustrates how an ideology maintains itself through exclusion,

handily subsuming and discarding any challenge as an evil that must be ignored, if not eradicated, and often closeting those whose presence it won't tolerate.

What the producers of dominant ideologies do not realize, however, is that the closet—the distant margins non-majority writers are shunned into and work from—may serve as a valuable formative space. As Wallace points out, Anzaldúa's "description of her own coming to voice suggests an incubatory function of closeting that does not erase the oppression inherent in the epistemology of the closet but also does not stigmatize the experiences of those who have been closeted" (120). We may wonder, perhaps excitedly, what may await us at the other end of this closeted period when oppressed people and ideologies come to voice and throw off the previously uncontested people and ideologies that closeted them in the first place. This uncloseting can never happen, however, if that closet door is effectively barred by blocking and eliminating "others'" ideas and works as soon as they are created.

Linking this notion of ideology and a burgeoning challenge of the status quo to the formation of literatures and of a national literary canon, I again cite Morrison, who claims that "[t]here is something called American literature that, according to conventional wisdom, is certainly not Chicano literature, or Afro-American literature, or Asian-American, or Native American.... It is somehow separate from them and they from it" (124). Interestingly, this notion of the dominant group defining itself as not-minority is paralleled in the theory of white privilege. For example, Harlon Dalton writes that "[m]ost White people, in my experience, tend not to think of themselves in racial terms. They know that they are White, of course, but mostly that translates into being not Black, not Asian-American, and not Native American" (15). We can see that the marginalization

inherent in the American literary canon is an indication and, arguably a result of the larger marginalization occurring in American society.

The most dangerous aspect of these marginalizations is their insidiousness. Many, if not most, white people do not call attention to their whiteness; white European literature does not call attention to its whiteness or Europeaness. Such dominant categories are merely seen as “normal” or socially unmarked. In order to deconstruct this binary system between “normal” and “other” that upholds the dominant ideological power structure, we must challenge it from the margins and claim that American literature is Chican@ literature, is Afro-American literature, is Asian-American, is Native American. In other words, we must make plain the intersectionality of literature itself, an intersectionality that opens the American literary canon to the literature of “others.”

Of course, the dominant group has not always willingly constructed the national canon to release its hold on the formation of knowledge and its identity. We must make those who construct it see their own omissions. There is hope in this effort, for Dalton also writes that because it defines itself by what it is not, “[w]hiteness, in and of itself, has little meaning” (15). One may conclude, by extension, that the established literary canon cannot forever stand on its own criteria if those criteria are constructed by what it is not. Chicanas and queer Chican@s, for example, are American; so when they create literature, they are contesting the unfounded notion that American literature “is certainly not Chicano literature” (Morrison 124). Yes, Chican@ literature exists for those who live in a liminal state, but it undeniably exists as part of an American literary record that reflects a part of America’s very real history. The dominant ideology thus cannot apply to all Americans or to all of their literature, for how can it apply to individuals (or their

literature) who are, according to the dominant ideology's narrow definition, neither one thing nor another? The dominant ideology must widen to accept the works of people who *are* American and who constantly intrude on the "non-definitions" of whiteness and dominance.

Yet, in order to defy the dominant ideologies and the notion of an already set American literary canon, Chicanas and queer Chican@s cannot be satisfied with merely creating and including works of fiction that adhere to dominant conventions. They and other marginalized people must write on their own terms and risk rejection from those in power. With such a responsibility, the creation and canonization of Chicana and queer Chican@ literature into the American canon become urgent matters. As Gloria Anzaldúa states,

[I write] [b]ecause the world I create in the writing compensates for what the real world does not give me. By writing I put order in the world, give it a handle so I can grasp it. I write because life does not appease my appetites and hunger. I write to record what others erase when I speak, to rewrite the stories others have miswritten about me, about you.... To discover myself, to preserve myself, to make myself, to achieve self-autonomy. ("Speaking" 83-84)

Literary Identity Pathways

By creating and inhabiting new ideological spaces in the national imaginary, Chicana and queer Chican@ authors are able to reflect in their novels the identity struggle of the people they represent. Young characters in many of these novels most clearly exemplify this identity struggle, for they often begin with a Romantic notion of a

unified identity that they inherit from their families. In other words, they unquestioningly carry on the beliefs and practices their families have established, whether religious beliefs, value systems, work ethics, or mute acceptance of the dominant ideology. One may wonder how this is unique, considering that many young people base their actions on inherited beliefs. This adherence to ethnic traditions is of great significance in Chicana families, however, as the migration of families from Mexico is continuous, ensuring that Chicana families are constantly having to pit traditional Mexican beliefs against capitalistic American ambitions. Their migration ensures as well the constant layering of cultural values over those already transformed by Chicana in the U.S.

This unchallenged identity, however, gives way to an existential dilemma as these young characters pull away (or are pulled away) from their inherited beliefs and struggle to re-form themselves. Yet, although many of these characters may realize that their families' ideologies can no longer contain them, they are left to wonder what ideological positions they *will* occupy. There is no simple, direct path to a new, independent self in society. This lack of familiar ground leads to existential questions: Where do I go from here? How do I behave when there is no prescribed role for me to fulfill?

This struggle subsequently leads to a postmodern scattering of the self from which these characters have to recover and "attach" themselves to something yet again (e.g., an ideology, a cause, among other things). In the process of identity formation, they create and subscribe to ideologies that resist even those they may have inherited from Chicana family members and compatriots. Without any prescribed role to fulfill, the character's identity may implode, in effect returning him or her to a pre-critical identity stage—but without an established pre-critical ideology. The character must return to his or her

origins without an ideological map to inform him or her of the bearings that work to constitute his or her identity. Thus originates the desire to create an original, individually tailored set of beliefs. In effect, the character must establish a new set of rules, however haphazardly, that guide his or her actions and beliefs. The character has come full circle, returning to where he or she began with the opportunity to create a belief system that may defy even the minority ideology of his or her family.

Implications

This literary identity formation's sociological relevance lies in how closely it mirrors the larger Chicana and queer Chican@ identity search that has been ongoing since the mid-1800s. While this character arc is presented in the fictional Chicana and queer Chican@ literature I analyze, it is also exemplary of real-life Chicana and queer Chican@ group identity formation. Although the analytical focus of this thesis will be novels by Chican@ authors, I do not wish to reject or discount drama, poetry, or other literary genres, for each one offers Chican@ authors opportunities to possess and declare their individual and collective experiences. Rather, I leave investigation of these genres to others more able to apply their expertise and examine the particular trends each genre presents. Here, my focus will be novels by Chicanas and queer Chican@s.

In Chapter II, I analyze two novels written by Chicana authors, for, historically, Chican@ studies (more broadly) and mainstream literary studies (more specifically) have not given the contributions of women as much attention as they clearly deserve. It is not a stretch to state that Chicanas are at the forefront of an identity struggle, for they must overcome the persistent silencing of their ethnic and sexual voices. Bárbara Renaud González's and Helena María Viramontes's respective novels, *Golondrina*, *Why Did You*

Leave Me? and *Their Dogs Came with Them*, present opportunities to examine Chicana identity formation specifically. I analyze these novels using, among other lenses, Chicana feminist theory, which contests the domination of Chicanas by their male counterparts and by white middle-class women, whose initial feminist push neglected the realities of women of color. In particular, I examine the ways Mexican women and Chicanas pass their cultural values on to their daughters and thereby either hinder or promote their daughters' efforts to counter the white, male dominant ideology. I also examine how women in these novels either resist or fall victim to the patriarchal restrictions their own ethnic group and American mainstream society place upon them.

In Chapter III, I analyze John Rechy's and Arturo Islas' novels, *City of Night* and *The Rain God*, respectively, as examples of queer Chican@ literature. The queer community has obviously been marginalized from the Chican@ community even more than women have been, for queer Chican@s must overcome oppression on multiple levels, making their path to identity formation even more treacherous and convoluted than that of heterosexual Chican@s. In my analysis of these two novels, I examine the identity formation of characters who have been ethnically marginalized by the dominant culture and sexually marginalized by their own people. I rely not only on theories of white and heterosexual dominance in this chapter, but also on gender and performance theories. By doing so, I intend to offer a glimpse of how queer Chican@ authors navigate multiple discriminations and how their characters portray the extreme marginalization that the authors also have faced.

I then conclude this thesis with a chapter dedicated to the educational implications of this literary and cultural study. Why are Chicana and queer Chican@ literatures and

their inclusion in the American literary canon important, and what bearing do those matters have on the texts educators use to teach in their classrooms? I aim to demonstrate that fictional literature has value equal to traditional sources of non-fictional knowledge. I will also show that, although Chicana and queer Chican@ literature and cultural studies have become more common and more developed in academia and American society since the Chican@ movement of the 1960s, educators must still make a conscious effort to include the artistic materials of such historically underrepresented people in their curricula. This effort is especially true as Chican@ studies continues to come under attack, as it has in Arizona and more recently in Texas,¹¹ and as queer rights continue to be hotly debated across the country.¹²

Despite the wide-ranging subjects represented in the aforementioned novels and the various backgrounds of their authors, all of them highlight their exclusion from the “American” literary canon. Concerning its exclusion, Saldívar, in 1989, offered another relevant point, this time from Pierre Macherey: “Like a planet revolving round an absent sun, an ideology is made of what it does not mention; it exists because there are things which must not be spoken of” (qtd. in *Chicano Narrative* 214).¹³ By speaking from the abyss of “things which must not be spoken of,” Chicana and queer Chican@ literature exposes what the dominant ideology suppresses and “fills the gaps and names the silences that are the limits of the ideological consensus of American literary history” (214-15).

This investigation has its value in revealing the “abyss” covered over by the academic guardians of the American literary canon as they flirt with the full-fledged inclusion of Chicana and queer Chican@ literature into the canon and Chicana and queer

Chican@ people into American society. It reminds readers that more than 160 years after the signing of the Treaty of Guadalupe-Hidalgo, Chican@s at large and oppressed groups within the Chican@ community (i.e., Chicanas and queer Chican@s) still must strive, not only to form and assert a collective identity, but also to emerge from a long history of oppression and suppression. With many Chicanas and queer Chican@s still facing economic, educational, and social gaps while facing new immigration laws that cast a wide enough net to worry American-born citizens, neither they nor their literature can afford to remain in that abyss and pretend that such struggles are over.

CHAPTER II

Integrating Her Way to Herself

I abhor some of my culture's ways, how it cripples its women, *como burras*, our strengths used against us, lowly *burras* bearing humility with dignity. The ability to serve, claim the males, is our highest virtue. (Anzaldúa, *Borderlands* 43)

[A]s I began searching to learn all that I had not known, I looked especially to Chicana lesbians and Chicana feminists. What I found was a language about and disposition toward life as a fleshy, messy, bodied experience.... It was from here, from engaging these kinds of work by Chicana lesbians, lesbians, and feminists of color, that I could begin to trace back through a life and come to speak for myself as a Chicana. (Martinez 37)

González's and Viramontes's Young Chicanas

Bárbara Renaud González's *Golondrina, Why Did You Leave Me?* and Helena María Viramontes's *Their Dogs Came with Them* have at their centers young Chicanas who must form autonomous identities under precarious circumstances. *Golondrina* is the story of young Lucero coming of age while in conflict with her mother and her own ideas about her home culture. It is the first novel in The University of Texas Press's Chicana Matters Series and represents the first novel ever published by the University of Texas Press. In the novel's front matter, the series editors, Deena J. González and Antonia Castañeda, write that the series is intended to "[document] the lives, values, philosophies, and artistry of contemporary Chicanas" and "underscore their significance in the history and culture of the United States." As such, it is significant that the editors chose *Golondrina* as the first novel to counter the suppression of Chicanas' "significance in the history and culture of the United States." Certainly, the novel's selection for publication by a major university press aids in its potential canonization, and the fact that it was

selected as part of the Chicana Matters series promises a resistant stance against hegemonic white, male literary domination.

In that mode, the novel, told mostly from Lucero's point of view, tells of injustices her family suffers at the hands of the white family that runs the King Ranch; the sexist oppression her mother, Amada, faces throughout her life; and the battle within Lucero between assimilating to Texan Anglo culture and expressing her Mexicanidad. As the novel progresses, her parents become opposite poles in her home education: Her father, Lázaro, belittles the mother, Amada, and her Indian-ness, while Amada struggles with Lucero's constant attempts to put distance between them. As Lucero maneuvers between her own desires and those of her parents, she must learn to integrate the disparate elements of the cultural expectations surrounding her.

Their Dogs Came with Them, meanwhile, involves a cast of characters whose stories become increasingly entangled in 1960s East Los Angeles. The novel's young Chicanas face oppression from governmental authority, parental limitations, and societal expectations. Ermila, a teenager whose social activist parents disappear when she is a small child, leaving her with her grandparents, constantly has her maturation contested by her grandmother, who took her in when she was still a small child. She also contends with constant signs and symbols of women's subjugation and their reduction to object status, all the while trying to make sense of the lustful feelings which her Mexican cousin Nacho has for her and her unfulfilling relationship with local gang leader, Alfonso.

Meanwhile, Turtle is a young woman who, in an attempt to impress her brother, Luis "Little Lizard," and maintain her relationship with him, discards all vestiges of femininity and joins the local gang, The McBride Boys, with him. Throughout the novel,

she is the subject of others' gender-based expectations, and she eventually internalizes her culture's negative view of women as flawed, weak objects. Ironically, although she resists the label of "woman" in order to seem strong and autonomous, she eventually surrenders her own will as she becomes the identity-less manifestation of the physical violence of her East L.A. neighborhood.

Tranquilina completes *Dogs'* central cast. The daughter of a traveling Christian minister and his unquestioning wife, she begins the novel as a quiet, submissive young woman. After being raped, however, she takes on a more earthly outlook and begins to lose faith in the miracles that previously seemed so commonplace. Viramontes highlights her innocence and saintliness through the character of her cruder, always perturbed friend, Ana. Ultimately, the community's fate depends on Tranquilina's identity formation and her assertiveness when Viramontes pits her against the social forces that oppress all the characters' lives.

Golondrina, *Why Did You leave Me?* and *Their Dogs Came with Them* portray prime examples of Chicanas resisting multiple sources of oppression as they try to construct identities from often conflicting societal expectations. Not only does the established, white power structure seek to either change or destroy them, but the men in their lives often personify the chauvinistic view of women as passive subjects of male sexual and possessive desires, much as Rendón does in his *Chicano Manifesto*.

Chicana Beginnings and Divergences

In the previous chapter, I highlight the importance of generational differences in the process of identity formation. All people absorb to different degrees the values and beliefs of their forebears. Despite this difference, however, everyone has a cultural origin,

a primary set of values and beliefs inscribed onto them throughout their childhoods. We must therefore take these cultural origins into account when examining how a person or character “becomes,” a term I use to denote the process of gaining an autonomous, realized identity. *Golondrina, Why Did You Leave Me?* and *Their Dogs Came with Them* both open with Chicanas of different (and conflicting) generations and origins.

González immediately begins *Golondrina*, in fact, with a generational difference and a dividing line between two locations of origin: “How my mother crossed the [Mexico-U.S.] border” (1). With this opening sentence, González establishes a major difference between mother and daughter (Amada and Lucero), emphasizing that they come from different countries and different eras. Soon afterward, this difference reemerges when Lucero states, “I’m an exile just like she’s been all her life, only from a different side of the river” (3). Although Lucero admits that she and her mother share the qualities of exiles—as we later learn, they become estranged from their origins and from the societies that would have them fulfill expected gender roles—she also points out the geographical distance between their origins (which leads to a figurative distance between them, as well). Throughout the novel, Amada and Lucero never fully reconcile their differences, for as Lucero matures, she becomes increasingly distant from her mother, eventually criticizing and belittling her.

Even before the gap between Amada and Lucero more fully emerges, a generational breach occurs when Amada physically removes herself from her first daughter, Salomé. Any hope of generational continuity is dashed when Amada decides she must abandon Salomé in Mexico in order to achieve autonomy by escaping her brutal first husband, Sapo. This continuity is something Amada fantasizes about throughout

Golondrina, convincing herself that reuniting with Salomé will repair the breaches in her life and in her family. She expresses anxiety over the possibility of this reunion multiple times, such as when she wonders, “Will my daughter remember me, or will she forget me?” (González 30). Later, she dreams during her escape to the U.S. about giving birth to a baby girl, only for her to “[become] a bird, pecking at the cord tying them together, sprouting wings, purple-tipped, and [flying] away” (37). Despite her desperate intentions to achieve continuity, the relationship between Amada and her second daughter, Lucero, does not repair this generational breach.

Unlike *Golondrina*, *Dogs* does not have a central character to point to. Yet, like González, Viramontes also opens her novel with female characters from different generations: “The Zumaya child [Ermila] had walked to Chavela’s house barefooted ... she stacked large, empty Ohio Blue Tip matchboxes the old woman had saved for her into a pyramid” (5). Unlike the gradual accumulation of generational differences in *Golondrina*, they assert themselves almost immediately in *Dogs* when the old Chavela becomes frustrated with Ermila as she tries to describe where she comes from: “I’m trying to tell you how it feels to have no solid tierra under you. Listen to me! The sound of walls cracking, the ceiling pushed up into a mushroom cloud. Do you need Drano to clean out those ears of yours?” (7). Although Ermila and Chavela are both from Los Angeles, Chavela and those of her generation came of age in a Los Angeles different from the conquered and colonized city Ermila and the other young characters learn to navigate. In Chavela’s outburst, we already see the ineffectiveness of intergenerational communication. Although much of this ineffectiveness may be attributed to the fact that

Ermila is very young at the novel's beginning, communication barriers persist throughout both novels.

Perhaps the most obvious—and ironic—communication impediment between Chican@s is the Spanish-English language barrier. Language is important not only as a socializing tool but also as a marker and carrier of cultural origins and traditions, especially for people whose customs are oppressed. It is not surprising, then, that Anzaldúa writes in *Borderlands* specifically about the importance of language for Chican@s, “a people who are neither Spanish nor live in a country in which Spanish is the first language; for a people who live in a country in which English is the reigning tongue but who are not Anglo; for a people who cannot entirely identify with either standard (formal, Castilian) Spanish nor standard English” (77). In short, because Chican@s are often represented by neither of the assumed concepts of “American-ness” or “Mexican-ness,” we must have a language of our own, one “with terms that are neither *español ni inglés*, but both” (77).

Considering such importance attributed to language in general, one may assume that a people would want to preserve their language through succeeding generations. In *Golondrina*, Lucero hears and learns her mother's Spanish throughout her formative years. But like many Chican@s who came of age in the 1950s and 60s, the acquisition of Lucero's family language works against her once she enters the homogenizing institution of public schools. She quickly recognizes the disadvantages of Spanish compared to her classmates' English: “I don't know all their words and that matters more than all my pretty flowers, that's what I'm learning in school” (González 87). In terms of identity formation, Lucero (like many Chican@s) makes the conscious, deliberate decision to

forsake her native language and speak English exclusively, thereby eradicating the cultural marker the Spanish language places on her—one less feature that makes her different from her classmates. Clearly, an academic education is not the only one Chicana students receive, for they also quickly learn (if they are lucky) to accommodate the cultural expectations American public institutions impose upon them.

The generational drift resulting from this language loss becomes apparent when Amada is unable to transmit her story to Lucero:

I'll just tell her the truth, and let my life be the example of all she should not become, look at how I've paid ... I will tell her how I am not a mother who abandons her children, how I've searched for her [Salomé], and no one knows what happened to her. There is so much Amada wants to confide in Lucero, but once her Texas-born daughter entered this English-speaking school, she refused to talk to her. (González 93)

Along with the language difference, Amada also again notes Lucero's different place of origin. The mother-daughter relationship, one that readers may assume should be the strongest that young girls have, has weakened as Lucero forms her identity according to Anglo American expectations. Lucero also recognizes the linguistic gulf between herself and Amada when she admits, "though I'm talking now in English ... I'm not saying very much because somewhere between the first and fifth grade I lost some words, and I don't know where they went. The words are from Mami, and it hurts to try to find them. And I'm afraid that I'll never see them again, and then what?" (94). Although she has apparently mastered English, overcoming the difficulties she encountered early in her public school education, she realizes she has paid a price for losing her command of

Spanish, and she equates her loss of Spanish with the loss of something from her mother—her mother’s tongue. Although she does not seem to have a clear conception of what this loss means for her, she is clearly becoming aware of the split with her mother and her cultural origins.

Although the loss of Spanish does not play such a large part in *Dogs*, it remains a factor near the novel’s beginning as Turtle, wanders the city, avoiding members of her rival gang, Lote M. When she asks a woman what time it is and doesn’t get a response, she tries to rephrase her question in Spanish: “Time. Time, sabes? Turtle tried to remember her Spanish, words that were boxed in storage. Pan, mantequilla. Ven pa’cá. But what was the word she couldn’t find?” (Viramontes 23). Like Lucero, Turtle had been raised hearing and speaking Spanish but lost her use of it in the ensuing years. Although this scene’s lack of communication likely stems from the woman’s fear of Turtle’s rough appearance, Turtle’s loss of Spanish demonstrates her potential inability to communicate with people of her own community.

Following from the loss of language—and even further-reaching—is the generational difference of values and beliefs. As I mention in the introductory chapter, there comes a period in a person’s or a character’s identity formation during which he or she begins to pull away from inherited beliefs and face the challenge of creating a new value system. In Lucero’s case, as she drifts further away from her cultural origins, she sees her mother in an increasingly negative way. Amada can’t join the PTA like Lucero’s classmates’ parents because “she doesn’t know *el inglés*” (González 93). But Lucero’s disgust with her mother grows from the language difference which to her represents a failure on Amada’s part to encompass all Lucero appreciates and believes in:

It's all her fault. It's the food we eat, her singing those *rancheras*, those sappy love songs between Mexican men and women crying for the ranches they lost or never had to begin with. Who cares about the stupid Mexican Revolution? Look how short she is, how lost she looks at the store because she doesn't know *el inglés*. How she doesn't even know she should be ashamed. (110)

Anzaldúa also expresses these sentiments acquired while growing up against traditional Mexican customs: "I grew up feeling ambivalent about our music. Country-western and rock-and-roll had more status. In the 50s and 60s, for the slightly educated and *agringado* Chicanos, there existed a sense of shame at being caught listening to our music" (*Borderlands* 83). Amada is also aware of Lucero's separation from family customs when she sees that, unlike her own culinary experience with "mangos, papayas, *chirimoyas*, *melocotones* [, h]er daughter never tasted anything, she realizes, watching her hungrily eye the peaches. This is all she knows" (138).

This intergenerational loss of shared beliefs also occurs in *Dogs*, most clearly in the teenage characters Tranquilina and Ermila. Tranquilina is the daughter of extremely pious parents whose faith allows them to believe even in the father's abilities of levitation and flight. Tranquilina shares her parents' faith until a young man attending one of their religious services rapes her, after which she cannot maintain her former innocent beliefs. After the rape, Tranquilina more clearly sees the banality of the people around her and consequently cannot believe they are fit to witness miracles:

Though Mama planted its incubation in Tranquilina's life, the actual experience [of her father's levitation] arrived without warning. Or had it

really happened? Tranquilina could no longer make that leap of faith, levitation ascribed only to saints who proved too holy for a world that didn't deserve them. (Viramontes 34).

Ermila, on the other hand, is continually subjected to the limitations her grandmother (as adoptive mother) tries to impose on her, limitations the grandmother probably abided by in her youth. In fact, Ermila's grandparents' house seems like a prison to her, filled with traps to ensure her captivity: "If she paced up and down the hallway, the repetitious groans from the loose floorboard reminded her she was entrapped" (Viramontes 146). The battle between Ermila and her grandmother even involves Ermila's hairstyle as a symbol of her rebellion (68-69). Ultimately, the differences between them become irreconcilable, and they become unable to communicate with each other: "The ground had shifted under them and the earth had breached, creating a rift between the two women.... Although Grandmother's big ears sprang out from her thinning gauzy hair, she could barely make out what Ermila said from the other side of the bluff" (179).

Tranquilina and Ermila have begun to recognize the limitations tradition imposes on them and express their desire not to submit to those limitations as had female characters of previous generations. But how do these characters go about forming new identities when they have little help from their mothers and grandmothers? As I ask in the previous chapter, where do they go from here? How do they behave when there is now no prescribed role for them to fulfill? These girls must undertake an uncharted journey toward autonomy despite multiple sources of oppression.

Toward *Coatlicue*

After making an effort to fit in with her Anglo classmates and separate herself from her mother (who becomes a metonymic representation of her cultural origins), *Golondrina's* Lucero now finds herself outside of two worlds:

The other *mexicanos* are always fighting with the gringos and making fun of them behind their back. They speak Spanish.... They don't want to belong like I do, they have no chance, but at least they belong to each other. They tell me I'm the stupid one, for pretending to be a gringa, and now the *mexicanos* are beginning to hate me too. The crazy thing is I'm beginning to hate them back, they just don't know it's the gringos I hate even more for making me hate them. (González 95)

Anzaldúa claims in *Borderlands* that "[t]he new *mestiza* copes by developing a tolerance for contradictions, a tolerance for ambiguity.... She learns to juggle cultures. She has a plural personality.... Not only does she sustain contradictions, she turns the ambivalence into something else" (101). It is clear that Lucero has not yet become comfortable with straddling the line between Mexican and gringo cultures, between the values of her home and the values of Anglo-American society. In her angst, she can't decide where to place her hostility, much less how to resolve it.

Lucero seems to be at a precarious point in her identity formation, as she seems about to enter what Anzaldúa calls "the *Coatlicue* State," a period of transformation in which people (ideally) learn to integrate the multiple and often conflicting parts of their developing identities. For as Anzaldúa writes, "[w]e need *Coatlicue* to slow us up so that the psyche can assimilate previous experiences and process the changes. If we don't take

the time, she'll lay us low with an illness" (*Borderlands* 68). She also claims that if we allow this process to occur, despite how difficult and uncomfortable it may be, then "our greatest disappointments and painful experiences ... can lead us to becoming more of who we are. Or they can remain meaningless. The *Coatlicue* state can be a way station or it can be a way of life" (68).

On the verge of Lucero entering the *Coatlicue* state, we then have several important questions to ask about her: Will she be able to integrate traditional and new beliefs into a cohesive yet mixed self-defined set of values? Will she pass through the "way station" of the *Coatlicue* state successfully and resolve her anger, or will the *Coatlicue* state become a "way of life"? And what will the result mean for her relationship with her mother and, by extension, her cultural origins? Before attempting to answer these questions, I will examine how some of the characters in *Dogs* also reach the beginning of their "*Coatlicue* states."

Unlike Lucero, Ermila has no relationship with her parents. I would argue that this puts her at somewhat of an advantage in her identity formation process. Viramontes writes of Ermila's parents that "they disappeared forever, leaving only a child" (58). While this is by no means a joyous fact, it leaves room for Ermila to develop her own ideologies and "become." She must first face the societal limitations imposed upon her as a woman, however. At the Salas car lot, she works part-time under "calendar pictures of bikini-clad women aiming their double-barrel chests advertising El Zócalo Fine Meats right above the thick accounting books where [she] recorded sales figures" (64). She also views a Coppertone billboard later in the novel that shows a "pigtailed girl's reaction to the pup tugging at her underwear. Her unmasked and untanned buttocks embarrassed the

girl, and Ermila couldn't fathom why. Angry, maybe. Frightened, yes. But embarrassed? At a dog biting *her* ass? This just didn't make sense" (245). Although she doesn't articulate it, Ermila is beginning to feel indignation at the fact that a girl or woman should be objectified and even embarrassed while her body is used as a promotional object.

Like Lucero in *Golondrina*, Ermila feels outrage but isn't able to resolve her anger. As she contemplates the objectifying pin-up calendar at work, she wants to free women from their submissive role, but rather than deconstructing the gender binary, she would simply reverse and perpetuate a gender-based power differential: "As the weeks passed, and as Ermila recorded figures into the green accounting grids, she secretly dreamed of hanging a bare-bottom man with a cannon of an erection and balls of iron advertising La Pelota Bakery, Con Safos, back to you, baby!" (Viramontes 64). Later, she feels an overwhelming, undirected anger at such disparate targets as the Vietnam War, the life-disrupting Quarantine Authority, and her cousin, Nacho, who has come from Mexico to stay with her and her grandparents at his parents' behest to find a job and make something of himself (285). Like Lucero, Ermila reaches a point where she must resolve the conflict between normalized injustices and her developing self-worth.

Unlike Lucero, though, Ermila comes close to articulating those injustices even as she matures. As a child, she resists the neighborhood's defeatist acceptance of their circumstances, for "she didn't want to ask why everyone disappears because it seemed to happen all the time; what she wanted to know, what she wanted to ask, was where" (Viramontes 15). She demonstrates this burgeoning sense of resistance again when she imagines defying the Quarantine Authority [QA] sent to deal with East Los Angeles's stray dog and rabies problem (meanwhile becoming another oppressive force in the

community), asking herself, “What might happen if the line of people simply wrapped themselves around the QA officers like a python?” (64). She also recognizes the gender binary under which the rest of the neighborhood operates, although she hasn’t yet developed the vocabulary to label or vocally oppose it: “Lollie’s mother slowly filled up with the fatty tires of family responsibility while [Lollie’s Aunt] Concha emptied because of family abandonment and Ermila had thought, What kind of fucked-up options are these?” (193). She is beginning to see the artificiality of the “choice” of either devoting herself to family or falling into ruin. Ermila seems poised to become something beyond virgen or puta as she reaches the *Coatlicue* state.

Turtle meanwhile contests gender expectations throughout *Dogs*, bringing to mind Judith Butler’s claim in *Gender Trouble* that “‘the body’ appears as a passive medium on which cultural meanings are inscribed or as the instrument through which an appropriative and interpretive will determines a cultural meaning for itself. In either case, the body is figured as a mere *instrument* or *medium* for which a set of cultural meanings are only externally related” (12-13). In other words, our physical bodies are vehicles for others’ interpretations of, among other things, our genders, making us all potentially passive beings who have our identities inscribed upon us by the people with whom we come into contact. Turtle exemplifies this passivity, for her identity is always inscribed upon her by others:

[Her real name] wasn’t the name Antonia María, tenderly whispered into the ear of a Mexican actress Turtle’s mother had admired from the balcony of the Million Dollar Theater.... And it wasn’t the nickname Tony Game, which had been given to her by a friendly Lucky Strikes-smoking gym

instructor at Belvedere Junior High. The name was her *For Real* one. She had been christened Turtle—always and por vida till death do us part—when she joined the McBride Boys [gang]. (Viramontes 16)

Even the name she considers “real” is assigned to her by others, the group of boys who themselves surrender their individual autonomy for the sake of having a group identity as the McBride Boys.

The switch between Turtle’s male and female names is indicative of her constant gender-switching in the eyes of others. The homeless woman who passes her on the way to Tranquilina’s religious service and Ray, a local shopkeeper, see her as a man (Viramontes 95, 259); but *The Eastside Tribune* records her as a woman, and her brother, Luis, ultimately sees her as a girl, a significant shortcoming in his eyes (258, 231). And it is Luis’s definition of Turtle that has the greatest effect on her because, in order to gain approval from him, she tries again and again to fulfill an expected male gender role. When Luis first takes her to meet the McBride Boys, she falls down the same slope that Luis easily navigates: “Luis was riding down, surfer-envious moves keeping his balance. She plunged in, catching a momentum downward, clumsily at first and skidding her ass, then springing up before Luis noticed” (225). Turtle tries to mimic Luis’s abilities, but, more importantly, she tries to appear “tough” and “able,” qualities she and Luis consider exclusively male. In fact, they both see womanhood as undesirable and practically as a defect. Early in the novel, Turtle recalls Luis cutting off her curls and shaving her head bald (25). Despite the haircut, Luis gives up the notion of making Turtle a “man” and instead consigns her to an undesirable, weak feminine identity: “He had forgotten he had a pussy for a brother. No matter how many asses Turtle kicked or how bad, how really

bad she was, Turtle was someone he hoped never to become” (231). Even Turtle internalizes this hatred toward her femininity and chastises herself more than once for being a “fucken girl” (220, 225).

Unlike Ermila, Turtle must struggle to integrate her male and female qualities so she can operate as a cohesive, whole person, despite everyone who would see her as either one or the other. If she manages to do so, she can claim her entire self, for as Butler writes, “The masculine/feminine binary constitutes ... the ‘specificity’ of the feminine [being] once again fully decontextualized and separated off analytically and politically from the constitution of class, race, ethnicity, and other axes of power relations” (7). In other words, Turtle could claim the intersectionality, the totality of herself, which I discuss in the previous chapter. If she fails, she will allow herself to be reduced to a single gender and to continue being defined by everyone but herself.

Tranquilina meanwhile is perhaps the most important character to examine in *Dogs* in terms of identity formation, for as I will later discuss, she is the most connected to the novel’s other characters and the one who eventually rises up against authority in a way Ermila only imagines. As previously mentioned, she must reconcile her parents’ (and her own former) faith with her jaded outlook in order to realize whatever power she has. We get a hint of this discrepancy when her mother declares upon her birth, “The child of God was not of this earth,” yet she is clearly an earthly, corporeal being (Viramontes 38). Will she fulfill her mother’s premonition about her, or will she be a woman “of this earth,” able to associate with those around her? Viramontes’s narrator provides hints of both possibilities at different points in the novel.

At times, Tranquilina seems to be a woman not made for this world, one who perhaps needs to hide herself away from everything around her. For example, she appears as a concealed woman when she and her mother create a meager meal for the people, many of them homeless, who will attend their ministry service: “Tranquilina’s unpolished toenails peeked out from under her long black skirt” (Viramontes 39). She also conceals her hand until she uses it to bring her friend’s brother, Ben, back to awareness after he suffers another emotional breakdown: “her hand emerged from under the poncho and she whispered, Posterior dorsal view, see Ben? ... And what is this, Ben? Ben took her nervous hand cautiously, and he whispered, his breath foul and hostile. Knuckles, he said, looking up at a familiar face. Your basic knuckles” (208). It seems that up until the novel’s end, she is unaware of her strength for helping others but still displays it in quiet ways, such as when she brings Ben out of his distressed mental state.

Along with Tranquilina’s dual earthly and divine natures, one cannot overlook her oppressed position as a woman, which is what causes much of her identity split in the first place after the aforementioned rape. Just before the rape, she still holds a strong Christian faith and believes in the power of her father, thinking that “Papa’s words had suspended like a bridge between possibility and impossibility. She sat next to Mama, her eyes nearly shut, drowsy from a drunkenness of faith. The humming of cicadas was enough to make anyone believe in God’s everlasting beauty” (Viramontes 213). In contrast to this sublime state, when she sees the young man that will rape her, a pronounced earthliness pervades the scene: “He had hardened callused hands that were no strangers to tilling, and accustomed to clenching the shaft of an ax to split timber into kindling. And Tranquilina could smell him. Fermented earth and corn bread” (213).

When he first assaults Tranquilina, he knocks her facedown into a pile of manure, a sharp physical, worldly contrast to the calm, otherworldly faith she had felt just moments earlier. To emphasize the violent animal nature of this event, Viramontes interweaves Tranquilina's memory of it with a description of dogs fighting over a soup bone, which ends with a "mutt lay[ing] warm in his own blood, his breathing a quick succession of pants, his eyes obsidian-glassy" (215). Within this passage, Tranquilina and the mutt are both powerless, reduced to victim roles in the face of dominating, savage predators. After this trauma, Tranquilina becomes more concerned with the matters of this world than with the heavenly, as her mother would have her be: "Know ye not, mama said, fixing her crinkly collar, that the friendship of the world is an enemy of God?" (203). How does Tranquilina reconcile her mother's constant view toward Heaven with the baseness of her new reality (and of the city that surrounds her)? And what bearing does this reconciliation have on the characters Tranquilina interacts with?

Lucero, Ermila, Turtle, and Tranquilina all reach a point where they are poised at the precipice of a great change. But, again, as Anzaldúa states, we cannot assume that these young women will successfully integrate conflicting ideologies into a cohesive identity. We must examine not only their own efforts at such integration but also the influences that push them either toward or away from it.

Coatlicue's Guides

As Lucero enters the Coatlicue stage in *Golondrina*, she has effectively separated herself from Amada after living for several formative years in the Texas Panhandle and drifting significantly from her cultural origins. This split between mother and daughter is more than a mere regrettable emotional loss. As Lucero grows more distant from Amada,

she communicates almost exclusively with her father, Lázaro. While this connection on its own does not hamper Lucero's identity formation, it could result in the lack of knowledge of the feminine. Such knowledge is more than an abstract female bond, for without it, Lucero might be exposed only to the tenets of patriarchy, which places women in a subordinate position just as the public school she attends makes Spanish an inferior language.

A large part of this subordination stems from what Anzaldúa claims is the belief of "Christianity and most other major religions, [that because] woman is carnal, animal, and closer to the undivine, she must be protected. Protected from herself" (*Borderlands* 39). Saldívar-Hull, citing Sonia López, also writes about the joint nature of a dominant patriarchy and religion:

the family structure is based on masculinist notions that emphasize men's supposedly natural superiority and authority over women. Women's role in the Chicano family is primarily to serve men. She also cites the power of the religious institution, which for Chicanas is primarily the Catholic Church. Through its myths and roles, the church trains men and women to accept patriarchal authority as something ordained by a (male) deity. (30)

Amada reveals this dual negative effect on her own experiences as a young woman of this oppressive connection between male and church dominance:

"The night before my wedding, you know what advice [my mother] gave me?" Her shoulders harden. "Told me that my duty was to *aguantar*. That I was going to become a woman, that I should obey, that I should obey. Had no idea what she was talking about. *Chiiiiit....*"

Aguantar. Put-up-with-it, take it, shut-up-and-don't-open-your-mouth.

A woman's lot. A woman's duty, the Bible says, the Church says.

(González 5)

With this admission, Amada indicts her mother—and all women before her—for cooperating with the patriarchal Catholic Church and its established tradition of making female submission a generational pattern. Examples of such submission to men abound in *Golondrina*, such as when Lázaro implies that women, like land, are possessions for men to own, saying, “My ancestors were mean. *Malos*. Had to be, Amada. That's the only way you could make it here, the land is meaner still. But if you can tame it, ¡aaaaaaay! Like a woman!” (24).

Amada would have Lucero defy this pattern if only she could communicate with her. González provides Lucero with a surrogate female presence, however. This presence comes from her tías, who form the safe space of a female community and who advance an alternative discourse of power in the face of societal and familial patriarchies. Wallace claims that safe spaces are valuable because “while it is important to continually engage the discourses of power and discrimination ... it is also important for those in marginalized groups to escape to settings and to maintain discourses in which the struggle against oppression need not be the dominant issue” (107-08). When the tías visit Amada in the Panhandle, they form this important “setting” where they can pass their knowledge on to Lucero.

Perhaps because female spaces are so rare in *Golondrina*, Amada and her sisters are careful to maintain this setting as an exclusively female one. Despite the cultural distance between Lucero and her mother, Lucero notes that, although Amada doesn't

understand another woman's English, she "understands everything because she says women have their own language" (González 73). Amada urges Lucero to protect this female communication from male interference, warning her: "Don't let a man get too close...." "Not till you're married.... Let the drums go inside you, but nothing else" (168). Although she doesn't yet recognize its social significance, Lucero begins to notice the absence of men in this safe space: "My mother's four sisters, my tías, dance all the time, even though their husbands don't" (169).

The tías specifically use the act of dance as their alternative discourse in which they can reverse the male-centered values surrounding them. While the established patriarchy views female sexuality and its expression negatively, Tía Lilia tells Lucero, "*El danzón* lets you show off the line, 'Madita, the pride in your neck, the crucifix dangling between your breasts, the proportion of waist to hips, the muscles in your thighs and calves in those stockings'" (González 77). Later, in a rare transmission of female values between Amada and Lucero, Amada tells her, "That's why you have to learn to dance, because it's the only time you can say yes!" (168). Dance also promises to be a replacement for the patriarchal values Lucero will ideally escape, for after she makes a failed attempt at a mambo, Tía Paquita foretells, "You'll understand the mambo when you get older.... Right now just learn the steps. One day you'll have to run away, and the mambo will be there waiting for you" (100). So the dance is not only an alternative language through which the novel's women communicate; it is also a value that will serve Lucero after she "becomes," serving as a replacement for the values of the dominant patriarchy Lucero must outgrow.

Despite his complicity in the dominant patriarchy, Lázaro, Lucero's father, also helps to guide her through the transitional *Coatlicue* state by transmitting his stories to her, thereby helping her maintain ties to her cultural origins. In fact, the importance of story, especially the telling of stories, no matter the emotional cost, is a theme that dominates *Golondrina*. Even before the novel begins, González writes in her author's note, "This book is a fictionalized telling of my family's story. The events are completely real to Texas, however, a story so cruel and sublime that if I wrote the truth you wouldn't believe it" (viii). Then, in the novel's introduction, Lucero presses Amada for the *story* of her crossing (2), but Amada is determined to leave her story behind on the other side of the border: "Mami's getting angry with this conversation, preferring a thousand other *chismes* and family '*scandalos*, anything but this" (4).

It turns out to be Lázaro who tells his story, spending nearly the length of the novel intermittently telling of his family's losses to the Anglo owners of the King Ranch. He sees his stories, in fact, as something to be treasured and maintained between generations, such as when he tells Lucero that his mother "trusted [him] with her story, even though [he] was just a boy" (González 121). Lucero also recognizes the generational importance of stories, stating, "As the oldest son, entrusted with top-secret for-your-eyes only family stories, [he] says he has to give them to me, the firstborn daughter" (109). Even despite the painful and shameful nature of the family's history, Lázaro bears the responsibility of telling it in order to release others from its burden: "Daddy doesn't want to tell it, but says he has to.... *la gente* want to forget this story, but they can't, that's why he keeps telling it, 'cause he's the chosen one to tell a story the people are trying to forget but they can't until he tells it from beginning to end" (132-33). Lázaro and his stories

have led Lucero to restate the premise of the *Coatlicue* stage: in order for *la gente* (and Lucero) to free themselves from the pain of their stories and become a whole people capable of moving forward, they must face their stories, much like Lucero must face the painful aspects of her maturation in order to become an adult woman.

Amada, on the other hand, seems incapable of influencing Lucero, especially considering her own role in maintaining traditional patriarchal values. But she occasionally manages to speak out against gender-based behavioral expectations. These brief moments of rebellion begin “when [Lázaro] called [Amada] old woman—because that’s what men call their wives—this time Mami didn’t like it ... that’s when the *corajes* began” (González 50). Amada later questions men’s possessiveness of women when she interrupts one of Lázaro’s stories by asking him, “So Texas was like a woman that any man could possess, *¿quieres decir?*” (115). Although Lázaro ignores her and continues his story, the question does not go unnoticed by Lucero, who thinks to herself, “I know that word, *poseer*, because my mother uses those words all the time, but I don’t think my brothers understand it” (115). While Lucero begins to recognize patriarchal discourse and behavior, she is also beginning to realize that that discourse has an effect not on her brothers, but on women such as herself and Amada. It seems that, in spite of her devotion to her family at the cost of her own autonomy, Amada is very aware of the patriarchal system she is a part of and indeed chooses moments to criticize it, thereby helping Lucero understand the forces that would inhibit her identity formation.

The comfort of a female safe space is also important to Ermila in *Their Dogs Came with Them*. Although she doesn’t have a protective group of aunts (or any surrogate supportive mother figure, for that matter), she and her three girlfriends, her F-Troop, form

a setting in which they can share each other's experiences without male intrusion. In their safe space, they share a non-standard language, using terms exclusive to their group, such as "I keso" for "I guess so" (Viramontes 61). As insignificant as such uses of slang may seem, the reader must keep in mind that the girlfriends exist in a larger society filled with oppression from public schools, overbearing parental figures, and the ongoing highway construction that daily is destroying East L.A. By using their own terminology, the girlfriends defy the sources of oppression surrounding them and mark themselves as part of their own group in the midst of a world that neither accepts nor satisfies them.

Along with providing an alternative discourse, the girlfriends' safe space allows them to create their own stories. In the previous chapter, I point out the reasons Anzaldúa gave for writing, among them the fact that "life does not appease [her] appetites and hunger" ("Speaking" 83-84). Similarly, the girlfriends tell stories that may at first seem impractical and valueless. But these stories are a way for them to recreate their existence beyond the boundaries of their present circumstances:

they listened to Rini rewrite accounts of her phantom father by
proclaiming a gift package or a funny postcard arrived in yesterday's mail
... and the girlfriends nodded but never asked to see his handwriting. Or
Ermila's single sentence stories of foster homes, half memories of the
Child Services or half truths about Alonso.... At the Top Hat Hot Dog &
Pastrami Eatery, Lollie continued her ongoing saga, a daily revised life
detailed in letters and slipped into her girlfriends' lockers about her
imagined marriage to the Monkees guitarist, Peter Tork.... She wrote lists

of what she cooked for him, described the house in Beverly Hills that she redecorated. (Viramontes 62)

The girlfriends' stories also keep people alive that the neighborhood has lost. They tell stories of Mousie's brother, YoYo, for example, who died in the Vietnam War, and "swore against allowing [him] to vanish into a number on the Cronkite evening-news death tally" (61). Through such stories, the girlfriends defy the events happening around them rather than situating themselves as unfortunate, mute victims, and thereby position themselves as actors rather than objects. Viramontes confirms this reading of the girlfriends' stories when she states, in an interview with Elisabeth Mermann-Jozwiak and Nancy Sullivan, that "we have these groups of people, like Ermila and her F-troop, who are trying to write stories other than the one, the *only* one that they have. They are trying to write these out; they're imagining other lives. To be able to imagine other lives in a colonized zone is incredibly subversive" (85). Thus, these stories are a means for Ermila to expand her realm of possibilities beyond her neighborhood.

As previously mentioned, however, Ermila displays some ability to free *herself* from the restrictions imposed on her. Despite her bond with the girlfriends, she remains unique from them. At Top Hat Hot Dog & Pastrami, they all wear "the same brand of [straight-legged] blue jeans they had purchased together at the First Street Store... in order to make a statement about togetherness and nonconformity," but when the girls leave the restaurant, "[o]f them all, only Ermila took home geography and algebra texts for homework" (Viramontes 56, 57). Ermila's part-time job also makes her unique among her friends. In fact, the job is a way for Ermila to strive toward a more mature identity, as "[a] paycheck somehow assured [her] that she took care of personal business like an

adult” (64). Combined with her desire to rebel against the Quarantine Authority, these examples show Ermila as at least preparing herself to create an autonomous identity, separate even from that of her closest friends.

Meanwhile, unlike the other characters in this analysis, Turtle has no female companions to help her form her identity or anyone simply to commiserate with. In fact, she spends nearly the entire length of the novel alone and rootless, as Viramontes often depicts her as an isolated figure, outside of the world around her. Not long after she enters the story, for example, she is oblivious to her surroundings, as when “[s]omeone had turned on all ten televisions [at the Black Cat TV Repair Shop] to the same station. All this action happened without her knowing, alarming her” (Viramontes 21). Similarly, she is disconnected from lives passing her by, as “[c]ars passed and fast-beating windshield wipers melted the faces of the drivers under sheets of water” (29). The people passing her become a faceless mass instead of individuals who could offer her some chance of connection.

Turtle’s isolation bears consequences when a shopkeeper molests her after she tries to steal from his store. When he realizes that Turtle is a girl, rather than easing off of her, he touches her in a more threatening manner, finally “[digging] his metal-cold fingers between her thighs again, this time pressing harder, palming her buttocks, swirling his two hands much slower and slower” (Viramontes 24). At the moment when Turtle most needs someone to reach out to her, “[n]ot one driver from all those cars zooming on the new freeway bridge, not one driver driving the overpass of the 710 freeway construction, not one stopped to protest, to scream” (24).

Throughout the novel, Turtle faces this same separation from everybody, including members of her own neighborhood gang, the McBride Boys, since she has gone AWOL. The one person she had previously sought a connection with, her brother Luis, shuns her simply because she is female. She is also isolated from everyone else because she is the only non-heterosexual female character in either novel. Other than Alfonso, a male gang member who strongly suppresses his bisexuality, Turtle is alone, disconnected from others. Regarding lesbianism, Anzaldúa claims that, more than being isolated figures, lesbians are viewed as a threat to the Chicano family structure because they place staid family concepts outside the realm of the ordinary, revealing them as structured rather than inherent social expectations: “[F]or the Chicana lesbian, ‘the ultimate rebellion she can make against her native culture is through her sexual behavior’.... She transforms the bourgeois concepts of ‘safety’ and ‘home’ into concepts she can carry with her along with her political commitments” (qtd. in Saldivar-Hull 73). Thus, Turtle is even more prone to challenges from dominant gender expectations than her counterparts in Viramontes’s novel. But while she is arguably the character who is in need of the most support through the *Coatlicue* state, she receives no assistance, placing her identity formation in great jeopardy.

Lastly, although Tranquilina has less support than Ermila or Lucero in Gonzalez’s novel, she is not as bereft of help as Turtle is. She does have one regular source of female companionship in Ana, a woman whose younger brother, Ben, suffers mentally and physically after he and a small boy he led away from his mother were hit by a cement truck when he was eleven. Initially, Ana serves as Tranquilina’s foil, angry and violent, in contrast to her subdued nature, even in dire situations. Ana also highlights Tranquilina’s

grounded nature with her own hectic life. When Tranquilina calls to tell Ana that Ben has disappeared again, Ana answers the phone “harassed and out of breath,” just getting home, from where she reports how busy she’s been at work (Viramontes 206). Yet, despite these differences between the two women, they form an effective team, helping Ben survive despite himself. In fact, they are the only ones able (and probably willing) to deal with the wreckage of Ben’s life.

The most important moment in Ana and Tranquilina’s relationship, however, occurs as they clean Ben’s filthy apartment. When Tranquilina drops a pot, she uncharacteristically exclaims, “SHIT” (Viramontes 209). Her exclamation is so uncharacteristic, in fact, Ana thinks that “[c]oming from anyone else, it would not have been so funny, but since it came from the lips of the saintly Tranquilina, the word took on such a renewed and refreshing meaning” (209). As the reader can expect, when Ana tries to get Tranquilina to repeat herself, she initially refuses. But Ana finally gets her to agree: “Okay, then, Tranquilina said and rose from Ben’s reading chair. Shit! And then Tranquilina pressed her hand to her mouth to cover the delight or perhaps to suppress another vulgarity” (210). This comic moment offers relief from the claustrophobic atmosphere of Ben’s apartment, but it is also an important moment for Tranquilina, as Ana brings her down from her saintly nature and provides a space for her to express her frustration in such a vulgar manner (and perhaps feel some pleasure at doing so). With Tranquilina straddling earthly and heavenly roles, Ana in effect pulls her down from the rafters and allows her finally to be human like everyone around her, thereby offering the support that Tranquilina does not receive from her mother.

The main female characters from *Golondrina* and *Dogs* have all reached the “postmodern scattering of the self” that I describe in the previous chapter. They have faced societal constrictions and have, in response, begun reshaping their identities at a distance from the ones they inherited from their families. They now have the opportunity to decide how they will deal with these constrictions and whether they will ultimately become a part of the social system that created them. In short, these characters must finally recreate themselves.

Way Stations and Ways of Life

Throughout the course of *Golondrina*’s narrative, Lucero faces pressure to assimilate to the language and social customs of her Texan Anglo classmates while she also discovers the importance of her family’s past from Lázaro’s stories. At the same time, she also witnesses the various ways traditional Mexican patriarchy has oppressed her mother, while receiving from Amada and her tías an opportunity to appreciate and develop her femininity. Ultimately, it is up to Lucero to decide which principles she will abandon and which she will change to her liking in order to succeed on her own terms.

Lucero begins gaining a sense of agency as she works with Lázaro. Her time in the cotton fields with her father affords her the opportunities to work outside the feminized home space and to earn her own money. Despite the weeds always “getting bigger anyway,” constantly giving her more to do, she states that “it feels good to do this, I can help my family” (González 145). She now has the opportunity to act rather than to be acted upon, since she can now choose either to help her family or use her money for “makeup, miniskirts, [and] hamburgers on Saturday” (143). As she matures into the work

world, she also becomes capable of self-analysis and self-criticism, recognizing the futility of her desperate attempts at assimilation:

I know how poor we are, and don't mind most of the time, but what I wear seems to matter so much to everybody else. I wear pretty things, like my Grace Kelly cashmere from the second-hand where the rich girls leave the clothes they don't want, so I don't look cheap, but in a way it's worse because the gringos know I'm pretending to be them.... Wish it didn't matter, that Billy Ray [Lucero's potential Texan Anglo boyfriend] would like me no matter what I wear, and then I'm the one who's ashamed because it matters too much to me. (158)

The tension between Lucero's native Spanish and the English she must learn and speak in order to fit in with her peers represents another obstacle that assimilation forces upon her and that Anglos never experience. According to Anzaldúa, acceptance of one's native language is a step toward freeing oneself from the dominant forces and from shame: "I am my language. Until I can take pride in my language, I cannot take pride in myself. Until I can accept as legitimate Chicano Texas Spanish, Tex-Mex and all the other languages I speak, I cannot accept the legitimacy of myself" (*Borderlands* 81). Lucero exhibits the beginning of this language acceptance at the same point in the novel as when she begins to see the eventual uselessness of forced assimilation. Rather than viewing Spanish as a source of shame, she begins associating it with the richness of her home culture:

Spanish makes me feel kind of like when I think of Billy Ray, all gooey and sentimental. Like the juicy opening of a just-sliced watermelon, the

wild sugar of *la sandia*'s pink-red heart, the warm after of Mami's peach jam smearing my lips. Spanish is the big hands of my father, talking and flowing with words.... And it's also my mother's sewing machine ... making me all the pretty sunflower dresses she never had, her Spanish purring with the pedal. (González 158-59)

Lucero realizes that by abandoning her native language, she has also abandoned a part of herself: "I'm nothing without these words, and now they're gone" (159). While the statement that she is "nothing" is an exaggeration, she clearly understands that she has paid too steep a price for acceptance from everyone around her.

Lucero also shows a willingness to face the stories of female subjugation, educating herself by unflinchingly "[reading] in books about the white men who carried the women's *panochas* on their belts, like it was a season of hunting women instead of quail. It's all in the back room of the library, the ones about Quanah Parker under lock and key, where the librarian gave me a look when I asked" (González 160). Rather than relying on stories from her father to learn about her history and herself, Lucero now seeks knowledge that is not easily available and does so despite others' silent disapproval. She also fulfills Tía Paquita's premonition about the mambo as she roots herself in dance, partially as a substitute for the Spanish she has lost: "Dancing is my big secret. Now that I hardly speak Spanish anymore, it's my way of talking without words, and nobody can take this from me, nobody can stop me from dancing with my mother. When I dance, my words are in my shoulders, my arms, waist, hips, feet" (169).

After Lucero begins reintroducing parts of her cultural origins back into her evolving identity, she attends "Taco Tech," The University of Texas-Pan American, where

“everybody’s Mexican, which is a good word here” (González 199). In this setting, Lucero has an opportunity to further reconcile herself with her cultural origins. She even states that she has no interest in transferring to the University of Texas-Austin because she is in “the perfect place for [her]” (199). Also, while she attends “Taco Tech,” Lucero’s conception of dance expands from an insular, protective feminine space to a universal one: “I hear conjunto music all night, which means joined together. Some people think our *polkita* looks simple, but it isn’t. Not about the steps at all. A polka’s for dancing in unison, when friend or foe, past and future relatives, pass you on the wooden floor. Reminds you you’re not alone, no matter what” (200). The words “future relatives” hint that Lucero can now integrate with the people currently around her while also opening herself to integrate with people from her own culture with whom she has yet to meet. It seems that Lucero is now more open to what her future may bring and is no longer concerned with assimilating with her Anglo-Texan peers. She has learned enough of the dominant culture, however, to learn “the rules” of academic success and achieve a more advanced education than anyone from her home culture ever has.

Lucero finally expresses without hesitation a willingness to return to her cultural origins near the novel’s end. While Lázaro tells her another story of his past and his family, Lucero sees a bird and recognizes it as “a kingbird [that] has left his family sleeping on a barbed-wire fence to fly away. I hear its *whit-whit*, see the flicker of iron-colored wings testing the wind to Mexico, wishing I could follow it, even though I’ve never been there” (González 210). After spending so much time trying to fit in with her Anglo peers and belittling her mother for retaining Mexican values, Lucero wishes to see her mother’s country. It is also significant that she wants to return to the country where

Amada abandoned her first daughter. Perhaps by returning to Mexico, Lucero would breach the generational gap that Amada's abandonment of Salomé created.

In perhaps the most challenging section of the novel, Amada makes a final appearance in which she attempts to remedy that gap herself. Once she has left Lázaro and her American-born children are gone from her, she receives a letter from Salomé (now over forty years old) stating that she intends to cross over to the U.S. and stay with Amada. Like Amada, Salomé has fared poorly with men, leaving "her professional husband after he beat her for the last time" (González 232). Moreover, her father, Sapo, has ruined her chances to improve her station in life, having "spent [all his money] on women, drink, and a half dozen other children, leaving nothing" for her (232). Thus, Salomé's exodus to the U.S. will serve as an escape from male control over her circumstances.

Salomé's crossing promises to be very different from the one Amada accomplished many years earlier. Amada remembers that "[t]he Rio Grande was not much of a river on the day she crossed it, just a bottle-green ordinariness of water and turtles underneath the wooden bridge" (González 230). In fact, her entrance into the U.S. seems easy and inevitable when she sees a sign on the U.S. side of the border that says "Welcome to the United States" (230). Salomé, on the other hand, laments that she didn't cross earlier, before "the border became the wall of Berlin" (232). Besides reflecting the realities of the U.S.-Mexico border becoming a more heavily politicized (and militarized) demarcation, the difference between crossings also demonstrates how much more difficult it becomes for women in male-dominated societies to actively change their circumstances when arbitrary borders and expectations are reified. Despite the currently

more dangerous crossing, however, Amada and Salomé intend to reunite at the site of separation—separation of one country from another, a mother from her daughter, and idealistic aspirations from harsh realities. Given a successful reunification between Amada and Salomé, it seems they would rectify a multitude of breaches.

It also bears noting that in this section of the novel, Amada reduces herself strictly to the role of “mother,” and an unsuccessful one at that. She berates herself for her children’s struggles, claiming that “everything is her fault, it has to be her fault that a son died, that another one’s in prison.... God punished her because she was afraid of being alone” (González 229). She similarly scolds herself for failing to provide Salomé with a better life when she thinks, “I was supposed to bring her [to the U.S.] in my arms, smelling of freedom and American *dólares*, and here I am, a poor restaurant cook who wears Avon” (235-36). In both instances, she determines her self-worth directly through her children, whom she has allegedly failed without any hope of redemption.

All this self-rebuking ends ambiguously when Amada enters the Río Grande to carry Salomé to the American shore. After suddenly seeing a dove and hearing a girl’s voice after awaking from a nap in her car, she leaves the car and runs into the river, convinced that the voice is Salomé calling to her. González does not guarantee to the reader, however, that the voice is ever Salomé herself. Rather than finding an actual person, “Amada reaches *that little girl’s voice*” (237; emphasis added). Moreover, the scene’s chaotic tone and the tree limbs and brush that pull at Amada call into question whether any other people are in the scene at all despite her feeling “the press of bodies” and “hands and feet trying to pull her with them” (237). One may indeed wonder if Amada has lost touch with reality altogether as she reverts to her past, feeling “her

daughter [Salomé] kick inside her, that first kicking” (237). Soon afterward, she reverts further, reliving moments from her childhood, “smelling the anise in her mother’s *pan dulce*, and once again she hears the whole plaza’s clapping for her little-girl rhymes” (237).

It seems that rather than wrestling in the water with Salomé—or anyone, for that matter—Amada instead falls from the cumulative weight of her memories and failures. Given this interpretation of the river scene, the reader may conclude that Amada has been defeated by her self-defined failure to provide for her children, especially Salomé. Indeed, shortly before she drowns to death, she envisions “all her children, impatient, waiting to be born,” as if she must try having and raising them again in order to placate their impatience. (González 238). Even at her death, she defines her life’s (lack of) success through her role of “mother,” ultimately surrendering to the expectations that the established patriarchy has always placed upon her and failing to define herself on her own terms.

González offers some redemption from Amada’s defeat, however, in *Golondrina*’s final pages, when she shows Lucero finally comfortable in the place where she began. As the epilogue opens, she is still dancing, displaying the spectrum of her femininity by letting a man “[put] her in jail, slowly and surely, all *suavecito* and stuff, and I’m a puppet on a string,” only to display her free sexuality later, “dancing *sin los* high heels and my French perfume is smokin’ the room and I haven’t twisted and shouted like this in years” (241). Yet, while she expresses herself individually in her dances, she is also able to situate herself as part of her larger cultural history, asking, “It begins here,

doesn't it?" (241). After spending a majority of the novel trying to escape from her home culture, she has integrated herself into it and can now guide others to do the same:

Now I understand. This is home, *¿por qué me fui?*

My name is Lucero, and it means bright star, guiding you back from so far away. (242)

There is a mystery concerning the identity of the "you" that Lucero refers to here. This undefined "you" also appears at the end of the novel's introduction when Lucero says that this is her mother's story and asks, "From what she didn't say, she told me her story, you understand?" (8) One may infer from the generational nature of *Golondrina's* stories that Lucero has a daughter of her own to whom she is transmitting her family's stories. If this is the case, Lucero may be "guiding ... back" this same daughter who has been on her own path of identity formation, serving as a *Coatlicue* guide as others have before her. However, "you" may be more universal and refer to *Golondrina's* readers. In this case, Lucero breaks the novel's "fourth wall" and tells readers at the novel's end that she is guiding them back to their own cultural origins and family stories. Whichever possibility readers deem accurate, the generational aspect of the novel remains intact, for Lucero, who has been aided by guides and has resolved challenges to her identity formation, now guides others and invites them to appreciate their own personal and familial histories.

This claiming by Lucero of her identity and purpose in the novel's final lines shows vast development when contrasted with an earlier moment when Lucero still sees her identity as defined by others and possesses only a vague sense of her ultimate purpose: "Guess I have the name my parents made peace with ... Lucero, which means

light, but more than that, more like a necessary light in the darkness, Mami says. The gringos just call me Luci. I think my name means more, something I can't translate, like the hopes my parents had, once upon a time between them" (González 105). Lucero by novel's end seems to have successfully passed through the *Coatlicue* state, able to accept and integrate disparate cultural values in order to return home without being constricted (and constructed) by the patriarchal oppression her mother suffered. We cannot, however, assume the same level of success from all female characters.

As previously mentioned, Ermila's grandmother in *Their Dogs Came with Them* would have her adhere to outdated rules and limitations. It is not surprising, then, that she subscribes to the belief that women's sexuality is dangerous to themselves: "Ermila's fate was something Grandmother could not challenge, and ... she sought out God's assistance, a thing she should have done, in hindsight, when her daughter first showed signs of femaleness. All of Grandmother's rational thoughts were absorbed in preventing Ermila's sex from entering their decent household" (Viramontes 73). According to her grandmother's belief, Ermila's sexuality is necessarily *indecent*, as opposed to the discursively assigned feminine home space which must be protected from outside contamination.

At one point, the grandmother even lets herself briefly imagine killing Ermila rather than allowing her to enter into her sexuality, admitting to herself, "*You cannot protect her even from the wilderness of herself*" (Viramontes 147), and consequently asking herself, "*Would you do it, have the courage to smother the child's breath once and for all?*" (148). Ermila nevertheless takes possession of herself in defiance of her grandmother's tendency to conflate her with her mother and an "evil" female sexuality,

telling her, “I’m me, Grandma, not my mom” (73). Ermila would obviously prefer to be treated as herself, on her own terms. It is not coincidental that after staking her identity claim, Ermila “freed her waist-length hair from its rubber band and shook it loose” (73). Although this may seem a small, insignificant gesture, the grandmother has spent the novel up to this point trying to tame Ermila’s hair just as she tries to tame Ermila. Combined with her words, this action signifies her refusal to subdue herself as her grandmother would have her do.

Similar to this rebellion against her grandmother, Ermila later acts on her prior desire to defy the Quarantine Authority, shouting, “Hey, what’s the holdup?” as she waits in an identification line with other neighborhood residents before she can return home (Viramontes 289). After a brief confrontation with one of the QA officers, Ermila is told that she can go ahead and pass the line. But after finally winning a small battle with the QA, Ermila looks beyond herself and her wants in order to let a woman with a sick baby go, instead. Yet, despite these signs that Ermila may be moving beyond the neighborhood’s established limitations, a few pages later, she is still concerned about Alfonso, her boyfriend and the leader of the McBride Boys, who is the epitome of meaningless “manhood” (and who, ironically, is not brave enough to recognize or claim his bisexuality) as prescribed by gender-based expectations (294). When she does finally return home, her grandmother mistakes her for her mother, Inez. Rather than asserting her own identity again, Ermila “wished she were someone her grandmother wanted her to be” and answers, “It’s me” (295). Viramontes doesn’t make clear whether Ermila is asserting, “It’s *me*,” like she did earlier, or if she’s finally surrendering to her grandmother’s tendency to conflate Ermila with Inez and answering, “It’s me,” as if she *were* Inez.

However, given the previous sentence in which Ermila wishes to appease her grandmother, the reader may assume the latter.

Ermila also occasionally falls back into the roles society expects of her. For example, although she shows a tendency toward self-reliance, she is still repeatedly willing to wait for Alfonso and rely on his “gang banging reputation” as an asset (Viramontes 65). At one point, she performs the romantic conventions that she clearly dislikes in a phone conversation with him: “She said she loved him, which was ... a lie, and then returned to bed, immediately regretting having arranged [a] clandestine meeting [with him]” (75). It seems that Ermila is not yet ready to claim independence from familiar routines and restrictions. She instead at one point “imagine[s] herself an empty wine bottle being jammed with a note and then tossed out into the ocean, roiling on the spume of the sea *until someone discovered her*” (italics added; 66).

Ermila ultimately proves a difficult character to decipher. Although she is independently able to begin seeing the system that would restrict her, she spends her time in the novel fulfilling the submissive role she rails against. Rather than freeing herself from an unfulfilling relationship with Alfonso, she continues to play the part of a steadfast girlfriend. And rather than gaining independence from her grandmother’s expectations of her, she yields in the end to her grandmother’s delusions involving Inez. By novel’s end, Ermila has not yet passed through any apparent change. The reader is left wondering if she will indeed learn to integrate new and old values and become more herself as Lucero does in *Golondrina*.

Turtle’s fate, however, is much clearer than Ermila’s. She has an opportunity to claim an autonomous identity when her lesbian sexuality is revealed. Claiming her

sexuality would also be a way to integrate the “masculine” and “feminine” aspects of her identity. But instead, Turtle refers to herself as a “Grade-A cold-blooded malflora,” which she clearly does not see as a positive quality (Viramontes 236). Not coincidentally, “*malflora*,” a Spanish pejorative term for lesbians, directly translates to “bad flower,” as if a lesbian were something that is supposed to be feminine but cannot be due to an innate defect. Shortly before calling herself a *malflora*, Turtle contemplates “how hurtful bad flowers can be” (235). It seems that Turtle has internalized dominant ideas about gender rules and restrictions and therefore sees herself as a defective part of her society rather than as someone different but still having intrinsic value.

Rather than integrating conflicting values into a new, cohesive identity, Turtle disintegrates into two selves, conveniently distancing herself from any responsibility for her later actions. We first see Turtle splitting into two selves when she is initiated into the McBride Boys by enduring a beating from them. As the gang members attacked her in a cemetery, “Turtle collapsed on a sodden grave, while she saw another self run away, another Turtle jumping the gravestones like a gazelle, feeling the wind running through her hair like fingers, running faster and out of this pain” (Viramontes 233). This identity split occurs again just before she murders Nacho—who incurred the McBride Boys’ vengeance by beating up their leader, Alfonso—when she notices that “[s]he was outside the Pontiac standing in the rain watching herself inside the car” (320). Shortly afterward, while she’s stabbing Nacho with her screwdriver, “another Turtle, the one not her, pulled out the screwdriver, her old faithful [from Nacho’s body],” (321).

By the end of the murder scene, rather than showing any possibility of joining the world as a whole person, Turtle progressively becomes less connected to what occurs

around her. At the beginning of the scene, when her gang mate Santos tries to hand her a gun, she kicks it away and becomes merely a part of “a mass confusion of limbs” (Viramontes 322). When Santos punches her, she barely feels it. Rather, “she no longer [has] a mouth to speak” and follows another gang member’s instructions to “waste” Nacho (322). Just before Turtle strikes the final blows, Viramontes writes that she is acting in a “rented body,” dashing any hopes that she may regain some connection to her humanity before she commits this irreversible act (322). After all this violence, Turtle finally abandons all of her former identity when she convinces herself that “a girl named Antonia never existed ... her history held no memory” (324). In Anzaldúa’s terms, Turtle has failed to achieve a *mestiza* consciousness, for “[t]he work of the *mestiza* consciousness is to break down the subject-object duality that keeps her a prisoner and to show in the flesh ... how duality is transcended” (*Borderlands* 102). Instead, Turtle spends the entire novel as a passive object—constantly *acted upon*—rather than becoming an active subject—*acting upon her environment* for her own betterment.

As defeatist as Turtle’s identity journey may seem, however, Viramontes in the novel’s final scene offers her redemption through Tranquilina, who accepts the earthly part of her personality that her mother would have her forsake, believing that “everything happened here on these sidewalks or muddy swamps of vacant lots or in deep back alleys, not up in the heavens of God” (34). Despite her mother’s best intentions, Tranquilina comes to believe that her makeshift missionary church ultimately does not improve anyone’s circumstances. The homeless woman we are introduced to early in the novel remains homeless. Tranquilina and her mother see the same faces time and time again coming to eat the thin soups they make at the missionary church ministry.

Tranquilina ultimately concludes “that their ministry was no better than another bottle of Thunderbird wine, a quick fix of heroin, another prescription drug for temporal relief” (97). Instead, she would rather perform miracles that are earthly and practical:

Her fidelity to earth, or better, her understanding of miracles came not from Mama’s fanatical prayer session, the frequencies of full-throttled worship taking place right above her—a dozen black-clothed women chiseling away sin—but from spent silence in the dankness and dampness of unvisited spaces. Forbidden places teeming with life she could not see. Miracles demanded faith in the unseen, and good earth, handfuls that ran through her fingers, was filled with minute worlds of it. (93)

This respect for the miraculous in the mundane reflects Viramontes’ concern with de-elevating literature, for as she has said, “the role of the writer should be akin to that of the subversive activist. The task of those who write from such a position is to clear away the ‘abstract’ from words and bring them down to the ‘material’” (Oliver-Rotger 300).

Tranquilina’s firm grasp of the earthly, then, allows her to be a minister of practical relief for the broken people of her city, and even “[t]he young hoods like those on Figueroa Street would never harass Tranquilina because they knew she was penniless. They would allow her to search inside a cardboard shelter or permit her to ask in her all-knowing voice, Have you seen a friend of mine?” (Viramontes 283). Tranquilina is therefore able to minister to those around her *because* she has removed herself from her mother’s expectations. Rather than shutting herself away from the world and remaining a concealed woman, she begins to fulfill her change as she and Ana search once again for Ben: “Tranquilina approached the darkness with an aura of light behind her and to Ana,

she became someone else, *something* else altogether” (280). She has claimed her own power and will become a liberating force for all the victims of East L.A.

After the graphic violence of the novel’s final pages, in which Turtle stabs Nacho and is herself shot and killed by the police (Viramontes 322, 324), Tranquilina sends the dead into peace by “[rearranging] the boy [Turtle] in an effort to make him comfortable in his eternal sleep, just as she had done with the other boy lying a few yards away” (325). In this moment, she takes on the burdens of the dead and is unable to “delineate herself from the murdered souls because these tears and blood and rain and bullet wounds belonged to her as well” (325). I would argue that Tranquilina, by extension, takes on the burden of the entire city when she defiantly shouts at the shooting police officers, “*We’rrrrre not doggggs!*” (324). Speaking for all the oppressed people of East L.A., she rejects the animal identity that the QA and other authoritative forces have impressed upon them. Out of all the characters in *Dogs*, Tranquilina rises up as the unexpected hero and takes on everyone’s suffering, putting herself in the line of the colonizers’ bullets. Her refusal to move away from the murder scene is vital, for she is the only one who can bear proper witness. Without her presence, the two dead “boys” and everyone else involved would become anonymous figures, as “[e]xcept for Tranquilina, no one, not the sharpshooters, the cabdrivers, the travelers dashing out of the [bus] depot, the barefoot or slipper-clad spectators in robes, not one of them ... knew who the victims were, who the perpetrators were” (325).

By novel’s end, Tranquilina has passed through the *Coatlicue* stage to claim the ultimate power of overcoming dominant forces in order to declare possession of her own and her neighbors’ identities. She fills the void left behind by the victims of such

authoritative dominance and moves well beyond the novel's last page, for as the novel closes, she resolves to

not fear them [the police]. Shouting voices ordered her not to move, stay immobile, but she lifted one foot forward, then another, refusing to halt.

Two inches, four, six, eight, riding the currents of the wilding wind.

Riding it beyond the borders, past the caesarean scars of the earth, out to limitless space where everything was possible if she believed. (Viramontes 325)

Viramontes intentionally leaves Tranquilina's fate undetermined, "calling to the reader and letting the reader decide whether the character goes off or not" (Moore 58). In fact, Viramontes creates this rhetorically ambiguous ending to challenge readers to take part in the creation of the novel, for she believes of literature that "readers [as well as writers] are participants" and that "the act of writing is only half finished and can only be completed when the reader is involved" (59). Whatever the reader decides of Tranquilina's fate, however, this stunning ending to *Their Dogs Came with Them* illustrates the power Chicana@s may gain in forming an autonomous, cohesive identity that can effectively move about in the world and create practical changes.

Conclusions

Although *Golondrina, Why Did You Leave Me?* and *Their Dogs Came with Them* differ in style, narrative structure, location, and historical background, both of their authors present within their respective novels the difficulties Chicanas face as they form identities that defy established patriarchal, gender-based restrictions. Generally speaking, women often face gender-based societal discrimination. But following the tenets of

intersectionality, we must recognize the unique challenges that individual women from different ethnic groups face. In the case of Chicanas, we must recognize that they face gender-based discrimination in the context of their Chicana identity. It is not enough to say that women are women and, therefore, all face the same difficulties. Indeed, as Butler writes, “It would be wrong to assume in advance that there is a category of ‘women’ that simply needs to be filled in with various components of race, class, age, ethnicity, and sexuality in order to become complete” (21). To avoid this false categorization, readers and critics must recognize the literary efforts of Chicanas (and other oppressed, underrepresented groups) on their own terms, for those efforts resist the reduction of Chicanas by putting forward the unique challenges they face.

Of course, one may extend the consideration of intersectionality by correctly arguing that we cannot even say that Chicana women are Chicana women and, therefore, all face the same difficulties. But because both the Chicano movement and the early Feminist movement excluded Chicanas from their narrow member definitions, we must make room to see the broad challenges that they once faced and still face today. Of course, we must do so without reducing them to one set of defining characteristics, which we can avoid doing by instead observing and valuing the identity development of individuals within the group while examining the group’s challenges. It is a large task to undertake, but one that is necessary if we are to avoid the mistakes and narrowness of previous univocal movements.

Butler demonstrates the value of recognizing the individual within the group when she writes about the formation of coalitions and movements that would buck the status quo. She questions the assumption that “‘unity’ [is] necessary for effective political

action” and suggests that “the premature insistence on the goal of unity [is] precisely the cause of an ever more bitter fragmentation among the ranks” (21). This challenge would apply to Rendón’s *Manifesto* and its assumption that Chican@s must all share the same characteristics and goals, thereby excluding women, whose characteristics and goals are different from those of men. Rather than placing such strict prerequisites on group membership, “[p]erhaps a coalition needs to acknowledge its contradictions and take action with those contradictions intact.... Otherwise, the model of dialogue risks relapsing into a liberal model that assumes that speaking agents occupy equal positions of power” (20). Such positions would justify the exclusion of certain individuals since, supposedly, everyone (in the dominant group, at least) shares these supposedly “equal positions of power” (20).

The “justified” exclusion of certain groups of individuals is more than a simple injustice, however. It is counterproductive to any movement that seeks to cause societal change, for if a group is concerned with policing its members’ identities in its pursuit of unity, how can it hope to ever challenge societal expectations? The group has instead become yet another homogenizing institution, replicating the purpose of the hegemonic institutions they intended to overthrow in the first place. Furthermore, such membership prerequisites hamper individuals’ identity formation, for individual identities become casualties of the groups’ political aims, which now have been decided by the dominant majority. Thus, individuals lose their identities and receive nothing in return, for the group never recognizes its goals. Indeed, in such a coalition, the individuals who don’t fit the mold are completely disenfranchised and, in effect, are run over by the will of the powerful few, as can be seen in the two novels examined in this chapter.

It is this accumulative disenfranchisement that Chicanas have had to fight against in the decades since the Chicana@ movement began. They have had to reclaim their rightful identities in order to address *their* specific concerns, even at the risk of splintering from the dominant group of Chicana@s. Queer Chicana@s, too, have been denied their place in the Chicana@ coalition in this same manner, requiring them to aggressively claim that place and their voices in order to address their specific challenges. The following chapter examines the representation of this struggle in novels by queer Chicano authors.

CHAPTER III

Endangered Queer Narratives

Those who have personal narratives that match the canonical narrative possess voice, and those who cannot or do not identify with the canonical narrative have stories that are silenced. These can be stories of subversion, resistance, or simply those stories that fall outside normative ways of being or thinking in a given culture. It is within this dynamic relationship that voice oppresses silence, or the canonical narrative oppresses the non-dominant narrative. (Weststrate and McLean 226)

[C]olored homosexuals have more knowledge of other cultures; have always been at the forefront (although sometimes in the closet) of all liberation struggles in this country; have suffered more injustices and have survived them despite all odds. Chicanos need to acknowledge the political and artistic contributions of their queer. People, listen to what your *jotería* is saying. (Anzaldúa, *Borderlands* 107)

Early Reception

John Rechy and Arturo Islas portray in their respective novels, *City of Night* and *The Rain God*, Chicano characters who also face multiple sources of oppression. Because of their queerness, *Night*'s unnamed narrator and *Rain God*'s protagonist, Miguel "Chico" Angel, face the oppressions I discuss in previous chapters along with heterosexist oppression from their home cultures. *Night*'s narrator realizes while he is still young—much like Anzaldúa, Champagne, and Preston do, as discussed in Chapter I—that his hometown will no longer serve him as he begins forming his autonomous identity. Much of his maturation aligns with the aforementioned authors' testimonies: He travels and stays in larger American cities and, as a male prostitute, experiences sexual freedom, but at the same time he encounters a queer underworld in each city that is just as oppressive as his cultural home of El Paso. Even he becomes a source of homosexual discrimination, passing judgment on other queer men whom he deems too "feminine."

As he roams from city to city, he avoids forming any kind of community. In fact, despite the physical closeness of his sexual encounters, he paradoxically distances himself even farther away from those he comes in contact with. He stays with other significant characters only long enough for them to give their testimonies of lust and broken love, and he then leaves before any lasting bond can form. Given the chance to finally form a bond with someone and leave behind the hustling world near the end of the novel, he rejects the opportunity for community (even of two) and reinserts himself into the frenzy of Mardi Gras, where he can again become a faceless part of a swirling chaos.

More remarkable than the plot, however, is the novel's original lack of reception in the Chican@ community. Published in 1961, it preceded the Chicano Movement's heyday, but even throughout the mid- and late-sixties, reviewers mentioned just about every element of the novel except that of the author's and protagonist's Chican@ origins. They occupied themselves more with the novel's queer aspects and attacked Rechy's protagonist for denying his own homosexuality. Marcel Martin, for example, reviewing *City of Night* for *ONE* magazine, writes, "by some trick of rationalization the hustler [Rechy's protagonist] is able to believe that so long as he gets money for what he does ... he is in no sense a homosexual" (25). Angus Wilson echoes this notion more bluntly in his review:

Mr. Rechy's hustler hero, so watchful of his virility, never allowing his clients to do more than go down on him, is, of course, a shit—both in his predatory greed and in his stinginess with his sexual favours. But more than this he is a confused wanderer, for, by superstitiously regarding certain physical acts as maintaining his masculine pride and others as

betraying it, he refuses himself all sexual pleasure and ultimately, therefore, the companionship he seeks. (107)

Early reviewers also debated the topic of genre, unsure of how to label the unusual format of Rechy's novel. Richard Gilman, in his caustic review, writes, "I have been calling his work a 'book' and the reason for this is that I am unable to find a way to call it a novel" (21). On the same theme, he later states, "*City of Night* isn't a string of short stories either, as most reviewers have described it, since none of its parts, with the dubious exception of the well-known Miss Destiny episode, is developed, seized from the chaos and interchangeability of raw material and given an ineluctable shape" (21). Martin is also determined to criticize *Night* for its lack of definite genre: "It is doubtful that this is a novel at all" (24).

Giles, however, finally connects *Night*'s themes of sexuality with its *Chicanidad*, mentioning about the author that "Rechy is half-Chicano, half-Anglo; he was born into poverty in El Paso; he has been a hustler; he is a devotee of the beautiful body" (369). Giles also makes the point that, as a queer Chicano, Rechy faces oppression from multiple fronts, much like James Baldwin did as an African-American queer man: "Baldwin, like Rechy, belongs to two 'minority groups.' He is gay and black; Rechy is gay and Chicano.... Rechy talked about his sense of identification with Baldwin and his belief that he and the author of *Go Tell It on the Mountain* shared a unique consciousness resulting from their status as members of the two 'rejected' groups" (376).

Giles also notes the lack of any mention of the narrator's Chican@ roots throughout *Night*, but rather than blaming that lacking on Rechy, he observes the incompatibility between the queer subject of *Night* and the overly-masculine sensibilities

of Chicanismo: “The ‘macho’ aspect of the Chicano movement mitigates against Rechy’s homosexual fiction as a vehicle for ‘brown pride’” (378). Giles obviously has a clearer view of Rechy’s novel and the limitations Rechy faced as a queer Chicano author. Rather than bash the narrator or Rechy for not being forthcoming about homosexuality in this particular novel, he recognizes that the Chican@ milieu at the time was incapable of accepting such a novel and therefore relegated it to the narrower realm of queer fiction.

Islas’ *The Rain God*, however, did not garner as much critical attention, even despite its unique narrative structure in which the novel is presented as a family saga written by the main character. Indeed, reviewer Jeff Gillenkirk calls it “an underground classic” (313). Unlike with *City of Night*, however, early reviewers did pick up on *Rain God*’s Chican@ themes. For instance, although Erlinda Gonzales-Berry does not directly mention the Chicano quality of the novel, she writes about two of its persistent themes: family and Catholicism. Early in the review, she notes the “strong sense of Catholic sin, guilt and repression of all things associated with the body” that pervades the character of Mama Chona, the novel’s family patriarch (258). She also writes about Miguel’s desire to detach himself from the legacy of past generations, stating that “he is finally able to make a public gesture announcing the end of Mamá Chona’s life-long hold: ‘Let go of my hand, Mamá Chona. I don’t want to die’” (Islas qtd. in 258). Meanwhile, Gillenkirk writes more directly about the novel’s Chican@ themes in his review, citing the clashes between “the spirit of Mexican-American life—faith and family and laughter and magic—against the cold puritanism of ‘making it’ in the United States” (313). Furthermore, he acknowledges that “[i]t is a novel about borders (not just geopolitical

ones but tradition/modernism, Indian/Spanish, Spanish/Anglo, family/individual, Catholic/secular, faith/despair, gay/straight, darkness/light)” (313).

The Rain God’s protagonist, Miguel “Chico” Angel, leaves his hometown of Del Sapo (a fictional version of El Paso, Texas) much like Islas did, as he also left El Paso for California. Unlike Rechy’s narrator, Miguel avoids any physical contact with others even after he leaves to a sexually freer city, blaming his dearth of lovers on the colostomy bag he must constantly wear (Islas 25). Like the unnamed narrator, however, Miguel also fails to directly acknowledge his queerness. In fact, the only direct reference to homosexuality points to his Uncle Felix, who is brutally murdered because of it. This lack of any mention of Miguel’s sexuality is striking, considering that he has made his new home in San Francisco, a city renowned for its queer citizens’ sexual freedom.

Despite Del Sapo’s lingering hold on Miguel, I would argue that his act of “writing” this family saga is—besides being an exorcism of his family’s lingering influence on him—his way of attempting to integrate the various elements of his past in order to maneuver through his *Coatlicue* State. By writing about the various people and events that have influenced him, he is able to examine and acknowledge the impact each has had on him. Had he remained in Del Sapo, he never could have acknowledged any elements of his or the family’s history that did not fulfill the town’s heteronormative expectations.

Because *The Rain God* is only the first novel in a trilogy concerning the Angel family, the reader does not get to witness Miguel’s full identity formation. In fact, the novel’s culminating event, Mama Chona’s death while she is surrounded by her family members and the point at which Miguel breaks away from her influence, happens at the

novel's end (180). Islas does give hints of Miguel's further separation from his home culture later in the series, as I will discuss later.

Leaving Home

While the Chicana protagonists of the novels I explore in the previous chapter stray from their home cultures in order to gain autonomy, the authors of *City of Night* and *The Rain God* make much of the protagonists leaving their physical homes. In fact, place plays a central role in both novels, reflecting the real-life queer search for "home" discussed at length in Preston's *Hometown*. *City of Night*'s unnamed narrator thus begins his story in his hometown, consciously acknowledging his beginnings by stating that the story "should begin in El Paso" (Rechy 11). And although he eventually longs to escape his Southwestern origins, he speaks fondly of them in comparison to other places: "I will remember other skies: like inverted cups, this shade of blue or gray or black, with limits, like painted rooms. But in the Southwest, the sky was millions and millions of miles of deep blue—clear, magic, electric blue" (12). Despite this fondness for Southwestern skies, however, the narrator eventually longs to leave El Paso and even projects his desire to escape onto his siblings: "my brothers and sisters all got married and left home—to Escape, I would think" (18). Rechy unconventionally capitalizes words within sentences throughout the novel. The capitalization of "Escape" here leaves no doubt of the significance of his leaving El Paso. Like several of the queer authors who contributed to Preston's *Hometown*, the narrator has reached the limit of his identity formation in his place of origin and feels the need to escape in order to further develop.

Night's narrator, however, ultimately maintains El Paso as a safe, uncorrupt space that he can return to, even if only temporarily. After beginning his hustling career in New

York and beginning his pattern of gaining people's desire without desiring them back, he returns home for a brief time and realizes that "[r]eturning here [to El Paso] again, I felt how easily I could regress to those early attitudes. The memory of the guarded isolation of that window [of his childhood home] ... drew me again to a craving for the powerful symbolic window away from the world" (Rechy 86). The memory of the window that separated the narrator in his childhood from all that happened outside highlights the insular nature of El Paso for him, for much like the relationship between the inside of his childhood home and the rest of El Paso, the city of El Paso itself remains "a symbolic window away from the world," unaffected by the narrator's various sordid experiences. Yet, despite the hold El Paso has on him, the narrator makes it clear that his identity formation can only be achieved outside of his hometown, finally admitting near the novel's end when he once again journeys home, "I returned to El Paso," but adding, "I'll leave this city again" (381).

Meanwhile, in *The Rain God*, Miguel has left his desert hometown of Del Sapo for the more modern and liberal city of San Francisco. Michael Hardin writes about San Francisco, stating, "In contrast to the repression of the desert border, Islas associates urban areas and California specifically with freedom, openness, progress, cleansing, and liberal thought" (229). He then cites literary critic Paul Skenazy, who states, "San Francisco, by contrast [to Del Sapo], is seen less as a place than an alternative viewpoint" and "is the space that provides relief from the enclosures, almost imprisonment of family" (qtd. in Hardin 229, 229-30).

Although it is true that San Francisco serves as a metaphor in Islas's novel, readers cannot ignore the literal distance Miguel Chico has placed between himself and

his family by moving to San Francisco. The two cities are also undeniably physically different from each other—one a slow, dry desert city; the other a glistening, often wet and foggy, California metropolis. Also, while Skenazy correctly states that Miguel Chico escapes the “imprisonment of family” (Hardin 230), most likely referring to the Angels’ cultural expectations, it is important to realize that he also escapes the patriarchal power structure in which his queer uncle, Felix, becomes enmeshed and ultimately murdered.

While Miguel escapes Del Sapo, Islas reminds the reader that “home” has permeated Miguel’s character. When he becomes ill before his life-saving colostomy operation, Islas writes, “the desert was very much in his mouth,” connecting Miguel’s body with the physical features of his hometown (6). But this irrevocable tie to Del Sapo does not indicate a lingering connection with his family or its culture, for “[i]n the three-month decline before the operation that would save his life ... he longed to return to the desert of his childhood, not to the family but to the place” (5). Miguel eventually exterminates even this tenuous connection with Del Sapo, though. Hardin notes that in *Migrant Souls*, the second novel in Islas’s Angel Family trilogy, “Miguel Chico has been asked by a Del Sapo waitress, ‘Are you from here [Del Sapo]?’ and he responds, ‘No. I’m visiting from California.’ This exchange is significant because it highlights Miguel Chico’s conscious severing of his identity from the border and from his family: he is no longer *from here*” (230). It is part of Miguel’s identity formation, then, not only to separate himself from his family and Del Sapo, but to disassociate himself completely from them, no longer even claiming the town as his place of origin. He has effectively renarrated his history by unmooring himself from Del Sapo, thus giving himself the distance and freedom to claim any location as his place of origin.

Why is it necessary for both characters to leave their places of origin? *Night's* narrator's parents live and die in El Paso; and besides Miguel Chico, no other members of the Angel family leave Del Sapo. What is it about these main characters' relations to their surroundings that give them the impetus to leave when others stay? To answer this question, I return to the notion of tribal expectations and the plight of those who cannot fulfill them. It becomes clear early in *Rain God* that if family members do not follow the routines set forth by cultural precedence, the family views them as inherently flawed: "Because he [Miguel Chico] was still not married and seldom visited them in the desert, they suspected that he, too, belonged on the list of sinners.... He had been the first of his generation to leave home immediately following high school" (Islas 4). Because Miguel did not marry at the "appropriate" time and had the gall to leave Del Sapo at a young age, the family declares Miguel a "sinner," one who has transgressed against codified cultural rules. Of course, the expectation of marriage is an axiomatic part of the patriarchal system of gender-based expectations. Islas even writes, "the greatest sentimental moment in Mexican culture is the coming together of a man and woman in holy matrimony" (55).

As a man, Miguel should therefore act in a heterosexual manner and produce offspring, much like his father, Miguel Grande, who is the novel's main enforcer of gender-based rules, a fitting duty considering that he is a career police officer in Del Sapo. While Maria, young Miguel Chico's childhood nanny and primary source of cultural values, is mainly concerned with his happiness, regardless of what form it takes, Miguel Grande would not permit her to practice liberal child-rearing. Islas writes that Miguel Chico "and Maria spent long afternoons cutting out dolls and dressing them. [But w]hen he got home from the police station, Miguel Grande would scold Maria for

allowing his son to play with dolls. ‘I don’t want my son brought up like a girl,’ he said to [his wife,] Juanita” (15). As I state in the previous chapter, patriarchal heterosexuality attempts to perpetuate itself by discarding any challenges to itself. Nagel writes about this rejection of alternative identities in her exploration of sexuality and ethnicity, claiming that heterosexuality “is a resilient system capable of absorbing and appropriating challenges on its edges in order to strengthen itself. Thus, sexual ‘deviance’ from the heterosexual norm can provoke gender and sexual policing and panics that, in the end, strengthen and further naturalize particular forms of heterosexuality” (117). This policing happens in the scene above when Miguel Grande sees the need to regulate his son’s behavior, which he considers deviant from the family’s heterosexual expectations.

Miguel Grande would also have his queer brother, Felix, blindly follow heterosexual expectations: “When they were children Felix enjoyed behaving like a clown, putting on his mother’s straw hat, mincing and dancing about in ways that made even Miguel laugh. As they grew older, Felix’s behavior embarrassed Miguel Grande, and he hoped that the stigma of being *jotos* would not reach past his brother” (Islas 87). Heterosexual social norms apparently became a necessity for Miguel Grande rather than being an innate part of his value system, for he enjoyed Felix’s dressing-up when they were children but worried about the gay stigma reaching him as an adult. It is no wonder that Miguel Chico chooses to leave such a repressive environment that disallows alternative modes of living beyond the strict heterosexual system established by the Angel male progenitors before him.

The Taint of Heterosexuality

Sexual repression follows Miguel Chico to San Francisco, however. Even after he has lived his adulthood in California, his grandmother's "look and her words [from her deathbed] gave him that lost, uneasy feeling he had whenever any of his younger cousins asked him why he had not married. Self-consciously, he would say, 'Well, I had this operation,' stop there, and let them guess at the rest" (Islas 5). He cannot mention his queerness to family members even from his new, freer location. Instead, he perpetuates sexual silence in which, "[r]ather than define a homosexual presence within the family, which would mean confronting truth, members of the Ángel clan rely on their fear and shame of it to accommodate the illusion that it does not exist in their homes or lives" (Ybarra 103).

In fact, as David Ybarra points out in his article examining sexual identity repression in *The Rain God*, the word "homosexuality" appears only once throughout the novel—after Felix's murder—and "is so treacherous to the illusions of the Ángel family that it can only be said outside the home.... Its absence from the vocabulary of the Angels bares significance in light of other words used openly that suggest homosexuality but doubtfully" (104). And though the factory whom Felix supervises jokingly call him "Jefe Joto" (117), they do not directly address his queerness even after his physical examinations of them in which he would—as Miguel coyly puts it—"touch it and hold it in his hands tenderly" (116). In a story narrated by the family's queer member, one cannot help noticing the lack of any mention of homosexuality. Indeed, Wallace writes that "language and rhetoric are always socially, culturally, and historically situated and dependent on actual practice for their continued existence," and it is that "continued

existence” of sexual repression that Miguel Chico allows and continues with his silence (4).

Although Rechy’s narrator does not mention the repression in his hometown as does Miguel Chico, he follows the same patterns of self-repression after leaving El Paso. Despite the fact that the narrator is obviously queer, he denounces other queer men who do not display enough “masculine” qualities. He states about another character early in the novel, “the kid’s looking for maybe a pad to flop in and breakfast—hes not queer himself, I dont like em queer: If I did, I’d go with a woman—why fuck around with substitutes?” (24). In fact, in the world of queer hustlers and the “scores” the narrator succeeds in having, gender-based rules are just as prevalent as in a heterosexual environment.

Rechy’s novel here suggests that his narrator is experiencing a form of “anxious” masculinity. Hardly a new term, I use it to denote a masculinity that feels the need to (sometimes preemptively) defend itself from any challenges to its discursively advantaged position. In the previous chapter, I discuss the patriarchal desire to keep women subdued. In this chapter, I am concerned with the patriarchal desire to maintain a “masculine” standard, one that allows no deviance and goes to great lengths to perpetuate itself. This necessarily means that any signs of queerness are, at the least, discouraged. About this fearful need to maintain the masculine standard, Arlene Stein writes,

homophobia serves a purpose: It allows men anxious about their masculinity to affirm themselves. As the story goes, masculinity is established through the repudiation of femaleness: Heterosexual men are troubled by male homosexuality because it represents feminized

masculinity. Confronted with contradictions in their own masculinity, they project their insecurities onto others. (602)

In short, heterosexual men evaluate themselves by their degree of non-femaleness. So in their struggle for masculinity, men often assume that homosexuality implies femininity. And if men are homosexual and therefore female, they must try harder not to show those qualities in themselves. They are clearly not satisfied with self-policing, however, as demonstrated by the fictional case of Miguel Grande policing other men's behavior and the all too real instances of harassment and even the murder of men who challenge the requisite notions of masculine behavior.

None of the claims above may be surprising, especially to those who have been on the punishing end of strict heterosexualism. What is even more striking, however, is that just as women must be protected from their own sexual prowess by being placed into a virgin/whore binary, gay men's sexuality is seen as something to be feared. Stein cites Barney, an antigay activist she interviewed: "They fail to tame their sexual impulses. Their relationships have no strings attached and no guarantee of duration.... Left to its own devices, some suggest, male sexuality is aggressive, individualistic, impulsive. For Barney, homosexuals represent untamed, undisciplined male sexuality" (609). All obvious stereotypes aside, heterosexual men ultimately fear women and queer men taking their sexuality into their own hands, regardless of assumed promiscuity. According to Barney's guidelines, heterosexuals, both male and female, cannot allow queer men to simply act as they will because they (according to heterosexual unconscious beliefs) have no notion of self-control. Their sexual behavior is therefore threatening to them.

Let us now put this fear into a tribal, Chican@ context. Women and queer men who would speak for themselves or act out sexually would endanger the advancement of the “cause,” as defined by straight Chicanos. Although queer Chican@s are not as explicitly left out of the cause as women are in *The Chicano Manifesto*, it is clear that their existence is not aligned with any plans therein. No wonder that Miguel Grande, in a strictly heterosexual world, must concern himself with young Miguel Chico playing with dolls or that *Night*’s narrator would demean other queer men despite his own queerness. For it is only by maintaining one’s own *and others*’ sexual behavior that a man justifies his own (and the established patriarchal power structure’s) worth.

A Separated Life

With such pressure to maintain a masculine façade, queer Chicanos must find somewhere to “put” their queerness, often leading to the compartmentalization of their lives. For example, a queer man’s behavior in the workplace may be much “straighter” than his behavior among friends, especially if those friends are also queer. Or a queer man may suppress his identity around disapproving family members while feeling much freer around friends. These men’s lives become separated and disjointed, often leading to a social schizophrenia: They maintain various conflicting personalities, displaying the rhetorically appropriate one for their surroundings. One may argue that we all have “separate lives” in different public and private spaces, but the need for such separation is more vital and regular for men who face persecution due to the constant disapproval and policing of their sexualities.

Such compartmentalization is one of the most persistent themes of *City of Night*. The narrator clearly keeps the three worlds he inhabits separate: the hustling world, full

of hustlers, Johns, and sordid tales; the “Other World,” the orderly, clean world outside of the hustling scene (Rechy 95); and then there is El Paso, which remains separate from even the Other World. The narrator hints at El Paso’s insularity when, early in the novel, he states about his home: “Inside, the house was suddenly serene, safe from the wind; but staring out the window in cold terror, I see boxes and weeds crashing against the walls outside” (12). While the world beyond his window is threatening with wind and trash, the house offers a safe, tranquil space. In fact, El Paso will never be violated by the influence of either the hustling world or the Other World, even despite the narrator’s own effort to accomplish that violation. Later in the novel, he hustles a man in El Paso in order to strip the town of its romantic hold on him:

I went to a movie theater in South El Paso—resolved, that night, to slaughter those seducing memories in this way:

The man followed me to the head, propositioned me there. I pretended I was a transient, reverting to the poses learned in New York, I told him I needed money. He agreed. In a parked car, in a dark section of this childhood city, I made it.

Crushing into my pocket the ten-dollar bill he had given me: rather than feeling liberated as I had expected, I felt a scorching horrendous guilt.

And I knew that no matter how long I would be in El Paso, I would never again allow that other life of New York to touch me here. (86)

As this scene makes clear, he cannot take satisfaction in hustling in his hometown—a surprising revelation, considering the narrator’s determination and ability to sail through nearly any given situation. El Paso is the one location where he cannot act blasé and

where he is held bound to memories of his home culture, a culture with predominantly Mexican values.

Just as El Paso is its own world with unique qualities and inviolable regulations, the hustling world is one that requires clear and full entry, which one cannot undo once he has accomplished it. The narrator states about the young men new to the hustling scene that “most active members are convinced that eventually those unreciprocating vagrants and wanderers into their world will cross the sexual boundary that separates them now—and they wait almost vengefully for the crossing of that line—to the Other Side—their side” (Rechy 189). Clearly, the new young men in the city’s underworld do not become part of the hustling world simply by inhabiting the same haunts as the “most active members.” They absolutely must cross the demarcated “sexual boundary” of initiation. In fact, the label of “hustling locations” trumps any other geographical notation so it doesn’t matter which city the narrator is in because they are all part of the same distinct world:

Times Square, Pershing Square, Market Street, the concrete beach in Chicago ... movie balconies, bars, dark hunting parks: fusing for me into one City.... Yes, if I take the subway, I’ll be on 42nd Street. Or in Bryant Park, or on the steps of the library, waiting for Mr King.... Or in the park in Chicago, also waiting.... Or if I hitchhike on this street, I’ll be on Hollywood Boulevard. (373)

Finally, it is in the Other World—locations that are neither El Paso nor part of the hustling world—where the narrator seems most able to drop his façades and relate to others honestly and meaningfully. When he meets a character named Dave at the beach,

away from the familiar hustling scenes, he remarks upon the lack of constraint he feels while asking a personal question: “It was a square question—the kind of question I would not have normally asked: but, having eased the street pose, I’m reacting completely different to him, responding to that evident struggle within him—the eminent Aloneness” (Rechy 226). In the hustling world, the narrator often senses others’ aloneness without attempting to connect with them to counter it. Here, however, he responds to Dave’s aloneness. He also notices a quality in Dave that is intrinsic to him *because* he is not a part of the hustling world, stating, “I began to discover in him an honesty that constantly amazed me, an integrity and decency rare in the world of the bars and streets” (217). He finally concludes, “My decision, from the beginning, to ease the usual street role had proved a right one.... There was an easy communication between us which the other scene would have strained” (229).

It seems that the only way the narrator can distinguish one place from another is by determining which of the three worlds it falls into. Thus, rather than a queer bildungsroman, *Night* can be considered a unique psychological novel presenting insight into the ways a queer Chicano, unable to reconcile his sexuality with his home culture’s expectations, copes by separating himself into multiple parts, each one dependent on which world the queer Chicano inhabits at a particular moment. This coping by self-denial, though, carries a cost, for these two novels present a pervasive and consistent sense of isolation.

Miguel Chico’s life in *Rain God* is similarly compartmentalized between Del Sapó and San Francisco. There is no question that he has “a life *here*” and “a life *there*.” Islas makes this separation clear when he writes,

His father's antics had long since stopped affecting him directly except when he was home with his family during the holidays. The old childhood feelings were then dredged up and he had to be alone for several days after his return to the West Coast. To recover, to rid himself of the desert, he walked on the beach or in the fog. (89)

Moreover, Miguel even has an upper-hand over his father in California that he never would have had in Del Sapo: "When Miguel Grande told his oldest son that he was in love with his mother's best friend and did not know what to do about it, they were sitting in the study of Miguel Chico's home in San Francisco. For the first time Miguel Chico felt that his father was talking to him as an equal" (89).

The feeling of being equals, though, soon gives way to Miguel Chico's advantage in what Islas sets up as a battle between him and his father: "'What does Lola say about your leaving her best friend?' Miguel Chico began to feel the exhilaration of cruelty, of being able to injure as one has felt injured" (94). When Miguel Grande begins crying again, "Miguel Chico began to taste his father's blood" (96). It is interesting to note that Miguel Chico ultimately senses a victory when his father shows uncharacteristically "non-masculine" behavior by weeping. The underlying truth, however, is that since Miguel Grande is in his son's domain, he is no longer dominant. Miguel Chico's "life here" allows him to see his father without his masculine trappings, thereby stripping the advantage that Miguel Grande had over him back home.

Miguel's colostomy bag also symbolizes a compartmentalization or separation from himself. He plays no part in the removal of waste from his own body. Instead, his waste ends up in the bag—what Miguel calls his "appliance"—regardless of any effort. It

is true that he has to clean the appliance and connect it to himself, but when it fulfills the job of collecting his waste, it allows him to reach the ideal he has established for himself: “the highest form of existence: pure, bodiless intellect. No shit, no piss, no blood—a perfect astronaut” (Islas 8). So by living in San Francisco and delegating the collection of his bodily waste to a machine, Miguel Chico has achieved the austere life he has long sought. Despite this physical austerity, however, there is no denying the physical elements of this novel or in *Night*, as I will discuss below.

An Isolated Self

In his essay on identity formation in queer Chicano novels, Daniel Breining writes,

For the Chicano man who is gay, there can be a deep conflict between gay and traditional social roles. In the Chicano and Mexican family, the man is characterized as an active and public figure, while the woman has a private role, staying at home, and remaining passive. Outside of the private space of the home, the man represents the family if he is married, or stands for himself if he is single. This symbol is in conflict with the identity of the gay Chicano. The public figure is not the true representation of the gay man, who desires a private space in order to create his gay identity, but conflicts with society when he tries to establish his sexuality.

(48)

This reversal of public and private spaces may create dissonance for the queer Chicano and cause a life-long sense of isolation, for he must form his identity in a hidden space, separated from his cultural milieu. Ideally, this hidden space will expand into public

spaces as the queer Chicano matures and discovers spaces where he can be more himself around accepting friends and family members. However, one cannot assume that this widening of the private (closeted) space will happen for every queer Chicano. For those who must remain hidden, isolation is unavoidable.

Rechy's narrator, for example, occupies many public, even crowded spaces—bars, parks, hotels—that are all part of *Night*'s hustling world. Paradoxically, he seeks to avoid meaningful connections with others despite the extensive contact he has with them. He reveals this sense of disconnection early in the novel, stating, "I liked to sit inside the house and look out the hall-window—beyond the cactus garden in the vacant lot next door. I would sit by that window looking at the people that passed. I felt miraculously separated from the world outside: separated by the pane, the screen, through which, nevertheless—uninvolved—I could see that world" (19). The narrator's isolation, however, is unlike Miguel Chico's, for he seeks the attention and desire of others while still wishing to be separate from them. For example, soon after revealing his early isolation, he states, "I was beginning to feel ... a remoteness toward people—more and more a craving for attention which I could not reciprocate: one-sided, as if the need in me was so hungry that it couldn't share or give back in kind" (20). This one-sided wanting pervades *Night* and becomes a symbol of success for the narrator.

Even the narrator's sexual encounters are ironically isolating, for he feels no emotional intimacy with anyone with whom he shares physical intimacy. When he has his first sexual experience, with a girl whom he spends time with but doesn't talk to, he notes that "the discovery of sex with her, releasing as it had been, merely turned me strangely further within myself" (Rechy 20). Much later in the novel, sex still does not create any

connection between the narrator and his partners. In fact, after having sex with a young man who attempts to break through his social wall, he notes that “[t]he orgasms have made us strangers again. All the words between us are somehow lost, as if, at least for this moment, they have never been spoken” (360). In this instance, not only does sex disconnect one person from the other; it also invalidates any proto-connection that may have already formed.

This intentional isolation is not limited to the narrator, as several characters in the hustling world prevent others from forming connections with them. Pete, for example, is another young hustler and early acquaintance of the narrator. They see each other regularly and have several chances to share personal information, given their time together, but the desire to avoid connection is mutual: “although I saw Pete at least once a day ... there was still the urgency, on both our parts, to split abruptly—to get away from each other” (Rechy 48). As the narrator has mentioned, he (and apparently the other hustlers) seek one-way desire, contact without connection and will go to great lengths to achieve it. Similarly, the Professor, whom the narrator later meets, laments the impermanence of his relationships with young hustlers (whom he calls his “angels”), but he ignores Larry, the man who offers a physical and emotional relationship: “‘Larry—’ the Professor says, the sobs slowly subsiding, ‘—Larry is not— ... an angel’” (64).

It seems, however, that some unintentional connections occur, which—beyond being undesirable—ruin even the superficial relationships the narrator manages to form. Once he and Pete learn too much about each other, they can no longer occupy the same space: “I saw him again, many times—in the movie theaters, in Bryant Park, on Times Square. We would say hello to each other, stop, talk casually: He would exaggerate his

scores, I would exaggerate mine. But we were never together for long any more. 'I have to score,' one of us would say, and we'd split" (Rechy 54). Considering Breining's statement about public and private spaces, one can surmise that once they let each other into their private psychological spaces, a violation occurred that they could not abide. They are only comfortable showing each other "[t]he public figure [that] is not the true representation of the gay man" (48). Once they breach the façade of that "public figure," they can no longer resume their relationship because that would entail communicating with another person who has seen beyond it. And in the hustling world they occupy, façades are a significant part of how they police their own sexuality, maintaining a semblance of "maleness" despite their sexual contact with other men.

The narrator rejects another man, Dave, in a similar fashion when he thinks Dave is getting too close to him. After noticing how honest Dave is and how unlike any of the hustling world's inhabitants he is, the narrator terminates their brief relationship:

Even when I saw the look of amazement on his face, even when I wanted to stop, even when I felt that compassion, tenderness, closeness to this youngman—even then, I knew, as much for me as for him, that I had to go on; that although, inside, I was cringing at my own words, in hammerblows I have to destroy this friendship. "I mean—well—I've spent too much time with you—thats all." (Rechy 219)

Unlike the scene with Pete, here the narrator expresses reluctance to cut Dave off because of the "compassion, tenderness, [and] closeness" he feels with him, and his words feel like "hammerblows" to him. The fact that he still leaves, though, is not surprising when we take into account his value system. The prize for him is to *be* desired and to remain

separate from the world as he did inside his El Paso home. Although he occupies a world of sex for money, the narrator seeks austerity just as Miguel Chico does. He wants nothing of romance or connections that will complicate his struggle to *be*, to experience life beyond the bounds of El Paso and his mother's love, which he deems "a devouring potentially choking thing" (349).

Unlike Miguel Chico, however, the narrator's quest for isolation in Rechy's novel ends ambiguously. After meeting many characters inside and outside of the hustling world and going out of his way to avoid making connections with them, he phones several priests, none of whom show interest in what he has to say. Finally, though, he reaches one last church,

[a]nd a priest who sounded very young answered, and he didnt hang up and he was the one I had tried to reach, I knew, and he spoke to me and spoke—and I can remember only one thing he said—and the rest doesnt matter because all I had wanted was to hear a voice from a childhood in the wind.... And what I do remember that priest saying is merely this:

'I know,' he said. "Yes, I know." (Rechy 381)

Has the narrator found agreement? reassurance? connection? And why does he find comfort in another person offering solace after spending the length of the novel shunning the connection that solace requires? It seems that there is a part of his identity formation that Rechy does not reveal within the novel's bounds and in which he may at least begin to seek out a space beyond his own satisfaction. It is also worth noting that the narrator still seeks to return to his cultural origins, for he "wanted ... to hear a voice from his

childhood in the wind” (381). He has clearly not estranged himself from his home as Miguel Chico has done.

Miguel Chico also seems determined to remain hidden. His identity formation is not fulfilled simply by moving to California, for even there, he avoids meaningful connections with others. He even completes a chore as common as laundry in a space that is public but where he can remain non-communicative, “in the washateria around the corner where he knew he would be in the company of those people who lived alone in the neighborhood. They would not disturb each other except to ask for change and they would read their Sunday papers in peace and isolation” (Islas 24-25). Nor has Miguel had sexual contact with anyone for an undetermined period of time: “He had forgotten what it was like to be able to hold someone, naked, without having a plastic device [his ‘appliance’] between them” (25). It seems that Miguel has moved to San Francisco only to enclose himself more securely in his private space. At least within this first part of the Angel family chronicles, he does not expand that space to include others, queer or otherwise. Instead, he remains isolated from those around him, avoiding any and all meaningful connections with anyone who could know his full story of himself.

One cannot deny the extensive isolation both protagonists impose on themselves throughout *Rain God* and *Night*. Even after escaping their hometowns and entering far more liberal cities, they seem unable to form any important connections with others, much less romantic relationships. Instead, they carry the proverbial closet with them, maintaining a protective barrier around their queerness and failing to challenge the “masculinity” that surrounded them before their escapes.

Telling the Truth

Despite the lingering deleterious effects stemming from cultural repression, queer Chicanos have the advantage of having an anthropological view of their home culture due to their intentional separation from it. In fact, Anzaldúa's claim in *Borderlands* goes so far as to suggest that queer Chican@s are able to transcend their ethnic identity because of the very fact that they are queer: "homosexuals have strong bonds with the queer white, Black, Asian, Native American, Latino, and with the queer in Italy, Australia and the rest of the planet" (106). Perhaps because of this second axis of identification, queer Chican@ authors can produce honest literature that exposes and transcends the façades most people may take for granted or even accept as truth.

Throughout *City of Night*, for instance, the narrator transcends façades by dealing with lingering generational allegiances to Catholicism, admitting about his youth that "I was very religious then. I went to Mass regularly, to Confession. I prayed nightly. And I prayed now for my dead dog: God would make an exception. He would let her into Heaven" (Rechy 13). As a boy, he looks to God to reverse death, for he still believes in an easy answer to the world's suffering. He later states, however, that when he is confronted with his dead dog's body, which he has had to rebury because of its smell, he refuses promises of Heavenly salvation: "Finally the body appeared. I turned away quickly. I had seen the decaying face of death. There was no soul, the body would rot and there would be Nothing left of Winnie" (13). The answers he thought he would receive from his prayers no longer seem possible. Later, he says about a church that "[i]t was serene and peaceful here—yes—but it was also Empty, infinitely Empty. The painted statues with blind eyes fixed in the air were remote and distant, like that heaven which doesn't exist.

Whatever was to be found was not in here. It was in the World” (245). The narrator does not merely look away from Heaven for answers; he also characterizes Heaven’s ineffectiveness in the world through the “blind” and “fixed” eyes of the church statues.

As I have mentioned before, Rechy’s unconventional capitalization throughout *Night* most often reveals what he chooses to emphasize. In the previous two passages, besides “World,” where he believes he will find whatever he needs to find, Rechy capitalizes “Nothing” and “Empty.” Taken together, these words characterize the existential angst that pervades *Night* and plagues the narrator. By looking to the “World,” he refuses any consolation from religious notions of salvation. Instead, he allows himself to exist in a world with a promise of meaninglessness—a promise fulfilled at the novel’s end when he exclaims, “It isn’t fair! *Why can’t dogs go to Heaven?*” (381). He is still seeking answers to his loss from the novel’s beginning. In his trek through the novel’s physical, seedy world, he has not found those answers and apparently has still not looked to Heaven for easy ones.

Rechy goes beyond Islas, however, in his novel’s direct defiance of Heaven. The Professor, for example, challenges notions of religious morality and discusses the more practical and tangible evils in the world: “Why is what I do immoral, when it hurts no one?—no one! an expression of ... Love.... Yet this unreasoning world ignores the true obscenities of our time: poverty, repression, the blindness to beauty and sensitivity” (72). The Professor goes as far as creating his own Heaven on earth, calling each of his lovers a streetangel, which brings the concept of heavenly beings down to the level of the mundane. It is interesting to note also that, unlike heavenly angels who are part of an eternal and saintly realm, streetangels invariably leave the Professor after draining him of

his physical and financial resources. It seems that in *Night*, Rechy aims to give all of Heaven a reality check.

Rechy's narrator goes even further by directly challenging Heaven. Rather than taking a humble stance before Heaven as Mama Chona or Tranquilina's mother would do, he claims, "I'll puncture Heaven—which I thought of as an island somewhere in the vast sky—and then Heaven will come tumbling down to earth" (12). Miss Destiny, one of the narrator's drag queen acquaintances, echoes this defiance when she says, "I'm going to storm heaven and protest! *Here I am!!!!* I'll yell—and I'll shake my beads at Him.... And God will cringe!" (120). While former generations have bowed before the demands and regulations of Catholicism—even to the extent of accepting their own suppression and oppression—characters in *Night* take their plights directly to Heaven and God, claiming that God will cower before them, rather than the other way around.

In the spirit of such defiance against accepted façades and conventions found in Chicana novels, Islas in *Rain God* contests the Catholic notion of denying the body in pursuit of spiritual advancement—in short, ignoring the physical in favor of the abstract. Islas connects this notion to religious belief and to former generations' hold of that belief when he writes about Miguel's grandmother through the narrator stating, "Mama Chona was not physically affectionate. Touching other people reminded her of her own body, and she encouraged her grandchildren to develop their minds, which were infinitely more precious and closer to God" (164). She even goes as far as de-sexing the act of giving birth, for as she says, she "bore her children out of duty to her husband and the Church. Thinking that after a stillborn child she might be barren, she was disappointed when she

gave birth to her gay son, Felix. In her mind, she conceived him and the rest immaculately” (164).

Mama Chona’s desire to reject her body influences Miguel Chico, even into adulthood. While recovering from his colostomy procedure, he thinks to himself that had he not had pain anchoring him to his body, he would experience “[n]o shit, no piss, no blood” and would be “a perfect astronaut” (Islas 8). Reality presents itself, however, when a “voice from inside his head kept saying, ‘You cannot escape from your body, you cannot escape from your body’” (7). In short, Miguel Chico cannot escape the physical truth of his existence, no matter how much he may wish to be “a perfect astronaut” with no ties to his body.

Literary critic John Cutler goes beyond this physical view of the body, however, and considers it a discursive carrier of identity labels, claiming that the early part of the novel presents Miguel Chico’s body “as bearing a triple burden in terms of sexuality, ethnicity, and disability,” which Miguel is equally unable to escape (12). In effect, Miguel’s body is not only a reminder of his health problems; it also serves as a marker of his queerness and his Chicanidad. Had he not been tied to his body, he could escape these social markers as well as his physical condition. Since he cannot escape it, though, he must instead come to terms with all three parts of his identity just as he must experience his body’s physical post-surgery pain.

Islas also pits the earthly against the heavenly, again having the more grounded of the two prevail. Besides her refusal of the body, Mama Chona denies anything earthly. For example, as the narrator states, “she would pray ... for herself that she might soon escape from this world of brutes and fools and join them [the dead]” (9). Even more

extreme, “in that time when Miguel Chico and [his cousin] JoEl fell under her instruction, Mama Chona denied the existence of all parts of the body below the neck, with the exception of her hands” (164). Here, again, Chona would turn her attention away from anything too “messy” or that would associate her with the stain of sin. Miguel Chico resists this particular mode of thought, however. Like Tranquilina in *Their Dogs Came with Them*, he chooses to break from former generations’ heavenly focus in favor of the often unpleasant, real circumstances surrounding him: “unlike his grandmother and Maria, [he] wanted to look at motives and at people from an earthly, rather than otherworldly, point of view” (28). Indeed, in places where “otherworldly” forces would be expected to reign, at least according to the likes of Mama Chona and Tranquilina’s mother, such as at a cemetery, for him the physical, mundane world prevails: “Miguel Chico encountered no saints but saw only stones set in the sand with names and numbers on them” (9). Rather than focusing on the elusive concept of death or spiritual possibilities, Islas presents readers with a plain view of the physical landscape surrounding him, as if to claim that even when juxtaposed with the mystery of death, the earthly—the real—inevitably remains in the foreground.

Such seemingly sacrilegious statements reflect what Islas and Rechy have accomplished by publishing their novels. Rather than cowering under the guilt placed upon them by generational Mexican Catholic beliefs, the authors challenge those beliefs and force their readers to look down from the sky in order to see the worlds of the queer Chicano and their practical implications. By forcefully presenting their realities in spite of hegemonic Chicano patriarchy, they align themselves with an existential reality in which unseen forces cannot explain away troubles. Like Viramontes’s gritty scenes in

Dogs, Islas's and Rechy's novels present unapologetic views of queer Chicano existence, an existence that is a constant struggle against a false but firm heterosexual/deviant binary. By writing about the real, Islas and Rechy echo Anzaldúa's statement against "an absolute despot duality that says we are able to be only one or the other [gender]. But I, like other queer people, am two in one body, both male and female. I am the embodiment of the *hieros gamos*: the coming together of opposite qualities within" (*Borderlands* 41).

Now we move closer to the central question of this thesis: How do people who embody the *hieros gamos* assert their centerless identities in a society demanding a firm center based on gender? How do queer Chican@s tell their stories within a strictly structured grand narrative that seems to flow only one way? This is where escaping the tribe becomes vital, for I would argue that in order to make our narrative part of the grand narrative, we have to completely leave its confines. It is not enough to try to use the dominant framework to our own advantage. We must work outside of it, not because we are forced out or because we do not have the determination to change it, but because we must form a space in which *our* rules work, and then come back and place our narrative in its rightful place within the U.S. national literary canon.

Telling Our Stories Our Way

In *Borderlands*, Anzaldúa writes, "though 'home' permeates every sinew and cartilage in my body, I too am afraid of going home. Though I'll defend my race and culture when they are attacked by non-mexicanos, *conozco el malestar de mi cultura*" (43). In this passage, she reveals that she is able to criticize the negative aspects of her home culture because of her separation from it. In order to write on her own terms, she had to create an alternate space—a third "mestiza" space—in which the disparate

elements of her identity can be brought together and synthesized and where she can finally assert her whole identity (101-02). This is the space I call for in this thesis where queer Chicanos can form their narratives.

In order to get outside of the dominant narrative form, however, we must first look inside of it to learn what oppressive forces operate therein. Early Chican@ literature was expected to fit a certain mold, which Dennis López reminds us of when he writes about an important early publisher of Chican@ literature, Quinto Sol Publications, that during the advent of widespread Chican@ literature, “as Quinto Sol’s involvement in an evolving Chicano Movement gradually took shape, questions of class and race, not to mention gender, steadily fell under the purview of critical and cultural frameworks aligned with the ideology of [Chican@] nationalism” (185). Therefore, any work put forth at that time as Chican@ literature had to adhere to a set standard “rooted in assertions of cultural distinctiveness, a unique history, an ethnic or racial purity” (Nagel 110). But who determined the purity of a Chican@’s artistic output? Who was the gatekeeper?

López states that “Quinto Sol, though not unique or alone in its activities, proved indispensable to the advancement and institutionalization of Chicano nationalism, especially Chicano literary nationalism” (185). In its formative days, Quinto Sol editors Octavio Romano-V. and Herminio Ríos sought to defy what they considered “the conventional academic thesis that Mexican Americans are ‘non-literate’ and ‘passive,’ ‘sleeping under the cactus,’ a people without a history and a culture” (qtd. in 198). However, by doing so, the press sought works that would fit a predetermined Chican@ image rather than allowing Chican@ authors the chance to fully present themselves

through their literature. Even Tomás Rivera, to whom Quinto Sol awarded its first prestigious Premio Quinto Sol literary award, was subject to the press's preconceived notion of "Chican@ literature." Before publication of his ... *y no se lo tragó la tierra*, Romano-V. and Ríos decided, according to Rivera, to cut the chapter centering around the character Pete Fonseca "a pachuco type [who] was presented in [a] derogatory manner and [who was] negatively sensitive for Chicano literature at the time (qtd. in 199).

According to Quinto Sol's editorial stance, Chican@ literature can "buck the system" only along certain axes. Yes, we can claim political power—if the person we wish to put in power is a "good," conventional Chicano. Yes, we can publish literature that presents Chican@s awakening from their naps under cacti—as long as they're ready to fulfill a preconceived, non-threatening social role. Perhaps it is these very constraints that led Islas to write plainly, "Much of what is passed off as literature is a compendium of folklore, religious superstition, and recipes for tortillas" (qtd. in Minich 697). Although this statement ignores the fact that ethnic literatures have their origins in folklore and cultural significations some might consider "religious superstition" or "recipes for tortillas," it is a clear indication of Islas's frustration with the narrow confines of published Chican@ literature, for queer authors may understandably have (at the very least) resignations concerning their place in such a restrictive literary canon.

If queer Chican@ authors, therefore, publish novels that do not concern "folklore, religious superstition, [or] recipes for tortillas," they are already operating outside the dominant heterosexual publishing space of Chicanos. They are already writing with the possibility that their work will not be recognized as Chican@ literature. Indeed, although Rechy and Islas are today well-known names in the Chican@ canon, they are seldom

mentioned among the likes of Tomás Rivera, Rudolfo Anaya, or Rolando Hinojosa, despite the fact that their work presents a facet of the Chican@ experience that is no less important than the works of the aforementioned authors.

Yet, if a queer Chicano author writes a novel, despite a possible lack of recognition from his own ethnic group, he has the freedom to create his own narrative forms. For example, Rechy strays from the conventional narrative mode to write *City of Night*. Like *The Rain God*, *City of Night* is episodic, revealing to the reader only those parts of the narrator's story which he wishes to share. While it is true that the reader is always at the mercy of the author, Islas and Rechy do not attempt to create the illusion of having a smooth, whole narrative. Suspension of disbelief is less important to them rhetorically than writing in the most appropriate form for their particular stories. Beyond telling his story in episodes, however, *Night's* narrator will often defy the order of time altogether by intentionally blurring its passage. For example, something as trivial as a passing sandstorm has no specific duration: "I cant remember now how long the windstorm lasted—it might have been days—but perhaps it was only hours—because it was in that timeless time of my boyhood, ages six through eight" (Rechy 15).

Moreover, the "timeless" nature of time allows the narrator the freedom to tell his story however he chooses. Just as I mentioned before that the particular hustling locations blend together, making their specificity irrelevant, periods of time also blend together, making any attempt at placing an event's time and context equally irrelevant. For example, later in the novel, the narrator states, "Suddenly, I was on Hollywood Boulevard. The bright early sun crashes on me, colors burst like tiny rockets. It was Saturday. Vaguely I remember Jamey telling me last night that he would be at the

Rendezvous Room this morning” (Rechy 202). In this passage, the narrator’s presence on Hollywood Boulevard occurs abruptly, and the verb tense within this passage shifts from present, to past, back to present. In Rechy’s hands, the reader experiences the same disorientation that the narrator does.

The Rain God’s structure similarly positions Miguel Chico as both ethnographer and character. While writing about the Angels from the distant city of San Francisco, he places himself in his own story as the protagonist still stifled by the repressive forces he has already left. He therefore simultaneously occupies within his story the active position of narrator and the passive position of character. The clearest effect this multiple point of view has on the novel’s structure is its decentering of perspective, for it allows Miguel Chico to tell the story without adhering to a linear plot. For Marta Sánchez points out, he

does not occupy center stage as he would with a first-person narration, nor does he presume to “speak for” the other characters, a gesture generally associated with a conventional third-person omniscient narrator. Seldom the central focus of our attention, he is often absent or on the periphery of the action. In this sense, the text lacks the cohesive narrative and resists the totalizing system of the bourgeois autobiography, a genre requiring that the protagonist be omnipresent, the center of action. (51)

Simply put, the reader does not rely on a totalizing narrator to tell the story. Instead, the reader is presented with narrative fragments (which are, of course, still given at the author’s discretion) in order to create the story.

While this novel’s structure does present questions of Miguel’s narrative reliability, it more importantly empowers him—the queer, exiled member of his family—

to tell his story outside of the pressures he would feel in his father's domain of Del Sapo. Like Anzaldúa suggests, he is able to present a story critical of his home culture primarily because he has left it. Islas has no qualms about Miguel's narrative power, writing that "[h]e, Miguel Chico, was the family analyst, interested in the past for psychological, not historical, reasons" (28). One could infer that had he written the Angel family's story under the direction of Miguel Grande, Miguel Chico as a writer would have had to fit the story to a form that would uphold the family's name, much like Quinto Sol's desire to present a certain kind of Chican@ literature that would counter the dominant mainstream view of Chican@s. Given the freedom to write his own narrative, however, Miguel Chico can focus on the effects of the narrative rather than worrying about what the narrative may reveal. If there is any doubt that Miguel's written story results from escaping his tribe, Islas erases that doubt by writing, "The white daisies in [Mama Chona's] hat no longer frightened him; now that she was gone, the child in the picture [Miguel Chico] held only a ghost by the hand and was free to tell the family secrets" (160). Like Miguel, Islas takes what has become a standard narrative mode and reformulates it in order to tell *his* story. As in *City of Night*, the narrative itself is less important than the psychological reasons for and outcomes of it.

There is no question that these particular novels Islas and Rechy have written could not have been told in a strictly linear fashion. Like their characters, Islas and Rechy had to "leave" their literary heritage—the expected heteronormative, nationalist Chican@ narratives of their time—in order to look back at their home cultures and critique them. They have not written in this way because they are incapable of writing more standard novels. They have done otherwise in order to form their narratives as they wish and then

assert them within a formerly restrictive ethnic minority canon. What David Rice writes when analyzing Miguel's story is true of all queer Chicanos telling their stories: "as an ethnic individual, Miguel Chico must communicate himself and his heritage in all its aspects. To do so is the only viable way for him to escape the crippling dichotomy of outcast and ethnic zealot, and find a middle ground where a real ethnicity can take hold.... Miguel Chico's history and identity—his story—is the very process of struggle" (185). This point of Rice's is indeed true for every queer Chicano who must fit his life into the previously set pattern advanced by generations before him

Although I cannot claim that every Chican@ household is equally repressive, I can say—from my own personal narrative—that it is still true in some cases that queer Chicanos begin forming their identities under the thumb of a heteronormative set of expectations. For some of us, the home is a site where we are seemingly doomed to internalize and reproduce the very norms that condemn us, for "it is in the home that we are inculcated with moral values and with a sense of justice, yet the very idea of justice we inherit omits the home and its gendered division of labour as proper subjects of political decision making" (Tebble 924). Many of us still must leave home and family not only to relay our own experiences but also to *have* those experiences, which will more solidly construct our own identities as queer Chican@s. Then, after our own narrative has had room to progress and we have had room to determine our narrative forms, we can then aspire to insert our narratives back into the larger Chican@ one and, consequently, alter that larger mainstream narrative with the presence of our own.

CHAPTER IV

Elements of Educating

As long as we continue to teach literature, pedagogical canons will exist, and as they change, so will the imaginary [universal] canon. Part of our pedagogy, then, includes our contribution to the ongoing construction of the imaginary canon. (Gallagher 56)

Empowering ... means teaching students critical skills that give them the necessary tools to question the dominant culture, and to transform the social order they live in, rather than just be part of it.¹ (Simandan 249)

Teaching Beyond the Curriculum

During my undergraduate years at The University of Texas at Austin, I was brave enough to take three of Rolando Hinojosa-Smith's classes. Never one to mince words, he would point out the window toward the state Capitol and say that he wanted to teach us to be better thinkers than "those people who work in that building over there." A demanding professor, he had no tolerance for facile work or answers. It was not enough to read assigned novels; we had to know them and come to class ready to discuss their merits—or their shortcomings. Despite the anxieties that came with being in one of his classes, I am grateful to him for teaching me to think about what I read, saw, and heard, rather than taking it all at face value.

Now, as an English teacher, I tell my students that I naturally want them to become better writers and more thorough readers, but my main goal is for them to leave my class better thinkers. Along with exposing them to what I deem valuable literature and guiding their writing efforts throughout the year, I show them hotly debated news stories

and discuss with them the stories' social implications. I ask them to place themselves in the place of the characters we read about and consider how they would deal with the problems those characters face. I do this teaching beyond the prescribed curriculum so my students, whatever their grade level, are better equipped to challenge what they read, see, and hear, just as Hinojosa-Smith did for me and my classmates. I believe that if I taught only academic content, I would do my students a huge disservice, leaving them unprepared for the work they will encounter later in their academic careers and in the societal structures that will attempt to pigeonhole them.

Several main questions arise from this approach to teaching. For one, *what* do we teach? How far do we go beyond or challenge the prescribed curriculum, and how do we choose what knowledge to impart to our students? Secondly, *how* do we teach? What methods do we employ in order to disseminate and create knowledge in the classroom? And finally, and most importantly, *why* do we teach? What do we hope to accomplish through our efforts, and what do we want for our students after they leave our classes?

What

Concerning what we teach, I return to Susan Gallagher and her remarks on the North American canon. She cites John Guillory to remind educators that, despite the heavy presence of a discursively accepted canon, we ultimately have the authority to decide what literature we incorporate in our teaching: "few instructors actually teach such a [the common] canon. 'What does have a concrete location as a list, then, is not the canon but the syllabus'" (qtd. in 54).² Thus, despite what may be academically prevalent, educators have the chance every time they teach a new class to build their own reading list for their classes, keeping in mind that they are in an authoritative position that allows

them to build a new sense of canon for students. As Insko writes about his own educational formation,

our canon included Jacobs, Chopin, Hurston, and Frederick Douglass *as well* as Emerson and Hawthorne. While the first three of these authors were *taught* to us as noncanonical, they were *received* by us as canonical. As John Guillory puts it, “Individual works are taken up into [the educational] system (preserved, disseminated, taught) and confront their receptors first as canonical, as cultural capital.” (qtd. in 346)

Thus, all works are canonical to those who are still in their formative educational phase, and it is when students are in our classes that we can expand their conception of “canon” before their schooling narrows it. If during students’ formative years educators fail to expose them to works from such socially oppressed groups as Chicanas and queer Chican@s, they not only miss a chance to broaden the accepted canon; they also perpetuate the notion that the canon is already set and inviolable. Imagine an educational institution in which the teachers expose their students only to authors such as Shakespeare, Robert Frost, and Ralph Waldo Emerson (in other words, the “dead white male writers”). With respect to their importance in America’s literary history, students would only tread academic ground that has no shortage of existing academic footprints.

This notion of expanding students’ sense of canonicity is even more important for those students who are part of oppressed groups (i.e.: women, students of color, queer, physically challenged, or any combination thereof, among others), for if they see no representation of themselves in what is passed off as the North American canon, what impetus do they have to engage with that canon, much less study and possibly make a

career from examining (and challenging) it? By not broadening students' pedagogical canons, educators are disinvesting them from their own education, for given no personal attachment to a curriculum, students are less likely to buy into it. As I mention in Chapter I, certain state governments are taking steps to officially strip Chican@s students of any social investment in their own education, all the way up to the university level. How do these states expect Chican@s to rise through the academic ranks when they have no self-representation? Or do they even desire Chican@s and other subordinated people to do so?

As an example of a student's disillusionment with education, Juan Carrillo, Ph.D. candidate from The University of Texas at Austin as of 2007, writes about his education: "I am restless, the manifestation of the Chicano movement's ideas on empowerment; I was highly influenced by this literature. Yet, my Aztlán entails that I attend conferences with intellectual midgets who patronize in umbrella terms the needs of my mother who works in a sweatshop and the agony of my father's search for redemption" (348). Carrillo clearly feels that what he has studied in the last few years at UT has been irrelevant to "the Chicano movement's ideas on empowerment" and that it has no bearing on the real-life circumstances of still-struggling Chican@s such as his parents.

How

It is not enough to merely add literature by underrepresented authors to syllabi, however. If that is all educators do, they are merely tokenizing those authors through barely-existent efforts at inclusion. We must also look at how we are teaching those materials. It is easy for an educator to broaden his or her pedagogical canon yet change nothing about his or her teaching. For example, as Gallagher states,

college syllabi have undergone radical transformations in the past twenty years, with many women and minority writers now included.... If instructors continue to employ only a New Critical methodology [in their teaching of these texts] ... students will simply conclude of the new pedagogical canon (1) that many women and minorities write just as well and white men, and (2) that a particular text by a woman or minority is representative in some way—leading either to reductionism or tokenism.³

(55)

In short, if we teach any underrepresented literature removed from its cultural context, we reduce it to being *the* example of its cultural genre, denying its or its author's full cultural history or intersectionality. Rather, it becomes another title to gloss over during the current academic term. Literature by Chicanas and queer Chican@s, then, must not be taught merely as additions to a "master list" of literature that already has an established "value." Rather, it must be given its own space in order for students to learn and explore such literature's historical and cultural underpinnings so they may fully appreciate it on its own terms.

Moreover, if we are truly to expand our students' conception of the universal canon and involve them in their own learning, we must make use of other forms of knowledge construction beyond the authoritarian approach of "teacher knows all." Teaching from a critical perspective will help teachers move beyond expected (and often unengaging) teaching methods. Although critical pedagogy has been defined differently by various theorists, Voicu Simandan points out that, at its heart,

critical pedagogy is an educational theory that raises the learners' critical awareness regarding social conditions that are oppressive. Through critical pedagogies, researchers strive to create a society based on egalitarianism, understanding and acceptance of its members, regardless of race, colour, and religion. Thus, critical pedagogy also has a political component as pedagogues struggle to challenge and hopefully transform oppressive social conditions.⁴ (246)

This conception of critical pedagogy represents a challenge to educators, for it leads them to reach beyond the act of disseminating given information toward a teaching method that employs a political engagement in order to change pervasive social conditions outside of the classroom—a tall order indeed. Echoing my discussion of teaching beyond the prescribed curriculum, Simandan also writes, “Critical education theorists consider that the curriculum of a school is more than just a syllabus, a program of study, or a classroom text. The curriculum does more than that. It prepares the students for their future role in society as a dominant or a subordinate class” (249).

If students are to have an active “future role in society,” they must be active learners, able to critique the circumstances surrounding them, rather than taking them at face value. In other words, they must become better thinkers, as I discuss at the beginning of this chapter. Educators can encourage students' critical thinking skills by inviting them to create knowledge rather than simply receiving it. Educators can most effectively do so in the spaces where the dominant narrative does not hold up under scrutiny. An example of such a space is illustrated by Jeffery Duncan-Andrade, who cites Walter Karp's contestatory account of Woodrow Wilson's 1914 decision to invade Mexico:

the invasion was Wilson's idea from the start, and it outraged Congress as well as the American people. According to Karp, Wilson's intervention was so outrageous that leaders of both sides of Mexico's ongoing civil war demanded that the U.S. forces leave; Textbook [sic] authors commonly use another device when describing our Mexican adventures: they identify Wilson as ordering our forces to withdraw, but nobody is specified as having ordered them in! Imparting information in a passive voice helps to insulate historical figures from their own unheroic or unethical deeds. (qtd. in 595)

Such manipulations of historical narrative are not rare, for the occlusion of certain historical facts has recently taken place in Texas. For example, according to recent changes in Texas social studies textbooks as legislated by the conservative-leaning Texas Board of Education, "[t]he new curriculum ... drops references to the slave trade in favor of the more innocuous 'Atlantic triangular trade,'" and "[s]tudents will now learn about the 'unintended consequences' of Title IX, affirmative action and Lyndon Johnson's 'Great Society'" (Holhut). In fact, one Hispanic board member, Mary Helen Berlanga, stormed out of one of the textbook meetings, claiming that "the standards ignore the Ku Klux Klan in Texas, Texas Rangers 'killing Mexican-Americans without justification' and the U.S. Army's role in the attempted extermination of American Indians" (qtd. in Molland).⁵

Such sites of contention are the intersectional points at which educators can crack open the dominant narrative and expose its vulnerability to historical truth, thereby inviting students to interrogate and broaden that narrative. Educators must not take such

opportunities lightly, especially when teaching historically oppressed students such as Chican@s. Duncan-Andrade highlights the importance of narrative interrogation by Chican@ students specifically: “for a Chicano student ... change in curriculum whereby an act by the most powerful of Americans could be questioned and critiqued opens up a space for that student to feel empowered to challenge other aspects of his reality that he finds unjust” (595). Such empowerment could lead to the eventual challenging of an unjust America, which in part is the ultimate aim of critical pedagogy: “The ability to analyze allows those without power to become critical of their surroundings, to problematize their material conditions, and then to act on solutions for ameliorating the oppressiveness of those conditions” (595).

Conversely, Duncan-Andrade goes on to remind readers that “[t]he deprivation of this opportunity to invent and reinvent, to see oneself as the creator of knowledge, stymies students’ intellectual and social growth. This results in a system of education that measures its efficacy on its ability to reproduce the norms of the dominant culture rather than on its ability to create self-thinkers” (596). Simply put, how can we expect change in our society at large if we do not begin it in our classes? How can we expect our oppressed students to create change for themselves if we profess only the narratives that place them as passive, non-contributing elements of society? This need for “invent[ion] and reinvent[ion]” is even more crucial for people who are multiply oppressed, such as Chicanas and queer Chican@s, for their autonomy is denied on more than one level. For example, even if a Chicana were to throw off the yoke of ethnic oppression, she is still vulnerable to gender-based oppression.

By including literary works like the ones I discuss in this thesis, educators will expose students to narratives that challenge the notion of Chican@s (and, by extension, other oppressed groups) as weak, passive objects who have been mere victims of historical domination. By having students read literature that includes queer individuals, gang members, people dealing with language difficulties, and border-crossers, educators can show their students that there is space for alternative stories in the U.S.'s fictional and historical canons. Although it may seem a far-fetched ideal, a young Chicana may identify with any of the Chicana characters I discuss, or a young queer Chican@ may see his or her struggles portrayed in *City of Night*, *The Rain God*, or in a thematically similar literary work. And upon seeing themselves represented in such literature, they may become emboldened to insert themselves into the narrative that frames them daily.

While subjecting historical and canonical narratives to challenges, educators must also place value on alternative forms of knowledge creation if we truly are to open our curriculums to students coming from historically oppressed groups. Along with “facts” from textbooks, educators must value more localized knowledge, such as that coming from the students’ communities and the students themselves. For example, Edwardo Portillos writes in his section of his and González’s article,

In my Chicana/o Communities course, students must find a local Chicana/o community and describe how Chicanismo is evident in the barrio. In my Youth Gangs course, students can do observations from either a law enforcement or gang neighborhood perspective. Through writing their papers, students learn how issues discussed in the literature may be apparent in their local communities. At the same time, these papers

also allow them to develop a sense of community with their fellow students. (28)

With this assignment, he requires students to seek knowledge from the surrounding community rather than passively accepting approved knowledge either from himself or a textbook. Educators can also invest oppressed students in their own education by valuing still more localized knowledge sources that can come only from the students and their personal and familial histories. Like Lucero in *Golondrina, Why Did You Leave Me?*, students can find not only personal strength but educational worth in their own and their families' experiences. Thus, if educators want students to readily receive knowledge, we must show them that they and those closest to them have a hand in creating knowledge. Otherwise, we imply in our teaching that only the knowledge validated by more powerful agents besides them is worth learning, so what point is there in them advancing and contributing to the academic community if their contributions are not valid?

The effect of such educational patterns is already evident, as some Chican@s do not choose to advance educationally and, therefore, do not have the opportunity to influence future Chican@ students as teachers. The result is a downward spiral in which Chican@s are less likely to seek educational opportunities because they are not well-represented in academia. For example, Duncan-Andrade points out that "the growth in the numbers of Chicanos attaining college degrees has not kept pace with the group's population growth, resulting in severe underrepresentation in the pool of qualified potential teachers" (591). Without Chican@ educators, Chican@ students are left with limiting career models: "Chicano students are left to their own devices to make sense of readily available images of Chicanos serving food in the school cafeteria every day, and

Chicanos cleaning the garbage cans and sweeping the floors at the end of each school day” (594). Although I do not wish to disparage the people in these positions, I would argue that *only* presenting young Chican@s with these possible opportunities only further perpetuates the historical narrative’s fictional notion that Chican@s are not able to contribute to society’s norm-producing class. In other words, Chican@ youth are at risk of believing that they can only be *acted on* rather than being able to *act on* society.

An increase in the number of teachers from socially oppressed groups is not merely an idealistic goal. Duncan-Andrade points out that having more such educators has concrete benefits for the students they represent. In the case of Latin@ teachers, for example, he states that “there are three positive outcomes of such an increase in Latino teachers: (a) an increase in shared identity between teachers and students, (b) an increase in professional role models in the school and the community, and (c) an increase in the capacity to develop and deliver a meaningful multicultural education” (592).⁶

Frankly, even if there are no Chican@ students in a given classroom, students from privileged classes will benefit from exposure to a teacher of a different background, for how can those who are socially unmarked (e.g.: not ethnic minority, not queer, or not physically challenged) and, therefore, privileged by default recognize the unjust status of their social positions without an educator willing and able to challenge this position? For example, in my second year of teaching, I used Sandra Cisneros’ *The House on Mango Street* as part of my fourth grade curriculum, emboldened by the fact that it was on the list of district-approved fourth grade reading material. I taught that year at a school where the students came from mostly upper-class white families.

My students became emotionally involved in the plight of Esperanza, *Mango Street*'s protagonist, as a young girl wanting to escape her neighborhood's social and economic limitations. While we were covering the novel, however, parents raised concerns that it presented themes that were inappropriate for fourth grade students, regardless of the fact that it was a district-approved novel. They eventually succeeded in having the novel taken off our school library shelves and into the librarian's office where students would have to ask to check it out, although they wouldn't even know it was there. And—much to my students' disappointment—I was forced to rush to the novel's conclusion, skipping several chapters. In hindsight, I wonder if the parents who caused the ruckus over *Mango Street* were more concerned with protecting their students from what they deemed age-inappropriate literature or sudden exposure to non-canonical literature (my coverage of the widely-taught novel *A Wrinkle in Time*, for instance, met with no objections).

Why

This contested teaching situation leads me to the why of teaching. Simandan throws down the gauntlet for educators, claiming that the educational (at least through a critical perspective) *is* the political when he writes, "Through critical pedagogies, researchers strive to create a society based on egalitarianism, understanding and acceptance of its members regardless of race, colour, and religion. Thus critical pedagogy also has a political component as pedagogues struggle to challenge and hopefully transform oppressive social conditions" (246). In short, if educators are to teach for any purpose found beyond the walls of their classrooms, they must act politically, for their

teaching is up against the “oppressive social conditions” their othered students constantly face.

If we are to make any practical difference in the world as Tranquilina longs to do in *Their Dogs Came with Them*, we must face the apprehensions of inserting ourselves into our teaching. Juan Carlos Gonzáles writes about such insertion in his own teaching, stating that “[a]s a college professor, to me Chicana/o pedagogy means that I am able to insert myself, my experiences and voice into any and all conversations about pedagogy” (González and Portillos 24). Similarly, as a teacher who works from a critical perspective, I use my personal experiences when I teach in an effort to make the content I am teaching relatable, and I put myself and my beliefs on the line when I encourage my students to debate and draw their own conclusions about socially relevant topics such as discrimination against sexual and ethnic minorities.

Of course, educators are not required to teach with such potential risks; teaching from behind the prescribed curriculum is always an option, and not one to be automatically dismissed, for students obviously must master academic skills if they aim to progress academically or socially. Despite our various pedagogical approaches, all educators must recognize that our cultural circumstances did not arise out of some void fully formed. In fact, Jennings and Lynn remind us that “the social, economic and political structure does not act alone; it is supported by the actions of people who work to maintain it or destroy it by resisting domination in myriad ways” (20). Thus, the circumstances in which we teach have a precedent; likewise, if we do not approve of the circumstances we and our students face, the change we desire must also have a precedent. Educators can establish that precedence in their curriculum by including works such as

the aforementioned novels in their pedagogical canons and inviting students to *engage with* those novels. By this I mean the teacher doing more than having the students read these novels before moving on to the next topic or unit. We can do more by connecting them with the social conditions they arise from, as Portillos does with his Chicana/o Communities course. We can invite minority students to share personal or family narratives that coincide with those of the novels, thereby creating in the classroom a narrative broader and more honest to these students than the culturally dominant narrative.

Educators cannot rest in the term “critical pedagogy,” content with their stated desire to challenge the status quo, for even those educators who desire to create social change are accountable for their own biases. Jacqueline Martinez reminds us of this axiomatic fact of education and other scholarly work when she writes, “no matter how diligent and disciplined we are in our work, we are always handicapped by the partiality of our perspective and the omnipresent danger that we will delude ourselves by virtue of undetected personal, social, or cultural prejudices” (xii). Jan McArthur also comments on educators’ (even social change-seeking ones) inevitable biases, stating that “not only must critical pedagogy build better alliances with other forms of radical pedagogy, it may need to consider alliances with those whose ideas it finds anathema. Such recognition is both fundamentally intrinsic to the ideals of critical pedagogy and staggeringly challenging to the adherents of those ideals” (498). She then gives the example of a Jewish professor teaching in Utah and having to deal with his bias against Mormonism: “I don’t hate the Mormons. But I do hate the Mormons. At least sometimes. I haven’t *really* gotten over, or beyond, my anti-Mormonism.... But you can’t hate your students

and teach them.... So every semester, every month, every week, every day, I fight a little struggle” (qtd. in 498).⁷

I have faced a similar struggle while teaching freshman composition at Texas State University in San Marcos. My students were working on persuasive essays in which I had allowed them to choose their own topic, given that they could presumably write passionately and effectively about it. One of my students, a white male from a small Texas town, wrote an essay arguing against Americans’ rights to same-sex marriage, and this during the semester when I was going to marry my now-husband! Like the aforementioned Jewish professor, I fought an enormous struggle in evaluating that essay. I consulted with friends and my fiancé. I struggled in individual conferences with the student to evaluate only the merits of his arguments and the effectiveness of his writing. Ultimately, the student received a low “B” on the grounds of not backing up all his arguments with something more than opinion or hearsay. Despite my discomfort with the student’s chosen position, I am glad he wrote that paper in my class and that I was able to offer a strong opposing viewpoint that challenged his arguments and conceptions of queer life in general. More importantly, I was glad that his paper allowed me to recognize my own biases in my teaching.

Although I must admit that grading that paper with even a “B” was difficult, had I not invited that student to use his voice in that paper, how could I have ever expected him to contribute his voice in our class? If I had automatically devalued his argument, how could I profess to teach for the interests of my students? I would, in effect, be closeting him within my classroom had I refused to entertain his argument. We both had to lay down our tightly-held beliefs to meet in such a neutral site as a writing conference in

order for me to offer unclouded assistance with his writing and for him to be able to accept my critique. Surely, critical pedagogy's aim to value all voices and potential sources of knowledge is as demanding on educators as it is on students.

All things considered, a huge majority of students' academic identity formation rests with their teachers, who in turn must decide not only what they teach, but how and why they teach it. Of course, such decisions are not as grand as they sound; educators make them constantly: when choosing what material to cover, when wording their lessons, even with how they answer students' questions. Every moment, educators have the opportunity to either welcome or constrict knowledge that comes from beyond the prescribed curriculum. With every decision, we either challenge or align ourselves with the society outside of our classes. We may even follow one perspective one day and another the next. I argue, though, that we must always keep in mind the real-life challenges that our students face. And, more importantly, we must consciously keep in mind our own prejudices in order to counter them so we do not exclude certain students from our teaching efforts.

And Beyond

Of course, teaching the novels I have analyzed alone will not immediately cure any social ill. Students most likely will not experience a sudden epiphany upon reading the last page of any of these novels, although they certainly might. We must try to prepare our students for the realities they face now and that they will face every day afterward. If we merely perpetuate the dominant norms in our pedagogy, we cannot expect our students to change those norms. In fact, without engaging alternative viewpoints, our students may not even know that challenging dominant norms is an option. These

alternative considerations are especially salient for educators who are part of one or more oppressed groups. Jennings and Lynn write that

scholars of color grapple with our identity/role as scholars of color who cannot be easily described in terms of being “privileged” researchers in the same way that white scholars define their role as privileged. The complex interactions of class, gender, geography, and even skin tone can reflect a specific positionality that denotes a complex sense of privilege within our own communities. (27)

So while we, as “scholars of color,” are not privileged in the same way as white scholars, we must recognize our positions of “privilege within our own communities”—Chican@ or otherwise—and our unique opportunity to influence students who are likewise oppressed. Otherwise, we have admitted defeat in the face of societal circumstances that have—moment to moment, day to day, year to year—attempted to place us in a hidden, subordinate position in order to silence and effectively eliminate us.

Making space for teaching the authors and works I analyze in this thesis opens up possibilities to alternative perspectives all students can learn from. And what they’ll learn is to be more critical of the dominant ideologies surrounding them every day of their lives. These novels by these authors represent a means to establishing a more just and equitable society in these highly turbulent times.

APPENDIX A

Endnotes

Chapter One:

1. In an effort to represent male and female subjects equally, I wish to avoid the terms “Chicano/a” and “Chicana/o” due to their cumbersomeness and the fact that they still favor one gender over the other. I use “Chican@” to mean both Chicano and Chicana. Thus, when I use either the term “Chicano” or “Chicana,” I am referring specifically to a single gender.
2. By “queer,” I mean anyone who does not identify as strictly heterosexual. Thus, bisexuals, gay men, lesbians, and transgendered individuals all fall under the term “queer” for the purpose of this thesis.
3. By using February 2, 1848 as the point of origin for the Chican@ people, I do not deny the fact that people of Mexican origin occupied what is now the American Southwest before that date, nor do I wish to imply that those people did not have their own literature prior to the signing of the Treaty of Guadalupe-Hidalgo. I choose this date as my departure point because it is the date after which the Mexicans who lived in what is now the American Southwest were suddenly cut adrift from their native country and had to begin forming their own culture separate from that of Mexicans or the invading Americans, namely the Chican@ culture.

4. For discussion on the Chicana “good woman,” see Baca Zinn 13.
5. For a detailed explanation of the Coatlicue State, see Anzaldúa, *Borderlands* 63-73.
6. For other examples of queer men feeling the need to leave their hometowns, see Gambone 81, 91; Lassell 160; Summer 42; Monteagudo 19; Nava 28, Wittke 278.
7. For a detailed study of gay men’s attitudes about feminine behavior in other gay men, see Skidmore, Linsenmeier, and Bailey.
8. For more on the “cash value” of literature for our students, see James 46.
9. For more on how, according to Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, the dominant class creates ideas for all classes, see Kolakowski 173.
10. For more on Eagleton’s definition of ideology, see Eagleton 15.
11. For more on the educational debates in Texas, see “Latino Activists” and Messamore.
12. For examples of such queer rights debates, see Campisi, “Gay Marriage Will ‘Destroy’ Children,” “Gay Marriage Ruling,” March, and Zernike.
13. For more on ideological silence, see Macherey 131-32.

Chapter Four:

1. For other concepts and goals of critical pedagogy, see McLaren, “Critical Pedagogy: A Look at the Major Concepts.”
2. For more about the problems of literary canon formation, see Guillory.

3. For more on canon revision and its possible effects and limitations, see Alberti.
4. For more on the nature and politics of critical pedagogy, see Cho; Edwards; McLaren, *Critical Pedagogy and Predatory Culture*; Sleeter and McLaren, and Giroux.
5. For more on the contentious nature of the Texas Board of Education's 1990 textbook approval vote, see Alexander.
6. For more on impediments to Latinos rising into the teaching ranks, see Valencia and Aburto.
7. For more on his struggle to value his students' voices despite his own recognized prejudices, see Gordon.

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