

BORDERING BORDERS: GENDER POLITICS AND CONTEMPORARY LATINA
LITERATURE

Melissa Dee Birkhofer

A dissertation submitted to the faculty of the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in the
Department of English and Comparative Literature.

Chapel Hill
2012

Approved by:

Dr. María DeGuzmán

Dr. Laura Halperin

Dr. Adam Versényi

Dr. Oswaldo Estrada

Dr. Emilio del Valle Escalante

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ABSTRACT

MELISSA BIRKHOFFER: *Bordering Borders: Gender Politics and Contemporary Latina Literature*

(Under the direction of Dr. María DeGuzmán)

I approach the field of American Literature as a comparative one that includes Latina literature with hemispheric or world perspectives that differ from Anglo-European worldviews. In my examination of Latina literature I note that Latinas/os are not part of a new or emerging literature in the Americas but in fact Latinas/os are one of the original “American” writers not because they crossed the border into the U.S. but because the “border crossed them” (Flores 612). Therefore, I draw upon the growing body of work that focuses on the Latina/o writer as one who precedes the Anglo-American tradition.

The works I address specifically in my dissertation focus on the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. These contemporary works are written by U.S.-based Latinas who write in English and Spanish. My dissertation, entitled *Bordering Borders: Gender Politics and Contemporary Latina Literature*, examines and critiques theories of border crossing in this body of literature. Using border theory and border crossing as a thematic link across chapters, my dissertation focuses on linguistic, familial, and geographic borders and the implications of these theoretical positions with regard to Latina women. I juxtapose Mexican American women writers and Caribbean origin women writers which allows me to apply (U.S. and Latin American) feminist theory to

my project providing a double lens by which to more fully understand the implications of Latina literature in the U.S.

This project is one of only a handful of thorough treatments of border theory and feminist thought. Second, there are many studies that focus on specific nationalities or ethnic identities such as works on Chicanas, Cuban Americans, or Puerto Ricans, but this comprehensive project considers, compares, and contrasts a wide range of Latina ethnicities and nationalities in a dialogic manner juxtaposing Chicana (Mexican American) and Caribbean origin Latina writers in each chapter. Finally, these two groups, while included in pan-Latina studies that are not gender specific, are not examined in dialogue with one another extensively in critical discourse. Hence this dissertation contributes to scholarship in the field by adding a new perspective to the existing U.S. Latina literary criticism from a pan-Latina and feminist framework.

DEDICATION

For my mother, who always wanted to be a writer

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

There are so many to thank.

Thank you to my committee members, Dr. Laura Halperin, Dr. Adam Versényi, Dr. Oswaldo Estrada, and Dr. Emilio del Valle Escalante, for your encouragement and support over the years. Thank you to many years of working with my mentor and director, Dr. María DeGuzmán, without whom I could not have written this dissertation.

Thanks also to the Institute for the Study of the Americas at UNC for ongoing support of my project. Part of my time writing this dissertation was funded by a Mellon Dissertation Fellowship and a supplemental award from the Federico Gil Dissertation Fund.

Thank you to my family and friends in North Carolina, Iowa, and North Dakota. Your support is always appreciated. Thanks to my mom and stepdad for being my second home in North Carolina. Thanks to my dad and stepmom for always answering the phone when I need to talk. Thanks to the Worley's for offering a vacation to Charleston anytime I needed it. Thanks also to Jürgen and Anabel Buchenau for being there at the important moment and for being the best damn mentors in the world. Your support over the years has made all the difference.

Last but not least, thanks to Paul, my strongest supporter and toughest critic for all of your support, pep rallies, and advice. I could not have done this without you.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

BORDERING BORDERS: GENDER POLITICS AND CONTEMPORARY LATINA LITERATURE

Overview of Dissertation Project

Latina literature has been studied as a space to talk back to the patriarchal inequalities in women's lives and voice frustrations with sexist paradigms. This body of literature has been examined for both voicing these inequalities and as modes of action to transform and dismantle oppressive structures. Although literary texts are indirect modes of communication subject to interpretation, scholars have identified trends in Latina literature in which authors repeatedly use the literary form to call into question unequal, gendered power structures. Gloria Anzaldúa, Debra A. Castillo, Cherrie Moraga, Sonia Saldivar-Hull, and Silvia Spitta, among others have studied works in Latina literature that not only talk back to sexism and racism, but also challenge the very assumptions and cornerstones upon which literary analysis rests. What all of these critics still call for, however, is a "new language" or "structural changes in the way we apply criticism" in Latina/o literature (Moraga *Loving* 45; Spitta 197). Many scholars and critics have discussed how literature is a political tool that can be used to talk back to oppressors. Castillo, for example makes it clear in *Talking Back: Toward a Latin American Feminist Literary Criticism* that literature and literary criticism are forms of activism because the work produced talks back to the center from the periphery. She states that, "it is a form of

activism to talk back to those who would restrict possibilities to a narrow set of formulas, rigidly applied. This task is also, broadly speaking, a political one, and it is not negligible” (xxi). Castillo and María Socorro Tabuenca Córdoba also explain in *Border Women: Writing from La Frontera*, a bi-national account of women writers living on the U.S.-Mexico border, that texts by women are rarely studied in relation to current border theory. While Castillo and Tabuenca Córdoba’s project studies the U.S.-Mexico border and women writers living on or near the border, this dissertation focuses on the border, not only as a geographical site, but also as a rupture or theoretical space. If, as Spitta remarks, that Anzaldúa’s *Borderlands* is “difficult if not impossible to classify” because Anzaldúa “does not respect boundaries or borders,” then this dissertation project attempts to use the “border as a new point of departure” from which to expand theoretical notions of the border with relation to women (Spitta 198; 202). One of the ways that this dissertation makes use of this “new point of departure” is to introduce a key term in order to facilitate the argument. While this project is not a theorization of the “borderland subjectivity” as Spitta discusses, this project utilizes a new term, bordering, to talk back to hegemonic, patriarchal, and colonizing practices (207). Bordering is a term I use to discuss how contemporary Latina texts are breaking boundaries of form, genre, and content. For this reason I have chosen to turn a noun, the border, into a verb, bordering, to signal this breaking of boundaries and slippage between categories.

In their treatment of contemporary Latina literature, the following chapters examine how certain texts, rather than re-inscribing patriarchal paradigms, create new modes of literary analysis. All of the authors included in this examination self identify as feminist writers. A close analysis of their texts reveals a similar trend among these

authors, which is the focus of this dissertation. In order to explicate this trend, I examine these approaches as evidenced in texts by contemporary Latina writers, specifically by Chicana and Caribbean origin Latina authors. It is the purpose of this dissertation to contribute to the existing critical assessments of border theory as related to contemporary Latina literature by examining texts within this body of literature that understand the ruptures associated with the border as providing transformative and unstable spaces, which open up the possibility to imagine another, more equitable society and provide the tools to enact it. This project relies upon feminist theory and border theory with regards to feminist Latina literature. Scholars including Scott Michaelsen, David Johnson, Debra A. Castillo, Walter Dignolo, D. Emily Hicks, and Héctor Calderón, among many others, discuss the limits and shortcomings of border theory. One of the often mentioned critiques of border theory by critics including Castillo, Michaelsen, and Dignolo, is the failure to study the border from a hemispheric position, or at least from both sides of the border. Moreover, even when U.S.-based and Latin American scholars appropriate a hemispheric approach, this new approach often re-inscribes old notions of imperialism, patriarchy, and difference, leaving women at the margin. The texts examined in the following chapters underscore women writers and their contributions to the field. This dissertation project then adds to current scholarship by providing a framework that expands theoretical notions of the border in contemporary Latina literature.

Contemporary Latina Literature(s)

In this dissertation project, the literary texts examined in the following chapters fall under the umbrella term Latina literature, and this project is itself a Pan-Latina

examination. It is important to note that the term Latina describes, or attempts to describe, women residing in the U.S. from over twenty nations. Hence, these women, while linked in some ways, have very different experiences. For example, as Argentine American Sonia Nazario explains in the prologue to *Enrique's Journey*, she “arrived in the United States on a jet plane,” not by crossing the U.S-Mexico border on foot (xii). Additionally, Cristina García, a Cuban American writer who edited and wrote the introduction to *Bordering Fires: The Vintage Book of Contemporary Mexican and Chicano/a Literature*, notes that there is “no such thing anymore, if there ever was, as a purely Mexican or Chicano/a identity,” indeed, “What does a third-generation Chicano artist in Chicago have in common with a newly arrived immigrant to South Central Los Angeles?” (xvi). In this project then, while acknowledging the complexities of the term Latina, I include texts written by women who identify as Latinas that treat vital issues pertinent to women in the Americas. Hence, I am employing the term Latina as a pan-ethnic identity that includes subgroups such as Chicana, Caribbean Diaspora women writers, and Puerto Rican women writers.

The term Latina/o is also complicated when referring the Latina/o literature, which is itself a hybrid literature mixing both Latin American and U.S. literatures. This dissertation project examines U.S.-based Latina writers who claim Latin American heritage. Chicana critic Diana Taylor in *Negotiating Performance: Gender, Sexuality, and Thatricality in Latin/o America* captures the hybridity evident in these literatures in her term Latin/o America, which notes the transnational and hemispheric exchange that takes place.¹ While there are many angles through which to approach this hybrid

¹ It is important to point out here that in the term Latin/o America the gendered language excludes the Latin/a America.

literature, the focus of this dissertation project understands Latina literature as an integral part of U.S. studies that includes a Latin American component. This project then, expands upon Guillermo Gómez-Peña's notion that Latin America exists within the U.S. national boundaries and these national boundaries, especially between the U.S. and Mexico have moved and shifted in history.

Although the term Latina/o can be problematic, as Cristina García notes its complexity above, the umbrella term Latina is nevertheless still useful in literary analysis. Juan Flores points out in *Divided Borders: Essays on Puerto Rican Identity* that Latinos are a “very heterogeneous medley of races and nationalities” and “do not comprise even a relatively homogeneous ‘ethnicity’” (199). Further, Flores and Yúdice explain that,

Latinos include native-born U.S. citizens (predominantly Chicanos – Mexican-Americans – and Nuyoricans – ‘mainland’ Puerto Ricans) and Latin American immigrants of all racial and national combinations: white – including a range of different European nationalities – Native American, Black, Arabic, and Asian. It is thus a mistake to lump them all under the category ‘racial minority.’ (199)²

Despite the problematic nature of an umbrella term such as Latino, Flores uses the term carefully and critically. I propose a similar usage of the term Latina in this project highlighting the important contributions of women in this literary analysis and, like Flores, understand the complexities that come with such a term.

² Although Flores's focus in this book and in the article he co-authored with George Yúdice, “Living Borders/Buscando América: Languages of Latino Self-Formation” is on Puerto Ricans and Puerto Rican identity, Flores articulates the limitations of a broad term such as Latino to represent such a diverse group of people.

Although Latina/o³ literature is not a new or emerging body of work, the academy is more than a little late in adopting Latina/o literature as a vital field of academic study. Within the umbrella term of Latina/o literature, Chicana Studies, which preceded the more general category of Latino literature, has also fought to be considered an important field of study. Chicana Studies refers to the study of women of Mexican descent. Castillo in her article, “Chicana Feminist Criticism” points out how the academy failed to recognize Chicana literature as a legitimate and engaging body of work:

Until astonishingly recently, Anglophone Chicana literature has been institutionally homeless, perceived as marginal or second rate, and thus not respected within English Department circles. Hispanophone Chicana literature has been seen as culturally contaminated, written in ‘bad Spanish,’ and certainly on the defensive, having to define and redefine their field of interest, justify it to the academic community as a valid and exciting area of study, and then, finally begin to lay the groundwork for serious analysis. (16)

As stated above, while Latina/o literature is neither a new nor emerging body of literature, there is an increasingly large body of criticism on Latina/o literature that is especially emphasized on contemporary literary texts. This dissertation draws on this body of criticism that includes critics such as Castillo, Tabuenca Córdoba, Saldivar-Hull, Halperin, and McCracken.

Castillo and Tabuenca Córdoba examine literature written by women from both sides of the U.S.-Mexico border providing contemporary scholarship with a bi- and

³ While I applaud the usage of different orthographic ways to include women in the term Latino (Latina, Latina/o, Latino/a, Latin@), since this project is woman-centered I have chosen to describe the literature that I will analyze in the following chapters as Latina literature. For a discussion of the uses of the different uses of Latino/a/@ and Hispanic, see Allatson *Key Terms* 140.

transnational approach to women writing about and from the border region dividing the U.S. and Mexico. The impetus for this work, as the authors explain, came out of an understanding of a border region as a real, lived site for border-dwellers more than a theoretical space. Castillo and Tabuenca Córdoba insist that it is essential to take “into account the very real material conditions of a closed border/barrier” (3). In their bi-national examination of border literature Castillo and Tabuenca Córdoba include literature from both sides of the border including Mexican and U.S. narratives about the border in English and Spanish. Also working with bilingual texts of and on the border, Saldívar-Hull’s critical work entitled *Feminism on the Border: Chicana Gender Politics and Literature*, published in 2000 was one of the first critical studies of Chicana/o literature devoted entirely to literary production by women. Also notable, Saldívar-Hull chose not to translate Spanish passages into English privileging her bilingual (Spanish, English) reader. Saldívar-Hull infuses her Chicana feminist critique with personal experiences and re-discovers Chicana literature placing this body of literature on equal footing with well-known Chicano writers from the same period. For Saldívar-Hull, her project seeks to “investigate domestic and other female spaces as they seek additional sources in history” while maintaining the bi-lingual nature of this body of literature (25).

While Castillo and Tabuenca Córdoba’s and Saldívar-Hull’s examinations of border literature are key critical texts for Chicana studies, these works focus on Mexican, American, and Mexican American women writing about and from the U.S.-Mexico border. There is a body of critical scholarship that focuses more broadly on contemporary Latina literature. Critics such as Laura Halperin and Ellen McCracken use a broad lens through which to examine contemporary Latina writers who claim a wide range of

cultural and ethnic heritages. Halperin, for example, in her dissertation entitled *Narratives of Transgression: Deviance and Defiance in Late Twentieth Century Latina Literature* includes analyses of Latina literature by a wide range of Latina writers including Irene Vilar, Ana Castillo, Julia Alvarez, and Gloria Anzaldúa, among others. Her interdisciplinary approach to these works links the legacy of colonialism with the ways in which Latinas are pathologized as deviant subjects. She argues that the authors she examines create Latina characters who, in varying ways, “depict and challenge the marginalization of Latinas in the U.S.” (2). McCracken’s work also presents a woman-centered study of Latina literature and ethnicity. Entitled *New Latina Narrative: The Feminine Space of Postmodern Ethnicity*, McCracken’s text focuses on women writers including Chicanas such as Sandra Cisneros, Denise Chávez, and Mary Helen Ponce as well as Latina writers such as Nicholasa Mohr, Graciela Limón, Cristina García and Julia Alvarez. Her focus on these contemporary authors highlights “the subsequent flowering in the 1980s and 1990s of Latina women’s narrative, and its movement, after initial marginalization, to the status of desirable and profitable postmodern ethnic commodity” (4). McCracken’s text is also vital to the study of contemporary Latina writers. McCracken herself notes the importance for more work to be done on these and other authors: “It is my hope that a number of Latina narrativists whose work is not discussed here – including ... Achy Obejas ... [among others] will be the focus of studies by other scholars” (204). Latina writers are being published and noticed as legitimate writers in 2012 and McCracken’s work on these contemporary authors, some of whom are not frequently discussed in critical literary debates in the academy, only underscores the need for more dialogue through which these authors are brought into the conversation.

One of the ways in which Latina writers are excluded from the canon of U.S. literature, as Spitta articulates, is that “the lack of a structural revision as to just what constitutes the literary canon of the United States” is not being debated enough (197). As Spitta notes, in English departments across the U.S. most “American” literature begins “with the foundation of Jamestown and an English colonial period” (197). However, Spitta points out that the “Spanish colonial period, which would antedate Jamestown by a century, should be included” in the “American” canon (197). She concludes by noting that, “Instead, Mexican-American literature tends to be studied in Latin American and Spanish departments and not in English or American literature departments” (197). Until these problems are rectified in the academy and within the U.S. literary canon, authors such as those examined by Halperin, McCracken and the authors included in the following chapters are still speaking from the margins of U.S. and Latin American literatures.

There have been recent studies published in an effort to bring Latino Studies and the Study of the Americas into a hemispheric, or at least transnational perspective. Most notably José David Saldívar’s *Border Matters: Remapping American Cultural Studies* and Gustavo Pérez Firmat’s edited volume *Do the Americas Have a Common Literature?* make claims at re-examining the definition of “American” literature by shifting the focus away from Jamestown in order to include the U.S. Mexico borderlands as a literary space that predates colonial literary production.

Bordering the Border

Chicana/o Studies is the home of border theory because of its unique historical, political, and geographical relation to the U.S.-Mexico border. Important works on Chicana/o studies that focus on the border and border theory include Héctor Calderón's and José David Saldívar's edited volume *Criticism in the Borderlands: Studies in Chicano Literature, Culture, and Ideology*, *Border Writing: The Multidimensional Text* by D. Emily Hicks, and Gloria Anzaldúa's *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza*. Scott Michaelsen and David E. Johnson in their edited volume *Border Theory: The Limits of Cultural Politics* adapt and expand some of the strategies from Chicano studies to broaden its applications all the while articulating the limitations that the border as metaphor encapsulates. One of the unique markers that Chicana/o Studies addresses is the issues and contestations associated with territory. The U.S.-Mexico border region has changed hands several times thus changing the nation in which people live without physically moving their homes. Most famously, the United States during the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo in 1848, which marked the end to the Mexican American War, forced Mexico to secede a large portion of land that was northern Mexico but became the U.S. Southwest. The new U.S.-Mexico border divided the people living in this region and this notion of contested territories became one of the tenets of Chicano/a Studies as the national borders of the U.S. moved south forcibly annexing parts of Mexico.

I draw on the works noted above, especially Hicks's notion of the deterritorialized woman in Chicana literature, Anzaldúa's mosaic of a marginal person, and Halperin's critique of the Latina typed as deviant. I focus on Latina writers and three types of border crossing. Within these parameters, I coin the term bordering for this project. Bordering is

used to describe a paradigm shift that marks a bold change from hegemonic and patriarchal structures. Bordering, however, occurs less in literature than ordering, which is a way to re-order knowledge without fundamentally changing elements within a pre-existing paradigm. Ordering, then, resolves conflicts by adhering to current norms, in effect, reproducing the status quo without fundamentally changing any power dynamics. Bordering is used in the following chapters to describe a radically different process. Bordering is a term that describes a bold change and contestation of patriarchal paradigms of thought. Bordering includes an active component that implicates the reader into the literary debate. Therefore, bordering in the following examples of literature defines these works as more than mere literary texts, as these texts can be read as weapons with which to arm oneself in order to breakdown these inequalities. I view bordering as a transgressive act in literature functioning in similar ways as hybridity. According to Néstor García Canclini's *Hybrid Cultures: Strategies of Entering and Leaving Modernity*, hybridity highlights intercultural mixing. This mixing challenges the histories of colonialism and cultural purity. Further, Homi Bhabha in the *The Location of Culture* notes that hybridity is the cornerstone of post-colonial studies. These hybrid spaces explode systems of classification and binary constructs such as colonizer/colonized and center/periphery. My term bordering attempts this same type of exploding of binary categories by examining works that include different genres, structure, and content. For example, the work *Canícula*, by Norma Elia Cantú, addressed in the fourth chapter, is described as an autobioethnography because the work breaks with so many genre classifications. The term bordering then also functions as a way to capture this breaking outside of the borders of genre classification and narrative structure.

The following chapters elucidate places in Latina literature that do not merely re-order ordering perspectives within imperialist and sexist paradigms, but provide examples in literature of bordering, or examples that transcend the deep structures of the center-periphery dichotomy and open up possibilities beyond patriarchal and sexist patterns of thought. In order to do so, this dissertation project is organized into five thematic and dialogic chapters that address border studies and border theory with a feminist focus. This feminist focus concentrates primarily on the double marginalization of Latinas in an Anglo-male-centered U.S. society. Further, the double marginalization of Latina writers, and by extension their texts, are also marginalized by being assessed using Anglo and Western feminist critical theories that do not necessarily apply to these texts. Therefore this dissertation draws primarily from Chicana and Latina feminisms.

The works discussed in the following three chapters were published in the late 1980s and 1990s, all of which were published after Gloria Anzaldúa's now universally famous *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza*. Each of the works examined in these chapters speak to a post-Anzaldúa readership and engage with the text *Borderlands* in many ways. Interestingly, the texts examined in this project also speak out of a Latina literary moment in which women writers are finding themselves left out of the literary debate both as women writers and as Latina writers.

Denise Chávez, author of *The Last of the Menu Girls*, among many other works, encapsulates the various oppressions discussed above in the title story of her novel, "The Last of the Menu Girls." In this story published just before Anzaldúa's *Borderlands*, Chávez conveys the story of the protagonist Rocío by introducing her through a job application. Rocío is applying for a job as Ward Secretary at a hospital and as she fills out

the predetermined categories of the employment application, her story unfolds in the margins. The story begins, “NAME: Rocío Esquibel AGE: Seventeen PREVIOUS EXPERIENCE WITH THE SICK AND DYING: My great-aunt Eutilia PRESENT EMPLOYMENT: Work-study aide at Altavista Memorial Hospital” (60). By telling Rocío’s story through the formula of the job application Chávez is clearly forecasting the repercussions of the failure to create a new paradigm, and instead demonstrates that Chicanas are writing their stories in the margins of predetermined categories. What is more, these Chicana experiences do not fit into the available categories that exist in Anglo feminist theory today, and Chicanas must create a new language and paradigm in order to more closely articulate and more deeply understand the specifics and multiplicities of Chicana perspectives.

Dialogic Latina: Chicana and Caribbean origin Writers

Since in this project I am attempting to show how Latina writers are using literature as a vehicle to demonstrate the ways in which binary thought patterns are dangerous and unequal for women’s experiences, it is essential that I outline my understanding of the problematic aspects of the binary and explain why and how I have chosen to organize this project in the following chapters. While I concur that the binary is a problematic tool in feminist literary work, it is also sometimes essential to problematize the binary from within a binary thought structure. The way in which I have chosen to structure this dissertation project stems from my reading of Walter Mignolo’s concept of border thinking. Mignolo explains that border thinking or border gnosis is “knowledge from a subaltern perspective” and is “conceived from the exterior borders of the

modern/colonial world system” (11). This perspective then, while it does disrupt the binary of the center/periphery model, still creates a dialogic relationship. Mignolo addresses this perspective by noting that the most useful critical vocabulary in use in literary studies today (he names Du Bois’s “double consciousness,” Wright’s “double vision,” Anzaldúa’s “new mestiza consciousness,” and Calderón’s “borderlands of theory”) interrogates dialogic patterns from within a dialogic or doubled position (Mignolo 84). What Mignolo notices from these terms and perspectives for an/other understanding is that they all contribute to the “disruption of dichotomies through being themselves a dichotomy” (Mignolo 85). This, he continues, “is the key configuration of border thinking: *thinking from dichotomous concepts rather than ordering the world in dichotomies*” (Mignolo 85 italics in original). Therefore, while I recognize that the following chapters are presented in a dichotomous fashion each juxtaposing a contemporary Chicana author with a contemporary Caribbean origin woman writer, my intention is to create a dialogue of literary analysis between different parts of the term Latina. This organization, while seemingly recreates a dichotomous relationship between these groups of women writers also attempts to think about these dichotomous relationships within the term Latina without re-ordering the dichotomies already present (Mignolo 85). Since these author’s works often defy genre categorization, I hope to highlight the spilling over of these categories both in relation to the multiple and hybrid genres that these author use to tell their stories and in relation to the characters in the texts who are often hybrid subjects themselves.

While I draw specifically on Mignolo’s work with border thinking and border gnosis, I also take note of the ways in which the editors of *Chicana Feminisms: A*

Critical Reader choose to interrogate Chicana contributions to feminist thought. In their book, Arredondo, et. al., set up essays and responses to essays in order to “create dialogues between authors and discussants and to provoke a multidimensional rippling of talk among many scholars” (10). The organization of this dissertation then, placing Chicana and Caribbean origin writers in dialogue with one another by juxtaposing their works within chapters on a theme revolving around border theory is intentional and, while I do not seek to recreate false dichotomies, I do hope to reveal the paradigms at work in these juxtaposed texts.

Overview by Chapter

I approach the fields of American and Latin American literatures as comparative ones that include multiethnic and hybrid literatures with hemispheric or world perspectives that differ from Anglo-European worldviews. In this examination of Latina literature I have already noted that Latinas/os are not part of a new literature in the Americas, but in fact Latinas/os are one of the original “American” writers not because they crossed the border into the U.S. but because the “border crossed them” (Flores 612). Therefore, I draw upon the growing body of work that focuses on the U.S.-based Latina/o writer as one who precedes the Anglo-American tradition.

The works I address in the following chapters are written by U.S.-based Latinas who write in English and Spanish. Using the border as a thematic link across chapters, this project focuses on linguistic, familial, and geographic borders and the implications of these theoretical positions with regard to Latina women. I juxtapose Chicana writers and Caribbean origin women writers, which allows me to apply (U.S. and Latin American)

feminist theory to my project providing a double lens by which to more fully understand the implications of Latina literature.

This project is important in several ways. First, it is one of only a handful of thorough treatments of border theory and feminist thought. Second, there are many studies that focus on specific nationalities or ethnic identities such as works on Chicanas, Cuban Americans, or Puerto Ricans, but this comprehensive project considers, compares, and contrasts a wide range of Latinas in a dialogic manner juxtaposing Chicana and Caribbean origin Latina writers in each chapter. Finally, these two groups, while included in pan-Latina studies that are not gender specific, are not examined in dialogue with one another extensively in critical discourse. Hence this dissertation contributes to scholarship in the field by adding a new perspective to the existing Latina literary criticism from a pan-Latina and feminist framework.

The three body chapters of the dissertation examine different ways in which bordering occurs in contemporary Latina literature. Chicana writers including Gloria Anzaldúa, Cherrie Moraga, and Norma Elia Cantú and Caribbean origin Latina authors including Julia Alvarez, Achy Obejas, and Judith Ortiz Cofer have all demonstrated through their works the need for new paradigms of subjectivity and gender relations. The new paradigm that these authors outline is not a mere perspective shift, but includes an active quality that the works discussed in this dissertation exemplify. The active qualities and activist roles that these texts present are similar to Augusto Boal's activist theatre, which is, "a theatre that attempts to influence reality and not merely reflect it" (168). By influencing reality, the texts to be discussed in this dissertation implicate the reader, not as a passive spectator, but as a stage actor who can enact change as an active

citizen/subject in her own life. A paradigm shift, then, signifies not only new ways of perceiving, but also includes active roles as feminist citizens in a society. In order to enact active feminist roles, these texts implicate the reader as a protagonist/actor in her community.

As the borderlands and mestiza consciousness take center stage in contemporary Chicana criticism, Paul Allatson in *Latino Dreams: Transcultural Traffic and the US National Imaginary* points out that these ideas do not represent all Latina experience,

The cultural appeal to the borderlands as fact and trope nonetheless carries a number of risks. Once the US-Mexico borderlands are regarded as a paradigm of national imaginary formation and transcultural signification, the trope may potentially overdetermine the communal and personal relations to the USA of other Latino/as (notably those from the Caribbean) with no historical-material relation to, or imaginative investment in, the land frontier or its adjacent terrains. Caribbean-origin Latino/as may have a different geospatial and cultural sense of their place in relation to the state in which they reside. (Allatson 29)

As Allatson notes, Chicanas and Caribbean origin Latinas have differing ways of understanding borders, geographical and theoretical. Allatson rightly warns of the exclusionary measure of allowing the Mexico-U.S. border to stand in for all borders since a large number of U.S.-based Latinas/os do not cross a land border at all.

In this dissertation I recognize border crossing in myriad ways from the physical crossing of the Mexico-U.S. border to flying into Newark from Santo Domingo as well as non-geographical borders including gendered borders and linguistic border crossing. Moreover, this dissertation focuses on the locus of enunciation of the texts at hand not as

a theoretical construct of a transnational feminism per se, but as a material condition of production, i.e. the text, itself. The following chapters examine how these writers use the text to intervene into material culture, which for these Latina writers does have transnational components. Nevertheless, these interventions call on the reader to recognize her own locus of enunciation within these communities. This act implicates the reader and calls for the reader to act, whether that action be focused on women or more broadly working for economic justice abroad, fighting for immigrant rights in the U.S., or buying fair trade products from Latin America.

Chapter Two: Bordering the Tongue

In chapter two, “Bordering the Tongue,” I use the term bordering as it relates to instances of linguistic terrorism in Latina literature in works by Gloria Anzaldúa and Julia Alvarez building on work done by Laura Halperin. I argue that these texts talk back to male-centered discourse revealing the power dynamic within monolingual and monocultural parts of “American” society and point to the breakdown of the unidirectional movement of knowledge from one language/culture into another.

Linguistic power has been rife with debate in Latina/o literary circles for some time. Many authors have included Spanish words and/or sentences in mostly English works. Notable examples include Luis Valdéz’s use of Pachuco language in *Zoot Suit*; Junot Díaz who, in his short story collection *Drown* does not distinguish code-switching with italics or quotation marks; Sonia Saldívar-Hull who chose not to translate Spanish parts of her critical text *Feminism on the Border* into English; and Susana Chávez-Silverman’s “Killer Crónicas,” which is written entirely in Spanglish. However, rather

than focus on code switching in Latina texts, this chapter examines instances of language breakdown.

These instances of language breakdown are analyzed by employing the term bordering while considering Gloria Anzaldúa's *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza* and Julia Alvarez's *How the García Girls Lost Their Accents*. These texts talk back to, complicate, and dismantle the notion of male-centered discourse. Anzaldúa describes how astounded she was the first time she heard woman-centered language while Alvarez's protagonist Yolanda literally loses her ability to speak and understand (male) language. These are both examples of bordering and contest the notion of male-centered discourse. Interestingly, both Anzaldúa's and Alvarez's texts include female protagonists who not only speak and have agency, but who also talk back to the notion that "language is a man's discourse" (Anzaldúa 76). These texts re-appropriate and re-structure male-dominated discourse for the use of these authors' speaking women protagonists.

Gloria Anzaldúa's foundational work *Borderlands* is a multilingual account of the author's life and struggles in the borderlands between Mexico and the U.S. She is careful to articulate that her borderlands also include psychological, sexual, and spiritual borderlands that "are not particular to the Southwest" (preface, pages unnumbered). She notes that within these borderlands she was ostracized from the Chicano movement because she is a lesbian and ties her multiple oppressions to the languages she speaks.

Julia Alvarez's novel *How the García Girls Lost Their Accents* experiments with narrative practices and has multiple points of view that overlap and often provide conflicting reports of the same event. While this formal technique of her prose questions

the reliability of Alvarez's narrators, the way in which *García Girls* is written also calls attention to and questions notions of classification thereby calling for a paradigm shift rather than another interpretation of the same patriarchal structure. *García Girls* maps the stories of four sisters whose parents move from the Dominican Republic to New Jersey. The stories that comprise the work are told from the perspectives of the sisters and occur in reverse chronological order following the sisters from young adulthood in the U.S. to their childhoods in the Dominican Republic and coming of age therein. The placement of the stories thus calls into question theories of epistemology in so far as they anticipate one another and question the very dichotomy upon which Western knowledge is based, the binary cause and effect. By placing these women's stories in reverse chronological order the text re-negotiates these questions and asks readers to rethink effect and causality with regard to gender. Alvarez's *García Girls* exemplifies bordering via Yolanda's loss of language, which signifies her refusal to participate in a society that attempts to efface her.

Chapter Three: Bordering the "Family"

In chapter three, "Bordering the 'Family,'" bordering takes on an active quality as I examine the various ways Latina writers, namely playwright Cherrie Moraga and author Achy Obejas, create protagonists/actors who uncover silenced histories from a Latina perspective that promotes numerous connections and multiple perspectives. In conversation with scholars such as Kate McCullough, I examine the ways in which the authors of a novel, *Memory Mambo*, and a play, *Heroes and Saints*, implicate their audience into action via events that take place in the works. Although these works are

very different in scope and genre, both *Memory Mambo* and *Heroes and Saints* show qualities of bordering by blurring the lines between actor and spectator. Achy Obejas's novel forces her audience into a trap from which her readers must make tough decisions and draw uncomfortable comparisons between characters while Cherrie Moraga's theatrical production more overtly blurs the borders between actor and audience showing how disparate groups can come together to effect change in a given community. While the communities that these works articulate are very different, these works nevertheless employ bordering as a technique in a similar fashion.

Hence, this chapter focuses on bordering with regard to the patriarchal family structure and community and the negotiation between who is/can/should act in a literary and/or theatrical work. Juani Casas, for example, the protagonist in the novel *Memory Mambo* tries to find out her "real" family history in a family where everyone is deemed a liar. What she finds out however is how she is implicated in these lies. Obejas goes one step farther by including a plot twist that implicates the reader of the novel into a similar situation to the one in which Juani finds herself.

Although in many ways the characters portrayed in *Heroes and Saints* differ from Juani's Cuban American life growing up, these works have some similarities. Although Juani works in her family's laundromat in Chicago and *Heroes and Saints* takes place in a rural part of the San Joaquin Valley in California, these works both bring into debate who can and should act. Both works explicitly blur the lines between spectator and actor.

Chapter Four: Bordering the Border

In the fourth chapter of the dissertation, “Bordering the Border,” I employ the term bordering in order to understand the Mexico-U.S. border as a space of fragmentation but I also discuss the ways Latina writers have used this rupture between two cultures to create hybrid identities that emphasize agency and the renegotiation between and across cultures. The texts that I examine in this chapter include Norma Elia Cantú’s novel *Canícula: Snapshots of a Girlhood en la Frontera* and Judith Ortiz Cofer’s memoir *Silent Dancing: A Partial Remembrance of a Puerto Rican Childhood*. These texts are juxtaposed in order to interrogate different types of borders and border crossing since Cantú’s novel focuses on the U.S.-Mexico border and how her family was split into two when the present-day national lines between Mexico and the U.S. were drawn. In 1848 the United States forced Mexico to hand over a vast amount of land that is now the U.S. Southwest. Cantú’s novel takes place in this space along the south Texas-Mexico border. In her novel she broaches the topics of moving back and forth across this border since parts of her family live on both sides. For contrast, I then discuss Judith Ortiz Cofer’s memoir *Silent Dancing*, which documents the movement back and forth across another border, the Atlantic Ocean crossed and re-crossed by the protagonist and her family who live part-time in New Jersey on the mainland of the U.S. and part-time on the main island of Puerto Rico. Puerto Rico has been a U.S. commonwealth since the Treaty of Paris, which ended the Spanish-American War in 1898. As part of this treaty Spain ceded Puerto Rico to the U.S. Although moving from Puerto Rico to the U.S. mainland is not crossing national border, these two types of border crossing are compared and contrasted in this chapter.

Cantú's novel begins with a map of the U.S.-Mexico border along the Rio Grande/Bravo. As a Chicana, Cantú's protagonist is able to cross and re-cross the border. Her fictional, though historically accurate story is told through photographs and accompanying vignettes about her family. These photographs are explained and embellished through the vignettes, and, at times the photographs do not match the story being told at all. By contrast Ortiz Cofer's memoir emphasizes memory and border crossing as the protagonist and her family are also able to cross and re-cross the border between the mainland and Puerto Rico. The author notes how she felt as if she were living two lives in tandem and that when she was living one life, the other life, in the other locale would stop and wait for her. Part of the work's premise is finding out that this is not the case. Although this memoir does not include photographs with accompanying vignettes as Cantú includes in her novel *Canícula*, Ortiz Cofer does include a story around the photograph that is used as the cover of the book. By examining these uses of photographs in these two texts by Latina women, this chapter expands the ways in which the border can be understood.

Chapter Five: Conclusion

The conclusion of the dissertation includes a recasting of the focal term bordering and its broader applications in contemporary Latina literature. By briefly examining Cherrie Moraga's warning in her play *The Hungry Woman: A Mexican Medea*, I show how Latina authors view the dangerous possibilities of creating the same models and paradigms that have marginalized their works. After an examination of Moraga's futuristic warning, I gesture towards what I think are the main trends in the newest

generation of Latina writers including authors Catherine Loya and Stephanie Elizondo Griest and how bordering might enrich the ways one reads these contemporary works by emerging young Latina writers.

CHAPTER 2

BORDERING THE TONGUE: LINGUISTIC OPPRESSION IN THE BORDERLANDS

Introduction

Gloria Anzaldúa's foundational work *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza* outlines what it means to be caught at the interstices of two cultures, multiple languages, and how these in-between spaces are oppressive spaces for women. According to Anzaldúa, language is inextricably linked to identity and self-formation, and she explains that she is not able to express herself in her own multilingual and multiethnic way. She is oppressed linguistically by constantly having to choose English or Spanish instead of being able to use a mixture of the many languages she speaks. She calls this choosing or privileging of one language over another "linguistic terrorism" and links her linguistic oppression directly to her complex ethnic identity: "Ethnic identity is twin skin to linguistic identity – I am my language" (81). Within the term linguistic terrorism she includes another oppression, the oppression of women caused by male-centered discourse. As Laura Halperin notes, "Anzaldúa also relates how Spanish is a gendered, masculinized language. As such, it can create yet another form of alienation, especially since women are often rendered invisible within language constructs" (248). Anzaldúa explains that male-centered discourse effaces the female signifier thus erasing woman from the linguistic landscape. For example, Anzaldúa notes that she was shocked the first time she heard someone say the word "*nosotras*": "I had not known the word existed.

Chicanas use *nosotros* whether we're male or female. We are robbed of our female being by the male plural. Language is a male discourse" (76). In this chapter I examine the ways in which Anzaldúa's terms linguistic terrorism and male-centered discourse function in Julia Alvarez's novel *How the García Girls Lost Their Accents*. Within this examination I point out moments in Alvarez's text that demonstrate to the reader of the text how to fight the oppressions that plague the protagonist Yolanda. I deem these interjections in the work as moments of what I call bordering.

It is important to note that scholars and critics including Laura Halperin have paved the way for this examination. Halperin specifically juxtaposes Anzaldúa's speaker in *Borderlands* with Yolanda from *How the García Girls Lost Their Accents*. In the chapter "Clamped Mouths and Muted Cries: The Pathologization of Language," she analyzes linguistic terrorism in these texts drawing astute comparisons between the protagonist's creative talents and subsequent categorization as "deviant" (238). Halperin's chapter has been instrumental in my reading of these texts, and in this chapter I attempt to insert my own mark on the interpretation of these two works by examining the specific moments in which Yolanda falls prey to Anzaldúa's linguistic terrorism and male-centered discourse. In my reading of these moments, I focus upon the ways in which Alvarez uses technique in order to highlight these oppressions and ways to subvert them. Therefore, building upon the current textual analyses of critics such as Halperin, I use my term bordering to distinguish textual moments that speak to and through a text directly to the reader.

These two oppressions, linguistic terrorism and male-centered discourse that Anzaldúa describes in *Borderlands* also oppress Yolanda, the protagonist in Julia

Alvarez's novel *How the García Girls Lost Their Accents*. However, through Yolanda's double oppression in *García Girls*, Alvarez uses linguistic plays and narrative strategies in the text in order to show the reader how to fight and combat the very oppressions with which Yolanda struggles. That is, by turning Yolanda's linguistic oppressions on their head using meta-linguistic aspects of the text, such as linguistic tropes, double entendres and rhyme, Alvarez reveals ways to empower the reader, making the text both revolutionary and didactic.

Both Anzaldúa's *Borderlands* and Alvarez's *García Girls* balance between languages and between cultures. In *Borderlands*, the quintessential example of a border text, invoking at least eight languages, many genres, and multiple counter narratives, Anzaldúa describes herself as a border woman, one whose life includes "the coming together of two self-consistent but habitually incompatible frames of reference" (100). These two "incompatible frames of reference" cause "*un choque*, a cultural collision" (100). This cultural collision is the site for many Latina authors who convey the double collision of straddling two languages and cultures with the added oppression of doing so as a woman.

Yolanda García and her family in Julia Alvarez's *How the García Girls Lost Their Accents* experience Anzaldúa's *choque* when the family is forced to leave the Dominican Republic for the U.S. Yolanda and her three sisters live in the borderlands between their economically privileged Dominican childhood and middle-to-lower-middle class upbringing in New York. *How the García Girls Lost Their Accents* maps the struggles of four sisters living "on the hyphen" between their Dominican heritage and growing up in New York. Although the novel follows all four of the García sisters, ten of

the fifteen stories include or are devoted to the third sister, Yolanda, who is the protagonist of the work. Yolanda experiences linguistic terrorism growing up by constantly having to negotiate between languages. While Alvarez's novel is a prime example of a border text and Yolanda a border woman, I argue further that Alvarez's formal techniques and Yolanda's use of language mark this work as not only a border text but also as a didactic primer through which the reader is equipped with tools in order to mirror Yolanda's decisions to act against her oppressors. This implication of the reader in the text is Alvarez's response to Anzaldúa's assertion that, "the possibilities are numerous once we decide to act and not react" (101). The active quality of Alvarez's *García Girls* that is present in both the form and the content of the novel is an example of what I term "bordering." Bordering, in this chapter is not only a transgressive act in that it identifies possible alternatives outside of pre-established patterns, but bordering also includes an active agent injecting an ethical component into the literary debate such that one perceives this text not merely as a literary artifact but as a weapon for cultural combat. That is bordering, in relation to Alvarez's text *How the García Girls Lost Their Accents*, focuses upon places in which Yolanda is unable to speak for herself which are also places in which Alvarez includes meta-narrative techniques to speak through the text on how to fight these oppressions. As such, this chapter includes an examination of Julia Alvarez's *How the García Girls Lost Their Accents* and this text's use of bordering techniques or examples in literature that transcend the deep structures of the center-periphery dichotomy to open up possibilities beyond patriarchal and sexist patterns of thought and language.

Further, this chapter focuses on examples of bordering in literature that are associated with linguistic oppression with regard to women. Therefore, bordering in this section will be framed as an aspect of Alvarez's text that provokes the reader to re-think paradigms of patriarchy be it through Alvarez's formal techniques or through Yolanda's and her family's struggles between two cultures, two languages. In myriad ways *How the García Girls Lost Their Accents* talks back to, complicates, and dismantles the notion of male-centered discourse. Through Yolanda's experiences with linguistic terrorism via her relationships with men and Alvarez's use of reverse chronological narrative, *García Girls* embodies the qualities of "bordering" in order to both underscore linguistic oppressions in the novel and to encourage readers to subvert this oppressive paradigm in real life.

This examination is thus anchored by Anzaldúa's term "linguistic terrorism" to measure Alvarez's position with regards to linguistic oppression. Anzaldúa explains that she did not speak Chicano Spanish at first because it was considered a bastard language, neither Spanish nor English. In the section entitled "How to Tame a Wild Tongue" Anzaldúa explains that her use of a mixture of at least eight different languages in this text defines her as a "border woman," a mosaic of a marginal person. She *is* her mixed language. "Language is a homeland closer than the Southwest" (77). Anzaldúa succinctly explains an extremely intricate oppression: women's effacement by the male signifier. The man stands in as a sign for the entire group, of the family unit, of the whole Chicano community, *nosotros*. How could one fathom a group or community of all women, a *nosotras*? Anzaldúa not only visualizes this group but she also puts it into action in *Borderlands/La Frontera* when she calls for women to unite in order to provide a more open, heterogeneous space of identity and expression for Chicana women.

Yolanda also falls victim to linguistic terrorism in *García Girls*, which is explored in the text through reverse chronological narrative practices that makes the work difficult to classify. The formal techniques of Alvarez's prose call attention to and question notions of classification thereby proposing a complete paradigm shift rather than another interpretation of the same patriarchal structure. In this way, Alvarez and the other authors to be discussed in this project include an active quality in their works. This active quality does not merely point out gender inequality, but calls to action and proposes a plan on how to begin to dismantle oppressive paradigms of thought. For Alvarez, this plan begins with a critical assessment of patriarchy and how literature can be a part of a movement to rethink gender inequality.

Yolanda's Relationships with Men

In the opening story of the novel, Yolanda is visiting family in the Dominican Republic. Her Spanish is rusty after a number of years in the U.S.; she has trouble conversing comfortably in her native tongue. "In halting Spanish, Yolanda reports on her sisters. When she reverts to English, she is scolded, '¡En español!' The more she practices, the sooner she'll be back to her native tongue, the aunt insists. Yes, and when she returns to the States, she'll find herself suddenly going blank over some word in English" (7). Here Yolanda is urged to stay in one language, in Spanish, and not revert back to English while in the Dominican Republic. However, some phrases and expressions are easier for her to explain in one language than the other and having to always speak in Spanish or always in English becomes oppressive to her as she thinks and wants to articulate herself in a mixture of both languages. She feels she cannot fully

express herself if she cannot mix Spanish and English together and feels stultified speaking completely in one language or another. Anzaldúa calls this act linguistic terrorism. That is, Yolanda is unable to fully express herself if she is not able to code-switch between languages. As Laura Halperin points out, “the instances when Yolanda is labeled out-of-control and in need of psychiatric/psychological ‘care’ are the times when she is attuned to the nuances of language – relying on her bilingualism, quoting from famous writers, and using figurative language” (254).⁴ Yolanda also experiences oppression through male-centered discourse in the novel in which her agency is effaced when men speak for her.

Alvarez’s *García Girls* exemplifies bordering via Yolanda’s loss of language, which signifies her refusal to participate in a society that attempts to efface her. Yolanda struggles to have a voice and agency as she negotiates her life both in the U.S. and in the Dominican Republic. From a young age males repeatedly silence Yolanda, sometimes forcibly. Yolanda falls victim to linguistic terrorism and learns that “language is a man’s discourse” by her father, a boyfriend in college, and her husband John (Anzaldúa 76). Halperin notes that the ideas of voice and male-silencing are important as well and points out the importance of language, being spoken for, and the tongue, “Alvarez illustrates how John privileges his monolingualism over his wife’s bilingualism, literally inserting his tongue into her mouth despite her objections” (249). In each of these moments in her life, Yolanda is silenced by male figures around her or her voice is re-appropriated through their words. Nevertheless, Yolanda eventually learns to fight these linguistic oppressions, and in a meta-linguistic aspect of the text, Alvarez speaks through the text to

⁴ Halperin’s assessment of Yolanda in *How the García Girls Lost Their Accents* is an astute interpretation of the psychic, psychological, and pathological categorizations of language and bilingualism and has been influential to my reading of the text.

inform her readers of these inequalities. These meta-linguistic aspects are the active qualities of the text and the examples of bordering in *García Girls*.

When Yolanda is in the ninth grade, she is asked to give the Teacher's Day Address at her school even though, "in the Dominican Republic growing up, Yoyo had been a terrible student. No one could ever get her to sit down to a book. But in New York, she needed to settle somewhere, and since the natives were unfriendly, and the country inhospitable, she took root in the language" (141). She tries to write her speech for the Teacher's Day Address, but because of her anxiety over having to give the speech in public, she is unable to write anything. She becomes inspired by the words of Walt Whitman and writes her speech, noting that she "finally sounded like herself in English" (141). Yolanda wants to celebrate this feat with her parents as she is finally beginning to master English and is proud of the work she has produced. She reads the first draft to her parents. Her mother listens first and when Yolanda is finished Laura's "eyes were glistening" and "her face was warm and soft and proud" (141). Her mother Laura describes the speech Yolanda has just delivered as "a beautiful, beautiful speech" and Laura asks Yolanda to read the speech to her father (141). However, after Yolanda delivers her Whitman-inspired speech, her father flies into a rage because the speech "shows no gratitude" is "boastful," "insubordinate," "improper," and "disrespectful" (145). He says, "[a]s your father, I forbid you to make that eh-speech!" (145). He tears the speech to shreds. Yolanda's father silences her in a violent way, literally destroying the first piece of writing in which she "sounded like herself in English" (141). In destroying the work she has produced, Yolanda's father censors Yolanda's voice in English and demands that she write a different speech.

Yolanda and her mother write a new speech, one of “stale compliments” and “polite commonplaces” (145). The new speech is not from Yolanda’s heart or mouth, but rather is what her father wants and will allow her to say. The new speech is met with success when she reads it at Teacher’s Day, but it is not Yolanda’s voice. That evening, when her father comes home from work he apologizes for his behavior and explains that ““Your father did not mean to harm”” and ““He just want to protect you”” (149). In an effort to reconcile with his daughter, he buys her a new electric typewriter with her “initials decaled below the handle” (149). Although Yolanda now has a typewriter so that she can continue to write speeches and stories, it is unclear at the end of this section if the gift is indeed a peace offering or a form of bribery. By giving Yolanda a typewriter on which she can compose, it could be read that her father further wants to control what she composes. Perhaps then, rather than a peace offering, the typewriter is a bribe for Yolanda that includes “all the extra features: a plastic carrying case with Yoyo’s initials decaled below the handle, a brace to lift the paper upright while she typed, an erase cartridge, an automatic margin tab, a plastic hood like a toaster cover to keep the dust away” (149). Yolanda’s father uses his patriarchal position to buy Yolanda’s destroyed speech by bribing her with a new typewriter. While this type of bribe is a prime example of the power structure of patriarchal marriage, the symbolism of the typewriter to both allow (Yolanda can write more speeches) and yet police (her father gives the typewriter to her, which also implies he can take it away) what Yolanda writes with it, is especially problematic. While Yolanda is the new owner of a typewriter, it is many years before she is able to assert her voice and agency.

As in the scene above when Yolanda's father forces her to rewrite her speech and then buys her a typewriter, presumably in an effort for her to find her voice within the father's predetermined appropriateness, Yolanda and her college boyfriend Rudy find themselves at a linguistic impasse. Rudy blames Yolanda for the "failures" in their relationship when it is a problem of gendered language and the inequality encoded in that language that is the problem between them. When Yolanda and Rudy meet, Rudy convinces Yolanda to help him with the first assignment in their poetry writing class. Already being manipulated by Rudy, Yolanda helps write Rudy's poems for him. Rudy blurts out some ideas, but it is Yolanda who organizes his ideas into scanned, rhymed quatrains. Here, Yolanda translates Rudy's crude ideas into something poetic with form, "We spent most of the weekend together, writing it, actually me writing down lines and crossing them out when they didn't scan or rhyme, and Rudy coming up with the ideas" (93). Here, Yolanda takes on a subservient role by becoming Rudy's typist. This scene is connected to the Teacher's Day Address since she is using a typewriter, but she is not composing her own thoughts. Instead, she transcribes Rudy's ideas, not her own. However, Yolanda explains in the first-person narrative of this section that she still did not feel completely comfortable writing in English. Castells notes that Yolanda's "linguistic shortcomings are such that she and Rudy spend a weekend writing love sonnets to read out loud in class, but she does not even realize that she has co-written a pornographic poem" (39). Yolanda recounts that this "was the first pornographic poem I'd even co-written; of course I didn't know it was pornographic until Rudy explained to me all the word plays and double meanings" (93). Like in the scenario with her father and

the typewriter, Yolanda plays the role of the typist and proofreader while Rudy inserts the sexual connotations into the poem.

After several weeks together, Rudy becomes annoyed at Yolanda's reluctance to have sex with him. He becomes impatient and begins to blame Yolanda, whose refusals "varied, depending on my current hangups, that's what Rudy called my refusals, hangups" (96). Here Rudy's blame implies that something is wrong with Yolanda for not wanting a sexual relationship with him. However, Yolanda explains that Rudy and Yolanda were not speaking the same language. Rudy uses literal and, to Yolanda, vulgar terms to describe sex and sex acts. Yolanda however prefers to think about a potential sexual relationship with Rudy in figurative, allegorical, and romantic terms avoiding the clinical and violent connotations in Rudy's vocabulary. She explains that,

Perhaps if Rudy had acted a little more as if lovemaking were a workshop of sorts, things might have moved more swiftly toward his desired conclusion. But the guy had no sense of connotation in bed. His vocabulary turned me off even as I was beginning to acknowledge my body's pleasure. If Rudy had said, *Sweet lady, lay across my big, soft bed and let me touch your dear, exquisite body*, I might have felt up to being felt up. (96)

This stand off in fact has less to do with Yolanda's notions of virginity and sexual experience than it has to do with gendered language and the framing of the actions being described. If, as Joan Hoffman asserts, "Yolanda insists that language is for her as important as sex" and that "the act must be properly named," then Yolanda here is attempting to do much more than convince Rudy to use less violent terms for sex (Hoffman 23). In fact, she is trying to claim ownership by renaming the act on her own

linguistic terms, emphasizing the framing of actions and words as actions. This move then is a decolonial act and has larger repercussions than whether or not Rudy and Yolanda sleep together. Indeed, as Yolanda attempts to rename things, she is asserting her own linguistic power over the situation and learning how to control her own discourse. Yolanda wants Rudy to use a female-inclusive language, but since he refuses to speak her language, she refuses to act. When she refuses to participate, he asks her, “‘What’s wrong with you,?’” implying that Yolanda is the root of the problem and that it is up to her to fix it (97). Unable to speak one another’s languages, Rudy and Yolanda do not have a sexual relationship, and Rudy stops calling her. However, Yolanda’s search for female-centered language does not end with Rudy.

In a chapter titled “Joe,” which is the English mis-reading of the Spanish “Yo,” short for Yolanda, Yolanda and her husband John are in bed on a hot summer night. John makes advances toward Yolanda. She is not interested in being intimate but “the hand wouldn’t listen” (76). As John continues his unwanted advances in bed he prints “J-o-h-n on her right breast with a sticky finger as if he were branding her his” (76). In this act John asserts his ownership by branding Yolanda, and his advances show that he thinks he is entitled to force Yolanda to be intimate with him. Once she is branded as his property, she loses her unique identity along with her own voice and agency. She attempts to push him away with her hand but he “ignored the violence in the gesture and kissed her moist palm” (76). John, choosing not to recognize Yolanda as an equal partner in their relationship, refuses to acknowledge her protests to stop. Here, the male-centered discourse revolves entirely around John branding Yolanda with his name, effectually taking possession of her and speaking for her. Halperin examines this scene through the

lenses of linguistic terrorism and sexual violence, and I am drawing on her ideas for my reading of this scene.⁵ She notes specifically that, John “uses his body, specifically his hand, to ‘own’ her, as if she were his possession” (246). When the advances do not stop, Yolanda leaps out of bed and yells expletives at him. She then realizes that even in this moment of protest he still maintains the upper hand because “he had forced her to say her least favorite word in the world,” and she is angry with herself for allowing him to control what she says (77).

To complicate matters further, the cultural miscommunication that takes place in Yolanda’s relationships with both John and Rudy make Yolanda’s experience in romantic relationships with Anglo men all the more problematic. Although Pérez Firmat argues that the Cuban-American 1.5 generation has “beneficial consequences” associated with its “intermediate location” including being able to “circulate within and through both the old and new cultures,” Yolanda does not always find this to be the case (4). In fact, this Dominican-American lives in a reality much more aligned to Rubén Rumbaut’s approximation of the 1.5 generation, a generation that “must cope with two crisis-producing and identity-defying transitions” in which “they are marginal to both the old and new worlds, and are fully part of neither of them” (Pérez Firmat 4). Further, Pérez Firmat and Rumbaut fail to address the specific marginalization Yolanda faces as a woman both in the U.S. and in the Dominican Republic. Like Anzaldúa’s “herida abierta,” the colliding of these two cultures is neither neat nor painless (25). Indeed, when

⁵ Halperin, Laura. *Narratives of Transgression: Deviance and Defiance in Late Twentieth Century Latina Literature*. Dissertation, University of Michigan. Ann Arbor: Proquest/UMI, 2006 (AAT 3208296). 244-255.

Yolanda's old and new worlds collide, bridging the two cultures usually does not work out.

Alvarez's Metalinguistic Methodologies

Although Yolanda suffers from both linguistic oppression and male-centered discourse, it is the author Julia Alvarez who injects the work with tools for Yolanda and indeed the reader to use in an effort to fight these oppressions. Alvarez employs linguistic tropes and double entendres throughout the novel such that while reading the stories therein, the reader is aware that the stories are told using unmistakable linguistic plays that break the flow of the narrative and jar the reader into remembering that she/he is reading a text. As noted by Ellen McCracken, "while Alvarez's narrative appears on the surface to be a straightforward telling of events, chinks in the veneer of simplicity are quickly evident" (28). These "chinks" are the theoretical strategies within the novel that speak between and through the text as lessons on how to eradicate, or at least minimize the oppressions that Yolanda faces. Alvarez's use of linguistic tropes, double entendres, and rhyme destabilize the asymmetrical relationship between English and Spanish in the United States, claiming both languages as equally valid for the multilingual, multiethnic subject (Yolanda) as well as interpolating a multiethnic, multilingual readership. Thus, Alvarez uses literature in the same way as Augusto Boal views activist theatre. That is, it embodies, "a theater [or novel] that attempts to influence reality and not merely reflect it" (168). As an "attempt to influence reality," Alvarez's interpolation of the reader through the linguistic strategies Yolanda uses to overcome oppression impels the reader to act in her own life.

Since third wave feminism and women of color made clear that middle class white feminism did not meet their needs, many feminist theorists have begun the long process of creating new methodologies by which to measure feminist scholarship by women of color. Black feminist theorists have been at the forefront of understanding feminist tendencies and methodologies in literature as theory itself. Critics including Carole Boyce Davies suggest that theory can be found within literature, that methodologies can be traced, not by theorists imprinting on a text, but by teasing out epistemologies from an author's work. Feminists of color thus argue that using only Anglo feminist theories to critique a work by a woman of color is an unfruitful and even violent act. Boyce Davies adds that,

cultural theorizing is often done by those with the power to disseminate, generally male scholars (more recently white women and Black men). Because of heterosexism and male dominance, the language and concepts of [white] male scholars gain easy currency. The ways in which Black women/women of color theorize themselves often remains outside of the boundaries of the academic context. (18)

In response to heterosexism and white male dominance, Boyce Davies then proposes "to read Black women's writing within the context of cultural theory and a variety of new forms of knowledge, but also to see what the texts themselves offer, theoretically, on the questions with which we are grappling" (19). Keeping in mind the violence that occurs when the One speaks for or as the Other, I posit that Julia Alvarez, Dominican American feminist author, presents a methodology or a set of tools that can be used by readers to

combat the oppressions that the characters face in her works.⁶ This section employs a feminist reading of Alvarez's text in so far as it examines what the text itself offers theoretically (Boyce Davies 19). In the following examples in which Alvarez speaks through Yolanda and her actions, bordering is evident as Alvarez interprets for her readers how to subvert the oppressions that Yolanda faces in her life.

One of the meta-aspects of the text that Alvarez employs in *García Girls* is the use of rhymes, off rhymes, and repetition of words in order to highlight the importance of a bilingual identity for Yolanda. Before the branding scene described above, Yolanda and her husband begin to play a rhyming game with their names. Yolanda rhymes first with her husband's name, modeling the game for him, "John, John, you're a pond!" but John cannot think of anything to rhyme with Yolanda and does not want to play the game. (71). Yolanda suggests using her English nickname Joe, "so use Joe. Doe, roe, buffalo" but John cannot come up with a rhyme (71). She then suggests using the word sky to describe her but John retorts, "That's not allowed ... Your own rules: you've got to rhyme with your name" (72). Yolanda counters, "Yo rhymes with cielo in Spanish." Yo's words fell into the dark, mute cavern of John's mouth. Cielo, cielo, the word echoed. And Yo was running, like the mad, into the safety of her first tongue, where the proudly monolingual John could not catch her, even if he tried" (72). Halperin suggests that John is trying to usurp his control over Yolanda in this part of the text. "Proudly" positioning English as the exclusive language upon which the rules of the game apply,

⁶ I am referring to Simone de Beauvoir's critique of the duality between the Self and the Other in *The Second Sex* and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's argument in "Can the Subaltern Speak?" Beauvoir, in *The Second Sex*, states that "humanity is male and man defines woman not in herself but as relative to him" ... "He is the Subject, he is the Absolute – she is the Other" (xxii). Spivak argues that current criticism takes the western world as Beauvoir's Subject leaving the rest of the world as the Other, pointing out the violence that occurs when the West attempts to speak for the subaltern (66).

John not only discourages Yolanda from switching back and forth between Spanish and English, he privileges his monolingual knowledge base over his wife's more expansive one" (246). Yolanda is able to manipulate the rules of her own game in this scene to silence the monolingual John, if only for a brief moment. Alvarez in this example demonstrates the importance of a bilingual identity for Yo even if John doesn't recognize or cannot understand what she says. Alvarez suggests through this rhyming game that Yolanda must assert her complex linguistic identity if she wants to be an equal partner in this relationship. Yolanda speaks and even if John does not understand her, for a brief moment she has asserted herself as a bilingual subject with agency during the rhyming game. This slight glimmer of agency when Yolanda uses "cielo" to rhyme with "Yo" is an example of bordering as Alvarez demonstrates through Yolanda how to break free from the linguistic terrorism John forces her into. Although in this scene Yolanda is not able to fully break free of John's control, this moment of agency does plant the seed for Yolanda to be successful in this endeavor later in the novel. Unfortunately for Yolanda this agency does not last. As soon as she speaks into John's mute mouth he responds with a claim that, as a bilingual, she is crazy, "What you need is a goddam shrink!" thus ending the rhyming game as a fight ensues (73).

Yolanda in fact does begin seeing a psychiatrist and is eventually admitted to a psychiatric hospital. Ironically, it is in the hospital that Yolanda is able to, if not free herself from dominating men in her life, then at least carve a space for herself in which she can see how she is being oppressed and begin to assert herself. In the hospital she is at the mercy of Dr. Dennis Payne's diagnoses of her. One day Yolanda watches her doctor cross the yard outside of her room. At that moment she feels a tickle in her throat

and vomits “a huge, black bird” that flies at the doctor and attacks him with its beak. “It plummets down toward the sunning man on the lawn” and then its “hooked beak rips at the man’s shirt and chest; the white figure on the lawn is a red sop” (84).⁷ The action of this part of the novel can be read as an attack on Dr. Payne, and more broadly on patriarchy, which decides, limits, and measures Yolanda’s abilities, freedoms, and agency as a woman. When the bird, birthed from Yolanda’s mouth attacks the doctor, Yolanda rejects the notion that it is up to Dr. Payne to diagnose her. The violent imagery of the scene suggests that violence is a necessary agent of action, but the scene can also be read as a visualization or projection that does not actually occur. For the purposes of my argument here, it is the meta-linguistic aspects of this passage that are central to the scene and which contribute to the feminist message in the action of the text.

Throughout the interactions with Dr. Payne, Yolanda is described in the text using several double entendres. These figures of speech point out places in the text in which Yolanda is being manipulated by the male power figures around her. These double entendres both draw attention to the injustices Yolanda faces and underline the arbitrariness of these unequal power dynamics that so often go unnoticed. This aspect of the novel is a prime example of a transgressive act that employs bordering as a powerful tenet in the narrative. One of John’s nicknames for Yolanda is Violet, “after shrinking violet when she started seeing Dr. Payne” (75). During another fight in which John calls Yolanda “Violet” Yolanda replies, “Stop violeting me!” (75). This demand is meant to be

⁷ The black bird featured here is most certainly a reference to Alfred Hitchcock’s *The Birds* and *Marnie*. In a later novel by Julia Alvarez, *Saving the World* (2006), the black bird and psychiatrist Dr. Payne reemerge on the first page of the novel-within-a-novel, “She explained that she felt as if a whirling darkness were descending on her, like dirty water going down a drain or that flock of birds in the film by Hitchcock. The doctor, who’d been jotting down her explanation, had looked up. He was so young; he probably hadn’t seen the film. ‘What kind of birds?’ he asked” (1). To my knowledge there is no published scholarly material on this connection.

read two ways: one, Yolanda wants John to stop calling her patronizing names such as shrinking violet and two, she wants him to stop violating her and respecting her right to say no. The use of the double entendre in this place in the text jars the reader from the narrative of the story highlighting the double play on the word “violeting/violating.”⁸

Later in the story after Yolanda has vomited the black bird and the bird is flying toward her window, she realizes that it will not be able to fly through the screen. “It flies toward the window. ‘Oh my God! The screen!’ Yo remembers in a moment of suspension of belief” (83). This “suspension of belief” is a play on the suspension of disbelief, in which an audience is asked to suspend judgment on fantastic or non-realistic elements or events in art. However, Alvarez intentionally turns this trope on its head asking Yolanda and the reader, not to suspend disbelief that the bird can or cannot fly through the screen window, but to suspend *belief*, that is, to suspend and by extension examine seemingly realistic elements. Here Alvarez is asking Yolanda to suspend her beliefs in what she thinks is real. That is to say, to see beyond what *seems* right into the deep structure of things. Gloria Anzaldúa calls this act “la facultad,” “the capacity to see in surface phenomena the meaning of deeper realities, to see the deep structure below the surface” (60). These plays on words then do much more than offer a humorous quality to the work; they disrupt the story in obvious ways in order for the readers to reflect upon what is happening to Yolanda. This disruption of the text, what I term bordering, then calls attention to the paradigm or deep structure of the language of the story and to the unspoken rules of patriarchy through which Yolanda is oppressed.

⁸ In this section I am indebted to Laura Halperin’s work on the concept of violation in Alvarez’s *García Girls*.

These meta-aspects of the text make it revolutionary because the text is the embodiment of one of Chela Sandoval's "technologies." She identifies a technique in *Methodology of the Oppressed* that she calls "chiasmic change of signification" (84). This chiasmic change of signification is a "twisted trope that makes meaning by turning in on itself, by repeating while simultaneously inverting the relationship between two concepts" (84). In the examples from Alvarez's *García Girls* above, Alvarez creates her own chiasmic change in signification in her text. As such, Alvarez not only paves the way for Yolanda to subvert or at least battle against her double oppressions, but she also teaches the reader how to subvert these oppressive relationships in real life. It is this aspect of Alvarez's text that makes it more than an award-winning literary achievement, as the text becomes a weapon with which women can arm themselves against the oppressions that Yolanda faces. Alvarez also employs these same techniques in the narrative structure of *García Girls* as she constructs her narrative in a reverse chronological order.

Reverse Chronological Order: Seeing the Beyond the Surface of Things

The title of Julia Alvarez's novel *How the García Girls Lost Their Accents*, suggests that language, culture, gender, and word play are investigated by a meta-narrative that privileges language and linguistic power.⁹ Additionally, the structure of the narrative, along with a host of narrative strategies that comprise Alvarez's *García Girls*, is uniquely important to the text in relation to gendered linguistic oppression. The reverse chronological order of the novel demonstrates Alvarez's commitment to unveiling

⁹ Although Ilan Stavans writes in a 1992 review that Alvarez's novel "isn't about language," the critical scholarship produced after Stavans's review, most notably Ricardo Castell's "The Silence of Exile in *How the García Girls Lost Their Accents*," proves otherwise (23).

gendered language oppression in *García Girls*. She employs meta-narrative techniques in order to prime the reader for what is to come in the novel itself. This priming both breaks down the boundaries between author and reader and implicates this reader in the message of the text, thus initiating a dialogue between author/protagonist/reader. This unique relationship between these figures marks another example of bordering in *García Girls*.

The novel is divided into three parts, each part containing five stories that move backward in time beginning from 1989 when the four sisters are adults living in the U.S. to 1956 when the family lives in the Dominican Republic. Therefore, the first chapter of the novel, where we meet Yolanda as an adult returning to the Dominican Republic after a long absence, is the last chronological moment included in the work. Consequently, in the final chapter of *García Girls*, Yolanda is five or six years old living in Santo Domingo before her parents were forced to flee to the U.S. William Luis calls this reverse chronological narrative technique “regressive narration” which occurs throughout the novel until the last few paragraphs in which the “novel pivots; the events stop unfolding in a regressive manner and are now narrated in a chronological one; time is accelerated, and life appears to make sense” (847). However, with regard to Alvarez’s narrative technique, there is nothing regressive about the narration of the novel. The narration does not become less advanced as the characters get younger. Rather, the indirect narrative strategies of *García Girls* are maintained throughout the work from beginning to end whether measured by the order of the chapters or chronologically by time. Typing *García Girls* as a work with a “regressive narration” Luis then compares Alvarez’s narrative structure with Alejo Carpentier’s “Viaje a la Semilla,” which follows the protagonist Don Marcial backward in time from after his death to before his birth

(840).¹⁰ However, whereas “Viaje a la Semilla” has a backwards narrative in which time actually moves backward depicting candles that do not burn down but get longer as they “unburn,” the narrative of *García Girls* does not move backward in time within the chapters; the chapters are placed in a reverse chronological pattern, but within each chapter, time moves forward. Each following chapter then picks up with one of the four sisters at some moment before the previous story occurred. William Luis, therefore, does not recognize one stark difference between the two different narrative techniques taking place in “Viaje a la Semilla” and *García Girls*. In Carpentier’s story time moves backwards in a regressive form whereas in *García Girls*, time moves forward in chapters that are placed in reverse chronological order in episodic flashbacks. This reversal of chronological time, though not regressive, does mark one of the formal ruptures in *García Girls* that impacts the reader by forcing the reader to disengage and then reengage in every section. Stephanie Lovelady explains that there are different types of reverse chronological works and that in *García Girls*, “time is not experienced backwards by the characters and causality is not reversed” (32). Even though causality is not reversed in the chronology of the novel, Alvarez emphasizes the binary relationship between effect and cause using this narrative technique.

Highlighting the reversed nature of effect and cause in the very structure of the novel before any of the stories are read, compels Alvarez’s readers to recognize her text as more than a literary work, more than a loosely biographical account of the author’s life, but also as a primer and weapon in which counter voices are contained. Gloria Anzaldúa calls them “counterstances,” which “refute the dominant culture’s views and

¹⁰ Other critics have also made this comparison including Ilan Stavans and Stephanie Lovelady.

beliefs” as a position “towards liberation from cultural domination” (100). Alvarez creates a counterstance in the framework of her novel’s reverse chronological time through the lives of the four García sisters, and this counterstance creates a meta-narrative through which Alvarez can instruct her readers. This metanarrative is an example of bordering because it is a device that textually marks bold change in the literary work. Hence, *García Girls*’s reverse chronological order accomplishes what Ellen Maycock describes, “the format of the backwards timeline demonstrates the mature protagonist Yolanda’s return to her past, implying perhaps a need to recover a distant self or cultural location through memory, nostalgia, and the power of the pen” (223). This technique also points to technique *as* technique. By emphasizing the structure of the novel *as* a structure, Alvarez is complicating and calling into question the very ways in which we make sense of things, complicating the notions of cause and effect, chronology, and reader expectations. The reverse chronological order of the novel jars the reader to such an extent that even from the first section of the novel to the next we have moved back in time seventeen years. This rupture questions the very aspects of how innocence-to-awareness works as a metanarrative.

To return to Carpentier’s story for a moment, “Viaje a la Semilla” has been championed as a prime example of backwards narration in which time is reversed. In Carpentier’s story Don Marcial’s house, which has been destroyed after his death, rebuilds itself in the reverse time device of the story. The fantastical element to the story – its use of magical realism – has not been compared to the fantastical elements mentioned above that occur in *García Girls*, but *Julia Alvarez: A Critical Companion* does mention magical realism in relation to Alvarez’s *In the Time of the Butterflies*.

Straddling the borderlands between the real and the fantastic, Alvarez asks her readers to revisit assumptions and entertain “la percepción remota de otras posibilidades” (Partridge 115; quoted in Lovelady 32). By positioning her novel in so many of the borderlands that Anzaldúa articulates, Alvarez’s *How the García Girls Lost Their Accents* becomes a manual for new epistemologies. Roberto González Echevarría notes that, “On the whole, magical realism was an effort to express counterintuitively the world as if the presuppositions of Western, bourgeois society could be erased and a fresh look possible” (19). My argument here is that Julia Alvarez’s use of reverse chronological time in *García Girls* “expresses counterintuitively” the lives of four girls growing up between New York and the Dominican Republic providing “a fresh look” at the presuppositions of patriarchy and sexist tendencies across cultures and languages. Therefore, her use of reverse chronological narrative structure is not merely an homage or harkening back to Latin American roots and magical realism, but her technique highlights the “presuppositions of Western, bourgeois society” and its systems of oppression and patriarchy on women of color in borderlands.

The counterintuitiveness of this narrative device places effect before cause as we see the García sisters as adults and then become acquainted with them throughout the novel as they get younger and struggle as young women battling patriarchal oppressions in the U.S. and the Dominican Republic. This strategy of effect before cause frames the novel, drawing attention to what Anzaldúa calls the “deep structure of things,” which thereby questions both the dyad of cause and effect and the very ways in which these oppressions are perpetuated and repeated in Western Cartesian binary thought patterns. Additionally, the reverse chronological time can be read as a revision of literature’s

tendency toward the national and/or nation. If as Said says, that “culture is a system of discriminations and evaluations” then it is also “a system of exclusions” (11). Yolanda finds herself excluded in both of her cultures.

By way of Conclusions: Beginnings and Endings

Catherine Romagnolo notes in her article “Recessive Origins in Julia Alvarez’s *Garcia Girls*: A Feminist Exploration of Narrative Beginnings,” that the “recessive nature” and “formal complexity” of the text “destabilize hegemonic connotations of beginnings while embracing their subversive potential” (150). Beginning the novel at its chronological end, Alvarez emphasizes the importance of origins, memory, and nostalgia in constructing subjectivity and identity. Further, by beginning the novel with the chronological end and ending the novel with the chronological beginning, Alvarez’s text is conceived in a non-linear fashion that interrogates binary thought while it subverts this either/or paradigm.

Though the bookending of the novel with stories that take place in the Dominican Republic and with Yolanda as the focus of the stories has not escaped critical notice, it is my argument here that the way in which Alvarez begins and ends her novel is much more than a question of geography and/or culture, including the dangers of silence. Both Joan Hoffman and Ricardo Castells mention that *García Girls* opens and closes with chapters that place Yolanda in the Dominican Republic. Hoffman focuses on the novel beginning and ending with Yolanda, noting that “the novel, in an engaging circularity, both opens and closes with segments from her [Yolanda’s] own experience,” while Castells adds that “the beginning as well as the end of the novel take place in the Dominican Republic” (Hoffman 37; Castells 35). However, the stories that end-cap the novel, both the opening

and closing stories of the work, include open mouths. Halperin's chapter "Clamped Mouths and Muted Cries: The Pathologization of Language" examines these two scenes with open mouths, the Palmolive ad from the first chapter of the novel and the "black furred thing" that ends the novel (290). In her chapter she explores the "relation between these painful wails and those of the 'black furred thing'" as she examines "the violation that accompanies the creative process" (237).¹¹ I make a similar observation here with regard to these two scenes and point out the technique as a jarring technique, an example of bordering, that signals to the reader to take notice of these silences that begin and end the work. By including descriptions of these open mouths in the first and last parts of her novel, Alvarez highlights the dangers of silence and of not speaking out/talking back. Whether we enter into the world of the García girls via the first chapter that occurs in the novel (the last chronological chapter) or the chapter that begins the girls' journeys through the borderlands from one culture to another, Alvarez wants her reader to notice gender inequalities, linguistic oppressions, and the consequences of silence in her novel.

In the first chapter of the novel, "Antojos," we meet Yolanda who has returned to the Dominican Republic after being away for five years. From the beginning of the chapter, language and linguistic privilege frame the narrative of the action. After Yolanda has convinced her relatives to allow her to leave the family compound by herself, she takes a relative's car and sets out for the coast. She makes one last stop before descending to the coast, stopping at Altamira, a small town on the highway. At a cantina she notices "A yellowing poster for Palmolive soap. A creamy, blond woman luxuriates under a refreshing shower, her head thrown back in seeming ecstasy, her mouth opened in a

¹¹ Laura Halperin's "Clamped Mouths and Muted Cries: The Pathologization of Language" was instrumental to my reading of these parts of Alvarez's text.

wordless cry” (15). After picking some guavas and getting a flat tire, Yolanda returns to the cantina where “the Palmolive woman’s skin gleams a rich white; her head is still thrown back, her mouth still opened as if she is calling someone over a great distance” (23). The Palmolive woman frozen forever with her mouth open is emblematic of the silent woman, someone at whom we are to look but someone who does not speak.

The chapter that takes place chronologically first and ends the novel with Yolanda as a young girl in the Dominican Republic before her parents were forced to leave, also ends with an open, this time wailing, mouth of a kitten. Yolanda as a child separated the kitten from its mother, and later in life the kitten haunts her dreams: “There are still times I wake up at three o’clock in the morning and peer into the darkness. At that hour and in that loneliness, I hear her, a black furred thing lurking in the corners of my life, her magenta mouth opening, wailing over some violation that lies at the center of my art” (290).¹² While Alvarez focuses on the guilt she feels for separating the kitten from its mother and how the kitten haunts her dreams, the wailing mouth closes the novel with a compression of Yolanda’s and Alvarez’s voices, again emphasizing that Alvarez has been in charge of the narrative from the beginning of the novel. Therefore, beginning and ending her novel with descriptions of these two open mouths, Alvarez asserts her “fresh look” upon gendered presuppositions and the violence of silence. If as González Echevarría asserts that, “to Latin American writers such a new look could be attained if reality could be observed through the eyes of those Latin Americans whose cultural

¹² I discuss the racial aspects and the denial of African roots in *García Girls* in conjunction with Achy Obejas’s *Memory Mambo* in the next chapter. Still, it is important to point out here that the García family, by drawing connections to the conquistadores, denies any African ancestry they might have. This black kitten “lurking in the corners” may refer to the often-denied African heritage of many Dominicans (290). Alternatively, Cherríe Moraga points out the racial uses of black and white in her essay “La Güera,” in which she notes, “the ‘unknown’ is often depicted in racist literature as the ‘darkness’ within a person” ... “In contrast, it is a pleasure to read works such as Maxine Hong Kingston’s *Woman Warrior*, where fear and alienation are described as ‘the white ghosts’” (32).

presuppositions were different because of their ethnic or class origin,” then I contend that the reverse chronological order of the narrative along with the bookending of these open mouths in the text are Alvarez’s “new look” by bicultural women of color “whose cultural presuppositions [are] different because of their ethnic [and] class origin” (20).

CHAPTER 3

BORDERING THE “FAMILY:” FAMILY AND COMMUNITY IN ACHY OBEJAS’S *MEMORY MAMBO* AND CHERRÍE MORAGA’S *HEROES AND SAINTS*

Introduction

This chapter focuses on the patriarchal family structure in Achy Obejas’s novel *Memory Mambo* (1996) and family and community in Cherríe Moraga’s dramatic performance *Heroes and Saints* (1992). Juani Casas in *Memory Mambo* along with Dolores, Cerezita, and Ana in Moraga’s *Heroes and Saints*, are oppressed by the family and community structures around them, and they seek an alternative to the patriarchal family structure. Juani lives in Chicago, IL, while Cerezita and her family live in McLaughlin, CA, yet they must negotiate their sense of identities and their roles as citizens within their respective communities. In *Memory Mambo*, Juani’s family runs a laundromat in Chicago, although the women in the family are the ones who work in the laundromat. However liberating this might be for Juani who is at times in charge of the business, she is still laundering clothes, doing domestic work. Throughout the novel she attempts to find the truth, the “real story” of her family’s history, her role in teasing out “what really happened.” In this novel I argue that Obejas forces her audience to make some uncomfortable choices about her narrative. Similarly, Moraga, by blurring the lines between spectator and actor in her drama, compels her audience to realize common oppressions across communities and families of Chicanas/os and other Latinas/os, asking

her audience to actualize their roles as citizens in society. Although in myriad ways these works differ from one another both in form and content, the authors' textual messages are similar by invoking a responsibility on the part of the audience and imploring this audience to act. These two works then, Obejas's novel *Memory Mambo* and Moraga's drama *Heroes and Saints*, are prime examples of bordering since both works, while focusing on family and community, show how working outside the hierarchical and patriarchal family unit that is oppressive to women can be subverted both in personal lives and in communities of oppressed peoples.

Bordering in this chapter includes the definition and examples from the previous chapter, and adds to this working definition, the role of the active citizen in a family and in society.¹³

A Multiplicity of Perspectives

Many contemporary Caribbean Latina authors use polyphony of voices in their works in order to explore many versions and perspectives of the same story or history, including Julia Alvarez, Loida Maritza Pérez, and Cristina García. These authors employ different characters that speak from first-person points of view in order to examine conflicting and opposing perspectives of the same event. This use of polyphonic voices in novels is not exclusive to contemporary Caribbean American literature, but is being widely employed by many writers of Ethnic American literature, because, as Walter Mignolo outlines in *Local Histories / Global Designs*, it is a conscious move toward a decolonial understanding of events insofar as it destabilizes the notion of the Western

¹³ Perhaps "community" is a more fitting term than "family" since I mean to imply any group of connected persons to one another via shared experience, proximity, kinship, language, etc.

(Anglo) hegemonic “I” in favor of multiple “I’s,” thereby exposing that the Western “I” is no less a subjective locus of enunciation than any other position (13; 114). Mignolo notes that the “long process of subalternization of knowledge is being radically transformed by new forms of knowledge in which what has been subalternized and considered interesting only as object of study becomes articulated as new loci of enunciation” (13). Julia Alvarez and other Latina writers include multiple perspectives in their works in order to destabilize the notion that there is only one perspective of a particular event. The multiplicity of perspectives in the works of these women of color also destabilizes the hegemony of the Anglo-American perspective and the male perspective since these writers employ multiple female perspectives by women of color from varying cultural backgrounds.

While many contemporary writers are employing multiple first-person perspectives in their literary works, Cuban American author Achy Obejas uses different techniques to a similar end. *Memory Mambo* is not a novel of multiple first-person perspectives that allow us to think from conflicting sides of a story, but in fact employs different literary devices that allow multiple plausible actions to occur in the novel even if these actions are contradictory.¹⁴ *Memory Mambo* is set in present-day Chicago and the narrator, Juani Casas, interrogates her family’s contradictory stories and histories of how they arrived in the United States from Cuba. The novel is not a mosaic of many voices, but is, like Alvarez’s, Pérez’s, and García’s novels, an examination of family, community, marginalization, and memory. As such, Obejas, while engaging with the

¹⁴ I recognize that Pérez’s *Geographies of Home* (1999) was published after *Memory Mambo* (1996). However, following the publications of both *How the García Girls Lost Their Accents* (1991) and *Dreaming in Cuban* (1993), I argue that the use of the polyphonic novel in U.S. Latina letters had been established enough to argue that Obejas is writing within this tradition.

same questions as her contemporaries, acknowledges the many versions of her family's history providing readers with *Memory Mambo*, another version that is incomplete and points to the many other versions of her family's stories.

Linda Craft notes in her article, "Truth or Consequences: Mambos, Memories, and Multiculturalism from Achy Obejas's Chicago" that Obejas's text, though differing in approach from polyphonic novels, nevertheless is still a "hybrid text, postmodern in its decentered and plural positionalities" and that "part of this complexity stems from its [the text's] 'borderlands' status" (370). Craft terms the work a borderlands text since *Memory Mambo* cannot be typed an "immigrant novel" because it encompasses what Gustavo Pérez Firmat calls the 1.5-generation, living in both Cuban and American cultures, often Cuba from memory (370). Indeed, *Memory Mambo* opens,

I've always thought of memory as a distinct, individual thing ... I often wonder just how distinct my memories are. Sometimes I'm convinced they're someone else's recollections I've absorbed ... sometimes other lives lived right alongside mine interrupt, barge in on my senses, and I no longer know if I really lived through an experience or just heard about it so many times, or so convincingly, that I believed it for myself – became the lens through which it was captured, retold, and shaped. (9)

Although not strictly a polyphonic novel since the novel is told only from Juani's perspective, Juani herself examines contradictory versions of events, constantly revising her understanding of how her family came to settle in Chicago. Juani then is an exemplar of how one can embody multiple and even contradictory identities simultaneously, foregrounding different versions of events for varying reasons. Unfortunately, for Juani

the freedom that comes with being able to occupy multiple spaces at once allows for a confusion of events when she ultimately lies and continually tries to conceal the truth behind the lie.

The Family Tree

Before examining how *Memory Mambo* can be read within the parameters of the polyphonic novel and how the central lie in the novel works, however, it is important to note the significance of the “family” unit and of family ancestry in both *Memory Mambo* and in *How the García Girls Lost Their Accents*.¹⁵ Julia Alvarez’s novel includes a pictorial depiction of a family tree that traces, in an obscure way, how the García sisters, and specifically the mother’s lineage, the de la Torre family traces back to los conquistadores and European ancestry.¹⁶ Dominicans have been criticized for refusing to acknowledge the mixture of ethnicities present on their part of the island of Hispaniola, and the García family, it seems, is no different.¹⁷ Similarly, Achy Obejas’s novel *Memory Mambo* opens with a claim to European ancestry, specifically to Bartolomé de Las Casas, despite the unlikelihood of this claim’s actual truth-value. While the novel does not include a pictorial family tree connecting Juani Casas’s family lineage to the conquistadores, there are family stories in which her mother tries to “whiten” her lineage.

¹⁵ I recognize the problematic nature of the traditional use of the term “family” understanding the hierarchical gender implications the term implies.

¹⁶ Indeed, the family tree included in the prefatory pages of Alvarez’s novel includes a looped, dotted line with question marks from “The Conquistadores” to the “García Family,” but a solid straight line connects “The Conquistadores” to “The de la Torre Family” noting the assured link between the mother (Laura’s) direct connections to European ancestry.

¹⁷ Dominicans have long been accused of erasing and denying the African and indigenous ancestral roots that are present in Dominican society. For a nuanced discussion of this topic, see Silvio Torres-Saillant’s “The Tribulations of Blackness: Stages in Dominican Racial Identity” in which he uses “indigenous paradigms to explicate the place of black consciousness in Dominican society and culture” (1086).

Juani observes that her maternal grandmother “is clearly a mixed breed – just touch the *pasitas* on her head – and my Abuela Olga is obviously of African descent, my mother will do anything to deny her real lineage” (32). Denying her heritage, Juani’s mother marries Alberto José Casas y Molina, a “light-skinned” man with “splendid ancestry” who traces his descendants directly to Bartolomé de Las Casas (32). “We’re direct descendents of Bartolomé de Las Casas” and “the whole legend around Las Casas positions the question of race between white and Indian, consigning most of the issue of blackness to silence” (32-3). Interestingly Juani, who is attempting to re-member and re-write her family history, notes that “Bartolomé de Las Casas was a Catholic priest sworn to celibacy” and that this fact is “always left out of the family stories so how, exactly, we’re supposed to be directly related to him is a bit of a mystery” (33). When Juani and her cousins try to unravel the ancestry mystery, they are thwarted at every turn. Patricia, Juani’s cousin, points out that “chances are we’re spawns of an illegitimate child conceived with some Indian woman he probably raped” (34). Juani’s mother, “practically faints over this – not because it so tampers with the historical image of our supposed ancestry but because it would mean that, in spite of my mother’s efforts, we’re not so white after all” (34). It is important to note that Juani’s mother is not bothered by the story because the rape is so upsetting, but that her children may not be as white as she suspected with this revision of events. Juani contributes to this obsession with ancestry as she maps the story of her family’s exile from Cuba and settlement in Chicago, where Juani grows up trying to “remember” and re-member how her family got there (32).

While the refusal to acknowledge African ancestry in Dominican and Cuban families is something well documented, Dominican Americans and Cuban Americans are

different Diasporic groups. Gustavo Pérez Firmat makes an important distinction between Cuban Americans and other Caribbean Americans. He points out that Cuban Americans are a people of forced exile and notes the “limited life expectancy” of the different exile generations (17). He notes that the 1.5 generation of Cuban Americans, those born in Cuba, but raised from childhood in the U.S. are neither their nostalgic grandparents nor their “ABC (American-Born Cubans)” children (5).¹⁸ Not only does Juani Casas try to unravel the unlikely story of her family’s connection to Bartolomé de Las Casas, but as a one-and-a-halfer, she also tries to re-member how she and her family fled Cuba after the revolution and arrived in the U.S. She is clearly not nostalgic like her father for the island, and barely remembers living in Cuba. According to Pérez Firmat’s thesis then, Juani is also distinct from the generation that will come after her, namely Cuban Americans born in the U.S. These Cuban Americans will certainly have opinions about family, race, and ethnicity, but those opinions will be different from Juani’s and Juani’s mother’s positions on these issues.

Juani points out that her mother’s “immediate goal became to get us out of Cuba, out of Latin America, out of any country where we might couple with anybody even a shade darker than us: We had to get to the United States, which was close by and chock full of frog-eyed white people such as Joe Namath and President Ford” (35). It is her father who comes up with the plan to flee Cuba for the U.S. Just after Juani’s rumination on whose memories are whose, the novel includes an account of the family’s harrowing trip across the Straits of Florida when Juani was six years old:

¹⁸ Pérez Firmat also points to the urgency with regard to his work on the 1.5 generation in *Life on the Hyphen* because, as he notes, the 1.5-generation is a fleeting generation. I would argue that this urgency is equally important to notice in contemporary Latina literature and forced exile texts from the Caribbean and beyond.

It was a twenty-eight-foot boat; there were fourteen of us; the trip lasted two days; we were picked up by the Coast Guard just a few miles from Key West, around Cayo Sal, a deserted island that refugees often confuse for the southernmost tip of the U.S. but which really belongs to the Bahamas. (10)

However, as Juani notes, this is not exactly how she remembers her journey and arrival to the U.S. “If these are the facts, why do I remember so much more?” she asks (10). She remembers for instance,

Combing through grasses and dirt, as fascinated by the tiny translucent frogs on the tree branches as by the malevolent shadows scurrying underneath? My father planned our escape this way but I never went along on these excursions. So why is it I can see my father’s body, gleaming like larvae, vanishing into the water just off the shore? (11)

She continues, “If these aren’t my memories, then whose are they?” (11). These are the questions with which Juani wrestles throughout the rest of the novel, analyzing how memory makes the seemingly distinct lines between truth and lies blur and how her involvement in the fabrication of certain lies shape the rest of the novel.

Kate McCullough in her article, “‘Marked by Genetics and Exile’ Narrativizing Transcultural Sexualities in *Memory Mambo*,” links Juani’s obsession with the past to memory, “the novel is organized from the opening around Juani’s exilic desire to achieve mastery over the events of her past, a mastery located in the discursive arena and grounded in her constant worrying of both memory and the past” (580). As part of the 1.5 generation of Cuban Americans, Juani does not have the nostalgia of her parents for Cuba and she is cut off from this collective memory of her homeland. In order to re-write

and re-member her past, she must rely on other's memories of a past to which she does not have access. Michel-Rolph Trouillot notes in *Silencing the Past* that,

Human beings participate in history both as actors and as narrators. The inherent ambivalence of the word 'history' in many modern languages, including English, suggests this dual participation. In vernacular use, history means both the facts of the matter and a narrative of those facts, both 'what happened' and 'that which is said to have happened.' The first meaning places the emphasis on the socio-historical process, the second on our knowledge of that process or on a story about that process (2).

Thus I argue in this chapter that although Juani seems obsessed with finding out the "truth" of her family's origins, the central lie of the novel and Juani's role in manufacturing this lie is a way in which to explore multiple versions of a story and Juani's struggle in becoming an active citizen. To use Trouillot's words, Juani is both actor and narrator of *Memory Mambo*, and these roles are difficult to maintain when the "truth" of the story is difficult to locate. Via Juani, *Memory Mambo* investigates multiple perspectives on the same event and implicates the reader into making uncomfortable ethical choices. These choices then reflect the ways in which bordering provides nuanced perspectives of events getting closer to both "what happened" and "that which is said to have happened."

Family Plots Intertwined: Jimmy and Gina

In order to clearly explicate how Obejas uses formal techniques that I argue are an extension of multiple perspectives of a story, it is important to first understand how the

central lie in the novel works. There are two main plot lines in *Memory Mambo*, both of which revolve around the same lie: Juani's uncomfortable dealings with her cousin's husband, Jimmy, and her failed relationship with her partner Gina. These two plot lines are intertwined not only textually, but also thematically, as the reader only understands certain "facts" of these relationships at specific times in the novel. As McCullough states, "while there is some narrative pull – on the form of questions such as what happened between Juani and Gina, whose version of the family history is 'true,' and why Juani and her violent cousin-in-law Jimmy are set up as doubles if she is the heroine – the weight of the novel is on Juani's attempt to make sense of her past" (580). I argue that Obejas employs non-linear narrative techniques to show and hide details of these relationships in order for the reader to form opinions about the characters based on partial information. Therefore, as the reader gleans new details of these relationships, she/he must revise her/his impressions of these characters and the assumptions made of them.

In the second chapter of the novel, Juani's cousin, Caridad, and her husband Jimmy are introduced. Most strikingly we learn about Jimmy's hypersexual demeanor, his obsession with his penis, and that he physically abuses his wife. The way we learn about the "facts" of Jimmy's life are set up in such a way that we immediately and instinctively dislike Jimmy. He becomes a "type" character who intimidates, abuses, and mistreats women in the novel. In the opening of the second chapter we meet Jimmy as Juani explains, "My cousin Caridad and her husband are fighting about whether she should buy a new car or not" (15). Caridad wants to buy a car, but Jimmy clearly does not want her to have that much freedom. Juani adds, "we [Caridad and Juani] both know from experience that you just don't mess with Jimmy, because his temper's wild" (16).

Caridad argues with him about buying a new car, and he forbids her to spend the money. She replies to Juani, ““He can’t just tell me what to do like that,”” but “we [Caridad and Juani] both know he can, and does,” alluding to his temper, his control issues, and his violent behavior toward Caridad (16). Juani explains that, “one time, Jimmy absolutely forbade Caridad to hang out with me and my friends” (16). From these descriptions of Jimmy at the onset of the novel and the fact that the family refers to him as “Jimmy Frankenstein” and “*comemierda*,” the reader understands that Jimmy is a violent man, a terrible husband, and an intimidator in the family (58; 67).¹⁹

Jimmy and his violent actions make up one of the two major plot lines within the novel. The other relationship that is integral to the work and related to the central lie is the relationship between Juani and her partner, Gina. Juani explains that Gina is a closeted lesbian who chooses to focus on the independence movement in Puerto Rico and cannot be distracted from her political cause. It frustrates Juani that she cannot be affectionate with Gina in public places, “every lover I’ve ever had has been closeted, has always instantly looked over her shoulder when we’ve kissed on a street corner or train station platform. This was especially, and most painfully, true of Gina” (76). Juani recounts how Gina did not know what to call Juani when introducing her: “she had no word for me, not *friend* or *lover*, just *Juani*” (77). This treatment from her partner is difficult for Juani especially when pressed on the issues, Gina retorts, ““Look, I’m not interested in being a lesbian, in separating politically from my people”” yet, Juani notes that Gina would disparage Juani’s position on sexual identity, ““That’s so white, this whole business of sexual identity,’ she’d say while practically undoing my pants” (77;

¹⁹ In these same passages quoted above, there are also hints of a more complicated Jimmy. While the reader is not aware necessarily of these hints at this point in the novel, I will analyze them in more detail later in this chapter.

78).^{20, 21} Here, Juani is uncomfortable separating her politics from her sexuality and this dilemma leads into the eventual fight between Juani and Gina. McCullough explains that, “on the plot level Obejas insistently represents individual erotic subjectivity as emerging from political categories such as ethnicity, nationality, and race” (577). Indeed, one night, Juani attends a party at Gina’s apartment with some of Gina’s friends and Gina’s mother.

The evening is tense between a couple of Gina’s guests and Juani. Gina’s Puerto Rican friends begin taunting Juani, one of them asking her, “‘You mean you’re a *gusana*?’ asked Gina’s friend, her face not hiding too well her loathing” (127). When the guests have left, Juani and Gina have a fight. Gina touches a nerve with Juani when Gina, a Puerto Rican who knows more about Cuba than Juani since Juani came to the U.S. at such a young age. Juani thinks, “I was jealous that she and her friends knew so much about my country, and I knew so little” and, “I was pissed that, while they’d [Gina and her friends] been to Cuba, I had spent all my time working in a Laundromat folding other people’s clothes” (133). As Gina’s guests are telling Juani about their experiences in Cuba, Juani felt like a “black hole, like the mouth of one of those big industrial washers into which everybody just throws all their dirty clothes” (133). In this moment of embarrassment and anger Gina shoves Juani. In retaliation Juani punches Gina “and I felt

²⁰ When Gina states, “‘That’s so white’” she is accusing Juani of following with mainstream white U.S. standards as well as jabbing Juani about being Cuban American. Gina, who is Puerto Rican adds, “‘Cubans, you think you’re white...’” (78).

²¹ Juani’s frustration with Gina’s separation of politics and sexual identity can be compared to Obejas’s position on the same matter. In an interview Obejas gave to Jorjet Harper published in the *Lambda Book Report* Obejas states, “I was working at the Sun-Times in the early ‘80s, [and] I did an interview with a very prominent Hispanic feminist and I asked her about the Latino feminist agenda, and she was quite animated, but when I asked her about lesbians she said, ‘Well, there are no Hispanic lesbians.’ And she looked me dead in the eye, knowing damn well that I was a lesbian. I was so stunned I didn’t even have a comeback, I was made invisible by her comment” (Harper 7).

the bones of her face collapse under my hand;” a violent fight ensues that sends both of them to the hospital (134).

The Incident

This “incident,” as the fight is referred to in the novel, turns the rest of the work upside-down. Until now, Juani has been a likable and sympathetic character who blames her family’s lies for obscuring how she understands her role in her family and in society. She doesn’t believe her father’s hyperbolic stories of inventing duct tape, just as she doesn’t believe what family members say about “crazy” cousin Titi back in Cuba. In fact, at one point in the novel Juani tells her sister Nena (who is dating Bernie, an Afro-Puerto Rican, but hasn’t told her parents that he’s black), ““everybody in our family is a liar,’ I said. ‘Mami and Papi make up stuff about the duct tape fortune, Caridad lies about Jimmy, Jimmy lies about everything, Patricia lies about Titi, god knows Tío Raúl and Pauli both have tons of secrets, and hey, you’re lying about Bernie. Everybody’s dancing around the truth’” (194). Ironically, during this trip to see her sister, Juani had planned on telling the truth about what happened between herself and Gina, but instead perpetuates the lie about the “incident” by avoiding the truth and allowing her sister to believe the lie Jimmy concocted.

Juani’s lie comes almost exactly half way through the novel after she has become a sympathetic character and we want to continue liking her, but she is now an abuser, like Jimmy. Readers feel manipulated into a trap in which Juani and Jimmy are both domestic abusers. While wanting to continue sympathizing with Juani and chastising Jimmy, it is difficult, if not impossible to differentiate their crimes. Once this fight occurs, we must

revise our opinions about Jimmy and about Juani and re-think the implications of their actions. In sum, when Juani punches Gina, we see Juani as a domestic abuser, not unlike Jimmy, and we are forced to revise our notions of Juani, which in turn revises our notions of Jimmy. It is important to note that Juani and Gina fight each other as opposed to the one-sided violence when Jimmy abuses Caridad. All of the negative opinions held regarding Jimmy are now transferred to Juani. The reader is being manipulated since to favor Juani and her actions over Jimmy's is unacceptable especially because Juani's physical assault on Gina is so much more violent than Jimmy's abuse of Caridad.²²

This process of revision begins half way through the novel when the details of Juani and Gina's fight are explained. Still, it is important to rethink how these characters are described in the first half of the novel since the "incident" has already occurred chronologically when the novel opens. Thus, when we re-read the passages of Jimmy described above Juani and Gina have already fought only we are unaware of it. In self-defense after she has been punched in the face, Gina bites Juani's breast. In the second chapter of the novel, even though we don't know what Juani is referring to, she mentions that she's "not doing too well tonight. My right arm's a little numb and a line of dull pain circles my breast" ... "The fact is, I miss Gina" (22). In these same passages in the first half of the novel before we learn of the fight between Gina and Juani, there are hints of a more complicated relationship between Juani and Jimmy that require re-reading as well.

In the first half of the novel before the details of "the incident" are revealed, we find out that Jimmy was "sent to the U.S. by himself on the Mariel boatlift" and that "he'd nearly died of dehydration and had to be hospitalized for weeks" (43). At the time

²² I'm certainly not condoning any type abuse, physical or otherwise, but only pointing out that the trap that Obejas sets is difficult to get out of since Juani herself admits that the wounds Gina and Juani inflict upon one another, "were so much worse than Caridad's had even been" (138).

we find out this information, after having come to the conclusion that Jimmy is an abuser, this sounds like a story to play on the reader's emotions, that Jimmy had a hard life, possibly has issues with abandonment, and that is why he is the way he is, but as readers we don't believe it. Instead, we're not interested in making excuses for Jimmy. When Caridad and Jimmy are fighting about getting a car, Jimmy is clearly against the idea because it would provide Cari with too much freedom. Nevertheless, Juani notes, "I hate to give him credit for anything because I've always thought he was a bastard – he does have a point: Living on just one salary in their overwhelmed, overstuffed one-bedroom apartment above our family's Laundromat, they really do have other bills to pay" (16).²³ However dire their financial situation, it is still unacceptable that Jimmy cannot have a conversation with Caridad about what they might do with the money. Instead, he forbids her to buy a car with the inheritance.

Besides these details about Jimmy and his motivations, there are also hints that connect Juani and Jimmy in the narrative in seemingly unexplained ways until we learn that they are both domestic abusers. Again, in the second chapter of the novel when Caridad asks Jimmy why he has forbidden her to see Juani, Jimmy replies, "'Juani's just like me, we're two of a kind'" (20). We think that Jimmy is referring to sexual preferences that they both prefer to date women, since Jimmy has forbidden Cari to hang out with Juani and her lesbian friends. However, re-reading this passage after knowing about Juani and Gina's fight, this comment means something very different. After another abusive episode with Jimmy, Caridad and Juani are talking, and Juani seems uncomfortable while trying to console Cari, "I agree she's not stupid. And I say so, but it

²³ Caridad does not work because Jimmy forbids it. A more realistic solution to their financial issues might be for Cari to go back to work and purchase the car for this reason, but these options are never discussed.

comes out in mumbles. What can I – of all people – possibly say to her? I cross my arms across my chest, momentarily touch my scarred breast, and remember Gina” (45). Again, although we do not know it yet, Juani is and feels like a hypocrite as she tries to console her cousin after being physically abused by her husband.

Jimmy is quick to point out Juani’s hypocrisy when she accuses him of hurting Caridad. Juani tells him, ““If you want me to stay away from my cousin, Jimmy, then quit hitting her”” but his retort is, ““*You* are telling *me* not to hit somebody? *You?*”” (55). Jimmy continues, taunting Juani, but of course we don’t know what he is taunting her about when he says, ““I mean, who the fuck do you think you are telling me how to deal with my wife, huh?”” ... ““Oh, big time memory failure!’ Jimmy laughs” (56). These hints that Jimmy and Juani are alike somehow, however, fall on deaf ears until we are forced to reconcile these strong emotions when Juani punches Gina and they fight sending themselves to the emergency room. Having this prior knowledge of Juani’s domestic abuse when Jimmy replies to her request to stop hitting his wife changes the perception of the entire conversation. It is as if Obejas wants us to revise our notions of Juani, wants us to uncover this dark secret about lesbian domestic abuse,²⁴ and is warning us that perhaps a lack of multiple perspectives such as those in use in other contemporary Latina and ethnic literatures can be dangerous. Juani notices that she is “relieved” “happy even” with not having to tell her family what really happened between her and Gina (141).

²⁴ Obejas notes in an article in *Ms.* that, “battering has long been one of the lesbian community’s nastiest secrets. Because they either buy into myths about the inherent goodness of lesbian relationships or fear giving fuel to homophobes, many lesbians refuse to admit that domestic violence can exist between two women” (53).

What we don't know when we meet Jimmy is that the other main plot line, the fight between Juani and Gina, has already occurred. There are hints in the narrative that point to the occurrence of "the incident," but until the middle of the novel we don't know what "the incident" is. Therefore, I argue that including the "incident" as a flashback that takes place in the middle of the novel is not accidental but a technical strategy that forces the reader to enact the same types of revisions that occur textually in the narrative.

After Juani punches Gina, Gina bites Juani's breast, and the two of them fight until the police arrive. They are both transported to the hospital where Jimmy works, and Jimmy is there when Juani awakens in the hospital:

When I finally opened my eyes, I was on a gurney in the emergency room, my breast all taped up where Gina had ripped my heart out with her teeth. It looked like a glob of white papier-maché dropped on my chest. And standing there above my head, stroking my hair and telling me everything was going to be all right, was Jimmy, in his hospital uniform, looking genuinely scared. ... I thought if I closed my eyes I could re-write the scene, sever the connection, make Jimmy go away. (136)

But Jimmy is about to become very involved and connected to Juani when he explains how Juani can lie her way out of this "incident." Jimmy understands what transpired between Juani and Gina as "'just a little domestic violence,'" something with which he has some experience (138).²⁵

²⁵ It is important to note that in this scene Juani admits that her wounds, and purportedly those she inflicted on Gina, were worse than any of the wounds Jimmy has inflicted on his wife, Caridad. Caridad has never required hospitalization. (138).

While Juani has been resting, Gina has been released from the hospital, and Jimmy has figured out how to explain this domestic abuse incident to the rest of the family. He explains to Juani, still sedated and groggy,

This is the story – the story is that you two were attacked by an unknown, anonymous assailant. Gina’s mom had left the party and so had her friends and they forgot to lock the door downstairs, see? So the unknown, anonymous assailant – who could be anybody, really – just walked in, which is why there are no signs of forcible entry. You thought it was a robbery and clobbered him and then he beat the living daylights out of you, right in the apartment, which explains all the screaming, get it ... But here’s the best part ... You and Gina part ways because – and she liked this part, I could tell – she thinks the whole thing wasn’t a robbery but politically motivated, like to teach her a lesson because she’s so politically important and everything, and you think it’s just too dangerous to be around her, period. (139)

Juani does not have much time to react to Jimmy’s revision of what actually happened between her and Gina, but she does realize that going along with this version of events, going along with this lie will indebt her to Jimmy, which is not optimal. Amazingly, everyone in Juani’s family believes Jimmy’s story, and the lie of the domestic abuse begins. At this point in the novel, almost exactly half way through, we are forced to rethink and revise how we measured and understood Juani’s character up until this point. Juani asks Jimmy why he told the police what really happened and then paid them off to keep quiet about it if he had this alternate version of events in mind. Jimmy’s response is

basically in order to manipulate Juani, ““This way I didn’t just bail you. This way you have to be careful, okay?’ He gave his dick a strong, full-palm yank for emphasis” (139).

As absurd and offensive as Jimmy’s verbal and non-verbal cues are, this manipulation of events and then tipping his hat to the fact that he is manipulating Juani in order to purchase her silence later on, mirrors the formal qualities of the novel’s narrative. Not only do we not know about this incident until half way through the novel, but the hints, most with regard to Jimmy and Juani, make the similarities between the manipulations ever more present. Jimmy’s plan to buy Juani’s silence however does not work, when toward the end of the novel Juani’s lie is becoming almost debilitating since it connects Jimmy to her in unwanted ways. Juani and Jimmy are at a family gathering to welcome a cousin back to Chicago with her young daughter. Certain family members leave to check on the Wash-N-Dry while Pauli, the new mother, steps outside to speak to the baby’s father leaving Juani and Jimmy to watch baby Rosa.

Juani is exhausted both by keeping up the lie, knowing that Jimmy knows the truth, and is planning a trip to Cuba to get away and connect with family still on the island. “I’ve emptied the *cafetera* but I’m so tired that I can barely keep my eyes open. ... My lids are dropping, my head’s still humming” (219). Juani drifts off to sleep and when she wakes up:

I open my eyes and the scene is clear, as clear as anything I’ve ever witnessed in my life: Jimmy’s sitting in the chair in front of the television set, its ghostly light casting shadows on his gruesome face. There are no sounds at all. His head is back, ecstatic, lips red and shiny. One hand is on the back of Rosa’s puny head,

pushing her down; the other is on his cock, inflamed and purplish, its glossy tip disappearing into her tiny, tiny mouth. (221)

After Jimmy is caught sexually abusing Pauli's infant daughter, he expects to have Juani's silence about the matter since he orchestrated the lie about her fight with Gina. However, Juani, although Jimmy will probably tell everyone what "really happened," refuses to keep silent about his actions, breaking the pact. In this scene Juani finally chooses to act instead of react to the events happening around her appropriating the role of an active member of the family, one who is no longer manipulated by her lie.

Juani as writer–reviser of a family memoir

As the novel progresses and Juani continues to try to unravel the truth, it becomes evident that Juani is in charge of the narrative she is weaving and is, in fact, in the process of becoming an actor/agent rather than a spectator in her life. Although, "Juani Casas does not give us a neat, tidy tale with resolution and closure," what she does provide is the scaffolding for a text that is above all, according to Craft, a "story of the formation of a writer" (372). As Craft argues, Obejas's story of Juani Casas is particularly a work that examines how "truth can be manipulated, how difficult if not impossible it is to disentangle its many strands and follow its complicated rhythms. The structure of narrative itself, with its phallogentric linearity and logic complicates, rather than elucidates Juani's life" (384-5). While I agree with Craft's assessment of narrative above, I would add that Juani's departure to Cuba at the end of the novel suggests that Juani is making decisions for herself and not relying on family members to tell her what to do and when to do it.

If we read *Memory Mambo* as a work in which the protagonist becomes an active citizen, we see how Juani changes, revises, embellishes, silences, and lies in the stories of her family and her family's migration to Chicago. Juani Casas is indeed telling us another story, a story in a story, and, as Craft suggests, "the extent to which we fall under her spell, are seduced by her powers of narration, and empathize vicariously with her predicaments, determines the esthetic success of the novel" (373). Craft's assessment of Juani's ability to craft and re-craft stories focuses on Juani becoming a writer, and the stories she revises of her family's history are more than just another retelling of a story, they are revisions in which Juani implicates herself as someone who impedes the truth. McCullough comes to a similar conclusion by stating that, "Juani struggles not simply to find out the 'truth' of her past but to narrativize it" (581). As Juani attempts to "narrativize" her past, she is also re-membering the various and contradictory stories of her heritage. If Juani wants to become a writer, or at least in becoming a writer she acquaints herself with the difficulties and impossibilities of telling the "truth," then Obejas is also making a statement through *Memory Mambo*. Indeed, Obejas's text is one in which the protagonist acts out the textual message: family histories and stories are pluralistic, opinionated, hidden, changed, and revised. Ironically, *Memory Mambo* then is just one attempt to retell the story of Juani Casas, and in some ways a failed attempt.

Obejas and Moraga: Shifting the Periphery

Certainly one of the tenets of Latina literature, Chicana literature, and U.S. ethnic literature more generally is to unmask the illusion of the homogenous nation with regard to the United States. Within this illusion, marginalized people are pushed to the margins

and the center becomes the symbol for the whole. Obejas's novel unmask some of these marginalized peoples, Juani especially, but the Casas family in general, bringing them into the fore. As the novel unfolds, Juani shifts from spectator to actor in the understanding of her family's migration stories. As Achy Obejas writes against the grain by astutely composing a first-person narrative with the qualities of a polyphonic novel, Cherrie Moraga, critic, theorist, poet, and playwright writes against the status quo especially as it relates to lesbian women, women of color, and gender equality. Like Obejas, Moraga also believes in a "family" and a community and a multiplicity of voices even though she recognizes the messiness and the discord this sometimes causes.²⁶ "The real power," she writes, "as you and I well know, is collective. I can't afford to be afraid of you, nor you of me. If it takes head-on collisions, let's do it: this polite timidity is killing us" (Moraga "La Guëra" 34). Moraga's community or family to which she often refers includes those typically effaced from mainstream society, namely Chicanas and Chicanos alike, women of color, Third World women, lesbian women and gay men, and poor women and men. This community of disparate voices, as Moraga argues must come together to effect change. In her dramatic pieces, Moraga has continually attempted to build this community by positioning contemporary issues and oppressions on the stage and performing these plays to specific audiences. *Heroes and Saints* also includes a character who moves from a passive to active stance in the play. Ana Pérez is an outsider at the onset of the play, a news reporter, collecting information of strange events that are occurring in a farm community. Her process from spectator to actor is not unlike Juani Casas's transformation in *Memory Mambo*.

²⁶ As stated previously, although I am using the term "family" I recognize the hierarchical gender implications that the tradition "family unit" implies. Moraga's "family" however is a community of women of different backgrounds, experiences, classes, races, and ethnicities.

Chicanas and Aztlán

The border region between Mexico and the U.S. has been a contested land area at least since the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo in 1848, which, largely dictated by the U.S., brought an end to the Mexican-American War (1846-1848). Guadalupe Hidalgo mandated the Mexican cession of a large swath of land that extends from modern-day California to Arizona and includes parts of Colorado. The treaty did not, however, resolve land or ownership issues for the people living in this region. As discussed in the previous chapter, Gloria Anzaldúa focuses on the border region between Mexico and the U.S. in *Borderlands /La Frontera: The New Mestiza*, but articulates that the border region she discusses can be extended to include all other contested borders, physical and otherwise, around the world. Indeed, as Anzaldúa explains,

The actual physical borderland that I'm dealing with in this book is the Texas-U.S. Southwest/Mexican border. The psychological borderlands, the sexual borderlands and the spiritual borderlands are not particular to the Southwest. In fact, the Borderlands are physically present wherever two or more cultures edge each other, where people of different races occupy the same territory, where under, lower, middle and upper classes touch, where the space between two individuals shrinks with intimacy. (Preface to the first edition)

Anzaldúa reminds us that Aztlán, the mythic homeland of Chicana/os was Mexican territory until it was forcibly ceded to the U.S. in 1848. The inhabitants of this border region, especially the women, as Anzaldúa articulates, live in an in-between space between two cultures. Anzaldúa describes this in-between space as a third space all unto itself that is neither Mexico nor the United States and yet is both at the same time. It is

out of the feminist idea that something can be *both and*, as in the case of Anzaldúa's third space that Chicana literature, theory, feminist thought, and theatre have emerged.

Chicana theatre in particular grows out of what Anzaldúa describes as, "*una herida abierta* where the Third World grates against the first and bleeds. And before a scab forms it hemorrhages again, the lifeblood of two worlds merging to form a third country – a border culture" (25). It is this idea of contested spaces that Moraga envisions a site for change in *Heroes and Saints*.

Cherríe Moraga, born in L.A. in 1952 to a Chicana mother and an Anglo father who left the family when Moraga was a young girl, is credited with many works including *Loving in the War Years*, *Giving up the Ghost*, *Heroes and Saints & Other Plays*, and *This Bridge Called My Back*, which she edited with Gloria Anzaldúa. The play *Heroes and Saints* was first performed on "April 4, 1992 at El Teatro Misi3n of San Francisco" and has been performed at many venues since (89). Although little critical material exists on this particular drama, one article that discusses *Heroes and Saints* specifically and substantially is Downing Cless's essay "Eco-Theatre, USA: The Grassroots is Greener," which locates the work as an important example of eco-theatre. However, I argue here that this play reveals Moraga's dynamic intentions towards activism and her vision of an interconnected framework of Chicana/os. Although a cursory reading of Moraga's *Heroes and Saints* may find that acting and activism have no reward and that all efforts for change are suppressed in the play, I posit that *Heroes and Saints* presents and links families and communities in a unique way resulting in loud and organized voices against oppression, opening up possibilities for change. Elizabeth Ram3rez notes that "in effect, Moraga has recaptured the essential theatrical intent we

first discovered in Valdez's farm workers' theatre to use *teatro* to provoke social action" (124).²⁷ While the play can be read literally to suggest that protests are dangerous and unfruitful, failing to result in real change in isolation, it is my contention that a more careful reading of *Heroes and Saints*, paying attention to the meta-theatrical underpinnings of the play, proves the above statement false and shows that Moraga's play is a notable example of bordering, introducing, like Juani in *Memory Mambo*, characters who learn how to become active citizens in their communities. This new type of activism then is grounded in a coming together of disparate parts to effect change.

Jorge Huerta rightly points out in his "Overview of Chicana/o Theatre in the 1990s" that *Heroes and Saints* addresses many important issues that "plague farm worker families, from pesticides in the fields, to subsidized housing built on toxic waste sites, to the realities of AIDS" (220). Other issues introduced in the play include family constructs, homosexuality, breast-feeding, and marital norms/expectations. It is my intention, however, to show that the actions that take place in the play, while a mirror of reality, are secondary to some meta-theatrical aspects of the work that are the agents of change in this theatrical production. That is to say, while the play is a moving glimpse into the lives of the women of McLaughlin, in which children are born with birth defects and dying of cancer, the context of the play, the horrors of harmful pesticides on a farm working community, while a real and pertinent problem, serves as one of many contexts Moraga could have chosen for her play. It is the meta-theatrical aspects that I will address here that are the bordering aspects of Moraga's text both envisioning and teaching

²⁷ Moraga discusses in the Author's Notes to *Heroes and Saints* that Luis Valdez's character in "The Shrunk Head of Pancho Villa," "Became, for me, a point of departure" (89).

spectators how to become actors in their lives, thus ultimately providing Moraga's audiences with the tools to effect social change by coming together to fight oppression.

Using Augusto Boal's *Theatre of the Oppressed* as a method of reading the meta-theatrical aspects of Moraga's *Heroes and Saints*, I propose that the different layers of audiences provide a new model for citizens, especially women, to come together to effect social change. It could be said then, that the "action" of the play takes place entirely outside of the theatre and that the theatrical production is a consciousness-raising tool to inform disparate communities of their common struggles. As Downing Cless mentions in his article highlighting some recent eco-theatre, Moraga's *Heroes and Saints*,

shares tenets of Augusto Boal's *Theatre of the Oppressed* – though not literally 'site-specific' like his Invisible Theatre, they often are rooted in the environmental problems of an immediate locale; though not fully spectator-activated like Boal's Forum Theatre, they usually have an element of audience participation and always have characters or incidents directly drawn from community input. (79-80)

The comparison between Boal's *Theatre of the Oppressed* and Moraga's activist theatre is not arbitrary. Moraga notes in an interview for *Voices from the Gaps* in 2000, that only after she had "read the Marxism of Brecht, then Boal's "Theater of the Oppressed," does [her] discomfort with the Aristotelian system begin to make any sense" (Interview by Maria-Antónia Oliver-Rotger). Moraga notes Boal again in a 2006 interview for *Chicana Spectators and Mediamakers*, "It's funny you say spectator because I think about the word 'spectator' in the context of Augusto Boal, that we are 'spec-actors,' that our job as artists is to look, to observe, to watch, but it's also the action" (Hidalgo de la Riva 106).

Heroes and Saints is a “site-specific” work that re-invents the occurrences that took place in an actual locale, “although *Heroes and Saints* is a work of fiction, it came in response to the numerous events that took place in 1988 which brought growing visibility to the United Farm Workers’ grape boycott in protest against pesticide poisoning” (89). Moraga names the real town (McFarland) McLaughlin in *Heroes and Saints*, in which, “from 1978 to 1988, a highly disproportionate number of children were diagnosed with cancer and were born with birth defects” (89). This play, then, instead of re-envisioning an historical moment and fictionalizing it, uncovers a silenced truth by re-historicizing the real event on stage. This re-historization utilizes meta-theatrical techniques in the play to maximize the effectiveness of the pedagogical message.

It is my argument here that one of these characteristics, the different types of audiences, is the strongest and most effective trope for Moraga’s message to be put into action. In my analysis I discuss three different audiences including the audience on stage comprised of community members/citizens, the audience members of the community watching the play and the audience of “dominant” society are implied through the character Ana Pérez and her camera lens through which Dolores finally allows her daughter Cerezita to be seen. Through the utilization and complication of these audiences Moraga’s play not only lives up to Boal’s theatre as a “weapon for liberation,” but also moves one step forward in this struggle by making connections, on a micro-level in the play between audiences and on a macro-level in reality between communities that may not have realized their commonalities before the play was presented (ix).

Citizens on Stage

The play begins with a brief scene in which the protagonist of the play is seen crucifying a small child. This opening scene is central to the rest of the events that take place. Recently in McLaughlin, children have been born with gruesome birth defects, some who live a few years before succumbing to their poor health, others who never live at all. In the second scene of the play we learn what has happened in the opening scene when the news reporter Ana Pérez discusses the town, which

has seen the sudden death of numerous children, as well as a high incidence of birth defects. One of the most alarming events which has brought sudden attention to the McLaughlin situation has been a series of ... crucifixions, performed in what seems to be a kind of ritualized protest against the dying of McLaughlin children. (92-3)

The women do not want the children to be forgotten and want to bring attention to the atrocities plaguing their town. In order to do this, the dead children are hung on crosses for the world to see.

In the first act of the play an audience is placed on stage. This “staged audience” is peopled, not with professional actors, but with members of the community in which the play is being performed. In the character description notes the following is included regarding EL PUEBLO, the on stage audience, “*EL PUEBLO should be made up of an ensemble of people from the local Latino community*” (90). This note accomplishes two things, one, it dissipates the divide between a traveling acting company and the community since the community members are on stage mingling with the acting troupe (who are also Latinos), and two, the play becomes more of a mirror of reality because the

audience is watching citizens (themselves) discuss community problems and actions relevant to that locale. This then becomes a jumping off point for a larger consciousness-raising effort, as dislocated communities are aware of each other and their common plights through the performances in various communities.

Moraga places the power of performance into the hands of the people by aligning her work as one in which, in Boal's words, "the theatrical performance was created by and for the people, and could thus be called dithyrambic song. It was a celebration in which all could participate freely" (ix). Her plays are created primarily for Chicana/os and Latina/os, and she breaks down the typical barrier between audience and actor by placing audience members on stage, implying that the seated members of the audience are just as much actors as anyone else in the theatre or in any community. Moreover, having some actual community members on stage as the play takes place, she creates a situation in which the audience sees itself participating actively as opposed to watching unknown actors "play" the community members. Moraga's choice in including actual community members in the action of the play breaks down the actor/spectator dichotomy, as audience members are able to identify with those they recognize on stage.

With these recognizable faces on stage, the play becomes less a performance of a "fiction" and more a re-telling of an actual event and a rehearsal of future actions by the oppressed community. In one of the last scenes of the play, the theatre notes read, "Lights rise to reveal a political demonstration" and where all of the actors are situated, El Pueblo and the Protestors are on stage carrying signs that read, "Boycott Grapes, No Compre Uvas, etc." (132). In this scene the audience that is watching the play sees neighbors and community members chanting in protest, "¡El pueblo unido jamás sera vencido!" (132).

Depending upon the community in which the play is being performed, these actions may be a mirror of reality, if the community is an active one or, it may be a rehearsal for action to come. As the protestors chant, the news reporter, Ana Pérez, states in no uncertain terms the three demands of the protest. The women of McLaughlin demand a federally funded relocation, shutting down the town well, which provides water to the school and homes, and a free health clinic for families affected by the pesticides used on the crops in which they work (132). This scene mirrors what kind of protest has been/could be generated in the town in which the performance takes place and includes explicit instructions on how to organize a protest and how to be clear about demands.

Spectators: The Seated Audience

Using the scene in which pamphlets are distributed to the audience members watching the play as a transition point from the acting audience on stage to the watching audience seated, I will show how the seated audience becomes part of the production and is implicated in the struggle and action for social justice. Toward the end of Act One, after the town of McLaughlin has been noticed nationally for its high incidence of birth defects in the town that are occurring presumably because of the use of pesticides on the fields surrounding the town, the same pesticides that in turn contaminate the drinking water, the women of the town organize a protest outside of the elementary school in McLaughlin. Amparo, one of the town's activists gives a speech in order to rally the rest of the crowd. At the end of Amparo's speech, she says, "Look into your children's faces. They tell you the truth. They are our future. Pero no tendremos ningún futuro si seguimos siendo víctimas" (111). The stage notes point out that, "*The PROTESTORS come down*

into the audience, passing out pamphlets of information about the pesticide problem”

(111). This note is important because the protest does not solely occur on the stage.

Instead, the protestors include the watching audience as potential members in the protest.

As Boal explains in *Theatre of the Oppressed*, the theatre Moraga creates arises out of a context and the seated audience lives within a very similar context.

In addition to the protestors on stage providing a mirror to either a reality that exists or an envisioned reality that could exist, Moraga employs these community members with an important task which further breaks down the “traditional” barrier between audience and actor. In the scene in which the protest takes place, the on-stage audience members move off of the stage and hand out pamphlets to the audience watching the play. This aspect of the play is integral to the type of drama Moraga is creating in *Heroes and Saints* because it implicates all members of the community, onstage, off stage, and outside of the theatre in the struggle for social justice. What is more, these pamphlets can be printed such that they do not have generic slogans about the oppression of Chicanas and their rights in the U.S. but can have specific information about a specific location. The pamphlets might include the most pressing issues, local resources that are available, and/or stories of other Chicanas in other areas, their successes and lessons learned in similar struggles. The employment of handing out pamphlets echoes Cless’s earlier statement regarding the Boalian aspects of eco-theatre, *Heroes and Saints* includes aspects of Boal’s Forum Theatre, by including “audience participation and ... characters or incidents directly drawn from community input” (79-80). These pamphlets then make it into homes allowing people who may not have witnessed the performance to read the pamphlet and participate as an active citizen.

These pamphlets serve to further break down the division between that which takes place in the theatre and what takes place outside on the streets of a specific community.

The seated audience is then able to make the connections not only between their counterparts on stage and the citizen's actions in real life, but also between one community's particular problems and similar, widespread oppression across vast areas of disparate communities. Indeed, although putting up crucifixions of infants is in many ways morbid, without the visible sign that atrocities are taking place, the women of McLaughlin would not have been able to draw attention to their calamities. Moraga's message then seems to imply that only by joining disparate communities together in a large scale, highly visible struggle will any real, fundamental change take place. For example, Amparo, one of the activists in McLaughlin, shows Dolores, Cerezita's mother, a chart she created that maps the high incidence of birth defects and cancer clusters in the town. Amparo explains to Dolores that she is not trying to point out Dolores's difficult situation to make her feel bad, but instead, "I'm not trying to tell you about your problems, comadre. I'm trying to tell you que no 'stás sola" (129). The people who receive the pamphlets (the seated audience) also realize that their problems are not isolated ones, that these problems are widespread in many communities. The performance of Moraga's play underscores that one community is not alone in its struggle and that there is a possibility of change in numbers.

Since these audience members see how their community members (onstage) react in certain situations, Moraga is training the audience in a very obvious way about the possibilities of action against oppression all the while informing the audience that these issues are more widespread than it may seem. By viewing how their fellow community

members react to certain situations, Moraga provides the audience members with some tools they can use to become active citizens in their society all the while tying disparate communities together as in when the women of McLaughlin travel outside of their community to Sacramento to join in on a larger protest there.

Becoming Agents: Dolores and Ana

The two audiences described above are compressed into one another, and the lines between actor/spectator are blurred because, for Moraga, we are all actors. In order to become active agents in our own lives, however, we must allow ourselves to be seen by others at our weakest points so that we can learn from others as they learn from us.

Dolores must learn these lessons if she can become herself an actor for social change.

Dolores's daughter, Cerezita, a victim of multiple birth defects, now eighteen, was born without arms or legs and can move only by pushing a button with her chin on her rolling platform. Since Cerezita was a child, Dolores has kept Cere out of the public eye and behind closed doors. Dolores does not want people to stare at Cere. In the second scene of the play Dolores sees the news reporter, Ana Pérez and avoids her, "*Upon sight of Ana Pérez coming toward her with her microphone, Dolores hurries into the house*" (93).

Dolores does not want to speak about her personal plights with the pesticides in McLaughlin. She cannot admit to herself that Cere's birth was a result of toxic chemicals, instead, as Dolores's friend, Amparo explains to the priest,

In her heart, Dolores feels difernt. Nobody wants to be a víctima, Father. Better to believe that it's the will of God than to have to face up to the real sinners.

They're purty powerful, those sinners. You start to take them on, pues you could

lose. This way, por lo menos, you always get to win in heaven. Isn't that what the church teaches, Father? (136)

Dolores is constantly concerned with who can see Cere. She peeks into her own home at night when the lights are on to find out how well one can see her daughter and if one can tell her daughter is disabled from the street. By the end of the play however, Dolores moves from the Dolores who “does not believe that any good will come from protests and union organizing” to a Dolores who is ready to let go of the safety in invisibility and brings Cere to the church and declares, “Come señorita. Come see how my baby se vuelve a santita. Come show the peepo” (Huerta 67; Moraga 148). The stage notes during this scene read, “*Ana Pérez is noticeably shaken by the image of Cerezita. She signals to the “cameraman” to begin filming*” (148). Dolores allows Cere to be seen and in a symbolic moment becomes herself an activist, which includes allowing others to see her weaknesses. Cerezita, whose stage presence includes an actor covered by a box with only her head showing, is a symbol of disembodiment and invisibility. She is invisible by being kept at home and out of people's sight throughout the play. Further, Cerezita is also a symbol of the disembodiment of the Chicana/o people from their homeland Aztlán and is a symbol of the gendered disembodiment of Chicanas excluded from the Chicano movement in the 1960s. Dolores then is the prototype of a defeated and disengaged community member turned activist. Likewise, the news reporter, Ana Pérez, transforms herself from being a passive onlooker to an activist for social justice.

Ana Pérez the news reporter from “the city” represents the Latina/os and Chicana/os who have become a part of dominant (Anglo) culture. Ana goes through a process of involvement not unlike Dolores's progression. At first she reports the story,

edits it to her advantage, and cannot “help” the women other than reporting their edited story on the news. We are introduced to Ana Pérez in the beginning of the second scene of the play, just before she sees Dolores, who avoids her, when she asks her cameraman,

Bob, is my hair okay? What? ...I have lipstick? Where? Here? Okay? Good.

Hello, I’m Ana Pérez and this is another edition of our Channel Five news special: “Hispanic California.” Today I am speaking to you from the town of McLaughlin in the San Joaquin Valley. McLaughlin is commonly believed to be a cancer cluster area, where a disproportionate number of children have been diagnosed with cancer in the last few years. (92)

Here, Ana is more concerned about her appearance than she is the story she is about to tell. It seems that she has written the story before she arrives in McLaughlin. The reality of McLaughlin for Ana is a story to be told and, at first, she does not understand or empathize with the human impact of the “story.” Ana first sees the town through “foreigners” eyes and pities the poverty and health atrocities occurring there but does not actively do anything about these injustices except to report them to her news agency.

While in McLaughlin, after not being able to speak to Dolores, she asks Amparo as she is walking down the street about the unusual happenings occurring when a child dies in the town. She asks Amparo, “Why would someone be so cruel, to hang a child up like that? To steal him from his deathbed” (94)? Amparo replies, “They always dead first. If you put children in the ground, the world forgets about them. Who’s gointu see them, buried in the dirt” (94)? After this conversation Ana concludes her “story” and says, “Cut! We’ll edit her out later” implying that Ana and the cameraman will edit the story so that it “makes sense” to their audience (94). Just after Ana says “Cut!” a few children come

up to her and say “Trick or treat!,” to which Ana replies, “No. I mean ...I don’t ...have anything to give you” (94). Ana does not realize the opportunity she has, that she can give these children a voice and visibility. She does however return to McLaughlin and begins to understand her role in the struggle to the extent that, by the end of the play, Ana joins in the action to affect change.

Ana Pérez is present as well when the women of McLaughlin travel to a protest in Sacramento to join a larger group of people protesting the failing health of people in their communities due to the pesticides the farmers spray on the crops they harvest. During the protest, Amparo “*steps out of the line*” to help a child who has fallen, and a “*policeman knocks Amparo down with his nightstick*” (133).²⁸ The policeman commences to beat Amparo with his nightstick. When this happens Ana exclaims, “She’s been struck! Amparo Manríquez ...oh my god! The policeman ...Stop him! Jesus! Somebody stop him! No! No! Stop him!” (133). Amparo’s husband throws himself on top of his wife to shield the blows and the scene ends. At this point in the play, Ana is still waiting for someone else to help. It is not until the end of the play that Ana realizes the only person she can convince to act in this protest is herself. Ana speaks to a specific audience outside the play; she is the character who believes she cannot help because this is not her fight, but then realizes that these atrocities are unjust and affect all people. Ana is the impetus for a pan-Latina movement in which Latinas, indeed women, from all economic backgrounds band together for social justice.

²⁸ Jorge Huerta notes the striking similarities of the actions of Moraga’s drama to the protest that occurred in San Francisco in 1988, “Less than a month after [Cesar] Chavez’s 36-day fast ended, Dolores Huerta, the Vice-President of the [United Farm Workers’] Union, was brutally beaten by a San Francisco policeman while holding a press conference out of concern about pesticides in the fields and to protest President George Bush’s disregard for the Union’s grape boycott” (64).

In the last scene of the play, Ana joins the protest and goes to the church with the citizens of McLaughlin when they decide to burn the fields surrounding the town. In the last scene Cerezita “impels her community to reclaim the land,” and the citizens of McLaughlin run to the fields after Cere’s brother Mario yells, “Burn the fields!” and el Pueblo responds, “¡Enciendan los files! (*They all including Ana Pérez, rush out into the vineyards, shouting as they exit*)” (Cless 87; Moraga 149). Finally, by the end of the play, Ana has realized her responsibility as a citizen in society and joins in the action instead of looking for someone else to “help” “them.”

Conclusions and Possibilities

Although it can be read at the end of the play that the burning of one field will not result in any fundamental change in the lives of the citizens of McLaughlin, it is my contention that Moraga is concerned with using this context in order to identify disparate groups of oppressed peoples and link them together in the hopes of future collaboration and collective activism for change. Moraga employs various techniques in order to involve the community members in the towns in which the play takes place including putting local citizens on stage and having actors move into the audience handing out actual pamphlets with authentic information on them. Moraga goes one step farther than these techniques described above and implicates dominant society in her play through the character of Ana Pérez, who must also become an activist for change to take place.

Ana Pérez’s transformation from spectator to actor and from actor to narrator, reporting the incidents occurring in McLaughlin, mirror Juani Casas’s transformation as she begins to add her own narration to her family’s contradictory histories. As readers of

Memory Mambo learn about the central lie in the novel and Juani's role in it, readers must continually revise notions of bodily harm and gendered physical abuse. Ana Pérez, who does not understand the cruel and unusual treatment of hanging crucifixes in the fields with dead children on them, revises her assumptions of this seemingly cruel act as she begins to understand her role in the atrocities that are plaguing McFarland in *Heroes and Saints*.

CHAPTER 4

BORDERING THE BORDER: NORMA ELIA CANTÚ'S *CANÍCULA* AND JUDITH ORTIZ COFER'S *SILENT DANCING*

Introduction

In chapter two “bordering” was discussed in relation to talking back to male-centered discourse in works by Julia Alvarez and Gloria Anzaldúa. Then, in chapter three bordering became the lens through which to talk back to the patriarchal foundations of the “family” in works by Achy Obejas and Cherrie Moraga. In this chapter I will discuss bordering in relation to works by Latina writers Norma Elia Cantú and Judith Ortiz Cofer, as their texts talk back to and deconstruct the center-periphery paradigm. Nelly Richard in “Cultural Peripheries: Latin America and Postmodernist De-centering” articulates the uneven partnership between the center and periphery arguing that the periphery should be understood, not by the models of thought produced by the center, but by the work going on in the periphery itself (221). For Richard the center-periphery paradigm is based on unequal systems of knowledge. I argue here that the center-periphery concept is applicable, as the two texts I examine in this chapter highlight the center-periphery relationship with the border. Cantú recreates the south Texas borderlands as a new center in her novel *Canícula: Snapshots of a Girlhood en la Frontera*, while Ortiz Cofer’s protagonist focuses on the circular movement between the U.S. mainland and Puerto Rico. This chapter then compares and dialogues with literature

of the Mexico-U.S. border as crossed by the main character Nena in Norma Elia Cantú's *Canícula* and the Atlantic Ocean crossed by Judith Ortiz Cofer's protagonist in *Silent Dancing*. By juxtaposing these two works focusing on the different types of border crossing, I hope to both articulate the negotiations of the center-periphery paradigm at work in both texts while acknowledging the different types of border crossing in these works. As previously noted, the term border crossing often refers to transnational movement; however, by including a text in which the border crossing is not a transnational crossing, but an important cultural and linguistic crossing nevertheless, I hope to broaden the ways in which border crossing is defined.

Although many Chicana authors such as Gloria Anzaldúa and Cherrie Moraga discuss the border as a metaphorical construct, Norma Elia Cantú treats the border as a concrete barrier between two cultures and one extended family. Indeed, her work begins with a map of the U.S.-Mexico border along the Rio Grande/Río Bravo. Recognized as a Mexican national, Cantú's protagonist is able to cross and re-cross the border. Cantú's novel is comprised of photographs and accompanying vignettes that tell a story (or multiple stories) about a family living on the U.S.-Mexico border in south Texas. The photographs are explained and embellished through the vignettes, and, at times the photographs do not match the story being told at all. This mismatch is intentional and forces one to re-think the ways in which memory functions highlighting the slippages where fact and fiction are blurred. While border crossing is not exclusively the realm of Chicanas/os, crossing the U.S.-Mexico border as a Chicana is a specific experience and one that Cantú captures in *Canícula*.

***Canícula* and the South Texas Borderlands**

Cantú's collection of stories begins with a map. Although it does not make ancestral claims as in the cases of *How the García Girls Lost Their Accents* and *Memory Mambo*, the map depicts the U.S.-Mexico border in south Texas. Highlighting sister cities on both sides of the border, the map also includes both names for the river that divides these spaces, the Rio Grande on the U.S. side and the Río Bravo on the Mexico side. The dark line of the river/border underscores the proximity of the towns and communities on both sides while marking the line that divides them into two countries. This map, which situates Cantú's novel in the south Texas borderlands, also recalls the artificiality of the national border and the very real material conditions it creates.

This work is important to the field of Chicana and Latina literature because it makes use of the Mexico-U.S. border in a real, site-specific manner. Cantú reminds her readers that the border between Mexico and the U.S. is a real site with border dwellers; some are able to cross to the other side, while others are never allowed access to both sides of the border. In an interview with Jorge Mariscal at UC San Diego, Cantú states that she wanted the readers of *Canícula* to be aware of the U.S.-Mexico border as a real place, a geopolitical space where people are dying, not just an abstract, theoretical concept (Cantú interview by Mariscal). In this interview she also discusses the title of the work, *Canícula*, explaining that the word *canícula* refers to the in between space between the hot days of summer and the onset of fall occurring in August/September. Cantú mentions that the word *canícula* captures the liminal position that the border signifies in her work (Cantú interview by Mariscal). In her novel she captures the complexities of a

family divided into two by the border between the U.S. and Mexico and how these families live in in-between spaces part U.S., part Mexico.²⁹

With regard to Cantú's novel *Canícula*, I argue that the work is an example of bordering because by intentionally destabilizing the relationship between the photographs and the text of the novel, Cantú "negotiates [her] own conditions of discursive control" (Richard 221). Nelly Richard in "Cultural Peripheries: Latin America and Postmodernist De-centering" notes an "unevenness" of "internal matrices" in regards to Latin America and the postmodern debate (217). In this article she explains the distinction between what she calls "celebrating difference" and "giving the subject of this difference the right to negotiate its own conditions of discursive control" (221). Like Walter Mignolo who also places a lot of weight in the "locus of enunciation" of a subject, Richard understands postmodernism as having the potential to dismantle center-periphery dichotomies and hierarchical structures: "The contaminating and disseminating multiplicity of meaning affects the assumption of unanimity of voice according to which the originals were the depositories of a foundational truth" (Mignolo 13; Richard 220). Cantú's postmodern novel *Canícula* both celebrates Richard's definition of difference while also identifying an "autonomous subject of enunciation" that creates a "critical *positionality*" in her work (Richard 221). This "critical *positionality*" centers on the ways in which the photographs and texts function in the novel. Therefore, in order to understand how Cantú enacts Richard's call to de-center the "model" for the "margin or periphery," we must first

²⁹ This division of families which took place in the 1840s is addressed in other Chicana/o works including Américo Paredes's "The Hammon and the Beans," in which the young narrator does not fully understand why his family was split into two nationalities and learns the official and unofficial histories of the events leading up to the forced Mexican secession of land with the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo in 1848.

understand the elements of the novel and its recursive style with regard to the photographs and stories (221).

Photographs and Narrative in a “discursive dance”

Cantú’s self-defined autobioethnographic novel tells a story through photographs and accompanying vignettes. The novel is neither chronological nor purely autobiographical. Instead of having a traditional plot and storyline, the work is a “collage of stories gleaned from photographs randomly picked, not from a photo album chronologically arranged, but haphazardly pulled from a box of photos where time is blurred” (xii). This nonlinear narrative then is told in order to mirror life: “we live life in memories, with our past and our present juxtaposed and bleeding, seeping back and forth, one to another in a recursive dance” (xii). As addressed in the previous two chapters, *Canícula* is a narrative that is not constructed in a chronological fashion. The work defies categorization and blurs the borders between fiction and non-fiction. Cantú explains in her essay, “The Writing of *Canícula*: Breaking Boundaries, Finding Forms,” that she was influenced by works that did not fit into easy classification including Rita Mae Brown’s *Six of One* and Maxine Hong Kingston’s *Woman Warrior*, both of which are forms of creative autobiography (100). Cantú explains that after reading these two works she began thinking about a form of autobiography set on the border that used the photographs to frame the narrative (99-100). This novel, like Julia Alvarez’s *How the García Girls Lost Their Accents* and Achy Obejas’s *Memory Mambo*, has an order, but the order is hidden or at least not readily apparent. Cantú purposefully creates an order that *seems* haphazard allowing for “gaps” in the narrative. She explains, “Chronological order had to

go; after all, we don't think in clean, clear chronological order; life doesn't happen in neat little packages. I wanted a narrative that, like my memory, worked in a recursive and overlapping fashion" (102). *Canícula* however, unlike the other works discussed in the previous chapters, includes photographs to create a montage of image and memory.³⁰ Vignettes and photographs are interspersed throughout the narrative of the work. Some photographs are explained in detail, others seem to be purposely misread, and still others are described in the prose that do not exist in the work.³¹ By using photographs in the novel, Cantú not only creates a concrete picture of the border in south Texas, but she also uses the photographs as a "means of making 'real' (or 'more real') matters that the privileged and the merely safe might prefer to ignore" (Sontag 7). Extrapolating from Sontag's position on photographs of war and "other people's pain," one can say that Cantú creates a collage describing textually and visually the material conditions of those living on the border highlighting how the events of 150 years ago still have real consequences today and how as a nation we perhaps do not know or understand all perspectives of borderlands histories.³²

³⁰ *Canícula* includes the photographs before vignettes that accompany the photograph. Other works of literature that include photographs embedded in the text include Ana Menéndez's novel *Loving Che* and W. G. Sebald's book *Austerlitz*, to name a couple. It is important to note that these works reproduce the images within the narrative of the text as opposed to textually describing a photograph.

³¹ I'll address this later in this chapter, but the photographs that are described but are not included in the work are fictional photographs and function differently than the vignettes that accompany photographs in the text. For a discussion of photographs embedded in texts and fictional photographs, see Melissa D. Birkhofer "Voicing a Lost History through Photography in Hispaniola's Diasporic Literature: Junot Díaz's 'Aguantando' and Edwidge Danticat's 'The Book of the Dead.'" *The Latin Americanist* 52.1 (2008): 43-53.

³² It is important to note the relevancy of these material conditions on the U.S.-Mexico border. Currently, in Arizona, the Tucson Unified School District has cut the Mexican American studies department and is now banning Mexican American books. (See: <http://tucsoncitizen.com/three-sonorans/2012/01/19/arizonas-banned-mexican-american-books/> for more details). Despite the fact that the United States has no official language, English-Only laws continue to be passed in which business transactions can only take place in English. See: <http://www.svherald.com/content/news/2011/03/15/senate-approves-measure-tighten-english-only-law> for one current example).

Bordering the Border in *Canícula*

Canícula maps the coming-of-age years of a young girl, Azucena (Nena) on the border. Nena, as she is referred to in the narrative, is modeled after Norma Cantú, and the photographs in the work are of Cantú when she was growing up in south Texas. Already, there is a disjointed nature to the work since it is autobiographical, but not exactly. Some of the stories in the novel include photographs of Cantú/Azucena/Nena and others describe an important moment in her life without a visual image. In the vignette entitled “Crossings,” for example, Cantú describes crossing back and forth between the U.S.-Mexico border. This story, which does not include a photograph, depicts the movements of the narrator’s parents and grandparents across the border. What is gleaned from the story is that Nena’s grandmother and her “Texas-born grandfather,” are deported to Mexico in 1935 (5). Thirteen years later the narrator’s parents move across the border again taking up residence in the U.S. In some ways this re-crossing “meant coming home, but not quite” (5). This movement back and forth across the border is described as crossing “from one Laredo to the other” twice in one paragraph to emphasize the confusion and power dynamic of physically crossing the border (5). Moreover, employing “one Laredo to another” highlights the crossing and the bridge, which is a liminal space between two places all the while complicating the trope of crossing into or out of the U.S. and Mexico. In this way, Cantú uses bordering as a technique in her work and is not re-inscribing the power paradigm associated with the U.S.-Mexico border. Instead, by including the map of the border and then intentionally confusing readers as to which way the family is crossing, Cantú re-positions herself as author in the liminal space between the two countries, thereby highlighting the act of crossing and not the hegemonic

relationship between Mexico and the U.S. In this example, by “crossing from one Laredo to another,” Cantú shows how bordering works. Debra Castillo and María Socorro Socorro Tabuenca Córdoba explain in *Border Women: writing from la frontera*, that, “for Cantú crossing the bridge (or, alternatively, crossing the river) is a permanent referent not only to her family’s binational life but also for the structural integrity of her tale” and “this style of presentation points towards the destabilization of the concept of the Nation itself” (98; 100). The story “Crossings,” thus questions the notions of citizen and nation for a people who were divided by an unnatural border.

Photographs and Vignettes³³

Complicating the already intricate relationship between image and memory, Cantú’s vignettes describe the photographs included in the work, but the descriptions do not always match the images that precede them. As Tomothy Adams notes in his article, “‘Heightened by Life’ vs. ‘Paralyzed by Fact’: Photography and Autobiography in Norma Cantú’s *Canícula*,” “comparing the actual photographs to the prose that describes them reveal[s] countless small discrepancies between the words and the corresponding image” (60). These discrepancies jar the reader since the stories clearly do not match the photograph that accompanies the vignette. For instance, in the vignette “Cowgirl” the protagonist’s dancing partner is described as wearing, “a red kerchief around his neck, a white shirt, and what appear to be blue jeans. Miss Montemayor’s version of cowgirls and cowboys; he’s even wearing a hat and boots” (33). Interestingly, none of the boys is dressed specifically as stated above. Quico, the narrator’s dance partner is presumably the

³³ Many of the ideas developed in this section stem from two courses on Latina/o Literature taught by Dr. María DeGuzmán: CMPL 179 Spring 2006 “Imagen doblada: Photography in Latina/o Short Fiction in the Americas” and CMPL 496 Fall 2007 independent study on contemporary Latina/o Literature.

boy on the far left with boots, a white shirt, kerchief, and no hat. The only boy wearing a hat is standing on the far right and is not wearing a white shirt. There is no boy in the photograph that fully matches the description of the dance partner, only parts of the description match parts of each boy in the photograph. In this way, each of the boys pictured could be the narrator's dance partner, and yet none is described exactly right. In *Regarding the Pain of Others* Sontag notes that, "all photographs wait to be explained or falsified by their captions" (10). In Cantú's novel, the stories that follow the photographs function as more than captions that sometimes match the preceding photograph. Indeed Cantú is unearthing a silenced border history with photographs and stories of her family's experience living on, and between, the U.S.-Mexico border effectually portraying a history that is traditionally "*not* being shown" (Sontag 14).

Furthermore, the photograph and vignette live in a symbiotic relationship with one another, each revealing and hiding certain facts, details, stories, points of view in a constant tension between the story and the people frozen in time in the photographs. For example, these "small discrepancies" occur again in a story called "Bueli," preceded by a photograph. The photograph looks to be taken in a living room and is a close-up on Bueli (the grandmother), Nena (the protagonist of the novel), and two younger sisters Dahlia and Esperanza. Much of the accompanying vignette perfectly describes the photograph including the opening of "Bueli," "In the photo, Bueli sits in her high-back rocking chair, her sillón where she'd rocked all of us to sleep" (24). And "[b]ecause we crowd into the small room, wanting to be in the picture, Mami takes it at an odd angle; Espy's two-year-old face looms huge in the foreground" (24). Other details are difficult to confirm from the photograph since it is damaged and has creases in it. For example, Bueli's hair is

“braided and wrapped on her head like a crown, adorned with grey plastic combs, my Mother’s Day gift from Kress’s where I spent thirty minutes and thirty cents deciding on just this pair with the encrusted rhinestones” (24). These details are difficult to confirm or deny based on the photograph. Bueli’s hair is pulled back but because of the angle of the photograph, it is impossible to tell how her hair is held back and whether or not it is in braids. Confirming or denying these details gleaned in the story however, is not the crux of this examination. Rather, these details function to destabilize the reliability of the narrator who is explaining the significance and meaning of the photographs while getting some of the details wrong. The discrepancies that Adams notes are striking, and invoke in the reader a destabilized relationship with the novel (image and text).

Moreover, some of the details included in the prose section do not occur in the photograph at all. The room in which the photograph is taken is cramped, and could be a “nine-by-nine living room,” but there are no “pseudo pink lace plastic curtains” in the photograph, and, more importantly, there are only four people pictured in the photograph, even though the prose description states that Bueli sits “surrounded by Tino, Dahlia, Esperanza, and me [the narrator Nena]” (24). Tino is clearly not captured in the photograph. This detail is striking since the preceding photograph in the work is the one in which we find out how Tino dies. The next vignette included in *Canícula* then includes him in the prose description when he is clearly not present in the photograph drawing attention to his untimely death and the ways in which photographs freeze time and are both a presence and absence. With the preceding photograph with Tino as a child pointing his hand as if it were a gun at the camera and then Tino being mentioned as present at an event, or at least in the photograph, in which he is not present mimics the

way in which photographs have been theorized, by Sontag and others, as both a presence and absence. A photograph of a person who has passed on is a good example of this phenomenon. The photograph is concrete object to remember a passed loved one, but as we regard this photograph of our loved one, we are reminded that she or he is no longer with us. In this way a photograph can be said to be both a presence and an absence.

Still other stories include descriptions of photographs that are not included in *Canícula*. These vignettes are important to the work as a whole because they refer to an original that is not present or missing. In *Voicing a Lost History through Photography in Hispaniola's Diasporic Literature: Junot Díaz's "Aguantando" and Edwidge Danticat's "The Book of the Dead."* I briefly explain the relationship between photographs that are textually described in fiction but are not present in the work. I refer specifically to Junot Díaz's "Aguantando" and Edwidge Danticat's "The Book of the Dead." In this article I coin the phrase "photographic absence" to refer to photographs that are textually described in the prose of the work but are not visually included or embedded in the work (as opposed to the works of Sebald and Menéndez). "I would like to draw attention to the distinction between actual images of photographs in a short story and the 'photographic descriptions' to which I will be referring here. In order to clarify this distinction in my work, I will refer to the photographic descriptions in the stories as passages of 'photographic absence'" (Birkhofer 45). Hence, Cantú's autobioethnography includes moments of photographic absence when the vignettes describe a photograph that is not included or embedded in the text, but her novel is also comprised of photographs with accompanying vignettes that sometimes confirm and sometimes deny what is present in the photograph.

Beyond Discrepancies: A Barthesian Reading

In a retrospective article in *Chicana Feminisms: A Critical Reader*, Cantú reveals that as she was writing the bulk of the vignettes that comprise *Canícula* in “Ana Castillo’s home in Old Town,” Albuquerque, she “did not have the photos” as she was writing (101; 103). Cantú explains that through this process of remembering and reconstructing the vignettes based on her memory of photographs that were not with her at the time of writing, she “was able to confirm the theory of how memory actually frees the past and photos freeze the moment” (103). Hence, the discrepancies that Adams, among others, spends pages dissecting are not the crux of the novel. What is at stake in *Canícula* rather is how the images and text function as an objective correlative invoking an emotional response from a wide range of readers.³⁴

Some of the stories that do contain photographs are haunting in conjunction with the prose that accompanies them. For example, in the photograph and accompanying vignette “Tino” the photograph is described (with some discrepancies,) but the photograph shows four children, Nena, two siblings, and Nena’s brother Floretino, or Tino. Tino, “stands to the side with his hand out as if pointing a gun or rifle” (14). The photograph is poignant even before reading the accompanying vignette because it depicts a group of three children and a fourth child slightly removed from the group. This fourth child, Tino, is posing as if he is shooting the camera or onlooker with a gun. He looks directly into the camera and is caught in the photograph in mid-fire. Susan Sontag draws an interesting comparison between cameras and guns in *On Photography* when she states that,

³⁴ Cantú notes in her essay, “The Writing of *Canícula*: Breaking Boundaries, Finding Forms” that she purposefully tried to “layer the narrative so that the text would speak to many – my family, my friends, Chicana/os, readers at large – about many things” (103).

there is something predatory in the act of taking a picture. To photograph people is to violate them, by seeing them as they never see themselves, by having knowledge of them that they can never have; it turns people into objects that can be symbolically possessed. Just as the camera is a sublimation of the gun, to photograph someone is a sublimated murder – a soft murder. (Sontag *On Photography* 14-15)

Not only was Cantú influenced by Susan Sontag in the writing of *Canícula*, but Cantú also references Roland Barthes in the introduction to the work.³⁵ Barthes's concepts of *studium* and *punctum* seem to be especially helpful in understanding this photograph and the story of Tino.

Barthes coined these two terms in order to characterize his emotional responses to photographs and discusses them in *Camera Lucida*. *Studium*, as described by Barthes, is the emotional response of a person who is drawn to a photograph for some reason. Barthes explains that *studium* means a “taste for someone, a kind of general, enthusiastic commitment” (*Camera Lucida* 26). He explains the types of photographs he is drawn to for myriad reasons but sets this emotional response apart from what he describes as *punctum*. *Punctum*, to Barthes, is a “sting, speck, cut, little hole—and also a cast of the dice. A photograph's *punctum* is that accident which pricks me (but also bruises me, is poignant to me)” (*Camera Lucida* 27). This *punctum*, something in a photograph that reaches out and grabs the onlooker is evident in the photograph of Tino with his siblings. There is something haunting and poignant about Tino, his hand pointed like a gun at the photographer/onlooker. It is disturbing to see a four year old shooting at you with his

³⁵ See also this interview in which she states that she was influenced by Roland Barthes: Norma Cantú. Interview by Jorge Mariscal. *USCD Guestbook*. UCSDTV, San Diego. 24 Apr. 2008. Web. 3 Dec. 2011. <<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4DGQks2Uwvc>>.

hand. This image becomes even more disturbing when one reads the vignette below the photograph called “Tino.” The story, which includes some discrepancies as related to the photograph, describes the photo as taking place at a birthday party even though the picture has “Easter 1952” written on the top. In the story we are told that “ten years later, 1968” Tino is “a soldier, and it’s not a game” even though Tino is probably four years old in the photo (14). The story continues, the same family that came together for the birthday party gathers again ten years later because, “We have all gathered around a flag-draped coffin. Tino’s come home from Vietnam. My brother” (14). After reading this segment of the story “Tino” and regarding the photo of him shooting the camera, the photograph becomes even more poignant.

Canícula begins with several quotations, one of which is from Susan Sontag, “All photographs are *memento mori*,” meaning that all photographs remind us that we are mortal and will die (Cantú ii). Like Barthes’s explanation of Time as *Punctum*, the caption under the photograph Portrait of Lewis Payne reads, ““He is dead and he is going to die...”” (*Camera Lucida* 95). After reading the story of Tino’s death while fighting in Vietnam, the photograph takes on a more intense form of *punctum*, what Barthes calls “another *punctum* (another ‘*stigmatum*’) than the ‘detail.’ This new *punctum*, which is no longer of form but of intensity, is Time, the lacerating emphasis of the *noeme* (‘that-has-been’), its pure representation” (*Camera Lucida* 96). The photograph of the child pointing his hand and shooting the camera is disturbing; it pierces the onlooker of the photograph. But with the knowledge of his death in battle in the accompanying story, the photograph’s intensity is heightened. While Adams suggests that “these small mismatches [between photograph and accompanying vignette] ... are deliberate attempts

at keeping the reader off balance in terms of the book's genre in a way that parallels the more complicated issue of assuming that *Canícula* is autobiographical because the narrator and the author are the same person" misses the larger issue at hand (62). In my view, Cantú's "discrepancies" and "mismatches," intentional or not, have more to do with the way one relates to the past and the present than with the categorization of the genre of the work. Since Cantú says that she wrote the vignettes based on her memory of the photographs and then added the photographs to the work later on, the discrepancies are intentional, not to confuse the reader, but to make a statement about memory. These deliberate points of slippage in the novel function in much the same way as Alvarez's character Yolanda takes a moment of suspension of belief as referenced from chapter two in order to see beyond what we assume we are seeing (Alvarez 83). That is to say that the discrepancies between what is photographed and what is described in the accompanying vignette is mismatched on purpose to show the deep and fissured structure of narrative and memory. By taking a deeper look at *Canícula*, we learn that the book is structured in the way we remember, in a dialogue between story and photograph that calls into question both the truth-value of the vignette and of the photograph since the mismatches call on us to read/see what is outside the frame of the photograph/story.

Cantú could be seen to be creating a historical/fictionalized embodiment of Emma Pérez's concept "sitio y lengua," a place that is also a language (Pérez 161). If, for Cantú and Roland Barthes, a photograph is living time and space, then a photograph with an accompanying vignette is living time and space with language. Similar to the ways in which Gloria Anzaldúa emphasizes the importance of the languages she speaks to her identity, Cantú underscores the importance of language with regard to the photographs. In

“The Photographic Message” Barthes defines the photographic image as “a message without a code” but in the case of *Canícula* the, or rather *a*, code is included with the photographs (*Image, Music, Text* 17). Because these codes seem to be at odds with the photographs they are encoding, Cantú shows the broken structure of the message. Since the descriptions do not match the photographs they purport to be describing, Cantú is enacting Barthes’s notion of describing a photograph: “however much care one takes to be exact, a connotation: to describe is thus not simply to be imprecise or incomplete, it is to change structures, to signify something different to what is shown” (*Image, Music, Text* 18-9).³⁶ If *Canícula* then is a work composed of descriptions of photographs that do not exactly match, the work is also an attempt to “change structures” (*Image, Music, Text* 18). *Canícula* becomes a work that “signif[ies] something different to what is shown” and can be extrapolated as a parallel to a silenced borderlands history (*Image, Music, Text* 19). The work highlights discrepancies and, instead of teasing out the parts that don’t match up, Cantú unveils the deep structures of language and image in her work, destabilizing the relationship between image and text. Nena, like Julia Alvarez’s character Yolanda in *How the García Girls Lost Their Accents*, calls on her readers to suspend belief and rethink oppressive structures (Alvarez 83). If Barthes’s photographic message is a paradox, then Cantú’s *Canícula* enacts this paradox on the U.S.-Mexico border both asking her readers to understand an/other way of knowing/perceiving the

³⁶ This is what Barthes describes as the photographic paradox: “The photographic paradox can then be seen as the co-existence of two messages, the one without a code (the photographic analogue), the other with the code (the ‘art’, or the treatment, or the ‘writing’, or the rhetoric, of the photograph); structurally, the paradox is clearly not the collusion of a denotated message and a connotated message (which is the – probably inevitable – status of all the forms of mass communication), it is that here the connotated (or coded) message develops on the basis of a message *without a code*” (*Image, Music, Text* 19).

border as well as implicating these readers into the creation and dissemination of this new knowledge.

In Roland Barthes's essay, "The Third Meaning" he explains three levels of understanding a still image. He explains that these stills have three levels of meaning: first, the communication, which takes place on an informational level, the message of the image. Second, the symbolic level, in which the image refers to a certain signification, is what Barthes calls the obvious meaning. Finally Barthes articulates a third meaning in the image he terms the obtuse meaning, which is not "located in language use" and is "outside (articulated) language while nevertheless within interlocation" (*Image, Music, Text* 60; 61). He explains that the obtuse meaning, "cannot be described, that is because, in contrast to the obvious meaning, it does not copy anything – how do you describe something that does not represent anything?" (*Image, Music, Text* 61). What Barthes says is that this third meaning, the obtuse meaning, "disturbs" and "sterilizes" "metalanguage (criticism)" (61). As seen in the case of Cantú's *Canícula*, many critics have spent countless hours debating and categorizing the work and the relationship between image and text without addressing the metalanguage within the text that explains how to read the work. Barthes's Third Meaning mutes the metalanguage of the text, and Cantú's novel disrupts and destabilizes the relationships between text and image. All the while it creates a blue print for how to read the work. If we refer back to the map at the beginning of the work that highlights the unnatural border between the U.S. and Mexico that splits families in two, then perhaps Cantú's *Canícula* is her response to this unnatural border, a work that contains numerous unnatural borders between text and image that sometimes fit and sometimes disrupt the narrative of the work showing the unnaturalness of the

imposed borders between language and image that are both “counter-logical and yet ‘true’” (*Image, Music, Text* 63). This then, is Cantú’s successful attempt “not to destroy narrative but to subvert it” in order to speak from in-between and outside the frame (64).

In this way, then, Cantú uses “the border as a place of enunciation” to create her own genre used in *Canícula* that destabilizes the roles of the “original and translation” (Castillo and Socorro Tabuenca Córdoba 9; Richard 220). Castillo notes that, “Cantú uses a box of photographs as the organizing point of departure for her narrative and plays with the reader’s expectations that in the photographic record there may be found some irreducible residue of fact. And yet, at each moment, Cantú warns her reader not to be fooled by appearances” (99). This resonates with the reading of the vignettes that make up the novel above since it seems that *Canícula* then is an example of a recursive text that can be repeatedly read with new sequences and patterns emerging with each reading.

Crossing Borders in Judith Ortiz Cofer’s memoir *Silent Dancing: A Partial Remembrance of a Puerto Rican Childhood*

In juxtaposition with Cantú’s border crossing narrative, this chapter also discusses a recursive and border crossing narrative that crosses and re-crosses the Atlantic Ocean. Although traveling from Puerto Rico to the U.S. mainland is not crossing a national border, Judith Ortiz Cofer explains in *Silent Dancing: A Partial Remembrance of a Puerto Rican Childhood* that the criss-crossing from the island to the mainland, though a different border than the Mexico-U.S. one, is movement across a border nonetheless. The bordercrossing Ortiz Cofer experiences fragments her sense of place and home. She explains that she never felt completely comfortable in Puerto Rico or in New Jersey, “I was constantly made to feel like an oddball by my peers, who made fun of my two-way

accent: a Spanish accent when I spoke English; and, when I spoke Spanish, I was told that I sounded like a ‘Gringa’” (17). However, in this fragmented space between Paterson and Hormigueros, Ortiz Cofer’s protagonist negotiates the border in a new way by positioning her hybrid identity as flawlessly fragmented. By embracing the power in the fragment instead of attempting to reconstruct the whole of her memory, Ortiz Cofer purposefully creates a “partial remembrance” of her bifurcated childhood. She refers to the stories and poems included in the work as “ensayos” or rehearsals. By referring to her essays as rehearsals, Ortiz Cofer expects each rehearsal to be slightly different.

Therefore, from the partial remembrance of her childhood and the fragmented vignettes that make up the work, Ortiz Cofer reminds readers that any new paradigm is not a whole in and of itself, but will need to be continually critiqued and repositioned. In this way Ortiz Cofer uses bordering in *Silent Dancing* by highlighting the fact that although much of Latina literature calls for a paradigm shift, these new paradigms must emphasize agency and the renegotiation between and across cultures rather than the production of another singular reified Latina identity. In other words, Ortiz Cofer understands this new mode of literary analysis as a method of self-critique and continual development.

Blurring the Borders between Genres

Like Cantú’s collection *Canícula*, *Silent Dancing* is also a collection of stories, poems, and tales of the protagonist’s childhood and coming-of-age placed in a nonlinear fashion. Instead of writing a family autobiography, Ortiz Cofer notes that she “wanted the essays to be, not just family history, but also creative explorations of known territory”

(12). By collecting these essays as Ortiz Cofer refers to them, the collection of partial remembrances opens up the possibility of reading the essays in a non-linear fashion, juxtaposing different essays creating new connections between narratives each time. In much the same way that Cantú describes *Canícula* as a recursive dialogue, one can return to Ortiz Cofer's essays and re-read them recursively as well. It is important to note Ortiz Cofer's choice to call her stories, poems, and cautionary tales essays, and she describes this practice in the preface of the work. She states that, "in writing these 'essays' (the Spanish word for essay, *ensayo*, suits my meaning here better – it can mean 'a rehearsal,' an exercise or practice), I faced the possibility that the past is mainly a creation of the imagination also, although there are facts one can research and confirm" (12). Here, like Cantú's *Canícula*, *Silent Dancing* can be read and re-read juxtaposing different essays in order to continually create new and different meaning(s). Also like in *Canícula*, the details and "truth value" are not the cruxes of the work; Ortiz Cofer notes that, "although there are facts one can research and confirm," ... "I am not interested in merely 'canning' memories" (12; 13). Instead of trying to tease out details of what stories are true, Ortiz Cofer offers her readers a creative revision of her life moving back and forth from Puerto Rico to New England.

The stories, poems, and tales that are collected in *Silent Dancing* add up to a whole collection, but are themselves fragments and partial remembrances of a childhood spent moving across the Atlantic Ocean between Paterson, New Jersey and Hormigueros, Puerto Rico. Unlike some works discussed in previous chapters and Cantú's novel *Canícula*, *Silent Dancing* does not begin with a geographical map highlighting the movement ever present in the work between island and mainland. However, the essay

“The Black Virgin” describes the protagonist’s parentage and ancestry. After noting that her parents were the “combining of two worlds, the mixing of two elements – fire and ice,” we also learn that the ancestry of her parents were equally as distinct (39).

Although born to parents from the same town, Ortiz Cofer states that her parents “represented two completely opposite cultural and philosophical lines of ancestry” ...

Her mother’s relatives were, “said to have originally immigrated from Italy, were all farmers,” whereas her father’s family “had come from Spain bringing tales of wealth and titles” (38-39). The marriage of the protagonist’s parents, she writes, “like my childhood, was the combining of two worlds,” which was “sometimes exciting and life-giving and sometimes painful and draining” (39). By highlighting the dyads discussed in this essay on the island and the mainland, Ortiz Cofer privileges the movement and the back-and-forth impermanence of her childhood. In this way it is the movement across the Atlantic and across linguistic and cultural borders that is examined here, something that Ortiz Cofer calls the “habit of movement” (138). Ortiz Cofer takes great pains not to privilege Spanish or English or New Jersey over Puerto Rico, but explains that she was an outsider in both languages and cultures growing up and foregrounds the movement between these spaces, literally the border crossing, what Jorge Duany, referring to the idea of fluctuation that comes from a “Spanish folk term for the back and forth movement of people between Puerto Rico and the U.S.” calls “la nación en vaivén” referring to Puerto Rico (*Puerto Rican Nation* 2). Duany also points out the special status of Puerto Rico as opposed to the Hispanophone Caribbean nations of Cuba and the Dominican Republic. He notes that Puerto Rico has been a commonwealth of the U.S. since 1952 and describes this non-national status as a “paradox of a stateless nation that has not assimilated into the

American mainstream” (*Puerto Rican Nation* 1). Just as Pérez Firmat calls on the urgency to study the current generation of Cuban-American writers and their works as it is a fleeting generation with a “limited life expectancy,” Duany also notes with respect to Puerto Rico that, “it is especially urgent to think about the nation in non-territorial terms because of the increasing numbers of people who now live outside their country of origin” (Pérez Firmat 17; Duany *Puerto Rican Nation* 14).

In the same story that explains the protagonist’s ancestry, “The Black Virgin,” her situation and reason for moving so frequently between the mainland and the island is explained, “because their early marriage precluded many options for supporting a wife, and because they had a child on the way, father joined the U.S. Army only a few months after the wedding. He was promptly shipped to Panama, where he was when I was born, and where he stayed for the next two years” (39).³⁷ Upon his return from Panama, the protagonist’s father makes shorter trips in and out of Brooklyn Yard in New York. While he is stationed in New York, the family resides in nearby Paterson, New Jersey, and when he is shipped out, the rest of the family returns to “my grandmother’s house where we were staying until my father returned to Brooklyn Yard in New York and sent for us” (51). This movement from New York to Puerto Rico, while sometimes a happy surprise, also causes conflict when the children are repeatedly displaced, “Being outsiders had already turned by brother and me into cultural chameleons, developing early the ability to blend into a crowd” (17). As permanent outsiders in both homes, not fitting in in New

³⁷ It is important to note here that both Latina authors discussed in this chapter reference U.S. military service. Cantú’s novel *Canícula* discusses Tino’s untimely death while fighting in the Vietnam War, and Ortiz Cofer in *Silent Dancing* discusses her father’s post in the U.S. Navy. Juan Flores notes that the “two decades after World War II saw the rapid industrialization of Puerto Rico under Operation Bootstrap, and hundreds of thousands of Puerto Rican workers migrated to New York and other United States cities” (Flores 147). (See also Duany *Puerto Rican Nation* 217.)

Jersey since the narrator and her brother spoke with a slight accent, and also having an accent in Spanish when on the island, the protagonist notices her permanent outsider status, “I was constantly made to feel like an oddball by my peers, who made fun of my two-way accent: a Spanish accent when I spoke English; and, when I spoke Spanish, I was told that I sounded like a ‘Gringa’” (17). She states that when in Paterson, she began to turn inward and began reading. Since it was too cold to go outside and play, “both my brother and I became avid readers” (106). This lifestyle is contrasted with the bustling of Mamá’s house on the island, the temperate climate, and cousins nearby. The multiple extended trips that the family makes without the father fit easily into Duany’s definition of “circular migration,” which is, “two or more extended round-trips between the island and the mainland” (32). This circular migration then does not allow for the young protagonist to create deep relationships as a young adult since she is constantly uprooted from her friends and transplanted into another, very different linguistic and cultural setting.

The Gender of Border Crossing

However, even when in Paterson, being Puerto Rican creates barriers for the protagonist that make her feel even more like an outsider at her school. She states, “I lived in the carefully constructed facsimile of a Puerto Rican home my mother had created. Everyday I crossed the border of two countries,” and she adds, “my mother carried the island of Puerto Rico over her head like the mantilla she wore to church on Sunday” (125; 127). As Jorge Duany notes in *The Puerto Rican Nation on the Move*, “although Puerto Rico is not a sovereign state, its migrants experience extensive

deterritorialization (and reterritorialization) in the U.S., similar to other transnational migrants. Hence people may circulate across national borders without ever crossing state boundaries” (235). All of this is true for the protagonist’s family in *Silent Dancing*, and the protagonist herself experiences this inclusion/separation in both her mainland home and her island one. Ortiz Cofer’s examinations of the protagonist’s mother, especially when the mother is in New Jersey and the father is away, offers a more nuanced and more specific type of border movement as she recreates, to the best of her ability, Puerto Rico in New Jersey. Duany rightly points out that women as migrants have their “own psychological impacts” and that often times (as is the case with the protagonist’s mother), “female mobility tends to concentrate in certain critical points of the life cycle such as marriage, divorce, and retirement” (*Puerto Rican Nation* 230). He calls this type of movement that is dependent upon the nuclear family “tied-circulation” (*Puerto Rican Nation* 230). Tied-circulation for Duany means the types of migration and circulation from Puerto Rico to the United States and back that occur as a result of a family member’s movement. For example, tied-circulation occurs when a dependent travels with a parent for reasons of employment. While both the mother and protagonist are part of the tied-circulation associated with the protagonist’s father, these characters are displaced in different ways. Having moved to the U.S. later in life than her daughter, the mother shelters her family as much as possible from anything that does not resemble a Puerto Rican lifestyle. This becomes frustrating for the daughter as she creates a community of friends and neighbors, both in El Building and at school with her classmates. Although both mother and daughter are forced to move to the U.S., it is the daughter who must negotiate both her mother’s world and the world outside of their apartment.

Not only does this constant movement impact the protagonist's feelings of being an outsider, the back and forth from the mainland to the island also affects her psychically. When she is a child, she has the perception that when one is in one place the other place waits for your return. For example, when she is told she is going to attend school in Puerto Rico and not in New Jersey, the protagonist explains, "I wanted to continue living the dream of summer afternoons in Puerto Rico, and if I could not have it, then I wanted to go back to Paterson, New Jersey, back to where I imagined our apartment waited, peaceful and cool, for the three of us to return to our former lives" (52). Here the narrator seems to be suggesting that one life stops as you live the other, but she soon finds that this bending of time is not in fact the case. Being absent for long periods, especially when one is a child will take its toll on friendships since, in fact, life in Paterson moves on without her while she is on the island. The young protagonist notes:

I lived in a bubble created by my Puerto Rican parents in a home where two cultures and languages became one. I learned to listen to the English from the television with one ear while I heard my mother and father speaking Spanish with the other. I thought I was an ordinary kid – like the children on the shows I watched – and that everyone's parents spoke a secret language at home. (52)

This bubble, however, bursts as the protagonist builds lasting relationships with people in Paterson and then is abruptly told at the dinner table that her father is shipping out in a few weeks and the rest of the family will be going back to the island very soon. Soon after the protagonist has her first crush in Paterson, which results in her first kiss, she is told they are returning to the island,

The next day Father announced at the breakfast table that he was leaving on a six month tour of Europe with the Navy in a few weeks and, that at the end of the school year my mother, my brother, and I would be sent to Puerto Rico to stay for half a year at Mamá's (my mother's mother) house. I was devastated. This was the usual routine for us. We had always gone to Mamá's to stay when Father was away for long periods. But this year it was different for me. I was in love. (135)

As the narrator makes friendships and puts down roots in New Jersey, her social world is thrown back into chaos with the announcement that she and her family will wait for her father in Puerto Rico. As this time they will stay for a longer period of time, the narrator realizes the social consequences to this constant movement as her friendships and love interest will not wait for her return to pick up where their friendships left off. As she grows in age she realizes that her understanding of moving back and forth between the island and the mainland changes: "our gypsy lifestyle had convinced me, at age six, that one part of life stops and waits for you while you live another for a while – and if you don't like the present you can always return to the past" (52). However, by the time the narrator is old enough to have her first crush, she realizes that life does not stop and wait at all.

Constant Movement

In the poem entitled "The Habit of Movement," the constant movement causes the protagonist and her brother to stop trying to create friendships and human connections because they know they are going to be uprooted eventually. This constant movement keeps them from forming deep human connections with anyone but each other. The poem

captures this distress that the “habit of movement” imposed on the narrator and her brother.

Nurtured in the lethargy of the tropics,
the nomadic life did not suit us at first.
We felt like red balloons set adrift
over the wide sky of this new land.
Little by little we lost our will to connect
and stopped collecting anything heavier to carry
than a wish.
We took what we could from books borrowed
in Greek temples, or holes in the city walls,
returning them hardly handled.

We bore the idea of home on our backs
from house to house, never staying
long enough to learn the secret ways of wood
and stone, and always the blank stare
of undraped windows behind us
like the eyes of the unmourned dead.
In time we grew rich in dispossession
and fat with experience.
As we approached but did not touch others,
our habit of movement kept us safe

like a train in motion—

nothing could touch us. (138)

With this constant movement, sometimes for long periods of time, the protagonist is unable to create lasting relationships with her school friends in New Jersey. This inability to have deep connections with people outside of her immediate family, then forces the protagonist to have deep bonds with her mother and brother who are the only two people present in New Jersey and Puerto Rico. However, as Ortiz Cofer explores in *Silent Dancing*, these people with whom she has the closest connection are distanced from her as they remember events that took place in the past very differently. This is disturbing for the protagonist but also allows her to have partial, and perhaps multiple remembrances of the same situations.

Not only is *Silent Dancing* a piecing together of this constant movement between two homes, languages, and cultures, both in content and form, but the collection of stories also interrogates the ways in which memory works to piece together the narrator's life on the island with her life on the mainland. Interestingly, as the narrator notes, her memories do not always match up with her mother's memory of the same event. Similar to the ways in which Cantú juxtaposes her memories with photographs that either confirm or deny details of her memory of events, the narrator and her mother have conflicting memories of the same events. This conflict emphasizes the tensions created by the constant border crossing and re-crossing to which the narrator is subjected (at times against her will). The rupture or slippage that occurs between the conflicting memories of the same event parallel the rupture or slippage that occurs as a result of repeated border crossing.

Conflicting Memories

In the vignette called “Silent Dancing,” the protagonist intersperses personal memory with scenes from a homemade silent movie of a New Year’s Eve party in Paterson. In this story, the silent movie and descriptions of people who make appearances in the movie are interspersed in a type of dialogue. The protagonist gives voice and sound to the characters that appear in the frame of the movie. As the movie and the added family histories are interspersed, they enter into a relationship with one another. In the story, the protagonist and her mother watch the movie together. The protagonist notes how she and her mother have conflicting memories of some of the events. One of the first scenes of the home movie is a frame capturing three women seated on a couch. Each of these women represents a part of the spectrum between Puerto Rican and mainland cultures and norms. One young girl at the party has just arrived from the island, and the protagonist thinks, “*The ‘novia’ just up from the Island, which is apparent in her body language*” (90). Also seated on the couch is a cousin who has grown up in Paterson and tries hard to pass as someone from the mainland, not from Puerto Rico. “*She doesn’t have a trace of what Puerto Ricans call ‘la mancha’ (literally, the stain: the mark of the new immigrant)*” (90). Seated between these two women is the protagonist’s mother some years earlier. This image of the three women becomes symbolic for the protagonist watching the movie because she understands her mother as a bridging figure between these two extremes. She notes that her “*mother is somewhere halfway between the poles they represent in our culture*” (90). Although her mother tries to recreate Puerto Rico in Paterson, these three women seated on the couch in the silent movie are emblematic of

the different role models the protagonist has growing up in her pattern of constant migration.

Although reading about the silent movie is in many ways different from looking at photographs since the movie is a moving image, Ortiz Cofer's text can still be analyzed in similar ways as Cantú's autobioethnography that juxtaposes photographs and text. While Ortiz Cofer's silent movie is not included visually in the text, there is mention of similar reactions or responses to the silent movie that one has to photographs. For example, watching the silent movie years later, people in the film have grown up, changed, and even died. Being privy to what happens to the people in the film in the years to come affects the protagonist in a Barthesian way when she states that it is both "comical and sad" to watch the silent movie. It brings people back to life at the same time that we realize these people are no longer with us. Moreover, the protagonist mentions that the silent movie does not capture the whole of her memory of that time, including the way she remembers the smells of the food from the party. "Even the home movie cannot fill the sensory details such a gathering left imprinted in a child's brain. The thick sweetness of women's perfume mixing with the ever-present smells of food cooking in the kitchen" (94). However, by including her mother as a pivotal part of her partial remembrance, *Silent Dancing* embarks into a space differing from that of *Canícula* as the two women have varying recollections of the same events.

In the section entitled "The Last Word," the protagonist and her mother are looking at a photo album together. As they look at the same photographs the protagonist notes the ways in which she and her mother remember the past differently, "It is always fascinating to me to hear her version of the past we shared" (162). As they look at the

photographs, the protagonist cannot explain why she and her mother have such differing memories of the events surrounding the photograph. The mother explains how she was almost two-years of age before she met her father, but when she did she was “the happiest little girl on the island” (162). This statement surprises the narrator because this is not at all how she remembers her introduction to her father at such a young age. She is “jarred by the disparity of our recollections of this event” because she remembers being taken out of the center of her mother’s attention for the first time in her life and being angry and sad about it (163). She remembers that she has been left alone and no one is watching her, and this loneliness is new since she has been the center of her mother’s attention since her birth. With no one keeping a close eye on her, she walks toward a fire and gets too close and is slightly burned. The protagonist remembers this action as a way to shift the attention from her father’s homecoming back to herself.

Her mother, however, questions her ability to remember anything from that evening, “you were only a baby ... what is it that you think happened on that day” (163). Her mother refuses to acknowledge the story about walking into the fire and counteracts this mis-remembering of the event by showing the daughter another photograph. This photograph is the photograph on the cover of the book with the protagonist as a child in her party dress on the night of her father’s return. The mother asks, “‘Where were you burned?’ and ‘Does that look like a child who was neglected for a moment?’” (163)? Her mother goes on to say that as a child she was fascinated by a book her father brought home. There was a fire in the back where they were roasting a pig, and she had thrown the book into the pit. She did not walk into the fire. But the protagonist notes the expression on her two-year-old face in the photograph, “a very solemn two-year-old

dressed in a fancy dress sent by an aunt from New York for the occasion, surrounded by toys and decorations, a huge, ornate cake in front of me. I am not smiling in any of these pictures” (164). Despite the discrepancy between remembrances regarding these pictures and the parties, the narrator notes that her mother’s memories, although differing from hers, “are precious to her and although she accepts my explanations that what I write in my poems and stories is mainly the product of my imagination, she wants certain things she believes are true to remain sacred, untouched by my fictions” (163). Clearly these discrepancies are important both to the protagonist and her mother. Ortiz Cofer’s work ends with this comment from the protagonist, “But that is not how *I* remember it” (165 emphasis in original).

Although Ortiz Cofer’s protagonist is not crossing and re-crossing a national border, the circular movement from the island to the mainland and back again forces her to look inward for stability and makes her feel like a permanent outsider. Because of this status, the protagonist is drawn to memories of this time in her life both through a homemade silent movie and through photographs. What is most striking to her is how she and her mother can remember certain events so differently. These recurring discrepancies both on the island and on the mainland are Ortiz Cofer’s contributions to my understanding of bordering, thinking from outside of pre-established patterns and paradigms. Bordering in this text is most easily identified in the slippages between the daughter’s and mother’s differing memories of the same events. The perspectives of two females from different generations who are subjected to almost constant migration for many years, then, become quite telling. It is my argument that the disconnection (between memory and the event that took place) creates a slippage of space from which to

understand the necessity of multiple perspectives. The disconnect the protagonist experiences, while jarring and uncomfortable, is an important space from which to think about Latina literature and the importance of a multiplicity of Latinidades. While Ortiz Cofer examines the constant movement between Puerto Rico and New Jersey, she uses this fragmented perception of herself to create a partial remembrance that is both an important and certainly valid entry into the contemporary Latina literary collection, all the while signaling that others may have differing, contradictory, and even negating partial remembrances that must also be included. Ortiz Cofer creates a partial remembrance via bordering in this text by centering the partial, fragmented, and bifurcated elements and placing them in dialogue without a resolution, allowing for multiple and differing perspectives to exist and enrich the conflicting memories of her childhood.

Conclusion

The texts examined above are different in many ways: the borders the protagonists cross are casted differently; the use(s) of photography differs between these works; the historical ramifications that lead to the border crossing in these texts also differ widely. Nevertheless by juxtaposing these two types of border crossing and how these texts discuss memory with regard to photographs allows for nuanced perspectives of what the border is and can be and how memory and history inform those perspectives. Both writers acknowledge the autobiographical elements present in these works allowing for yet another slippage between fact and fiction. Norma Elia Cantú rewrites the border experience from the perspective of a young girl growing up on both sides of the U.S.-

Mexico border, and Judith Ortiz Cofer expands the notion of “national” border crossing highlighting the circular movement that is so common among Puerto Rican migration from the island to the mainland and back again.

CHAPTER 5

BORDERING BORDERS: GENDER POLITICS AND CONTEMPORARY LATINA LITERATURE CONCLUSIONS

In the preceding chapters the term bordering was used as a lens through which to examine the ways contemporary Latina writers make bold claims in their works. The texts explored focused on different types of border crossing including linguistic borders, blurring the border between audience and agent, and geographical borders, but the works addressed also expand the borders between narrative structure and genre in their hybrid forms, memory and time, visibility and invisibility, and aesthetic borders. The treatment of these works focused on how contemporary Latina writers are expanding the ways in which border theory and the trope of the border has been and can be used in literature. Each of these important contributions to Latina literature addresses the warning that Cherrie Moraga articulates her play *The Hungry Woman: A Mexican Medea*. This play is Moraga's vision of a potential future if important changes are not made not only to the ways women are treated in society, but also to the ways in which knowledge is created and disseminated within patriarchal and sexist paradigms.

The first stage reading for Cherrie Moraga's play *The Hungry Woman: A Mexican Medea* occurred in 1995, "commissioned by Berkeley Repertory Theatre" (Moraga 5). Moraga explains that the play is set in "a future I imagine based on a history at the turn of the twenty-first century that never happened" (6). The performance is a dystopic post-

U.S. reality after many ethnic groups have seceded from the “nation,” creating their own sovereign states. The play takes place in the future after,

an ethnic civil war has ‘balkanized’ about half of the United States into several smaller nations of people. These include: Africa-America located in the southern states of the U.S. (excluding of course, Florida); the Mechicano Nation of Aztlán which includes parts of the Southwest and the border states of what was once Northern México; the Union of Indian Nations which shares, in an uneasy alliance with its Chicano neighbors, much for the southwest and also occupies the Great Plains and Rocky Mountain regions; the Hawai’i Nation; and the confederacy of First Nations Peoples in the former state of Alaska. (Moraga 6)

The independent nations that make up parts of the former United States then re-define what it means to be an outcast in each society and banish their new outcasts to border towns, one of which is Phoenix, Arizona. Here, Medea, the protagonist, lives with her son Chac-Mool because she is a lesbian and is considered an outcast in her society. Women become increasingly marginal in these fractured societies.

With this play, Moraga suggests that as we welcome one group of people into the fold, another will always be outcast. This idea likely stems from Moraga’s work on lesbian Chicanas and how they were doubly marginalized from the Chicano movement, which not only failed to include women in the movement, but also failed to recognize lesbian women. The play forecasts the fact that until a new paradigm is created, one that does not rely upon the deep structures of the hierarchies inherent within patriarchy, we will only keep recreating the same systems in different disguises. The play begins with Medea locked in a prison psychiatric ward. A prison guard directly addresses the

audience in the first scene: “A prison psychiatric hospital in the borderlands. The near future of a fictional past, dreamed only in the Chicana imagination” (10). Moraga’s play can be read as a decisive warning of a future dystopia that will exist if women continue ordering, instead of bordering that is, building a new kind of community based on new models and ways of knowing. For example, Medea and Luna have been banished to a border wasteland because of their sexual preferences. Medea, at first, does not want to fight the injustices she and Luna have suffered when she explains to Luna,

It doesn’t matter now. I am the last one to make this journey. My tragedy will be an example to all women like me. Vain women who only know how to be the beloved. Such an example I shall be that no woman will dare to transgress those boundaries again ... I am the last one to make this crossing, the border has closed behind me. There will be no more room for transgressions. (46)

Here, before Medea decides to fight for her relationship with Luna and for her son Chac-Mool, Medea’s actions show a moment of ordering in which she accepts the terms and rules of her banishment and can only see how she will be used as an example for other women to follow the rules of the fractured societies that now exist.

New Directions, Next Generations

By way of conclusions I would like to point out a couple of examples in literature in which the youngest generation of Latina writers are transforming the ways in which the term bordering can be used in literary study. This generation of Latina writers continues the long tradition of Latina literature in the U.S., but they differ from the Latina writers who are the focus of this dissertation. Latina authors Catherine Loya and

Stephanie Elizondo Griest, for example, have written stories and travel narratives with protagonists who are Latina and who do not speak Spanish. Although the second chapter of this dissertation is devoted to linguistic borderlands and the ways in which female characters are oppressed by not being able to assert their bi- or multilingual identities, these young writers address language use in the U.S. from a very different perspective.

Indeed, in Catherine Loya's story "We Don't Need No Stinking Maps,"³⁸ language and the bilingualism Anzaldúa discusses in *Borderlands* are curtailed because the protagonist Teresa and her brother do not speak Spanish like their parents. Teresa's brother jokes when her father asks them to sing a song in Spanish, "we laugh. This has to be a joke. He knows we don't know Spanish." The brother attempts to sing in Spanish by reciting 'La Cucaracha,' "'La cucaracha, la cucaracha. Ya no puede caminar porque some guy stepped on him and squashed him and now he's dead and bleeding brown cockroach blood'" (Loya 207). This young literary generation, a generation that grew up in the U.S. speaking English (and sometimes, but not always, Spanish) have very different realities than their parents or generations of Latinas/os before them whom Gustavo Pérez Firmat famously describes as living on the hyphen.³⁹

Instead of projecting fragmented lives through their works like we find in Ortiz Cofer's memoir *Silent Dancing: A Partial Remembrance of a Puerto Rican Childhood* and in Norma Cantú's novel *Canícula: Snapshots of a Girlhood en la Frontera*, these

³⁸ The title of the story, "We Don't Need No Stinking Maps" is a reference to Luis Valdéz's play performed in 1987 *I Don't Have to Show You No Stinking Badges*, which refers to a line in a 1948 film *The Treasure of the Sierra Madre* and the film *Blazing Saddles* (1974), which is said to have been adapted from a B. Traven novel *The Treasure of the Sierra Madre*.

³⁹ While the trends in Latina literary production are such that some contemporary Latina writers are noting the fact that they are not native Spanish speakers and sometimes about the fact that they do not speak Spanish, it is important to note that the opposite trend is also occurring in the U.S. In the newest generations of migrant working families Spanish is the first language, and these young people are not necessarily learning English as their first language.

new authors have “emerged as cultural interpreters” who expand what “Latina/o” literature is and can be (Augenbraum and Stavans xvi). Whereas the previous generations saw disjuncture and fragmentation in narrative style, this new generation on the contrary, “has begun to construct coherence from cultural variations, through autobiographical narrative, memoir, and fiction” (Augenbraum and Stavans xvi). As Ilan Stavans suggests, this new generation of writers might be better understood for what they are not, “what they aren’t is immigrants with a Spanish accent; instead they are proud to perceive themselves as hyphenated people perfectly fluent in the language of the American dream” (Stavans *New World* 8). These young Latina writers then can be said to be expanding the ways in which bordering can be applied in contemporary Latina literature as they make bold claims outside of sexist paradigms in their works.

Perhaps the best example of the process that takes place with regard to bordering is in two travel narratives by Stephanie Elizondo Griest. Growing up in South Texas with a Mexican-American mother and an Anglo-American father, Elizondo Griest’s travels around the world make her works unique examples of bordering. First, Elizondo Griest begins her travels as a nomad, with little plan and no end goal or final destination. Second, she becomes introspective, but cannot reconcile a complex heritage such as hers. She must be either one thing or another, either Mexican or “American.” Finally, by the close of *Mexican Enough*, Elizondo Griest is able to embrace her multifaceted heritage through bordering in the two narratives.

In her travel narrative *Around the Bloc: My Life in Moscow, Beijing, and Havana*, Elizondo Griest travels the world in order to explore places she thinks will be interesting, exciting, and worth experiencing. While travelling through these various places, she is a

deterritorialized nomad, in Deleuzian terms who “goes from point to point only as a consequence and as a factual necessity” (Deleuze and Guattari 380). Indeed, she moves from one country to another for various reasons including: when money runs out because she cannot find a job, the economy is unstable, or she fears for her safety. Initially she leaves Corpus Christi, Texas in order to have some adventures before she gets too old to travel, “I wanted to be a rambler, a wanderer, a nomad – the kind whose stories began with, ‘Once, in Abu Dhabi ...’” (Elizondo Griest *Around the Bloc* xi). During these travels she is not aware of any end point; there is no vector pointing her to a future permanent home. When she decides she has spent enough time in one place, she moves on, or as opportunities become available to her, she seizes them and travels to a new place without focusing on or planning for an end to her travels. She notes, “I was just looking for some excitement. I really didn’t care what happened, as long as it was interesting” (Elizondo Griest *Around the Bloc* xiii). Despite the fact that Elizondo Griest in *Around the Bloc* inhabits a deterritorialized nomadic space, she is beginning a process that will eventually lead her to thinking about the deep structures in society around her. This becomes clear by the end of the first travel narrative when Elizondo Griest realizes why she chose to visit the places to which she travelled.

After a four-year stint through Russia, the Czech Republic, Latvia, Lithuania, Estonia, China, Vietnam, Mongolia, Uzbekistan, the former German Democratic Republic, and Cuba, she realizes that, as a Mexican American, she never considered going to Mexico or learning Spanish because it was devalued for her throughout her childhood in South Texas and therefore not worth experiencing. She laments the fact that the only reason she goes to Mexico in *Around the Bloc* is to enter Cuba. Mexico is a stop

over, a stepping-stone from one “interesting” locale to another. When a friend asks her if she wants to spend the New Year in Cuba, Elizondo Griest asks how they would get there. ““Through Mexico,”” Machi, her friend replies, and “after a few days of wandering around, Machi bargained a great deal on airline tickets at a travel agency in Cuernavaca and we jetted off to Havana” hence marking the end of the travel account of Mexico (Elizondo Griest *Around the Bloc* 303; 305). Elizondo Griest, at the end of this first travel narrative, regrets that she never considered Mexico or her Mexican heritage something worth investigating.

Mexican Enough begins where *Around the Bloc* leaves off with the Elizondo Griest preparing for a journey through Mexico to learn to speak Spanish and to visit her mother’s relatives in northern Mexico. While she is aware of the ways in which her cultural heritage has been devalued for her growing up in south Texas, her first few months in Mexico only exacerbate the unequal relationships between center-periphery dichotomies. Elizondo Griest is initially unable to reconcile the complexities of her biracial identity and mixed heritage. Repeatedly throughout *Mexican Enough* she feels as though she can only have one ethnic identity or another, she can only be Chicana or Anglo-American.

For example, in grade school when asked if she is Hispanic or White, she “had no answer to this. Both? Neither? Either? My mother’s roots dwelled beneath the pueblos of northern Mexico; my father’s were buried in the Kansas prairie. I inherited her olive skin and caterpillar eyebrows, and his indigo eyes. But in South Texas, you are either one or the other” (Elizondo Griest *Mexican Enough* 4). The oppression to which she is exposed growing up informs her initial reactions to her experiences in Mexico. Being told that her

cultural heritage is of no value prompted her to study Russian instead of Spanish, to travel to the Communist and former Communist Bloc instead of Mexico and Latin America. Once in Mexico Elizondo Griest initially perpetuates the notion that Mexico has nothing to offer and, at the outset of her travels, begins stereotyping Mexicans before she begins to understand the complexities of the culture in which she is living. At first, she “tropicalizes” her experiences in Mexico. That is, she “imbues a particular space, geography, group, or nation with a set of traits, images, and values” stereotypically associated with that group (Aparicio and Chávez-Silverman 8).

During her first couple of months in Mexico she studies Spanish at a school in Querétaro and lives with some university students. They teach her the word “flojo” explaining, ““Lying around, doing nothing. We’re being flojos”” (Elizondo Griest *Mexican Enough* 30). She compares her new “flojo” way of life to the life she left in the U.S., “I was working seventy-hour weeks, gulping down meals while running to the subway or pounding away at a computer. Being flojo is a luxurious change of pace” (Elizondo Griest *Mexican Enough* 30). Here, Elizondo Griest seems unable to understand the complexities of the comparison she is making and instead perpetuates the common stereotypes that Mexicans are lazy and Americans will sell their souls to make a buck. However, as she spends more time in Mexico, learns more Spanish, and becomes closer to her classmates, she is able to see beyond the stereotypes that initially cloud her understanding. As Elizondo Griest continues her travels in Mexico, she sees beyond the “tropicalizing” stereotypes and begins to embody the notion of bordering.

Once she returns to the U.S. she travels to Kansas for a reunion with her Griest family and realizes that Kansas and the people who live there are “just as much my

heritage as Mexico” (Elizondo Griest *Mexican Enough* 287). She notices her cousins’ green eyes, “the physical characteristic that sets me apart from most Mexicans unites me with them” (Elizondo Griest *Mexican Enough* 287). Only after travelling to both her mother’s and father’s birthplaces is she able to articulate the mixed feelings she felt growing up, what she refers to as the “schizophrenia of being biracial, of straddling two worlds but belonging to neither” and embrace the complexities of her “mestizo heritage” (Elizondo Griest *Mexican Enough* 287).

While the border is not a new term in literary studies, Latina writers are only recently being recognized as legitimate U.S. literary contributors, and these women writers spend a great deal of time discussing borders and the female’s double marginalization within border theory. These authors are reinventing what it means to be Latina in the U.S. through a lens I call bordering. The authors discussed above contribute to my reading of bordering in literature. Elizondo Griest notes at the end of *Mexican Enough*, that there are “seven million Americans who claimed to belong to more than one race in the 2000 census. That’s only 2.4 percent of our nation, but we’re growing, organizing, forming committees. Striving to believe that – whatever we are – it’s enough” (288). Elizondo Griest’s travel narratives are of particular importance because they are part of the newest generation of Latina writers and because they map a process in understanding bordering.

Bordering Borders

While the border includes many different aspects and border crossing many different types of movement, the texts examined in this and the preceding chapters

elucidate some of these borders. By looking closely at narrative structure in multigenre works, each text discussed in the previous chapters defies categorization. These texts explode traditional definitions of narrative structure being hybrid forms themselves, laying the foundations for my term bordering. Bordering is disruptive in several ways by spilling over the borders discussed above. This dissertation focuses on moments in literature and theater in which authors create oppressed characters who manage to fight these oppressions in the works. I argue further that the hybrid formal techniques incorporated into these texts extend the ways in which these characters fight the oppressions around them and how these techniques speak through the texts to involve the readership in the protagonists' struggles in these works.

Specifically I examine the linguistic borderlands in *Borderlands/La Frontera* by Gloria Anzaldúa and *How the García Girls Lost Their Accents* by Julia Alvarez. In these linguistic borderlands I show how formal techniques in Alvarez's novel *García Girls*, especially the reverse chronological narrative frame, open up a space for bordering to take place as readers are implicated in Yolanda's struggles. Next, I discuss the ways in which author Achy Obejas sets up an uncomfortable realization in her novel *Memory Mambo* implicating her readers by forcing them to make difficult choices about the characters in the novel. I juxtapose Obejas's novel with a theatrical work by Cherrie Moraga, *Heroes and Saints*, and discuss the ways in which different types of audiences must also make these difficult choices in her play. Finally, using photography as the technical frame, I examine Norma Elia Cantú's novel *Canícula: Snapshots of a Girlhood en la Frontera* in relation to Judith Ortiz Cofer's memoir *Silent Dancing: A Partial Remembrance of a Puerto Rican Childhood*. In this chapter I discuss the tenuous

relationships among text, image, and memory and show how through the use of photographs, these texts call for new ways in which to think about and understand Latina literature.

While the border and different types of border crossing are the focus of this project, I make use of a unifying term in each of the chapters outlined above. This term, bordering, links the works examined in this dissertation by showing the different ways these authors use the trope of the border in order to speak through their texts, calling for new ways of knowing, understanding, and theorizing contemporary Latina literature. Bordering, while treated slightly differently in each chapter listed above, refers to the literary moments that mark bold change or call for a paradigm shift. The authors mentioned above enact bordering in different ways in their literary pieces, depicting moments of bold change, of bordering, in their works. This dissertation, then, adds to the conversation that has already begun about contemporary Latina literature and expands the ways in which the border as theoretical or symbolic trope can be applied to literary texts about women in a myriad of borderlands.

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