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Latinx individuals are part of the youngest and largest minority group in the United States. Despite comprising a large part of the population, Latinx adolescents are largely underrepresented in literature. This content analysis examined twenty young adult books published between 2014, the year that the organization "We Need Diverse Books" was created, and 2017, all of which featured Latinx female protagonists. The study analyzes overarching themes present across the texts, and discusses how representations of Latina teenagers relied upon, or refuted, common stereotypes surrounding that community. It also discusses how representation differed depending on whether or not the authors were members of the Latinx community.

#### Headings:

Young adult literature

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“I DON’T WANT US TO BE ASHAMED ANYMORE”: REPRESENTATIONS OF  
LATINX TEENAGE GIRLS IN YOUNG ADULT LITERATURE

by  
Sarah Sculnick

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Approved by

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Sandra Hughes-Hassell

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## Introduction

The Latinx<sup>1</sup> population has garnered a lot of attention recently due to the current political administration and debates surrounding immigration policy. According to the US Census in 2015, there were 56.5 million Latinxs living in the U.S., comprising 17.6% of the total population (Flores, 2015). Institutions who serve the public have had to adjust their services to better accommodate Spanish-speaking populations, as well as the unique needs of the Latinx community. This has been especially relevant for those who work with and for adolescents, such as schools and libraries, because not only are Latinx the largest minority population in the United States, they also happen to be the youngest. One-in-five schoolchildren is Latinx, and one-in-four newborns is Latinx (“Between two worlds,” 2018). Latinxs make up 18% of teens in the U.S., and have significant issues that impact their community.

Young Latinx women face their own set of unique issues. While there is a substantial amount of research surrounding Latina teens, the majority of it revolves around sex, teen pregnancy, and body-image. Latinas have the highest rates of teen parenthood out of any major racial or ethnic group in the United States. According to the Pew Research Center, about one in every four Latinas becomes a mom by age 19 (2018). The prevalence of research shows that these are clearly problems impacting this community, and group-centered approaches need to be taken to address them. Latinx adolescents also have the highest rate of depressive symptoms, and girls are more likely

than boys to experience higher levels of depression (Lorenzo-Blanco et. Al, 2012).

Developmentally, adolescence can be a challenging period for anyone; socially it can be difficult to navigate school, relationships, and pressures to succeed. Latina adolescents must straddle two cultural identities, fulfill familial expectations, and deal with the difficulties of being a teenage girl.

The field of critical librarianship, and Critical Race Theory (CRT), emphasizes the need for counter-narratives. The framework of CRT clearly outlines counter-storytelling as a tool to combat oppression and to bring traditionally marginalized voices to the forefront of anti-racist work. By building on everyday experiences, critical race theorists have used “perspective, viewpoint, and the power of stories and persuasion to come to a deeper understanding of how Americans see race” (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017). The same theoretical framework underlies the concept of the #ownvoices movement in children’s publishing, which encourages writers from traditionally marginalized identities to publish diverse representations in literature. With the diversity of experiences and cultures represented within the Latinx group, and the swath of intersectional identities and problems that impact adolescent girls, literature should be showcasing a variety of stories and perspectives from this group.

Young adult (YA) literature should reflect the realities of being a teenage girl, and the experiences of non-white adolescents. Children’s literature as a whole has traditionally depicted largely white characters and white narratives. With such a large Latinx population in the United States, and having it skew so young, kids and teens should be seeing themselves represented in stories. While there has been an increase over the past four years of Latinx writers and illustrators, and an increase in diverse literature

across the board, their representation is still largely disproportionate to what the publishing industry is releasing as a whole—more statistics regarding this imbalance are provided in the following section.

The need for more culturally relevant literature has long been discussed in the field of children's literature and librarianship. Rudine Sims Bishop famously discussed the need for children to have access to “mirrors, windows, and sliding glass doors” in literature—every child should be able to see themselves reflected in what they read, see into others' experiences through the windows of literature, and also be able to empathize and step into another person's experience (1990). Literature can help readers understand themselves and the world in which they are situated. With the current political climate, and the demographic changes occurring in the United States, it's important to see how Latinx characters are being depicted within literature—and with such unique problems facing Latina teenagers, it's important to see how girls are being represented within books targeted for this age group.



## Literature Review

In order to understand their community, however, one has to understand the cultural nuances of being Latinx. The majority of Latinx teens describe themselves by their country of origin before describing themselves as American (“Between two worlds,” 2018). For many Latinx teens, this means existing with hyphenated identities and straddling two cultures—that of their family, and that of themselves and their peers. This can create tension in a number of ways. Some might be quick to view the Latinx community as a homogenous group instead of a term to describe people from a swath of Spanish-speaking backgrounds, and native-born Latinx teens might experience different hardships from their immigrant counterparts. Mexicans comprise the largest immigrant group within the Latinx community, in 2014 they were 64% of the total Latinx population, but there are many other countries of origin represented (Stepler & Brown, 2016). While almost two-thirds of Latinx millennials are of Mexican-origin, even more are younger than 18, and in 2014 Latinx youth were 69% Mexican. About 15% were from Caribbean groups, which included Puerto Ricans who made up the majority with 9% in 2014 (Patten, 2016). Salvadorans and Cubans made up just under 4% each, and Dominicans were 3.2% of the population (Stepler & Brown, 2016). Additionally, according to estimates from the Pew Research Center, 22% of Latinx teens ages 16 to 25 are undocumented immigrants, and approximately 58% of foreign-born Latinx youths are undocumented immigrants (“Between two worlds,” 2018).

## Negative Stereotypes

Much of the representation of Latinx adolescents in the media and in the news is negative, adversely impacting their experiences and leading researchers and policymakers to focus on them as communities that need to be fixed. Latinx adolescents' perceptions were studied by the National Council of La Raza in 2009, where they met with a series of focus groups with sixty Latinx youth ages 15-17 across various regions of the United States. The participants were asked about how they viewed and engaged with different social settings and institutions, and the overwhelming majority of participants expressed ethnic stereotyping by teachers, peers, and administrators (Foxen, 2010). Young Latinxs are routinely stereotyped in mainstream discourse as low academic achievers, teen parents, or gang members—all of which are negative stereotypes that further exclude them from the dominant culture, marking them as unassimilated or lesser. Latina youth specifically have emerged as subjects of concerns and intervention programs related to sexual and reproductive health, and are seen as an at-risk population (Garcia, 2012). With such stereotypes, teenage Latinx girls are seen as promiscuous, or likely candidates for teen pregnancy.

## Latina Sex and Sexuality

Teen pregnancy is not a problem that exists in an independent bubble. Latinx teens are entering partnerships where expectations for behavior, contraceptive-use, and communication can vary greatly based on your gender. In a study conducted about Latinx teen pregnancy, where 157 Latinx teens were interviewed, there were clear differences in their responses based on gender. When asked, “have your parents ever talked to you

about contraception?” 37% of girls ages 12-14 said yes compared to 42% of boys the same age, and 60% of girls ages 15-18 said yes compared to 54% of boys the same age (Sabatiuk and Flores, 2009, p. 19). There is a clear change in how parents talk to children based on their age, and as girls get older they learn more about contraceptive use, while boys are not spoken to about it as frequently. More responsibility is placed on Latinas shoulders as they get older, and they have different familial expectations for behavior. In the same study, when asked if their parents had ever talked to them about what it took to have a successful relationship, 80% of female participants said yes while only 66% of male participants said yes (Sabatiuk and Flores, 2009, p. 22). Family discussions, expectations, and norms play a large role on how Latinx teenagers approach their own reproductive health.

Family is extremely important for Latinx teens, and their opinion weighs heavily on decisions regarding their personal lives. In a study conducted with 157 Latinx teens, researchers found that 49% claimed their parents were the most influential people when it came to making decisions about sex (Sabatiuk and Flores, 2009, p. 16). Parents were more influential than friends, the internet, or even themselves. Research suggests that Latinx cultural values also play a large role in dating and sexual behavior. Concepts such as machismo (ideals of masculinity), marianismo (ideas of femininity and women's roles), familismo (ideals centered on the family and familial obligation), acculturation, and religion can impact how Latinx adolescents approach dating (Cardoza et. al., 2012). Familismo is seen as having three primary components: familial obligations to provide support, perceived support from family members, and family as referents for behavior and attitude. Some conceptions of familism also talk about reputation and preserving the

familial name and image (Stein et al., 2014). Latinx teens look towards their family for examples of behavior, want to honor their family's image, and seek familial support in their endeavors. In a review looking at how familismo impacted youth developmentally, researchers discovered four key ways that familismo manifested itself in Latinx teens. Teens take on more responsibilities in the house as their parents became more vigilant of their behavior, and as teens got older, they felt their parents had more say in who they could date. Girls especially would feel burdened by familial responsibilities, and research revealed that at this time teens are internalizing values of familismo, which could lead to parental and familial conflict (Stein et al., 2014). Most Latinx parents speak to their teens about sex, yet don't feel comfortable doing so. In the study conducted by Sabatiuk and Flores, 77% of parents and 64% of Latinx teens agreed that parents often didn't know what to say when discussing sex, or how to start the conversation (2009, p. 18). While parents seemed to be harder on themselves in this study than their kids, this shows that facilitating discussions between parents and their children is important for discussions about sexual and dating health.

## Familismo and Sexuality

Latinx cultural values regarding traditional gender roles impact how those discussions are facilitated. The value of machismo, which can be seen as defining the dominant qualities a man should possess in order to assume a patriarchal role in his family, can impact how parents talk to their sons. Conversely, marianismo is a value that defines a Latinx woman's role in her family and society, and usually emphasizes morality and femininity (Sabatiuk and Flores, 2009). These roles can impact whether and how Latina teenagers seek out advice about contraception or relationships. In a study

conducted in Chicago between 2002-2004, Garcia conducted in-depth interviews with Mexican and Puerto Rican teenage girls and some of their mothers to discuss their emerging sexualities and how they approached safe sex. All of the participants were between 13-18, identified as sexually active, identified as Mexican or Puerto Rican, had no children, and identified as practicing safe sex. Garcia saw that almost no previous research examined how Latina youth themselves understood their sexuality, pleasure, and safe-sex. Throughout her interviews, which were conducted in English and Spanish, she also explored the familial roles and expectations that are conferred by mothers of Latina teens. The mothers in the study saw themselves as directly responsible for discussing sexual safety with their daughters, as opposed to the fathers. They largely preached “respecting yourself” and “taking care of yourself” over abstinence until marriage, and often discussed respect in tandem with familismo. They also revealed that daughters should defer to the authority of elders, which included both parents and other familial adults and community members (Garcia, 2012). Promiscuous behavior could bring shame onto the family, or change how other community members viewed them.

Latina teen sexuality is intimately linked with their family’s image and societal norms. Garcia identified four strategies that mothers used to navigate societal restrictions placed on Latina sexuality: they promoted safe sex and redefined “respect;” they had open discussions with their daughters about their own sexual experiences to show possible disadvantages that could come of their own situations; they disclosed their daughters’ sexual behaviors to other family members; and they made evaluative references to the sexuality of white women (Garcia, 2012). From these findings, one can see that Latina sexuality is not a personal topic—it is multigenerational, focused on

consequences rather than rewards, and uniquely Latina. The majority of mothers in the study discovered their daughters were sexually active by searching their bedrooms, and brushed off the idea of this being an invasion of privacy as an “American” notion. They worried that they would not get the truth by simply asking their daughters, so instead they would take action and speak with their daughters once they had proof (Garcia, 2012). Expectations for Latina teens, regardless of whether they are born in the United States, should be evaluated differently than those of white American teens. The mothers in the study revealed that upon finding out their daughters were sexually active, they would initially accuse their daughters as being victims, giving into pressure from boys and not thinking about themselves. In heteronormative relationships, the girls were seen as victims to men and boys. In lesbian relationships, however, Garcia found an additional racial and ethnic lens was used to analyze the power dynamics. White girls were seen as “corrupting” their daughters, and mothers largely described same-sex practices as being reflective of white culture (Garcia, 2012).

In research conducted about white teens versus teens of color and their discussions with parents about sex, it was found that urban adolescents were more likely to discuss sexual matters with their mothers than with their fathers (Kotchick, Dorsey, Miller, & Forehand, 1999). With this finding in mind, researchers recruited groups of African American and Latina mothers and their daughters in Washington Heights and Upper Harlem in New York City. The grounded theory study found that mothers began their discussions about sex when their daughters got their periods or showed notable interest in a boy (O’Sullivan, 2001). A daughter would have to feel comfortable telling their mom about romantic interests for this to happen, however, and conversations about

relationships do not always occur organically. The participants revealed that mothers often spoke about the consequences of having sex, and would emphasize how painful the experience of sex and of giving birth is in order to deter their daughters. Findings showed that mothers focus on how daughters need to avoid having sexual encounters, and could be stricter with them than men (O'Sullivan, 2001). Parental relationships played a very large role in how Latinx teens engaged in relationships. Latina teens were more likely than Latino teens to say that they didn't use birth control or contraception because they were afraid that their parents would discover it (Sabatiuk and Flores, 2009). Girls clearly worried more about the consequences and how their parents would perceive them if they discovered their daughters were sexually active. Only 2% of Latinx teens reported that they didn't use contraception because they wanted themselves or their partner to get pregnant (Sabatiuk and Flores, 2009, p. 23). That statistic supports the fact that many teens aren't intentionally trying to have babies, regardless of what their attitude might be about motherhood. Rather, teens aren't using contraception because they don't understand the consequences, or they are concerned about how they will be viewed by their parents. In fact, one study found that teens who have higher levels of Latinx cultural orientation, and who strongly believe in values of familismo and respeto, have less of a chance of engaging in risky sexual behavior (Ma et. al., 2014). With such prevailing stereotypes existing around Latina sexuality, and societal pressure to be secretive about it, it would behoove Latina adolescents to see accurate representations of people like them, going through the same struggles of negotiating family dynamics, interpersonal relationships, and community expectations.

## Familismo and Mental Health

Latina adolescents are also disproportionately vulnerable to experiencing depressive symptoms. Not only do Latinx youth experience symptoms of depression at a higher rate than other ethnicities, Latina girls have higher levels compared to Latino boys. Additionally, according to national survey data that's been collected since the 1990s, Latina adolescents are more likely to attempt suicide than girls from other races or ethnicities (Zayas et al., 2005). Researchers have begun to consider how Latinx cultural values, such as familismo and respeto, could impact suicide prevention—and how to successfully incorporate them in mental health interventions.

Kuhlberg, Peña, and Zayas attempted to research how familismo and other cultural factors impacted teenage girls' mental health within the Latinx community (2010). They interviewed a group of 226 adolescent Latinas in New York City, half of whom had attempted suicide previously, and assessed them on a number of different sociocultural impacts. They measured self-esteem and internalizing behaviors through self-reporting surveys, parent-adolescent conflict with a questionnaire, and familismo variables, such as familial support and subjugation of self to family, with another self-reporting scale (Kuhlberg, Peña, and Zayas, 2010). Their results revealed that familismo acted as a protective factor and could be helpful in treating suicidal girls, but also many of the responses from participants revealed feelings of self-sacrifice and obligation to their parents. Those restrictions reveal how important it is for potential suicide interventions to focus on parent-daughter relationships in adolescence (Kuhlberg, Peña, and Zayas, 2010). Gender, familismo, and depression need to be studied in conjunction with each other.



Multiple studies found that familismo protected against negative mental health outcomes for Latinx adolescents. Any interventions aimed at Latinx teens should incorporate and build upon the strengths that are associated with their cultural values (Ayón, Masiglia, and Bermudez-Parsai, 2010). While familismo and familial cultural values can be protective for both Latinx male and female adolescents in terms of preventing suicide, filial obligations and relationships played a larger role in preventing Latina adolescents against suicidal actions (Cupito, Stein, and Gonzalez, 2015). Research conducted by Lorenzo-Blanco et al. supported this same finding, claiming that interventions targeted at Latina adolescents should incorporate the cultural values of familismo and respeto (2012). In order to improve the state of Latina adolescent mental health, families need to work on improving interpersonal relationships and draw upon Latinx cultural values to strengthen those connections. Additionally, studies have shown that it is important to consider the relationships and familial expectations placed on Latina girls, but there is very little information available about gender non-binary or trans populations within the Latinx community.

Scholars have also studied how the process of acculturation can lead to depressive symptoms. Acculturation in the Latinx community has been seen as the acquisition of dominant American cultural elements (Cabassa, 2003). This could result in changing behaviors, values, and attitudes, among other identifiers, to reflect American culture. Researchers have found that the process of acculturation can occur in conjunction with enculturation, which describes the process through which Latinx youth engage with the values and identifiers of their Latinx culture (Cabassa, 2003). The risk for depression in Latinx youth increases with acculturation to American culture, and girls seem to

influenced by acculturation more than boys. The value of familismo and respeto might promote family cohesion and discourage conflict, which helped prevent attempts at suicide (Lorenzo-Blanco et al., 2012). There are a lot of stressors associated with having a hyphenated cultural identity, and straddling two cultures. Many Latinx teens face the pressure of having to adhere to familial expectations, speak two languages, and to succeed within dominant societal expectations. Those stresses can result in higher rates of internalized depressive symptoms, but using cultural strengths and familial bonds can help to offset those cases.

### Lack of Positive Representation

Much of Latinx children's and teen literature does not do an accurate job reflecting the lived Latinx experience, and the literature that does is in scarce supply. Naidoo asserts that much of children's literature serves as a broken mirror for the Latinx community (2011). Instead of reflecting back positive and authentic representations of Latinx culture, many readers were seeing inauthentic and stereotypical depictions of their cultural heritage. While it's important for children to be exposed to other cultural backgrounds in the stories that they read, its harmful for both members of that group and non-members if those representations propagate negative stereotypes about that group. One study revealed that Latinx children in southern schools faced discrimination from non-Latinx children and educators because of misconceptions and ignorance about Latinx culture (Wainer, 2004). It is not only important that literature taught in school reflects the cultural diversity present in the United States, but also that it does not spread misconceptions.

Poor representation of Latinx individuals in literature and media is not a new problem. In a study from 1998, Barry discussed how she noticed a lack of representation of Latinx people in literature, despite the fact that they were the fastest growing minority group. The majority of representations available were negative, which was partly due to a lack of advocacy for the group, but also the heterogeneity of the Latinx community (Barry, 1998). What she said is still relevant 20 years later—this group is still underrepresented in YA literature, despite being the fastest growing minority group. Even award-winning books lack representation. In an analysis of 90 *Américas* and Pura Belpré award winners published between 1991 and 2004, awards that are dedicated to exceptional Latinx literature, Naidoo found that they failed to represent the complete social and cultural spectrum of the Latinx community (2007). The majority of books were centered on Mexican-American culture, while other backgrounds were underrepresented. Additionally, the picture books continued to focus on a certain “look” for Latinx characters, ignoring the spectrum of racial identities present within the Latinx community (Naidoo, 2007). With so much of Latinx youth identifying first as their country of origin, they need to see the diversity of cultural backgrounds acknowledged and represented in what they read and see.

There is a clear disconnect between portrayals of the Latinx community in children’s and young adult literature and those communities lived experiences in the United States. Naidoo claims that there is a necessity to re-analyze children’s literature about Latinx cultures (2012). With such prevailing negative stereotypes, or lack of visibility, there are negative impacts on Latinx youth. Stereotyping from school administrators often leads to Latinx students being overlooked, excluded, and negatively

impacted in school environments, and leads to unequal educational opportunities (Foxen, 2010). The same is true of literature—if kids and teens are seeing the Latinx community as a monolithic entity in stories, this can impact how they view themselves and how others view them. If images of Latinx teens as gang-members and teen moms are being perpetuated by the media that they consume, this can result in internalization of negative images regarding their own cultural heritage. There is a clear need to analyze the current literature to see what messages it sends about the Latinx community, and also to reconceptualize how literature can be used as a positive tool for re-affirming Latinx identity formation.

### Applying an Asset-Based Cultural Perspective

A large portion of research surrounding adolescents is currently dominated by what some researchers refer to as the “Deficit reduction paradigm.” In this framework, researchers focus on naming, counting, and reducing the occurrence of environmental risks, such as family violence or poverty, and health-compromising behaviors, like teen pregnancy and school dropout (Benson, 2003). While important, this paradigm has shaped funding and research initiatives, and made it so that most literature focuses on harmful behaviors instead of positive ones. In an attempt to move away from problem-focused dialogues, and seeing the Latinx community as an “at-risk” group, some researchers are beginning to apply positive youth developmental (PYD) approaches to their research. Developmental assets are sources of internal and external support for development that can also act as protective factors, and are required for all adolescents who are trying to achieve their goals (Alvarado and Ricard, 2013). Developmental assets can be measured by external assets—such as support, empowerment, constructive use of

time, and high personal expectations—as well as internal assets—such as commitment to learning, positive values, social competencies, and positive identity development—in an attempt to consider the various factors that help adolescents grow up healthy, caring, and responsible (Search Institute, 2006). Adolescents who report higher levels of developmental assets tend to “thrive” rather than “survive” in terms of achieving positive social expectations (Alvarado and Ricard, 2013).

While Latinx teens do deal with many societal pressures, there should be more focus on their successes rather than just on their at-risk behaviors. In a study conducted by Alvarado and Ricard, they found that internal assets are more indicative of whether Latinx adolescents will thrive. It is important to note that those assets also had to be associated with positive identification with their ethnic identity (2013). Ethnic identity can be seen as an internal asset that should be cultivated, as a way to help minority adolescents succeed. Ethnic identity is a part of a person’s social identity that is derived from their belonging to a social group and the value and emotional significance that they connect with that group identity (Tajfel, 1981). Studies have shown that ethnic identity can play a large role in self-concept of minority youth. Minority group adolescents often find themselves feeling pressured to conform or suppress their ethnic identity to assimilate to the dominant culture, but adolescents with strong ethnic identities have been shown to more effectively handle negative stereotypes (Phinney, 1992). In much the same way that familismo could help protect against suicidal behaviors, it can be used to embolden Latinx adolescents to handle pressures that come with acculturation and their dual-identities.

Along with familismo, community and communal values can impact Latinx success. Community involvement plays an important role in PYD. When youth have a caring and developmentally facilitative community, they are encouraged to contribute meaningfully to their civil society (Lerner, 2003). Researchers who wanted to understand how adolescents who were actively involved in their community understood their social world and themselves. The researchers found that the youth showed more commitment to both their heritage and to the future of their community, and that they viewed themselves as reflections of their parents and community (Hart & Fegley, 1995). When Latinx teens are part of a larger community, and see themselves as an integral component of that community, they are more likely to develop positive social assets.

The idea of PYD is closely associated with the theoretical framework of “funds of knowledge” which places value on the knowledge and social practices of a household. Lived experiences and social practices are seen as worthy knowledge bases. Moll and González applied this framework to education, and to their work with Mexican-American families, to show that families had valuable experiences and knowledge that could help with instruction (2012). It focuses on the cultural values that immigrant or dual-identity families possess, and places value on them as legitimate educational sources.

Latinx YA literature can be used as a means to redefine the ways that mainstream media portrays the Latinx community, and a way to incorporate PYD into writing. Using the CRT framework created by Delgado, Hughes-Hassell posits a theory for which multicultural YA literature can be used as a counter-storytelling tool. She claims that it could serve to give voice to teens who are often silenced and underrepresented (or misrepresented) in mainstream media, validate the existence of teens from multicultural

and diverse backgrounds, reveal the complexity of racial and ethnic identity formation, and build empathy and awareness for readers who have not faced marginalization in their own lives (2013). Instead of acting as a broken mirror, multicultural literature can be used to amplify positive representations of the Latinx community. Authentic representation in stories can be transformative for readers—both for readers within the community being represented and for readers outside of the community whose perceptions are shaped by the stories they read.

Books about Latinx characters and their community need to be considered and studied as their own unique entity within the field of multicultural literature. In a study conducted by Jiménez García, she builds upon Hughes-Hassell's model and uses it to analyze Latinx YA literature. She notes that cross-generational relationships between characters are very important, and that the novels tend to be social-justice oriented (2018). As many social studies suggest, familismo plays a very important role in Latinx families. Maternal relationships also are very important in the lives of Latinx teenage girls, and cross-generational relationships within books should be reflective of that. Current trends in Latinx YA literature also focus more on the failures of cultural nationalism, and reimagine how youth can participate in revolutionary practices today (Jiménez García, 2018). Latinx literature is not just a mirror for readers, it can be a call to action. It can be inspirational for someone to read about a Latinx teen fighting against gentrification, racism, and unjust immigration, especially for teenagers who might not be able to vote or who feel as if they have no voice in the current political climate. According to a survey conducted by the Pew Research center, half of Latinxs say their situation in the United States has gotten worse over the past year, and over the past year

the number of Latinxs who have concerns about their place in American society has increased as well. The majority of those polled also said they are worried that a family member or close friend could be deported, and most blame the Trump administration for the current worsening situation for Latinxs (Lopez, Gonzalez-Barrera, and Krogstad, 2018). The Latinx community is the largest minority group in the country, yet their identity and well-being is constantly brought into question. The current political climate makes the need for authentic and positive Latinx representation so much greater; and YA literature should be affirming of Latinx identities instead of perpetuating negative stereotypes.

While there has been some limited Latinx-specific research conducted about YA literature in recent years, none of it has focused solely on female protagonists. I will explore how Latinx teenage girls are portrayed in YA novels by employing the CRT-based framework that Hughes-Hassell developed for studying multicultural literature, and building upon ideas of counter-storytelling and the #ownvoices movement. I will be exploring the following questions:

- How do young adult novels portray Latina teenagers, and do their representations dispel or align with prevailing stereotypes that exist about this group?
- How do those books differ depending on whether or not the author identifies as Latinx?



## Methods

This study used qualitative content analysis to examine YA novels that featured Latinx female protagonists. This type of research method is grounded in the interpretation of content through identifying common themes or categories, which are then used to understand a particular social reality (Wildemuth, 2017). This framework for the study was a comparison of themes across a collection of related texts, which were then analyzed to see what they said about that body of literature and society. The themes were developed as I read through the texts, and were analyzed using emergent categories. While there has been research conducted on this group, the purpose of conducting a content analysis on this population is to see what new themes can be identified, and to fill a gap in the literature. The advantage of using emergent conceptualizations is that they often are the most relevant and best suited for the data, and they are able to be continually developed and adapted (Glaser, Strauss, and Strauss, 2017). Sometimes trying to apply a pre-existing coding scheme or theory to a body of work can hinder the ability to create new categories or themes. Using emergent qualitative coding ensured that I had more accurate, representative categories for the data (Glaser, Strauss, and Strauss, 2017).

Whereas quantitative content analysis is interested in looking at how characteristics of the content relate to the research question, qualitative content analysis

relies upon rich description to comment on themes that arise from the research.

Qualitative content analysis is inductive, meaning themes emerge from the data through the analytical process (Wildemuth, 2017). In general, qualitative content analysis necessitates a small, purposively selected sample of materials, resulting in descriptive analysis.

## Data Collection

In order to establish my data collection, I began by defining the population and timeline for my sample. Since the organization *We Need Diverse Books* was created in 2014, I decided to look at books published from that year until 2017. While there have been a number of YA books published in 2018 by Latinx writers and featuring Latina protagonists, not all of them would have been released by the completion of this study. With those four publishing years established, I encountered the issue of wanting to compile lists of published YA novels, but not knowing how to get comprehensive data. Each year the Cooperative Children's Book Center (CCBC) at the University of Wisconsin compiles annual statistics about multicultural children's literature. They take the books that they receive and divide them into different multicultural categories, comparing those statistics against the total number received. They also look at statistics about books written by members of that same community, versus those written by outsiders. The Latinx statistics are below:

	Total books received from U.S. publishers	Books in that group about Latinx individuals	Books in that group written by authors or illustrators of Latinx ancestry
2014	3,500	66	36
2015	3,200	79	56

2016	3,200	157	95
2017	3,500	205	108

According to the CCBC, they decide a book is “about” a Latinx character if the main character/subject is Latinx, or if a Latinx character features significantly in the narrative. They do not count a book if the principal character is white and then some of the secondary characters are Latinx, but don’t play large roles in the narrative (CCBC, 2018). They also note that in recent years they have seen more paperback series, and that more publishers are sending along books than before because they are aware of their booklists. They also have continued to change their collecting process, reading through *Kirkus Reviews* whereas in the past they might have missed some titles (CCBC, 2018). These changes could also contribute to the growing number of books featuring characters of color.

The CCBC takes into account the authors’ own identities, as their statistics look at how many of the titles are by members of the group being represented. Their Latinx titles are organized by specific region and country or heritage group within the text, so a book about a Cuban-American is categorized separately from one about a Mexican-American. In this way they acknowledge the distinct cultural identities that compile the Latinx group.

The logs were divided into categories based on cultural background, listed below:

Latino/a Authors & Artists (No Cultural Content)

General/Unspecified Latino Topic

Latin & South America

United States

Within the regions listed above, books were further divided by country (e.g., Argentina, Brazil, Chile) or by hyphenated identity (e.g., Argentine-American, Brazilian-American, Chilean-American). Within those subcategories, names were bolded if the authors or illustrators were of Latinx descent.

The books were not separated by audience, however, and simply had “pic” or “fic” written next to them. Thus, I went through every single title with the denotation of “fic” to determine whether it was Middle Grade or YA. I used a series of methods to determine whether the title was YA: I looked at Goodreads categories for the book, the cover, read summaries, and looked at publisher’s blurbs if other methods were not useful. The protagonists also had to be 14+ for me to consider it a YA novel. I then recorded all of the titles that were for YA audiences per year, and categorized them as shown below:

Sample of YA Titles, 2015

<b>Title</b>	<b>Author</b>	<b>Own Voices? (If yes, Nationality)</b>	<b>Cultural Background of Character</b>	<b>Notes</b>
The Hunted	De la Peña, Matt	Yes (Mex-Am)	Mex-Am	Male protagonist
Joyride	Banks, Anna	No	Mex-Am	Switches perspectives between Mex-Am girl and white boy, girl’s parents were deported
The Summer of Chasing Mermaids	Ockler, Sarah	No	Tobagan	Not Spanish-speaking

I included all YA novels, regardless of whether they would end up in the final content analysis. All told, I identified 153 YA novels from 2014-2017 that had Latinx

characters. In 2014, the year that WeNeedDiverseBooks was established, there were the lowest number of Latinx teen books, with only 17 titles. In 2015, there were only 20 titles. In 2016 there were 44, and 2017 had the most with 72 titles.

Once I had the YA lists, I began eliminating titles that were outside the bounds of my project. I disqualified books that were voiced entirely from the male perspective (eg *Bloodline* by Joe Jimenez, for example), featured Latinx characters in the form of male love interests (eg *Freeks* by Amanda Hocking), had Latina characters who didn't voice significant parts of the narrative or were secondary characters (e.g. *Interference* by Kay Honeyman), or took place outside of the United States (e.g. *An Uninterrupted View of the Sky* by Melanie Crowder). I also limited the books to characters who had Spanish-speaking ancestry, as I was interested in how the Spanish language played into the character's experiences and relationships with their families.

Interestingly, in 2014 and 2015 many of the YA titles with Latinx characters were Hi-Lo books, which are books featuring high interest themes presented at a lower-lexile level. While it is worth asking why diverse characters were primarily represented in lower-lexile books intended for struggling readers, that was not the focus on my research question. For the purpose of this study, I only focused on novels that were marketed for general YA audiences, through US publishers. There were forty-one books that ended up fitting within those sampling guidelines, and of those books I chose twenty novels, two of which were by the same author. Of those twenty novels, ten were written by members of the Latinx community and ten were written by white authors.

## Data Analysis

In order to analyze the body of YA novels, I developed an emerging coding scheme. Coding is the process of identifying variables to study within a sample of work. Qualitative analysis of content usually uses themes as the units for analysis, instead of looking at quantifiable units of measurement. Categories and coding schemes are derived from three sources: the data, previous related studies, and theories (Wildemuth, 2017). I used available research on my population, Latinx teenage girls in America, to create initial themes to explore in the novels. Much of the research was focused on sex and sexuality, mental health, and familial/cultural values. My codes were inductive, as they emerged as I read the novels and began to see common threads that tied them together. Through qualitative analysis, I connected YA novels to larger population trends, seeing what they say and how they represent Latinx teenage girls.

## Findings

The following themes were compiled from a sample comprised of twenty novels that were published between 2014 and 2017. Throughout the coding process, it became clear that mental health, sexuality, and sexism were problems that were commonly discussed by protagonists. A number of traits arose that showcased their resiliency, however, and showed strength in their cultural heritages. Frequently protagonists were proud of speaking Spanish, and connected with family through language. They also were able to find voices and develop their identities through the act of creating—creating through writing, performing, painting, cooking, doing community advocacy, or using magic. Often that act of creating connected them to their parents and helped them to navigate their dual-identities.

### Mental Health of Latinx Women

Within the sample, there were a handful of characters who explicitly dealt with mental illness. For some characters, it was hard for their families to understand what they were experiencing. Victoria's father expresses this sentiment in *The Victoria in My Head*, when he claims, ““of course [Victoria's] not depressed,”” speaking over his daughter, asking, ““what does she have to be depressed about”” (Milanes, 2017, ch. 1). In many instances, characters brush off mental health concerns. Madeleina (Maddie), the protagonist in *On the Edge*, does this when her mother insists she see someone after

being attacked by a neighborhood gang called the Reyes and hospitalized. She was jumped after witnessing a crime and revealing the identities of two Reyes members to the police. After making an appointment with the school psychologist, she claims, “it would at least confirm to everyone at school that I was in desperate need of psychological help,” because why else would “Maddie Diaz, a supposedly smart girl and editor of the school newspaper, *Prep Talk*, have ratted on two Reyes?” She answers her own question saying, “because I was batshit crazy, of course” (Van Diepen, 2014, p. 33). Instead of addressing her trauma, she makes light of her situation by referring to herself as “batshit crazy.”

Unlike Maddie, Julia, in *I Am Not Your Perfect Mexican Daughter*, attends therapy and openly discusses her depression and anxiety. In the book she tries to commit suicide, and is hospitalized after failing to slit her wrists. Throughout the book she expresses depressive thoughts, at times saying she could “feel sadness spreading inside” of her (Sánchez, 2017, p. 144). Before attempting to kill herself, she talks to her boyfriend on the phone, whom she is prohibited from seeing. She says, “I don’t know what to do. I feel like I’m suffocating. I can’t stand living like this anymore,” adding, “fuck, why does everything have to be so impossible all the time” (Sánchez, 2017, p. 205). While other characters, such as Gabi in *Gabi, a Girl in Pieces*, and Rosina in *Nowhere Girls*, expressed feelings of depression, loneliness, and anxiety, Julia is the only main character who tries to kill herself and explicitly addresses her journey with mental illness.

In addition to the teenage protagonists, two different mothers dealt with mental health struggles. In *The Go-Between*, Camilla (Cammi) discusses her mother’s changing moods. She states, “when she was happy, it was like the warmth of a thousand suns.



When she was angry, it was all hellfire, like her fury could burn the whole house down. But the sadness was the worst” (Chambers, 2017, p. 29). Cammi’s mother is a telenovela superstar, so a flair for the dramatic is to be expected. How she describes her sadness, however, is beyond acting. She describes that when her mother was depressed, “it was like a slow plague that floated through our house,” and while her family “couldn’t see it or touch it or smell it,” they “could all eventually feel what she was feeling— the sadness, the weakness, the bewilderment, the helplessness” (Chambers, 2017, p. 29). Eventually her mother begins seeing a therapist in Los Angeles, to try and escape the notoriety she has in Mexico City, and this plays a role in relocating the family to the United States. In *Tell Me Something Real*, the mother’s mental illness does the reverse, repeatedly taking the family from San Diego to Mexico. They go to Mexico under the guise of giving her an experimental treatment for cancer, but slowly the protagonist Vanessa and her family realize that there is something more insidious going on with their mother’s care. It turns out that she has Munchausen Syndrome, where she repeatedly makes herself sick in order to fake cancer. After being committed to a mental institution, Vanessa’s dad asserts, “I’m not a doctor, Vanessa, but I do know that mental illness is still an illness” (Devlin, 2016, p. 195). Her mother’s illness is discussed, but stigmatized by Vanessa, her sisters, and many of their peers. Her older sister Adrienne worries that the school will find out, and Vanessa imagines everyone saying, “she’s the one with the crazy mother” (Devlin, 2016, p. 203). The mother’s illness is discussed only in terms of how it impacts her family. Vanessa claims that her mom “made a choice, conscious or not, to not love us,” at least “not in a way that is real and true” (Devlin, 2016, p. 273).

While both mothers and daughters exhibit mental health struggles, they are often seen in how they impact the family as a whole, not just that individual.

### Sex and Sexuality, or, “there’s no winning if you’re a girl”

According to the majority of novels, an inherent part of being a teenage girl, especially a Latinx one, is that your sexuality, body, and dating life is closely scrutinized and policed by those around you. Frequently, that policing is shown by family members limiting their daughters’ ability to date, and an overwhelming reticence to allow their daughters any sexual freedom. Alma, one of the two protagonists of *Dream Things True*, attempts to describe to her fellow white protagonist, Evan, that “hell will freeze over before my dad lets me go on a date with you” (Marquardt, 2015, p. 106). Her father had previously caught her kissing another boy, and went to great lengths to separate them. Julia, the protagonist in *I Am Not Your Perfect Mexican Daughter*, hides her relationship with Connor from her mother, as she is too is not allowed to date. In *Joyride*, the main character Carly lies to her brother about dating Arden, her love interest. She claims that if her brother saw a boy bring her home, he would “pass away directly” and say something like, “you’re going to get distracted, get pregnant, and then we’ll never get Mama and Papi back here” (Banks, 2015, p. 44). He would see it as counterproductive to their goals of reuniting their family, but also assume that she would be sexually active and become pregnant. In *Kiss Kill Vanish*, Valentina goes to great lengths to hide one of her relationships from her father, as the person she falls for is twenty-four to her seventeen years, and happens to work for her father.

Rarely did parents allow their children to date free from any rules or commentary. In *On the Edge* and *The Victoria in My Head*, the parents required that their daughters

bring their boyfriends over to meet them. In *All the Crooked Saints* and the *Shadowshaper* series, the main characters were allowed to date, but not without a few remarks from parents about their dating lives. The rare exceptions to parental intrusion were *Like Water*, *Labyrinth Lost*, and *The Gallery of Unfinished Girls*, all of which also had main characters who were bisexual.

Even when characters were allowed to go on dates, it frequently was accompanied by scrutiny and fear from their parents. Whenever Gabi, from *Gabi, A Girl in Pieces*, goes out, her mother warns her, “‘ojos abiertos, piernas cerradas.’ Eyes open, legs closed.” (Quintero, 2014, p. 1). Many parents seemed to come to the conclusion that dating inevitably leads to sex.

Even when parents try to create a dialogue, their efforts fail: for example, the parents in *The Victoria in My Head* insist, “‘you can tell us if you have a boyfriend, you know,’” but the father says it in such a manner that Victoria notes, “his tone is light, but he’s clutching his fork in some kind of kung fu death grip” (Milanes, 2017, ch. 10). Her father later concludes that boys are “‘only interested in one, thing, tu sabes,’” with that one thing being sex (Milanes, 2017, ch. 10). Her father is telling his own daughter that men are single-mindedly interested in sex.

Many adults in the books are afraid that sex will eventually lead to pregnancy. While none of the characters across the twenty novels actually becomes pregnant, four secondary Latinx characters either had children as teenagers or become pregnant as teenagers and young adults. Many of the main characters have conversations with their parents or mentors about the likelihood of them becoming pregnant. This point is hammered home by Alma’s mentor, Mrs. King, in *Dream Things True*. She asserts that

Alma should not date, as, “‘Latinas have the highest teen pregnancy rates of any group in the U.S.,’” and, she continues, “‘you’re a good Catholic girl, aren’t you? So are most of the forty-four percent of Latina teens who get pregnant before the age of twenty’” (Marquardt, 2015, p. 141). The fear that their child will end up as a statistic, or pregnant, permeates most conversations that parents have with their Latina daughters regarding dating. When Gabi’s best friend, Cindy, becomes pregnant in *Gabi, A Girl in Pieces*, Gabi claims that Cindy’s mom “is still disappointed in her of course and still makes inappropriate and hurtful comments,” and claims, “it will take her a long time to forgive her for what she did to her” (Quintero, 2014, p. 104). Many parents see their daughters’ actions as reflections of themselves, and thus see pregnancies as disrespecting their reputations and hard-work.

Family members, boyfriends, and community members felt it was appropriate to comment on the bodies of Latina teenage girls. Alejandra (Alex), the protagonist in *Labyrinth Lost*, notices this at her Deathday ceremony, which functions as a coming-out ceremony in the fictional Bruja world comparable to a quinceñera. She claims, “It’s always nice when your older male relatives tell you how great it is to be a woman now, like I was an androgynous experiment before” (Córdova, 2016, p. 68). Other characters commented on how their bodies changed their relationships with relatives, as well. Sierra mentions in *Shadowshaper* that her relationship changed with her grandfather once she reached puberty. She “entered that awkward preadolescence stage, all pimples and big glasses and brand-new curves,” and her grandfather “acted like he didn’t know what to make of this new creature” (Older, 2015, ch. 11). Male relatives are unable to separate the bodies of their daughters and granddaughters from their personalities. Mothers also

commented on their daughters' bodies. Vanessa's mother, in *Tell Me Something Real*, chastises her clothing choices, saying, "Vanessa, change your clothes. That shirt is sheer and I can see your nipples" (Devlin, 2016, p. 13). Often the body was seen as a direct reflection of sexual desire or experience. After repeated chastisement from her mother about showing too much cleavage in certain clothes, Julia, from *I Am Not Your Perfect Mexican Daughter*, asks, "I'm supposed to be embarrassed of my boobs? I don't get it. Even the time she found out I had shaved my legs, she was hysterical" (Sánchez, 2017, p. 107).

The body, and signs of puberty, indicated that daughters were more experienced or seeking out something sexual. Many characters expressed frustration at how their bodies had changed during puberty. Sierra asserts that, "it was hard work making suggestions and not blatant declarations with her ever-changing Puerto Rican body" (Older, 2015, ch. 12). Her body was not within her control. Other times, strangers, not the main character, made it clear that the body was a problem. In *Out of Darkness*, the main character Naomi overhears white women talking about her. They claim, "'a girl like that can be fast in other areas of life, you know... [it] runs in the blood,'" and that someone could "'just tell that she wants the boys to look'" based on her body (Pérez, 2015, p. 103). Repeatedly the body, something that belongs to one person, was discussed, analyzed, and imbued with meaning by other characters in the texts. In a few books, romantic partners would limit what girls could wear. Evan encourages Alma to put on a cover-up over her swimsuit in *Dream Things True*, and Arden lies to Carly so that she won't wear her swimsuit to a social gathering. He claims, "'I've seen you in your swimsuit, Carly. And there's no way you're wearing it around this bunch of perverts'"

(Banks, 2015, p. 173). Often people feel as if they're protecting women by preventing others from sexualizing their body—even as they do so—or see young Latina women as inviting male attention because of their bodies.

Often the teenage girls acknowledged their own sexuality and sexual desires, but felt shame about it. Beatriz from *All the Crooked Saints*, a character who claims to have no feelings, only later to acknowledge that indeed she does have them and shouldn't be ashamed of them, claims, "some feelings are rooted too strongly in the body to exist without it, and this one, desire, is one of them," adding that she "was aware of this form of attraction from observation but not from personal experience" (Stiefvater, 2017, p. 59-60). On the other end of the spectrum are a series of characters who acknowledge their feelings, but feel immense guilt about it. Carly kisses her boyfriend for the first time only to be caught by his racist father, and she worries that she is a bad person, saying, "I'm full of all this rage about what the sheriff did—what he said—and yet I'm thinking about Arden kissing me. I'm a straight-up psycho" (Banks, 2015, p. 168). She believes that her sexual desires should be secondary or less important than her other feelings.

Other characters worry about being perverse or abnormal because of their feelings. Gabi, in *Gabi, A Girl in Pieces*, expresses this fear when she discusses kissing her boyfriend. She thinks, "I kind of wanted him to go further than he was going, but I didn't say anything because I thought that I would have seemed way too slutty," since she believes "girls are not supposed to think that way" (Quintero, 2014, p. 234). She continues to question this, even as she loses her virginity, and that is common amongst quite a few characters. Upon losing her virginity to her boyfriend in *I Am Not Your Perfect Mexican Daughter*, Julia claims, "I keep thinking I'm doing something dirty. So

many feelings all jumbled together” (Sánchez, 2017, p. 200). Margot echoes this sentiment in *The Education of Margot Sanchez*, when she claims, “what I have to show for my first time is sand up my ass and emptiness” (Rivera, 2017, p. 211). Throughout the book Margot’s family warns her against spending time with boys, so much so that she does not see sex as enjoyable or desire as positive. In *On the Edge*, the protagonist Maddie falls for a gang leader who worked to free women from sex trafficking situations. As she is getting to know him, she keeps thinking about how sexy he is and claims, “If we hooked up, it probably wouldn’t go anywhere. And the last thing I needed was a booty call setup,” which she then amends by saying, “okay, so maybe I needed it, but I definitely couldn’t go for it” (Van Diepen, 2014, p. 69). She admits that she is attracted to him and that she wants to have sex with him, but that she is trying to prevent herself from following through on that desire. Even though the main character Julia, from *Even if the Sky Falls*, openly talks about having sex with her ex-boyfriend, and has sex with her love interest in the book, she claims, “I’m shocked by how close I want to be, how much more skin I want to touch” (García, 2016, p. 199). Her feelings still surprise her, even though she does not chastise herself for having them.

There were a few sexually active protagonists who didn’t express shame about their actions. Mercedes, in *The Gallery of Unfinished Girls*, openly discusses having sex with her ex-boyfriend, without any commentary or guilt. The main character Savannah, (Vanni) from *Like Water*, states,

I’ve never felt bad about the things I did with boys. Slipping out from beneath a sweating Jake Mosqueda has always been a bittersweet business, but I mean, I never felt bad about myself. My mother, unlike Marilee’s, never told me that my body was a precious banana, and if I allowed myself to be unpeeled, my sweet white fruit might be forever spotted. Unlike Diana’s parents, she never said my virginity was my contract with a holy ghost. Mom told me sex could be fun and

feel good, but it's more fun and it feels better when a girl knows what she wants and knows how to take care of her body and herself, et cetera, (Podos, 2017, ch. 12)

This comparison, between Vanni's mother and her other Latina friends' mothers demonstrates a clear division in how sex is discussed between Latinx mothers and daughters. Many of the protagonists have religious parents, or parents who believe that sex is something that can ruin them. There are multiple ways that mothers try to tell their daughters to respect themselves with sex, and Vanni's mother is an exception to the majority of parents within the sample. Vanni also dates multiple people in the novel, most notably a white genderqueer person, without questioning her desires or actions.

Notably, there were five protagonists who identified within the LGBTQ community out of the twenty book sample, four of whom were bisexual. There were also five Latinx secondary characters within the novels who were either gay, bisexual, or lesbian, as well as two Asian secondary characters who were lesbians in *The Victoria in My Head*. Some of the characters had already come out to their families, and while it caused conflict for Rosina in *Nowhere Girls* and for Estrella and her cousin Dahlia in *Wild Beauty*, it also was eventually met with acceptance for the protagonists in all of the novels.

Only two of the novels featured a character coming out or discovering she was bisexual, while the others had characters who already were out to those around them before the timeframe of the novels. Mercedes, in *Gallery of Unfinished Girls*, describes realizing she was bisexual as being like "putting on a shirt that fits," or "like saying my full name" (Karcz, 2017, p. 157). Even as she spends most of the book contemplating her feelings for her best friend Victoria, there is no conflict between the two of them, nor is



there conflict between her and her family in regards to her bisexuality. A similar confession occurs in *Like Water*, where Vanni comes to terms with her bisexuality, when she acts upon her attraction to her genderqueer friend Leigh. She claims that usually after sex she feels trapped, and “squirm[s] away and reassure[s] the boys that it was great” before leaving (Podos, 2017, ch. 12). She realizes that with Leigh, however, she feels differently. In *Wild Beauty*, all five of the Nomeolvides cousins are in love with the same woman, and are bisexual. The main protagonist of the five, Estrella, explains it by claiming, “Estrella’s heart and her cousins’ hearts, the way they were as likely to fall in love with women as with men, was a language the five of them shared,” but in a house where three generations of Nomeolvides women live, “they did not know how to teach it to their mothers and grandmothers” (McLemore, 2017, p. 243). Eventually Estrella’s mother admits to her that she, too, is bisexual, and while Estrella ends up with a man, her cousin ends up with the woman who all of the cousins were initially in love with. Likewise, while Alex spends most of *Labyrinth Lost* contemplating her attraction to a man, Nova, she ends up romantically linked with her best friend, Rishi. There is no overt discussion about her bisexuality, but when she gives up her magic to save Rishi’s life, she begins to think about her differently. Before their first kiss, she admits, ““I have all these feelings that I can’t sort out,”” but assures Rishi they’ll do it after leaving the labyrinthine dimension in which they are traveling (Córdova, 2016, p. 274). Both *Wild Beauty* and *Labyrinth Lost* have magical realism or fantasy elements, while the other texts featuring queer characters are contemporary texts.

All of the novels, regardless of genre, showed how sex and sexuality differ depending on if you identify as male or female. Many of the characters internalized ideals

of how men and women are different in terms of sex and sexuality. Women and men are held to different standards for sex. As Estrella succinctly observes in *Wild Beauty*, “what shamed a girl was, in a boy, so often worth showing off” (McLemore, 2017, p. 280). In *Gabi, A Girl in Pieces*, *Education of Margot Sanchez*, *The Victoria in my Head*, *The Go-Between*, *Shadowshaper*, *Joyride*, *Dream Things True*, *Even if the Sky Was Falling*, and *All the Crooked Saints*, there were brothers who were held to different standards about their conduct around the house and not questioned about their romantic life in the same manner as their sisters. While Margot’s brother is allowed to talk to any woman he wants, Margot claims that “according to Mami, I can’t even speak to a guy on the phone until I finish high school” (Rivera, 2017, p. 9). Most of it comes down to the idea that men somehow have a different perspective about sex. Margot’s mother claims, “men are different,” because “they view sex differently” (Rivera, 2017, p. 253). Her father also claims that “girls are too dumb to think for themselves when it comes to sex,” while her brother “fucks everyone and Papi doesn’t bat an eye” (Rivera, 2017, p. 103). Instead of men viewing sex differently than women, or women having different sexual desires, other characters show that the difference largely lies in how people look at women as sexual beings. Victoria voices this double standard when she questions how long is acceptable to wait before having sex with a partner, because “If you have it too soon, you’re a slut. If you wait too long, you’re a prude,” adding “there’s no winning if you’re a girl” (Milanes, 2017, ch. 24). Girls are judged based on their decisions where men are not. In what Gabi refers to as the “unspoken set of girl/boy rules” women and men have different expectations for how to act in a relationship (Quintero, 2014, p. 51). Gabi’s mom insists that girls “don’t want to be faciles— easy, sluts, hoes or ofrecidas,” since she believes

that “being this way was what got Cindy in trouble,” with her pregnancy (Quintero, 2014, p. 100). Women are the ones who are called sluts or prudes, women are the ones who are told to act a certain way, while men are given free rein to do what they want. Women’s sexual feelings and agency are often diminished by those around them.

Across the books, there was not a single character who did not have a relationship with someone. In *The Education of Margot Sanchez*, *The Victoria in My Head*, *Like Water*, *Labyrinth Lost*, *Shadowshaper* and *Shadowhouse Falls*, *I Am Not Your Perfect Mexican Daughter*, *Gabi*, *A Girl in Pieces*, and *Kiss Kill Vanish*, the main characters have multiple relationships and love interests, often both in and outside of the Latinx community. In some, but not all cases, the relationships outside of the Latinx community were met with some resistance. In *Dream Things True*, *Joyride*, *Gabi*, *a Girl in Pieces*, and *Tell Me Something Real*, relationships with men outside of the Latinx community were met with resistance. Many of the novels also asserted that American men, women, and American sexuality were inherently different than those of Latinx cultures. In *I Am Not Your Perfect Mexican Daughter*, the mother sends her daughter back to Mexico, because she believes her daughter has become spoiled by American ideals. In *Dream Things True*, Alma’s aunt describes her daughter Isa, who was born in the United States, as “the Typical American Teenager.” This means that she has, ““No respect! So selfish! All she cares about is her teléfono! And those short shorts”” (Marquardt, 2015, p. 83). Short shorts are part of being American, as is presenting sexuality differently. Margot’s mom in *Education of Margot Sanchez* tells her, ““there’s no such thing as guy friends,”” and that ““ese concepto es Americano”” (Rivera, 2017, p. 141). Being American means many different things to the parents of the characters in the books, but many believe that

White girls and American girls are more overtly sexual. Gabi addresses this when she claims,

I don't think that White girls move away because they want to abandon their families and want to be free to have wild monkey sex whenever they please. In fact, I am 100% certain that Mexican girls like having wild monkey sex too. Actually, I think that having wild monkey sex may be on the mind of many teenage girls. Hormones—and things like hate and love—know no boundaries when it comes to race and gender (Quintero, 2014, p. 226).

Gabi is trying to normalize sexual desires, acknowledge her own feelings instead of quashing them, and show that sexual desire is just as prevalent for women as for men, for Americans as for Latinx individuals.

## Familismo

The most consistent theme that presented itself across the novels was the importance of family. Within each text, familismo, familial ties, and familial obligation played large roles in the main character's life. That sense of obligation presented itself in different ways across texts. At times, it was clear that the girls were conduits for their families' dreams. Many characters felt that they needed to live up to the dreams that their parents had for them, or show that their parents struggle was worthwhile. Victoria explains, "my parents came to the US from Cuba when they were young, and they act like they're playing a game of catch-up with the rest of the country," and "they don't just work to make money; they work like they have something to prove" (Milanes, 2017, ch. 2). Margot echoes this sentiment, saying, "what matters is keeping the Sanchez dream alive," adding, "it might not be my vision of my life but it's still a decent dream to have. It benefits everyone if I succeed" (Rivera, 2017, p. 56). As children of immigrants, Margot and Victoria are expressing a reality that was present in many of the novels—

their success is their parents' success, and their parents' work was to benefit them. Many families, saw the girls as reflections of themselves. Julia, in *Even if the Sky Falls*, expresses the feeling of being conflated with her family members when discussing her brother. After returning from combat, her brother copes with trauma by drinking, and accidentally paralyzes someone while drunk driving. Julia says that "the police want me to testify against my brother," but she adds, "I don't know what to do. People look at me like I did it. I look at me like I did it" (García, 2016, p. 212). Her brother's actions are her own, and her family's, and she has trouble separating herself from them.

Familismo is also about respect, and many parents express that their children need to respect the amount of work that their parents have done. Rosina's mom tells her, "you need to treat your mother with respect. I do everything for you." She adds, "your family and the restaurant are what keeps a roof over your head and gives you food to eat. If you don't appreciate it, maybe you don't need it" (Reed, 2017, p. 181-182). Rosina's mother perceives her daughter's disrespect as her not appreciating the hard work her family undertakes to provide financial support for the younger generation. For some characters, familial obligation came in the form of concern about family financials. Almost all of the novels, except for *Shadowshaper*, discussed family financials. Most families were lower-class, with the few notable exceptions being *The Go-Between*, where the mother is a telenovela star, *Kiss Kill Vanish*, where the father is a cartel boss, and *The Education of Margot Sanchez*, where her family owns a chain of grocery stores (for more details, see Appendix A). Margot still needs to work, and expresses feelings of inadequacy compared to her wealthier white peers at her elite school in Manhattan. Victoria, in *The Victoria in My Head*, has a comparable situation, where she receives a scholarship to attend an elite

school in Manhattan, and while she says her family is not struggling, she is working to get a scholarship for college because otherwise she cannot attend. Vanni, in *Like Water*, delays going to college to help care for her father, who has Huntington's Disease. She hopes during her time off she can "spend meaningful time with my dad while I could, help my mother at home and with the restaurant," and "work and save so that when I went to school I wouldn't cost my parents anything" (Podos, 2017, ch. 11). Her educational goals are at odds with her family's goals, and while she eventually obtains a swimming scholarship, her struggle certainly is not unique. Julia, in *I Am Not Your Perfect Mexican Daughter*, receives a first-generation scholarship to attend New York University, and Carly, in *Joyride*, and Alma, in *Dream Things True*, are juniors actively working towards gaining scholarships.

At times, discrepancies between familial goals and the desires of the protagonists were viewed as cultural differences. Carly's family does not understand her desire to go to school, however, and believes she should focus on making money. Her mom tells her, "the most important thing right now is getting your family back," after her parents and unborn younger siblings were deported. Carly explains,

...of course I want my family back. Of course I want to meet my brother and sister. But keeping my grades up and getting a scholarship is the only way I'm making something of myself. And isn't that what they were trying to do when they came to the States? To make something better of themselves? She wants me to find a job with more hours, to save more money, to get here sooner. But more hours means less time for homework. (Banks, 2015, p. 59)

In the case of Carly, providing for the family took precedence over education. Her question, about what it means to come to the United States, shows that she still sees herself as an extension of her parents' dreams, but that being American might stand at odds with traditional familial obligations. Gabi experiences a similar struggle, claiming,

“being Mexican-American is tough sometimes. Your allegiance is always questioned. My mom constantly worries that I will be too Americana” (Quintero, 2014, p. 28). This idea of taking up American ideals or eschewing what your parents want is also echoed by Victoria, who says “here’s the thing—I’m in between two worlds, but I can’t fit into either one perfectly” (Milanes, 2017, ch. 42). Victoria dreams of singing and performing music, while her family wants her to get a practical job and to go to Harvard University, something that would show their move and their struggle was worth it.

A few characters had siblings or cousins that they felt obligated to care for, or were expected to care for because they were women. Rosina’s mother and family expect her to babysit for her cousin’s everyday as well as work in their restaurant. Alma’s father expects the same thing. He claims, ““You, Alma, are not a child,”” but he tells her, ““you are a sixteen-year-old woman, and you need to start acting like one. You will come directly home from school every afternoon to take care of your cousin”” (Marquardt, 2015, p. 11). For Alma, being a woman means that she has to contribute to caring for family members, and being a woman and being a caretaker are inextricably linked in terms of familial values. Carly has a similar realization when she reflects on her parents’ reasons for trying to return to America after deportation. She decides they are working for a better life for her siblings—but definitely not a better life for her. She says, “I’m already sixteen. A junior in high school, probably a senior by the time they get back. They expect me to take care of myself when they get here,” and that her mother has made it clear that “she needs my help more than I need hers” with raising her younger siblings (Banks, 2015, p. 130). As a teenager, she is no longer considered a child, rather she is considered a caregiver in her family. Naomi cares for her younger siblings, as well, after

promising her grandparents she would watch over them. Her mother died in childbirth, so she has helped raise them for their entire lives. Upon moving back in with her brother and sister's father, her step-father, she also begins completing all household tasks. While sewing her brother's pants, she thinks, "she didn't mind the sewing. But after that, there were the dishes," and then after the dishes "she needed to prepare tomorrow's lunches," and then "she was behind on the cleaning and the laundry" (Pérez, 2015, p. 131).

Teenage girls are expected to help their families, and this includes childcare, cleaning, and cooking. Mercedes, in *A Gallery of Unfinished Girls*, also cares for her sister in her mother's absence. Unlike Rosina, Alma, Carly, and Naomi, she does not cite obligation as a reason to care for her sister. Instead, she struggles to ensure that she is present enough for her sister in the absence of their mother. While driving her sister around she asserts, "I will drop off my sister at Hannah's house and wait, like our mom always does" (Karcz, 2017, p. 147). She tries to emulate their mother's care, and show love through her actions.

Many parents cited familial ties as a reason for their daughters to stay close to home. In *Wild Beauty*, magic and familial blood literally binds the Nomeolvides girls to their home. For the generations of women, "the only thing stronger than the curse of their blood was La Pradera, this flowering world that possessed the Nomeolvides women so deeply it killed them if they tried to leave it" (McLemore, 2017, p. 8). For them, family is tied to the land and their home, and leaving their family is not an option. Other families use non-magical means of trying to tie their daughters to a place. Vanessa's father, in *Tell Me Something Real*, tries to prevent her from attending a music conservatory boarding school, by asking, "what would your sisters do without you?" (Devlin, 2016, p. 231). For



Vanessa, leaving her family is seen as a betrayal. When she visits her future school, realizing how badly she wants to be there, she claims, “in leaving, I’ll lose them,” and “it will never be the same again” (Devlin, 2016, p. 278). For Vanessa, being around home reminds her too much of her mentally ill mother, and she is torn between leaving the memories of her mother behind, and staying with her family. She says, “in letting Mom go, I’m letting them go too. It’s the choice I have to make, but it splits me in two” (Devlin, 2016, p. 278). Vanessa makes the choice to leave her home, knowing it will upset her family. Julia, in *I Am Not Your Perfect Mexican Daughter*, gets into school in both Chicago, where she lives, and New York City, and her parents question why she would need to leave their home. They eventually allow it, but never fully accept it. Gabi’s mother has the same problem with Gabi going away for college. Gabi reflects on her mother’s actions, saying, “she is trying so hard to keep me here, she doesn’t realize that what she’s doing is pushing me away” and her mother’s actions show “she doesn’t respect me as her daughter or as a person” (Quintero, 2014, p. 272). Unlike other characters, Vanni’s mother supports her leaving New Mexico for California, telling her, ““I know it’d be tough for you, but your father and I would be okay”” (Podos, 2017, ch. 20). Her mother understands that Vanni feels a pull to stay with her parents and care for her father, but is showing her love for her daughter by allowing her the chance to leave.

While love is sometimes portrayed as a burden, many characters also opine on the power of love and care for their family, and sees familismo as a sign of their love. Rosina considers, “can love be the same as duty and obligation,” words that normally would make her upset, but now she sees as positive (Reed, 2017, p. 276). Love, duty, and

obligation are seen as interwoven themes throughout many of the novels. Alex describes her love for her family by saying,

Love is you jumping through a portal despite your own safety. Love is Mom singing in the car and Rose making tea when we're sick and even us fighting because we're blood, and no matter what you do, I'll never forget that you are my sister. (Cordova, 2016, p. 159)

Love can be shown through doing something scary at the expense of protecting others, through caring for others, and through forgiveness. Family is the most important thing for many of the main characters. One notable exception is Valentina in *Kiss Kill Vanish*.

After discovering her father is in charge of a Colombian drug cartel, she asserts, "I can't believe I actually wondered if I could love and hate Papi at the same time, a man who would kill innocent people for revenge" (Martinez, 2014, p. 105). She leaves her family to move to Spain with her boyfriend, and lives apart from her sisters, preferring to be far from them. Most characters, however, echo Gabi's sentiment when she says, "while familia is the glue that keeps us crazy, it is also the glue that makes us who we are" (Quintero, 2014, p. 59).

## Bilingualism

Language plays a very important role in many of the novels. Of the twenty protagonists, eleven are fully bilingual, able to both speak and listen in both Spanish and English. For those who do not speak Spanish, it is often portrayed as contributing to a familial divide. Some older generations use Spanish as a private language, keeping it separate from their children. Beatriz, from *All the Crooked Saints*, claims that when the adults discussed issues in Spanish, it "meant they were no longer actively soliciting the younger Sorias' thoughts," meaning she and her cousins (Stiefvater, 2017, p. 193).

Victoria's parents use it in a very similar way. She claims they "still believe Spanish is this indecipherable secret language to me," but she amends that "even though I don't speak it fluently, I've been around it my entire life and can understand it almost perfectly" (Milanes, 2017, ch. 16). Vanessa's mother, in *Tell Me Something Real*, also uses Spanish to keep secrets from her family and to discuss matters in a manner that her daughters will not understand. Vanessa's mother is the only member of their family who can speak Spanish, and insists upon receiving medical treatments in a Mexican clinic that are not approved in the United States. Vanessa explains, that her mom "manages communication, freeing us from doctors and details" (Devlin, 2016, p. 6). At first Vanessa sees her lack of Spanish as freeing her from the burden of dealing with the doctors, however it ends up being detrimental. Since her mom had Munchausen Syndrome, it meant that she was able to keep all of her medical details private from the rest of her family, whereas if they were also able to speak Spanish they would have been able to be more involved in her medical journey—and also in understanding her mental illness.

For other characters, Spanish is a way to connect them to their older family members. Mercedes, in *A Gallery of Unfinished Girls*, claims that her Spanish is terrible, and she "used to take it in school, but [she] got tired of being the Puerto Rican girl who couldn't get an A" (Karcz, 2017, p. 208). She regrets not making more of an effort to learn Spanish, however, when she sees it as a barrier to knowing her mother. She longs to understand the language when her mom returns from Puerto Rico, where she was visiting Mercedes' comatose grandmother. Speaking of her mom, she says, "her childhood was in Spanish; her dreams and thoughts still are. I want us to understand each other" (Karcz,

2017, p. 266). For Mercedes, understanding Spanish would enable her to understand her mother, and vice versa, on a more complete level. Language is an inherent part of her mother's identity. In other books, it was the parents who worried that their daughters would lose their identity if they only spoke English. Carly claims, "Mama only speaks Spanish to me," adding, "sometimes I wonder if she thinks I'll forget where I came from—even though I've never actually been there" (Banks, 2015, p. 58). Spanish is a way to connect Carly to her Mexican heritage, and to her family. Spanish also connects Naomi and her younger siblings to their Mexican heritage and grandparents. While she insists on speaking English with her siblings once they move in with their father, Spanish connects them to their past. While she believes that "Spanish was a talking and singing language," Naomi recalls that "when Abuelito had finished teaching the twins to write in English, they'd begged him to show them what was different in Spanish" (Pérez, 2015, p. 30). Spanish is seen as an intellectual pursuit, even more so when Naomi begins teaching Spanish to her love interest, Wash. It is also a language that connects them to their grandparents and old home.

Navigating both Spanish and English is seen as an impressive feat. Gabi uses both Spanish and English in her own writing. For her, reading Spanish in school gave her a way to connect more closely with her studies, and to be inspired in her own writing. When talking about her writing class, Gabi says,

We have been practicing using two languages in writing since after we read some poems by two superpoets: Michele Serros (who is still alive AND from California!) and Sandra Cisneros (she's still alive too, but not from California.) Before we read their poetry, I didn't even know you could use two languages in a poem. I thought they either had to be in English or Spanish. Turns out I was wrong. (Quintero, 2014, p. 61)

For Gabi, bilingual representation mattered. She suddenly saw that she could use both of her languages in her writing, and that it was something that teachers affirmed and taught in schools. It inspired her to write in both languages herself, and gave her a way to see herself in her schoolwork. Other characters saw bilingualism as something to be lauded, as well. Cammi, from *The Go-Between*, claims, “I have begun to think of being bilingual as one of my superpowers,” and with that superpower she now had two personalities, “the girl I was in Spanish and the girl I was becoming in English, and I liked the fact that each of my selves had her own language, her own way of hearing and being heard in the world” (Chambers, 2017, p. 98-99). Speaking Spanish is seen as a strength, and bilingualism as a positive asset.

### Connection through Creation

An overwhelming number of protagonists created stronger bonds with their families and Latinx cultural heritage through creative pursuits, and by doing so also gained confidence and developed stronger personal identities. It was important for characters to form bonds on an inter-generational level, and often the act of creating helped characters to do so. The protagonists in *On the Edge*, *I Am Not Your Perfect Mexican Daughter*, and *Gabi, a Girl in Pieces*, all use writing as a way to express themselves and to represent their cultural identities. While Maddie uses journalism to address issues facing her community—such as sex trafficking by local gangs—the other girls engage in creative writing and poetry. Writing is a release, and a way to connect with others. Gabi explains how writing impacts her, saying, “the more I write, the more creative I feel and the more I feel I have to share.” She uses writing and zine-making to discuss what it is like to be a teenage girl, claiming,

I wanted the zine to make people think about how girls are raised to think about our bodies and who gets to decide how we think about them. Like how Cindy was called a slut and constantly criticized for having a baby so young, but then it wasn't seen as that bad for my mom to have a baby because she was an adult even though she was in a really bad situation. Or how we are raised to believe that it is our job and responsibility to protect our bodies and if something goes wrong, we are always at fault, even if it's rape. And we have to fix it. (Quintero, 2014, p. 197)

Gabi hopes that her writing will affect how other people view society and gender inequality. For Julia, writing is a way to connect with her family and to deal with the unexpected death of her sister. She writes about her family at the insistence of her teacher, who tells her to sit in his class and write out her feelings. She says, "that day I sat in his classroom for nearly two hours, crying over my notebook, smearing the ink on the pages" (Sánchez 339). Writing allows her to connect to her family, grieve her sister, and sort out her feelings. Gabi and Julia are daughters of Latinx immigrants and teenage girls, and writing gives them a space to solidify their identities and express themselves.

Other protagonists also find their own voices through performing. For Rosina, in *Nowhere Girls*, music is an escape for her. She hopes that one day she "will graduate from high school and crawl out from under this layer of grease and run off to Portland to start her all-girl punk band" (Reed, 2017, p. 57). For Victoria, music brings her out of her shell and gives her purpose. She describes the way she feels in the band as "a connection to something larger than myself," and music helps her connect to both her Cuban ancestry and the person she is aspiring to become. Dancing to Cuban music at her cousin's quinceñera, she reflects, "this music connects me to where I come from, and the band's music connects me to where I want to go" (Milanes, 2017, ch. 42). Performing gives her a platform to express herself, and also brings her closer to her Latinx heritage.

Alma, in *Dream Things True*, also dances in her cousin's quinceñera, while Julia in *I Am Not Your Perfect Mexican Daughter* has her own quinceñera at the request of her parents. Dancing and performing is part of a cultural rite of passage, a way to connect with family and community members.

Food, and learning to make it, also enabled characters to develop bonds with their family and grow as individuals. Julia and Vanni attempt to learn how to cook Mexican cuisine from their parents in order to connect with their culture, and Naomi would cook Mexican food as a reminder for her siblings of their upbringing. Food was also a way for families to express care and pride. For Sierra, in the *Shadowshaper* series, Dominican food helped her to stay grounded. One night, upon walking into her house, she “was greeted by the heavy, mouthwatering smell of arroz con pollo and plátanos simmering on the stovetop,” and claimed that her mother’s chicken and rice “eased her mind away” from her troubles (Older, 2015, ch. 12). Maddie’s mother would also cook her heaping portions of huevos rancheros, because she “showed love through food,” and because “she could never afford to spoil me with clothes, high tech gadgets, or music lessons,” food was a way for her to express how much she cared (Van Diepen, 2014, p. 24). Cammi, on the other hand, always had private chefs growing up. While her parents did not cook, she began taking cooking lessons upon moving to Los Angeles. For Cammi, cooking “was the proverbial icing on the cake” at her new school. She adds, “Mexico has great food. Not just tacos and burritos but really amazing modern food,” but before she attended her school in Los Angeles she had never cooked anything (Chambers, 2017, p. 97). Cooking allowed her to make dishes that reminded her of home, bring her family together, and explore a new creative outlet.

Activism also served as a method for bringing protagonists closer to their communities. The protagonists in *The Education of Margot Sanchez*, *Even if the Sky Falls*, *On the Edge*, *The Go-Between*, the *Shadowshaper* series, and *Nowhere Girls* all work with other members of their communities to fight injustice. Julia, in *Even if the Sky Falls*, builds houses in New Orleans as a way to rediscover herself after a family tragedy, traveling with her largely Latinx church group. Margot, who is initially apathetic about the gentrification of the largely Latinx neighborhood in the Bronx where her family owns a grocery store, befriends peers who are actively involved in advocating for local tenants and businesses. When Margot attends a protest against gentrification, she is inspired by a woman named Doña Petra who had lived in her neighborhood in the Bronx for many years. Doña Petra claims, ““I live here. Yo vivo aquí,”” adding, ““Ustedes me conocen. And I say it too in English, porque sí. This is my home and I don’t want to live anywhere else”” (Rivera, 2017, p. 281). Margot forges connections with those around her, where bilingualism is a strength, and begins to see herself as someone who can instigate change. Sierra also fights against gentrification and police brutality against minorities, especially in *Shadowhouse Fall*. Rosina changes her view of herself and her agency by forming a group called the “nowhere girls” that fights against toxic masculinity and rape culture in their town. She supports other women, helping a peer report a rape to the police, and works to give all women in her town voices. Cammi, who throughout the novel thinks nothing of perpetuating stereotypes about Mexican-Americans in an “act” at her new school, connects with the Mexican-American community in Los Angeles by organizing a block party in her friend Milly’s neighborhood. After recognizing her privilege, she convinces local vendors and businesses to donate and sell their goods at the event, where



“all the proceeds were going to the Polestar scholarship fund,” and she even got “the Admissions Department to set up a table so that kids from Milly’s neighborhood could learn about opportunities and even apply” (Chambers, 2017, p. 183). Community organizing brought Cammi closer to the Mexican-American community and helped her recognize that she could use her position to help others. All of the characters experienced positive growth by contributing to social causes, working with others, and advocating for causes they believed—and all of them did so through their Latinx networks. All of them also had the eventual support and help of at least one member in their families.

For some of the characters, creating takes the form not of writing but of painting. Mercedes connects to Puerto Rico and her grandmother every time she paints. Even when choosing colors, she is deliberate. She chooses a blue, “like my mother’s bathrobe that she was wearing the morning she left for San Juan, that’s still draped over the armchair in her bedroom,” or a “blue like the houses in Old San Juan” (Karcz, 2017, p. 90). She paints her grandmother’s portrait, her house in San Juan, her familial tree. Elements of magical realism also make it so that she is painting in companionship with a younger version of her grandmother, literally connecting with her family history through creating together. Magical realism also imbues all of the painting in *Shadowshaper* and *Shadowhouse Fall*, where Sierra literally connects with spirits and her heritage through her painting.

Many of the books have aspects of magical realism or fantasy, and contain characters who connect deeply with their ancestors through magic. In *Labyrinth Lost*, *Wild Beauty*, *All the Crooked Saints*, and the *Shadowshaper* series, magic bonds characters to those who came before them. The protagonists in *Wild Beauty* and *All the*

*Crooked Saints* both have innate abilities that tie their family members together, and tie them to a specific land. In *Wild Beauty*, every generation brought about five Nomeolvides women, and only women, for as long as their family can remember. Estrella and her cousins, their mothers, and their grandmothers all were able to create flowers and gardens, and make even the most arid ground bloom. The gift of creating life was something that was true for everyone, “for Estrella’s cousins, for her mother, her cousins’ mothers, all their grandmothers, there was order to it, lilies and irises growing only where they asked them to,” but this “inherited gift still put a kind of desperation in them, a need to grow what was in them” (McLemore, 2017, p. 69). Every member of the family has this desperation, and they are connected by this power. They are also cursed, unable to leave the land, and their true loves always disappear. Only by unveiling past tragedies that had occurred on La Pradera, the land where they live, and correcting those wrongs, are the Nomeolvides women able to be free. They are forced to confront and make reparations for past wrongs, and work together to create a new, more thoughtful, landscape. Like the Nomeolvides family, all of Beatriz Soria’s family in *All the Crooked Saints* were born with the ability to perform magic. The Soria magic takes the shape of performing miracles. The family had “marched out of Mexico under the cover of darkness and had kept walking until they’d found another mountain-edged place quiet enough to let miracles be heard” (Stiefvater, 2017, p. 29). They are able to perform miracles by revealing the darkness that exists within individuals, but the family lives in fear of revealing the darkness in themselves. In order to save her cousin, Beatriz understands that the act of confronting her darkness is also freeing it. Because of her dedication to her family, and love for her relatives, Beatriz faces her darkest fears. In

doing so, she ultimately helps everyone in her family. Both the Nomeolvides and Soria families are bound to places where they can create magic, magic that has been in their family for generations. Each family lives with multiple generations and cousins, and the protagonists' love for their families is inherently tied to their magic-making.

In the *Shadowshaper* series and *Labyrinth Lost* (which is also part of a series), magic and creating is also ancestral. Sierra learns that her mother and grandparents were able to shadowshape, and that she is part of a long history of people who were able to give form to spirits through art. In order to shadowshape, Sierra must “work in tandem with spirits.” Their purposes are unified, and they have a symbiotic relationship. Sierra’s friend Robbie explains, ““when we’re creating, we attract spirits that are like-minded,”” and the spirits align with them and imbue their artwork with life (Older, 2015, ch. 19). In *Shadowhouse Falls*, Sierra becomes closer to her mom through shadowshaping, and her mom advocates for the act by asserting, ““we were practicing our cultural heritage. ¿Y qué?”” (Older, 2017, ch. 2). The act of shadowshaping literally connects Sierra with past ancestors, and enables cross-generational activism. Along with her friends and her family, Sierra fights against white supremacy, gentrification, and police brutality with her cultural heritage. Alex also is able to channel magic from her ancestors, and her family of brujas all are born with magic and special abilities. Her family maintains an ancient text called the Book of Cantos, and when Alex flips through it she finds, “pages of spells, curses, the names of the Deos, the history of our magic, my family tree,” and all of the history of her bloodline (Córdova, 2016, p. 65). Alex attempts to use a spell from that book to quell her magic, and deny her cultural history, only to accidentally banish her family to a desolate labyrinthine dimension. Only through connecting with her magic,

and with her family, can she save her mother and sisters. She can only control her magic by connecting with the Old Ones, her ancestors, who must give her their blessing. When they do so, she claims, “my family channels their power through me all at once. I can see our lifelines twisting like sinew, like DNA, like roots in the earth” (Córdova, 2016, p. 302). Through connecting with their familial magic, both girls become new versions of themselves—Alex becomes the Encantrix and Sierra becomes the Lady of Shadow and Light. Each of them embraces their roles as leaders, and work with their families to be stronger, more empowered women.

Cultural heritage, family, and creation were key components for many of the protagonists. Many of the girls felt empowered through embracing cultural values, and being able to express themselves through action.

## Discussion

The following section will discuss the main takeaways from the content analysis, and what coding revealed about how Latinx teenage girls are portrayed in YA literature. I will also discuss how the representation varied depending on whether or not the story was written by a member of the Latinx community, and how that also changed depending on the year of publication. I will end by discussing limitations to the study, and further implications for research.

### Overarching Themes

The sample for this study, while not all-encompassing, revealed clear trends in literature written about Latinx teenage girls. As with most teenage girls, the characters found themselves grappling with questions about things like sexuality, friendship, and educational aspirations, all while trying to establish their own personal identity. Many of the novels delved into considerations of dual-identity, cultural histories, and the experience of being a minority in the United States. As García puts it, “The lens of Latinx literature is one that magnifies issues of transnationalism, language, race, ethnicity, gender, and class,” and reveals how those shape the larger American experience (2017, p. 120). The majority of characters came from families of lower socioeconomic status, and many questioned what it meant for them personally to straddle American culture and their family heritage.

One overarching theme became very clear—family, and the opinion of family members, is important. Every single protagonist grappled with familial obligation and duty, expressing at times intense guilt over doing something that they were worried their family would not approve of, or dread at doing something unappealing because it would make their family happy. Even when the crux of a character’s problems was derived from familial strife, the majority sought out a resolution, or a sense of understanding between themselves and their family. Many of the characters had absent fathers, or described their fathers as being around but not fully present, while women were seen as strong, resilient, and hard-working pillars of the family. The books clearly demonstrated that teenage girls are affected by the way that their families discussed mental health, sexuality, and work. Love and obligation frequently went hand in hand, and as teenage girls are negotiating their own identities, they are also reconfiguring their relationships with their parents and within their family structure. Those family relationships also play a role in how the main characters connected with their culture and with activism. García argues, “the current trend in Latinx literature for youth contains a potent argument against colonial oppression, stolen histories, and territories,” all of which are things “that the Latinx protagonist resists through activism on the road to adulthood.” One defining characteristic of Latinx literature is that “ultimately, Latinx adults cosign on this resistance, which is a clear diversion from Anglo YA” (Garcia, 2018, p. 223). Intergenerational relationships were extremely influential throughout the novels, especially in discussions about acculturation, gentrification, and activism. Within *Shadowshaper*, *Shadowhouse Fall*, *Wild Beauty*, *All the Crooked Saints*, and *Labyrinth*

*Lost*, there was actual magic that developed from the establishment and strengthening of generational bonds. Family is immensely important for Latina teens.

For the majority of characters, however, being a girl meant being objectified and having their sexuality discussed by family members and peers. The constant scrutiny of their bodies, actions, and desires constituted a type of sexuality policing. Many parents policed their own daughters' sex lives, limiting who they could see and equating them being sexually active to disrespecting their family values. The books supported the study conducted by Sabatiuk and Flores, which revealed that parents were more the most influential factor for Latinx teens in making decisions about sex (2014). Studies have also shown that stereotypes about good/bad femininity affected how girls saw themselves in relationships. Gabi, in *Gabi, A Girl in Pieces*, questions what being a "good girl" means for her mother and for herself, and Julia, in *I Am Not Your Perfect Mexican Daughter*, grapples with what it means to be a good girl and a good daughter. One study revealed that girls were concerned about being labeled as "sluts" if their boyfriends found out about them having previous sexual relationships, which fed into their perception of being considered a "bad" girl (López & Chesney-Lind, 2014). This can be seen in how many of the characters expressed shame at having sexual desires, because of how frequently they were told that "good" girls did not have sex.

There were also quite a number of protagonists who were bisexual, with many queer secondary characters. While that could be a result of the sample that was selected, there were a number of other books that featured queer characters within the CCBC lists that I did not analyze. According to data collected by Malinda Lo, the number of YA books with LGBT protagonists increased from 2014-2016, which is also in line with the

increase of Latinx novels in that time frame (2017). Overall, the presence of so many queer characters show that this is an important intersectional group that needs to be addressed, and that there are a significant number of queer Latinx teenagers in the United States.

### #OwnVoices v. White Voices

There were some notable differences between stories written by authors from the Latinx community and by white authors. A disproportionate number of the titles—over half of the sample—featured characters from Mexican backgrounds, which could be in part because this is the largest Latinx subgroup within the United States, but also is in line with Naidoo’s research, which showed that children’s and YA literature failed to represent the complete cultural diversity of the Latinx community (2007). The books *Joyride*, *Dream Things True*, *Like Water*, *The Gallery of Unfinished Girls*, *All of the Crooked Saints*, *Kiss Kill Vanish*, *On the Edge*, *Tell Me Something Real*, *Nowhere Girls*, and *Out of Darkness* were written by white authors. Of those ten titles, eight featured characters of Mexican heritage. Mexicans have always been the largest subgroup of the Latinx community, but that has actually been declining while other non-Mexican Latinx groups are increasing (Flores, 2017). It is possible that white authors feel more comfortable portraying members of this community because they are more familiar with Mexican-American culture and people. It is also possible, however, that more white people write about Mexicans because they conflate the Mexican-American experience with the Latinx experience in the United States.

A number of the contemporary texts by white authors featured a romance between the Latina protagonist and a non-Latinx partner. In *Dream Things True* and *Joyride*, the



Mexican main characters either were undocumented or had undocumented family members that they were trying to protect. The stories had surprisingly similar narratives—girl meets boy while working a low-paying job that they perform to help support their family, boy is white and wealthy and intrigued by how beautiful and hard-working the protagonist is, protagonist has family patriarch who disapproves of her being in a relationship, but that protagonist has some undocumented family members while boy has racist family members and somehow he fights against his own family in order to help save his love and her helpless Mexican family members. The stories were two examples of a classic “white savior” who steps in to save the day.

The gender roles designated by machismo and marianismo are social constructs, but the stereotypes surrounding them—and ways that Latinx men and women act—impact how others view members of that community. Those constructs impact how Latinx individuals are represented in media, books, and research, and often those stereotypes are reinforced because “these representations are often presented in a negative light,” and machismo is often “used to explain ‘social problems’ such as teen pregnancy, sexually transmitted infections and interpersonal violence from a cultural deficit perspective” (López & Chesney-Lind, 2014, p. 529). The act of having social initiatives or interventions targeted at the Latinx community in order to prevent problematic behaviors, or continually portraying that community as at-risk, can compound negative stereotypes. This impacts how members of the Latinx community see themselves, and how others see them. To have multiple portrayals of Latina teens in relationships where the men are more dominant serves to reinforce those negative gender stereotypes. Additionally, *Joyride*, *Dream Things True*, *On the Edge*, and *Kiss Kill*

*Vanish*, all had portrayals of girls with very possessive boyfriends, where the characters prioritized relationships over their family and personal goals. While the relationships also were supportive and consensual, they were all more stereotypical—and were all written by white women.

While familismo was a value present in all the novels, most non-Latinx authors portrayed it as a burden. In *Nowhere Girls*, Rosina is constantly at odds with her mother and family members, and her relationship with her mother is shaped by caustic exchanges. In *Tell me Something Real*, the main character constantly feels an obligation to stay with her family, and eventually decides to leave them to pursue her musical dreams. Her family was not supportive of her exploring her passion. In *Joyride*, Carly's family does not understand why she would care about doing well in school, and prefers that she works to provide money for their family's journey across the border. Alma's father in *Dream Things True* also asserts that his daughter should prioritize taking care of her family over succeeding in school. While some characters in Latinx-penned novels had parents who had not graduated from high school or college, none of their parents openly criticized wanting to succeed in school. Julia's family in *I Am Not Your Perfect Mexican Daughter*, which is written by a Mexican-American writer, had a difficult time understanding her educational goals and questioned her work ethic, but never in a way that minimized the way they valued her intellect. It is telling that only white authors portrayed Latinx families as not caring about educational attainment.

White authors were also the only ones who portrayed gang violence. Alma's cousin is involved in a gang, and In *Kiss Kill Vanish*, and *On the Edge*, the main protagonists get caught up in gang-related drama. Both lose themselves completely to

relationships, casting off their families in favor of their love interests. Valentina eschews her obligations to her family in *Kiss Kill Vanish* after learning that her father is a cruel drug lord who murdered her mother, and leaves Miami behind her. Maddie, in *On the Edge*, also deals with the Colombian cartel and lives in Miami. While the entire book is about gangs and gang violence, at least her love interest “Lobo” is the leader of a gang who fights against sex-trafficking—like the Robin Hood of gangs. It is worth noting, however, that not a single Latinx author focused on gang violence within their own narratives.

This is not to say that every book by a white person was poorly executed. The books by white authors that did not rely upon negative representation only served to show how egregious is it that the other texts did fall back on those stereotypes. Clearly it is possible for both Latinx and non-Latinx writers to create unique and positive portrayals of Latinx teenager girls. While *Out of Darkness* was beautifully written and exceptionally well-researched, its historical context necessitated a bleak outcome for the Mexican protagonist, Naomi. Interestingly, two of the books by white authors that shied away from negative stereotypes and focused on positive character development, *All the Crooked Saints* and *The Gallery of Unfinished Girls*, were both written in the style of magical realism, a genre that is typically associated with Latin America and Latin American writers.

Books that most effectively strayed from negative tropes were ones that showed cultural identity as one part of a teenage girl’s overall identity, and showed it as positively shaping her self-worth and growth. As one reviewer puts it, one thing that makes *The Victoria in my Head* so successful is that while you get many aspects of her

Cuban background, Victoria is more than just a Cuban-American. She is “not defined just by her Cuban identity or her Latina ethnicity,” but instead those are part of her larger identity; “where she comes from is important, but so is what she likes and dislikes, who she meshes well with, [and] what her dreams are” (Ortega, 2018, para. 9). The books that successfully executed what Milanés did with Victoria—showing that a character’s cultural background is important, but that her identity is composed of so much more—were the ones that most successfully strayed from negative cultural stereotypes. This was accomplished by both Latinx and white writers. Podos managed to do this with *Like Water*, showing Vanni working in her father’s restaurant, but also having positive and respectful relationships with her family, and working towards personal goals alongside them. Older, Córdova, and McLemore managed to intertwine magic and Latinidad, bringing together ancestral history, magic, and self-identity within their novels. Other novels excelled at portraying contemporary Latinx teenage coming-of-age experiences, like Rivera, García, Chambers, and Quintero. Teenage girls are multifaceted, and the best portrayals of them addressed that reality.

Each year saw an increase in books published by Latinx authors and books featuring Latinx characters. It seems that #weneeddiversebooks and the general uptick in conversation around diversity in YA literature did, in fact, bring about more diverse books. It also brought about more books of diverse genres. In 2014 there were three writers of Latinx descent who wrote YA books with Latinx characters, and in 2017 there were fifteen. The number of YA books with Latinx characters also steadily increased, with seventeen, twenty, forty-four and seventy-two books in 2014, 2015, 2016, and 2017 respectively.

## The Poet X

During the course of this study, *The Poet X*, by Elizabeth Acevedo, won the National Book Award and the Printz Award. The book, which was published in early 2018, stood out as a literary exemplar, and perfectly encapsulated so many of the themes and findings completed in this research study. The book is a great coming of age story, and as one reviewer put it, “Xiomara pretty much does it all—falling in love, questioning religion, clashing with family, finding an outlet for her passion, calling out rape culture and sexism,” and those experiences help her discover who she is and what she believes (Audrey, 2018, para. 8). *The Poet X* is a beautifully written book by a member of the Latinx community that perfectly encapsulates so much of the Latina teen experience from a positive, asset-based perspective.

In *The Poet X*, the main character Xiomara struggles to connect with her parents. Throughout much of the novel she has different opinions than her parents, but she strives to understand where they come from. While not as explicitly as Julia, in *I Am Not Your Perfect Mexican Daughter*, Xiomara does discuss feelings of sadness, loneliness, and insecurity. She continuously talks about how degrading it is for others to comment on her changing body, claiming, “My body was trouble... My body was a problem” (Acevedo, 2018, p. 151). Not only do others comment on her body, Xiomara has frequent familial input about it as well. Xiomara’s dad claims, “‘It’s that age. Teenage girls are overexcited. Puberty changes their mind. Son locas,’” while her mother stays silent “since Papi knows more about girls than her” (Acevedo, 2018, p. 63). Her observations not only show what it’s like to be objectified as a teenage girl, but also how gender plays a role in family dynamics. Her family sends constant messages about how she should act,

and what a “good girl” should be. She explains, “I’m told girls/Shouldn’t. Shouldn’t. Shouldn’t,” and that she should act virginal and pure and “to have faith in the father the son in men/and men are the first ones to make me feel so small” (Acevedo, 2018, p. 58). Xiomara explicitly states what many of the protagonists express—men make her feel small, and often diminish her agency.

Her family also polices her sexuality, and fears about how her behavior would impact their reputation. Xiomara puts it succinctly when she says: “Mami’s Dating Rules Rule 1. I can’t date./Rule 2. At least until I’m married./Rule 3. See rules 1 and 2” (Acevedo, 2018, p. 89). Throughout the book she emphasizes this point, punishing Xiomara when she sees her kissing a boy on the train, threatening to send her back to the Dominican Republic. Her mom also sees her actions as reflecting those of the whole family. She argues, “this is why you want to go away for college so you can open your legs for any boy with a big enough smile,” and adds, “You think I came to this country for this? So you can carry a diploma in your belly” (Acevedo, 2018, p. 204). Becoming pregnant is seen as disrespecting the hard work immigrant parents have put into moving to the United States and working. The idea that she should be virginal and that teenage girls are overexcited clearly plays into how Xiomara views her own sexuality. As she talks about her own desire, she asks, “what if I like a boy too much and become addicted to sex” (Acevedo, 2018, p. 32). After having her body under constant scrutiny and commentary from those around her, Xiomara strives to accept herself and respect her own voice and feelings.

Part of how Xiomara find her voice is through writing and performing slam poetry. With her words, she discusses what it is like to be a teenage girl. For Xiomara,

writing and performing is a release. When she performs, she says, “my little words feel important, for just a moment” (Acevedo, 2018, p. 259). Writing gives her a platform, and a way to express herself in a way that makes her feel heard. Not only is writing allowing her to represent herself, it is helping her to accept herself. When she writes, “the pages of my notebook swell from all the words I’ve pressed onto them. It almost feels like the more I bruise the page the quicker something inside me heals” (Acevedo, 2018, p. 283). Writing is cathartic and empowering for Xiomara. It helps her to connect to her background and to verbalize her feelings about the world around her. Some of her poetry is bilingual, and much of it touches on questions about her cultural identity. Xiomara claims, “when I was little Mami was my hero. Because she barely spoke English and wasn’t born here, but she didn’t let that stop her from defending herself if she got cut in line at the grocery store” (Acevedo, 2018, p. 179). Xiomara doesn’t see her mother’s language as a deficit, instead she sees her mother as brave for coming to a new country and still standing up for herself in a second language. She also sees power in the Spanish language.

Her parents also come to understand her better through the poetry and her performing, despite not understanding her poetry at first. Even after butting heads with her mother for the majority of *The Poet X*, Xiomara describes that “love can be a band: tears if you pull it too hard, but also flexible enough to stretch around the most chaotic mass” (Acevedo, 2018, p. 340). Love is powerful and encompassing, and can change shape. Her relationship with her family shows that love and care can be shown in different ways. Throughout the novel she shows love to her twin by protecting him during fights, her best friend shows love by supporting Xiomara when she is fighting

with her family, and her teacher shows love by inviting Xiomara into the poetry club and by checking in with her family. Xiomara realizes that love encompasses all that she does, and that her relationship with her family, while a “chaotic mass,” is one that has power and support within it.

While *The Poet X* did not fit within the parameters of the study, it is an exemplary novel that clearly shows how common themes of gender, sexuality, familial relationships, and creation can influence the life of a teenage girl. It also gives an affirmative, positive representation of a Latinx girl finding her voice—one that would be empowering for Latinx and non-Latinx alike. It also shows how much more research there is to do—on both new novels and old ones—to best understand the impact of such positive and authentic representations on Latina youth.

### Combatting the “Single Story”

Latinx literature can act as a powerful counter-storytelling tool. According to Hughes-Hassell’s model for YA multicultural literature, it can give teens a voice who have historically been voiceless, and “whose lives are at best underrepresented, but more often misrepresented, in the mainstream discourse.” Multicultural YA literature can also challenge the idea of a single story and present the complexity inherent in ethnic identity formation. It also builds empathy and challenges readers “whose lives have been shaped by race and privilege to consider how the world looks to groups of people that have traditionally been marginalized and oppressed,” showing them the inequalities that are faced daily by those individuals (Hughes-Hassell, 2013, p. 215). The sample showed how important it is for counter-narratives to exist, and rally against stereotypical representations of the Latinx community. In order to combat the “single story”



perpetuated by media and social programs, both Latinx and non-Latinx readers need to see a wide array of YA stories featuring Latinx characters. As Chimamanda Adichie puts it, “the single story creates stereotypes, and the problem with stereotypes is not that they are untrue, but that they are incomplete,” and those stereotypes make one story the only story being told (2009). Yes, Latinx teenage girls have high rates of mental health problems, teen pregnancy, and high school dropout, and while that can be addressed in literature, it should not be the only story. It is also powerful for stories to have multiple languages interwoven throughout the narrative, especially as the United States becomes more multilingual. In an interview published in *Time Magazine*, Daniel José Older discusses how he came to realize the importance of language in his self-identity and in his writing. After trying to acculturate to American culture for years, and refusing to speak Spanish, he claims, “I looked back on was a lifetime spent allowing one part of myself to devour another,” and in refusing to speak Spanish he claims, “I had internalized the same bigotry I cringed at in the newspapers, and I had turned it against myself” (Older, 2019, para. 10). By ignoring his family’s language, he was internalizing negative opinions about his culture and what that language represented. Seeing powerful representations of Spanish, and of Latinx cultural heritage, can positively impact all readers.

With so many cultural backgrounds and contexts, it is difficult to homogenize the Latinx community in the United States without relying on stereotypes to describe them. It is unfair to continue working with Latinx youth using a deficit model. Instead, writers, educators, social workers, librarians, and anyone who works with Latinx youth, should be focused on positives. They should focus on the beauty of Xiomara’s poetry, the power of

Sierra's shadowshaping, and the unflinching acceptance of Estrella's multigenerational family of matriarchs. As Adichie puts it,

Stories matter. Many stories matter. Stories have been used to dispossess and to malign, but stories can also be used to empower and to humanize. Stories can break the dignity of a people, but stories can also repair that broken dignity.  
(2009)

Just because *The Poet X* exists, and has received numerous accolades, does not mean that there is not a need for more stories with Latina protagonists, or even Dominican-American protagonists. It is empowering to see oneself reflected in a novel, and to read positive portrayals of oneself and one's culture.

### Limitations and Implications for Future Research

There were a number of limitations to my study. I was only pulling data from the lists provided by the CCBC, which were limited. They only received books from large publishing agencies, and not from independent publishers who might not have been able to afford sending their books to all reviewing sources. The CCBC titles were by no means exhaustive lists of books written by or for members of the Latinx community, which meant that some acclaimed books were left out (for example, *Juliet Takes a Breath*, by Gabby Rivera, and *Good Girls Don't Lie*, by Alexandra Diaz, both of which were published by independent presses). The lists also provided mixed data about who was the Latinx character within the story. I narrowed my sample down by reading publisher information and reviews about the novels, which ensures that some titles surely slipped through the cracks. Since I had a purposive sample, this was not an impediment to my research, but if someone were to continue using the CCBC data, they would need to ensure that they fully investigated all titles.

Additionally, while I researched and tried to find books with protagonists who were Latina, there were multiple books that I read only to realize halfway through that the main character was not Latinx at all. The CCBC provided a few titles that had characters with Latinx-sounding last names—for example Vic Navarro in *Kill All Happies*, who halfway through the book describes her features as “a melting pot of ethnicities” with “[her] Irish-American grandmother’s blue eyes, [her] Native American grandfather’s dark brown hair, [her] Filipino grandfather’s nose,” and her “Polish grandmother’s fair skin” (Cohn, 2017, ch. 12). She is only one example of multiple characters who I expected to identify as Latinx based on the evidence I was given, but did not. In fact, *Tell Me Something Real* by Calla Devlin never explicitly stated whether or not the main characters were Mexican, so even though that book was included on the CCBC list and in my sample, it is unclear whether or not the protagonist and her sisters were actually Latinx. They took many trips to Mexico and their mother spoke Spanish, but that is as far as the evidence goes. It is worth considering how the CCBC and researchers try and quantify Latinx in their categorizations.

A large number of #ownvoices books from the Latinx community came out in 2018 and 2019. As *The Poet X* clearly demonstrated, it would be worthwhile to try and expand the study to include more recent publications, or to focus solely on #ownvoices novels. The reverse would also be interesting, to study how white authors portray Latinx characters and whether that representation is changing. It would also be worthwhile to expand the categories that are analyzed within the novels. A few novels touched on body image within the Latinx community, and there is a wealth of resources about that topic. It is clear that there is a need for researchers to explore Latinx representation, and there are

many paths that researchers can go with their studies. With so many novels coming out, and the Latinx population continuing to grow, there is a clear gap that could be filled by analyzing how YA literature can impact the Latinx community.

## Conclusion

It is altogether too easy to focus on how Latina adolescents are an “at-risk” group. With high rates of mental illness, teen pregnancy, and low educational attainment, many studies about Latinxs focus on preventing unwanted behavior and outcomes. The perpetuation of these negative stereotypes within the research and media is often reflected in literature. Much of YA literature is replete with negative representation, providing Latina teens with books filled with stereotypical experiences. A dearth of representation for the numerous Latinx cultural backgrounds ensures that certain homogenous perspectives about Latinx teens and the Latinx experience are perpetuated, as well.

It is imperative for researchers and writers to begin viewing and portraying this group through a positive developmental lens. By focusing on empowerment, positive relationships, and commitment to learning, writers can begin to negate the negative tropes frequently used to portray Latinx teens. Writers can also show the strength that lies within strong familial and cultural connections, emphasizing how Latinidad and cultural pride is an asset, instead of a negative. Latinx cultural backgrounds should be portrayed as a benefit instead of a deficit. Latinxs are the largest growing, and youngest, minority in the United States. Thus, they are a huge market for YA literature. Adolescence is already an extremely difficult time, and it should not be made more difficult by reading books that portray one’s own experience as a problem, or one from which someone would need rescuing. Every single teenager deserves to be able to see themselves positively reflected

within the books they read. Latina teens should be able to see as many different representations and stories featuring members of their own community as their white peers.

Visibility and awareness about diverse YA literature has definitely helped create a conversation around, and need for, more books for the Latinx community. Every year since 2014 the number of books published for and about the Latinx community increases, as was seen in the data from the CCBC. In 2018, according to CCBC data, there were 196 books by Latinx authors and illustrators, and 247 books about Latinx characters, out of the 3,617 books they received (2019). While there are clear gains in Latinx representation, books about Latinx characters are far from dominating the market. Additionally, it is not the quantity of books, but the quality of the representation, that matters. Latina teens do not need more books about undocumented Mexican girls who are afraid of getting pregnant, whose parents ostracize them for caring about education, and who enter illicit relationships with white boys who save them. Those books already exist, and unfortunately emphasize existing negative images of Latina teens that are frequently propagated by political figures and the media.

Books like *Gabi, a Girl in Pieces*, the *Shadowshaper* series, *Labyrinth Lost*, *The Victoria in my Head*, and *The Poet X* clearly show how there is power, magic, and pride in being Latinx. Gabi manages to sum up the desire to move past negative stereotypes. She claims, “I don’t want us to be ashamed anymore... of being pregnant or gay or poor or having a crackhead dad! I want us to be fucking proud of ourselves” (Quintero 121). Being proud, instead of being ashamed of what others perceive as deficits, is

empowering. All teens deserve to feel inspired, seen, and represented; all teens deserve to have books that make them feel proud.

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Throughout this paper I chose to use the term Latinx as a gender-neutral term for anyone who identifies as a member of a community with Latin American origin. I use Latina when referring to female-identifying individuals within this group. Some people use Hispanic, others might use more country-specific terms such as Chicana/o, while some people argue against the use of a pan-ethnic term at all. For more about the history behind this word, read here: <http://remezcla.com/features/culture/latino-vs-hispanic-vs-latinx-how-these-words-originated/>

## Appendix A: Identified Themes from the Sample

Book Title	Shadowstaple/ Shadownhouse Fall	Gabi, a Girl In Pieces	All the Crooked Saints	The Co- Between	Kiss Kill Vanish	Labyrinth Lost	Wild Beauty	I Am Not Your Perfect Daughter	The Murder Education of Marquet Sanchez	Dream Things True	Out of Darkness	On The Edge	Gallery of Unfinished Girls	Tell Me Something Real	Even if the Sky Falls	The Victoria In My Head
Name of Author	Joyride Barnes	Daniel José Corder	Isabel Quintero	Amy Reed Shelver	Veronica Chambers	Jessica Martinez	Zoraida Córdova	Anna-Marie McLemore	Rebecca Fidos	Erika Sanchez	Liliam Rivera Marquart	Ashley Hicks-Petrez	Alison Diepen	Lauren Karcz	Celia Devlin	Mia Garcia Manes
Family																
Mother	x (in max)	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x (gone to help grandma)	x	x	x
Father	x (in max)	x	x (for part of the book)	x	x	x	x (all women)	x (there but not present)	x	x	x (stepfather)	x	x	x	x	x
Other guardian figure	x	x		x	x	x										
Sexual Identity																
Pregnancy (main character)																
Pregnancy (secondary character, Latinx)																
Queer							x (b)		x (b)							
Queer (secondary character, Latinx)	x	x (boy)					x (b)	x (boy)					x (b)			
Straight	x	x					x (b)		x						x (boy)	x
Romance within Latinx	x	x					x	x	x							
Romance with other ethnicity	x	x	x	x	x	x	x (Dalia)	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x
Family policing sexuality	x		x					x		x	x					
Cultural Identity																
Discussion of dual identity	x	x	x	x	x	x		x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x
Familismo values	x	x	x	x	x	x		x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x
maternalismo values	x	x	x	x	x	x		x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x
Socioeconomic Status																
Wealthy (detail)	x (landsc., works multiple jobs)		x (laddet died)	x (works in restaurant)		x (telenovela star)										
Poor (detail)																
Contributing to Community	x															
Creating developing stronger bonds with family through Latinx culture	x															
Bilingualism	x	x														
Genre																
Magical Realism																
Fantasy	x															
Realistic Contemporary	x															
Historical																
Cultural Background of Characters																
if own voices, what background	NA	Dominican	Mexican American	Mexican American	Mexican American	Colombian American	Ecuadorian Puerto Rican	Mexican American	Mexican American	Mexican American	Puerto Rican	Mexican NA	Mexican NA	Mexican NA	Puerto Rican	Cuban American
Year published:	2015	2015/2017	2014	2017	2017	2017	2016	2017	2017	2017	2017	2015	2015	2014	2017	2016



## Appendix B: List of Books Used in this Study

Acevedo, E. (2018). *The Poet X*. [Kindle version]. New York, NY: HarperTeen.

Banks, A. (2015). *Joyride*. New York, NY: Square Fish.

Chambers, V. (2017). *The Go-Between*. New York, NY: Delacorte Press.

Córdova, Z. (2016). *Labyrinth Lost*. [Kindle version]. Naperville, IL: Sourcebooks.

Devlin, C. (2016). *Tell Me Something Real*. New York, NY: Atheneum.

García, M. (2016). *Even if the Sky Falls*. New York, NY: Katherine Tegen Books.

Karcz, L. (2017). *The Gallery of Unfinished Girls*. New York, NY: HarperTeen.

Marquart, M. (2015). *Dream Things True*. New York, NY: St. Martin's Griffin.

Martinez, J. (2014). *Kiss Kill Vanish*. New York, NY: Katherine Tegen Books.

McLemore, A. (2017). *Wild Beauty*. New York, NY: Feiwel & Friends.

Milanes, J. (2017). *The Victoria in My Head*. [Kindle version]. New York, NY: Simon Pulse.

Older, D. J. (2015). *Shadowshaper*. [Kindle version]. New York, NY: Arthur A. Levine Books.

Older, D. J. (2017). *Shadowhouse Fall*. [Kindle version]. New York, NY: Arthur A. Levine Books.

Pérez, A. H. (2015). *Out of Darkness*. Minneapolis, MN: Carolrhoda Lab.

Podos, R. (2017). *Like Water*. [Kindle version]. New York, NY: Balzer + Bray.

Quintero, I. (2014). *Gabi, A Girl in Pieces*. [Kindle version]. El Paso, TX: Cinco Puntos Press.

Reed, A. (2017). *Nowhere Girls*. New York, NY: Simon Pulse.

Rivera, L. (2017). *The Education of Margot Sanchez*. [Kindle version]. New York, NY: Simon & Schuster.

Sánchez, E. (2017). *I Am Not Your Perfect Mexican Daughter*. [Kindle version]. New York, NY: Knopf Books for Young Readers.

Stiefvater, M. (2017). *All the Crooked Saints*. New York, NY: Scholastic Press.

Van Diepen, A. (2014). *On the Edge*. New York, NY: HarperTeen.

## Appendix C: Sample set from which the books were selected

All YA novels collected from the CCBC Latinx lists, arranged by publication year. Highlighted selections were flagged for having a female-identifying protagonist and for fitting criteria for the study.

2014	
Book Title	Author
Shelter	Aust, Patricia
A Blind Spot for Boys	Chen, Justina
Heart of Dread: Stolen	De la Cruz, Melissa
The Public Eye: A Port City High Novel	Freeman, Shannon
Pig Park	Martinez, Claudia Guadalupe
Kiss, Kill, Vanish	Martinez, Jessica
Real Diva/Man Up	Moore, Stephanie Perry
Gabi, A Girl in Pieces	Quintero, Isabel
Bad Blood	Schraff, Anne
Guilt Trip	Schraff, Anne
I'll Be There	Schraff, Anne
Misjudged	Schraff, Anne
Stolen Treasure	Schraff, Anne
To Die For	Schraff, Anne
Silver People: Voices from the Panama Canal	Engle, Margarita
The Lure	Ewing, Lynne
On The Edge	Van Diepen, Allison

2015	
Book Title	Author
Into the Dangerous World	Chibbaro, Julie
Rebellion	Diaz, Stephanie
Wandering Star	Russell, Romina
Gearhead	McGill, Leslie
Andreo's Race	Withers, Pam
Game Seven	Volponi, Paul
Untwine	Danticat, Edwidge
The Summer of Chasing Mermaids	Ockler, Sarah
A Fighting Chance	Meléndez Salinas, Claudia
The Way We Bared Our Souls	Strayhorn, Willa
Light of Day	Van Diepen, Allison
The Cage	Sheperd, Megan
Joyride	Banks, Anna
The Hunted	De la Peña, Matt
Taking Hold	Jimenez, Francisco
Dream Things True	Marquardt, Marie
Out of Darkness	Peréz, Ashley Hope
Emancipated	Reyes, M.G.
Show and Prove	Quintero, Sofia
Shadowshaper	Older, Daniel José

2016		2016 cont.	
Book Title	Author	Book Title	Author
Kill the Boy Band	Moldovsky, Goldie	The Skylighter	Wallace, Becky
Black Moon	Russell, Romina	The Cat King of Havana	Crosshill, Tom
The Girl Who Raced Fairyland All the Way Home	Valente, Catherynne M.	Autumn's Wish	Thorne, Bella
Tumbling	Carter, Caela	Labyrinth Lost	Zoraida, Córdoba
The Light Fantastic	Combs, Sarah	Tell Me Something Real	Devlin, Calla
Life is Funny	Frank, E.R.	Shame the Stars	Garcia McCall, Guadalupe
The Lovely Reckless	Garcia, Kami	Incriminated	Reyes, MG
Stay With Me	Gray, Lila	The Memory of Light	Stork, Francisco X
Spirit Level	Harvey, Sarah N.	Even if the Sky Falls	Garcia, Mia
The Row	Johansson, J.R.	A Fierce and Subtle Poison	Mabry, Samantha
When the Moon was Ours	McLemore, Anne-Marie	The Haters	Andeews, Jesse
Lucky Few	Ormsbee, Kathryn	Future Shock	Briggs, Elizabeth
A World Without You	Revis, Sarah	In the Swish	Green, Dawn
Rampage	Sandford, John and Michele Cook	Interference	Honeyman, Kay
Break Me Like a Promise	Schmidt, Tiffany	Overdrive	Ius, Dawn
Just Kill Me	Selzer, Adam	Bloodline	Jimenez, Joe
Don't Tell, Don't Tell, Don't Tell	Shaw, Liane	You in Five Acts	LaMarche, Una
The Contaminants	Smyth, Devin	I'm Not Your Manic Pixie Dream Girl	McNeil, Gretchen
As I Descended	Talley, Robin	Never Missing, Never Found	Panitch, Amanda
The Merciless II: The Exorcism of Sofia Flores	Vega, Danielle	Burn Baby Burn	Medina, Meg
The Head of the Saint	Socorro, Acioli	This Adventure Ends	Mills, Emma
Wild Swans	Spotswood, Jessica	Smash and Grab	Parker, Amy Christine

2017		2017 cont.	
Book Title	Author	Book Title	Author
Thirteen Rising	Russell, Romina	Antisocial	Blake, Jillian
History is All You Left Me	Silvera, Adam	The Victoria in my Head	Milanes, Janelle
Us, In Progress	Delacre, Lulu	Water in May	Williams, Ismee
Blight	Duncan, Alexandra	Retribution Rails	Bowman, Erin
The Closest I've Come	Aceves, Fred	Kill All Happies	Cohn, Rachel
Frank (Blacktop #3)	Alonge, LJ	Worthy	Cooner, Donna
Crazy, Messy, Beautiful	Arcos, Carrie	Here, There, Everywhere	Durango, Julia and Tyler Terrones
Far From the Tree	Benway, Robin	Just Another Girl	Eulberg, Elizabeth
Dare You	Brown, Jennifer	Genius: The Con	Gout, Leopold
Sleeper	Cadenhead, Mackenzie	Light Years	Griffin, Emily Ziff
Echo after Echo	Capetta, Amy Rose	Too Shattered For Mending	Hoffmeister, Peter Brown
The Go-Between	Chambers, Veronica	The You I've Never Known	Hopkins, Ellen
The Cholo Tree	Chacon, Daniel	Dare Mighty Things	Kaczynski, Heather
Little & Lion	Colbert, Brandy	Summer Unscripted	Klein, Jen
The Lost Causes	Etting, Jessica Koosed and Alyssa Embree Schwartz	We Are Okay	Lacour, Nina
The Unlikelies	Flinstone, Carrie	All The Wind in the World	Mabry, Samantha
Grit	French, Gillian	Wild Beauty	McLemore, Anne-Marie
Turtles All the Way Down	Green, John	No Good Deed	Moldavsky, Goldy
The Hearts We Sold	Lloyd-Jones, Emily	The Nowhere Girls	Reed, Amy
Moxie	Mathieu, Jennifer	The Inexplicable Logic of My Life	Sáenz, Benjamin Alire
Deep Water	Nichols, Katherine	I Am Not Your Perfect Mexican Daughter	Sánchez, Erika
Shadowhouse Fall	Older, Daniel José	Because of the Sun	Sanchez, Jenny Torres
Like Water	Podos, Rebecca	Pretty Fierce	Scott, Kieran
Inevitable and Only	Rosinsky, Lisa	Two Roads From Here	Steinkellner, Teddi
Whenever I'm With You	Sharp, Lydia	Its Not Like Its a Secret	Sugiara, Misa
They Both Die in the End	Silvera, Adam	Everything all at Once	Leno, Katrina
Windfall	Smith, Jennifer E.	A Psalm for Lost Girls	Bayerl, Katie
All The Crooked Saints	Stiefvater, Maggie	The Careful Undressing of Love	Haydu, Corey Ann
A Map for Wrecked Girls	Taylor, Jessica	The Gallery of Unfinished Girls	Karcz, Lauren
Run the Risk	Van Diepen, Allison	Miles Morales: Spider-Man	Reynolds, Jason
On The Free	Voorhees, Coert	The Education of Margot Sanchez	Rivera, Lilliam
Ones and Zeroes	Wells, Dan	The Truth of Right Now	Cothron, Kara Lee
And Then There Were Four	Werlin, Nancy	Freeks	Hocking, Amanda
We Now Return To Regular Life	Wilson, Martin	100 Hours	Vincent, Rachel
Wonder Woman: Warbringer	Bardugo, Leigh	If Birds Fly Back	Sorociak, Carlie
The Inevitable Collision of Birdie and Bash	Ganger, Candace	An Uninterrupted View of the Sky	Crowder, Melanie