

ABSTRACT

Title of dissertation: OUR LADIES: THIRD SPACE IDENTITIES
IN CHICANA ARTISTIC EXPRESSIONS,
1970-2000

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This dissertation examines Chicana feminist artistic expression in literature and in the visual arts produced between 1970 and 2000, when intense questioning of Chicana identity politics and border subjectivities emerged in both literature and the arts. Chicana feminists explored problems of the subordination of women, both in mainstream U.S. discourse and within the Chicano Movement, which had hitherto focused on masculine strategies of self-definition in the attempt to shape a communal Latino identity. The works studied include the poetry of Lorna Dee Cervantes (*Emplumada* 1981), Alma Villanueva (*Bloodroot* 1982), and Pat Mora (*Borders* 1986); the photographic autobiography of Norma Cantú (*Canícula* 2001); and visual art by Ester Hernández (*La Virgen de Guadalupe Defendiendo los Derechos de los Xicanos* 1975), Yolanda Lopez (Guadalupe series 1978), and Alma Lopez (*Our Lady* 1999).

Utilizing Gloria Anzaldúa's notions about *mestiza* consciousness and Cherríe Moraga's "theory in the flesh," I explore Chicana creative works and examine the development of multiple subjectivities that are a product of Borderlands thinking, mediated by Chicana everyday experiences. Theories of location, such as Edward Soja's

Third Space provide a framework for my study. Moreover, I theorize that in these works the female body becomes an important site of contestation for the sexist and masculinist practices of the Chicano Movement and the oppressive conditions of dominant culture.

OUR LADIES: THIRD SPACE IDENTITIES IN CHICANA ARTISTIC EXPRESSION,
1970-2000

by

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Dedication

In memory of my children Kirsi and Kari who crossed over to the other side during the years I was working on this project, to my sister Minna who beat the odds so many times, and to Roger, Erik, and Annika for being there.

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CHAPTER ONE

Introduction

I want to explore the various selves that I am, and I decided on *a escondidas*¹ because of much who I am has been unfolding of who and what I was all along *a escondidas*, hidden so deep inside that not even I knew who or what I was.

Norma Élia Cantú, “*A Escondidas*”

The epigraph above, from a text written by Norma Élia Cantú, speaks to the complexity of identity formation, and her long search for the hidden aspects of herself, stretching back to her childhood. While she questions whether she is a Chicana feminist teacher who writes, or a Chicana feminist writer who teaches, her quest to understand who she is and her strenuous effort to uncover all facets of her persona have been a common theme in Chicana writing and art work. Cantú explains that the “Chicana” became an ethnic marker for her after she was introduced as “Spanish” at a training session for teachers. To her, Chicana expressed ethnic heritage, ideology and identity (*A Escondidas* 124). Misclassifying the Latina other by calling her “Spanish” also shows the kind of pitfalls that members of the U.S. dominant culture can encounter in their misguided effort to appear culturally sensitive. The facilitator of the training session was describing Cantú as “Spanish” in an attempt not to insult her by characterizing her as Mexican (124). The exchange took place at a school function with educators, but it is a typical example of the racist and discriminatory attitudes towards Mexican Americans that prevailed during the period in the 1970s that Cantú describes, something that persists even today. To the well-meaning school administrator, it was preferable to address Cantú

as “Spanish” rather than as the less desirable category of Mexican. Such attitudes towards Chicanas/os, in the context of U.S. ideals of cultural assimilation, have often resulted in the repression of a people’s true history and subjectivities, which then remain *a escondidas*. This dissertation, in which I will explore creative texts produced by Chicanas, owes much to my work with Latin American trauma survivors. Although their bodies and psyches were scarred by violence, they taught me the value of art and poetry during their healing process, as they started to recover the self, lost to years of abuse and masculine control. One of the activities I participated in with Latina survivors was to stitch together a quilt made of individual patches that were symbolic of each person’s journey to wholeness. In the end, the quilt was full of references to the survivors’ experiences of violence, their memories of their home countries, and their hopes for the future. Each of these often mismatched identity indicators created a meaningful whole that revealed much about the lived experience of each Latina woman and of the women as a collective. It was this that sparked my interest in the development of both cultural tropes and female identity.

My focus in this dissertation will be on the construction and representation of female subjectivity in contemporary Chicana literature and artistic production. I will examine the poetry of Lorna Dee Cervantes (*Emplumada* 1981), Alma Villanueva (*Bloodroot* 1982), and Pat Mora (*Borders* 1986); the photographic autobiography of Norma Cantú (*Canícula* 2001); and visual art by Ester Hernández (*La Virgen de Guadalupe Defendiendo los Derechos de los Xicanos* 1975), Yolanda Lopez (Guadalupe series 1978), and Alma Lopez (*Our Lady* 1999). The selection includes texts primarily from the 1980s and 1990s that hark back to a renaissance in U.S. Latino literature, when

diverse literary representations, including identity issues, were extensively explored. In this period, Chicana writers were focusing on an examination of the problems of the subordination of women, both in mainstream U.S. discourse and within the Chicano Movement. This movement had hitherto focused on masculine strategies of self-definition in an attempt to shape a communal Latino identity (Mujcinovic 2).² The dissertation will examine Chicana feminist artistic expression in literature and in the visual arts between 1970 and 2000, when intense questioning of Chicana identity politics and border subjectivities emerged in both literature and the arts. Utilizing Gloria Anzaldúa's notions about *mestiza* consciousness and Cherríe Moraga's "theory in the flesh," I propose that the Chicana creative works studied in this dissertation show development of the multiple subjectivities that are a product of Borderlands thinking, mediated by Chicana everyday experiences. Theories of location, such as Edward Soja's Third Space, provide a framework for my study. Moreover, I theorize that in these works the female body becomes an important site of contestation for the sexist and masculinist practices of the Chicano Movement, and the oppressive conditions of the dominant culture.

While their male counterparts claimed Aztlán as a Chicano home base foundational to their identity, Chicana writers and artists instead explored the space of interpersonal relations, re-interpreting old motifs, such as *La Llorona* and *La Malinche* from a womanist perspective. One of the most significant Chicana accomplishments was the recovery of the female subject both as an embodied person and as a cultural/societal agent (Davis-Undiano 130). This led Chicana feminists of color to develop "theories of the flesh" that focused critical attention on the physical realities of Chicana lives, such as

skin color, sexual orientation, and the body as a basis for a new politic “born out of necessity” (Moraga, *This Bridge* 24). In art the emphasis was not on the exile’s desire to return home to the nationalistic and masculinist land of origin envisioned by the Chicano Movement in the 1970s, but the making of a more bodily connection to place. As Alicia Gaspar de Alba theorizes, Chicana artists produced an embodied aesthetic in which they themselves became their place of origin, and their bodies signifiers of place (127). This can be seen in the many visual images that depict the Virgin of Guadalupe as a present-day working woman, removing her from her traditional place in Catholic dogma and bringing her closer to the lived experiences and preoccupations of Chicanas.³ In practice, then, Chicana feminist scholarship developed theories of the body by focusing on the experiences of women of color, as well as on issues of class and race. Hence, in the wake of the Chicano Movement, Chicana scholars, writers, and visual artists like Yolanda Lopez brought to the foreground notions about “brown bodies” and female border subjectivities.

As indicated above, this dissertation will analyze poetry, art, photographs, and an autobiographical text, in which border crossings and (creative) spaces in the interstices of official cultural and geographic boundaries open up possibilities for the formation of multiple subjectivities. Such works give a voice to the formerly silenced female persona, resist traditional patriarchal discourse, and seek alternative forms of expression. My goal is to examine different genres and to use theories that interrogate and promote dialogue with one another and that add an-Other snapshot to the growing body of criticism in Chicana/o studies. As Debra Castillo writes in *Border Women: Writing from la Frontera*, theorization about the border cannot be consolidated into a singular hegemonic structure,

but fragmentary retakes and discontinuous snapshots may offer the best hope for more grounded and polyphonic theories of the border. In studying female subjectivities from a perspective that allows theorization from a multidimensional spatial construct, the consideration of lived experience and the political positioning of the subject are of fundamental importance. Edward Said commented in *Orientalism* that ideological, political and institutional constraints have an impact on the author, and we can better understand culture when we see these constraints as productive (13).

As I am studying different genres and time periods in texts by authors who have acquired critical acclaim but also attracted heated criticism, my project aims to answer several questions: How are Chicana subjectivities manifested in the creative works studied? What contribution have the authors made in their respective fields of art in bringing forth problems of Chicana women? What Chicana voices do their works give expression to? How have the authors resisted the patriarchal discourse and created new images of women that cross borders of gender, sexuality, race, and economic status? What does the Borderlands trope and concept of spaces in-between add to the notions about female subjectivities? What techniques do the authors use to represent life on the border and give expression to these subjectivities? What is the significance of the liberation of the female body and theories in the flesh for the larger Chicana feminist project? My methodology involves thematic analysis of the works of Villanueva, Cervantes, Mora, Hernández, Lopez, and Cantú. I utilize a feminist framework within a socio-historical context. Finally, I employ theories of the Borderlands, Third Space, and cultural hybridity that help us understand the development and expression of Chicana subjectivities, and their relationship to living in-between worlds. The most important of

these theories were crafted by Norma Alarcón, Anzaldúa, and Soja. I complement their notions with the theories of Roland Barthes and Marianne Hirsch about photography.

In the study, I rely heavily on Anzaldúa's notions about *mestiza* consciousness. She characterizes this as the consciousness of the Borderlands, specific to women (*Borderlands* 99). As a theoretical construct the Borderlands help to reveal the shifting subjectivities and plural identifications of Borderlands dwellers. Anzaldúa writes that as a *mestiza* she is a product of the multiple cultures that she walks in and out of (99), drawing from various notions of cultural and racial hybridity. While she strongly opposes the dominant ideology of racial purity (99), she explains that being of mixed race produces restlessness (100) and conflict:

In a constant state of mental *nepantlism*,⁴ an Aztec word meaning torn between ways, *la mestiza* is a product of the transfer of the cultural and spiritual values of one group to another. Being tricultural, monolingual, or multilingual, speaking a *patois*, and in a state of perpetual transition, the *mestiza* faces the dilemma of the mixed breed: which collectivity does the daughter of a darkskinned mother listen to? (*Borderlands* 100)

Anzaldúa was among the first Chicana theorists to address the issue of multiple subjectivities. This construct was developed further by Norma Alarcón, who created a theoretical framework around the construction of a subject-in-process. However, the idea of multiple subjectivities has been adapted to Chicana studies without significant questioning. In my project, I broaden the scope by also utilizing notions about lived experience and identity theories that complement and interrogate each other rather than relying on one ideology alone. I expect that the project will provoke many complex

questions about identity formation: Are the notions of multiple subjectivities applicable in the same way across different genres? What are the drawbacks of these notions? Is it possible (or even desirable) to theorize against all essences?

In Latina/o communities, the radical social movements of the 1960s and 1970s challenged national political and identity paradigms by directing critical attention towards the south and engaging in a process of border crossing (Torres, "Transnational" 174). In addition to demanding access to power, Latinos and Chicanos embarked on a search for the homeland and a definition of group identity, largely constructed as difference from that of the dominant society (174). On a symbolic level, the Chicano Movement's claim to Aztlán as the ancient home of their ancestors served to construct a special "spatial reality" that decreased the alienation of the population and gave it a sense of having returned to a home of its own (Davis-Undiano 118). On the other hand, this process made it necessary to reconcile differences, once it became obvious that Mexico was not invested in its populations residing in other countries, unless it could gain some political advantage from it (Torres, "Transnational" 176).⁵ Consequently, the recognition that one is "in and out of place in both the home and host country gave rise to the exploration of border identities" (177) and Borderlands cultures. In addition to the geographical site, Borderlands thinking or Border gnosis, as Walter Mignolo calls it (11), included notions of *border zones*, such as gender, sexual orientation, class, race, and nationality. According to Renato Rosaldo these are not empty transitional zones but sites of creative cultural production. This is evinced, for instance, in the work of the authors studied in this dissertation, when they show how shifting subjectivities emerge in the interstices of the border experience.⁶ Moreover, connected to the idea of border zones is the term

“people between cultures,” which Rosaldo coined in *Culture and Truth*. This notion of being in-between cultures is important to my study, as it opens up a dynamic spatial imaginary from which to theorize the border experience (198).

The notion of location, in general, provides a useful perspective for a study of different groups of people and cultural production. Edward Soja has stated that the spatial dimension has more relevance in today’s *praxis* and politics than ever before.⁷ According to Soja, the spatiality of life is equally as important as historicity and sociality which form a three-dimensional construct that inspires us to revise how we have studied history and society. This third space is especially interesting to explore, because it creates a concept that has until recently been ignored. In its ideal form, and unlike other sites of discipline, the third space is:

instead, an efficient invitation to enter a space of extraordinary openness, a place of critical exchange where the geographical imagination can be expanded to encompass a multiplicity of perspectives that have heretofore been considered by the epistemological referees to be incompatible, un-combinable. It is a space where issues of race, class, and gender can be addressed simultaneously without privileging one over the other, where one can be Marxist and post-Marxist, materialist and idealist, structuralist and humanist, disciplined and trans-disciplinary at the same time. (Soja 5)

According to Soja, the theory of the “third space” tries to capture what is constantly moving and changing in the milieu of ideas, events, appearances, and meanings to restructure the binary notions of Western thinking and to open up new alternatives (2). Since the purpose of the present study is to investigate the multiple

expressions of Chicana identities in literary and artistic production, and to explore how the proximity of the U.S. Mexican border shapes the construction of the female subject, theories of location provide a useful foundation because they challenge the Western idea of an autonomous, unitary (male) subject.

Thus, in my research, theories explaining the development of multiple identities will complement notions of border. As Anzaldúa notes with insight in her foundational text, *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza*, the space that a Latina/o person occupies in the United States is a space in which "the lifeblood of two worlds merge to form a third country — border culture" (25). The Borderlands she describes is the site of a continuous transition of those who are culturally and normatively different. It is a site that often becomes a battlefield, and "a hemorrhage where the third world suffers a confrontation" with the first world (Ramirez, "El feminismo" 207). Its characteristics include ambivalence, tensions, and symbolic bleeding. For Latinas/os, it is also a site of cultural disconnection because

alienated from her mother culture, "alien" in the dominant culture, the woman of color does not feel safe within the inner life of her Self. Petrified, she cannot respond, her face caught between *los intersticios*, the spaces between the two worlds she inhabits. (*Borderlands* 42)

This tension, however, not only produces collisions and alienation, but also conditions for creativity, because from the confrontation and conflict emerges a new hybrid synthesis, a mixture of languages, customs, cultures, and populations (Ramirez, "El feminismo" 207). Also, a new way of being and of seeing the world emerges there, as expressed in Chicana third space culture in the works of Villanueva, Cervantes, Mora, Hernández, Lopez, and

Cantú that are examined in this dissertation.

The feminist theoretician bell hooks also echoes the importance of location for a new cultural ethos, when she writes that the margin is the site of radical openness or resistance because that is where revolutionary ideology is created, by incorporating the experiences of the oppressed (hooks, *Feminist Theory* 161). She emphasizes that the marginalized need to make theory and direct the action. Like Anzaldúa, she indicates that the margin is, in reality, a site of risks and danger, but she also believes that it is the only space from which it is possible to theorize an agenda for a cultural practice (*Yearning* 149), mostly because the people who occupy this place have the capacity to see the world "outside in and inside out" and find new ways to survive: "This sense of wholeness, impressed upon our consciousness by the structure of our lives, provided us with an oppositional world view — a mode of seeing unknown to most of our oppressors, that sustained us" (149). This survival strategy, which corresponds to Anzaldúa's *facultad*, makes possible the observation of deeper realities and the development of a new consciousness, which has the potential to restructure the life and the self of the person (*Borderlands* 61).

According to hooks, the oppressed population often struggles against forgetting. In the more recent creative work, remembering is not only about recalling the past but also about creating spaces where one can "redeem and reclaim the past, legacies of pain, suffering and triumph in ways to transform present reality" (hooks, *Yearning* 147). Hooks says that language is another place of struggle. Borrowing from Adrienne Rich, she reminds us that a radical voice often speaks in the language of the oppressor. While speaking this language got hooks through graduate school and job interviews, it was a

language that “carries the scent of oppression” (146). Hooks differentiates between the language that is directed to the oppressor and the struggle of the oppressed in language. The goal of the latter is not simply to confront domination but to recover one’s self, to reconcile, to reunite, and to renew (*Yearning* 146). In this sense, hooks’s ideas mirror those of the Chicano Movement and Chicana feminist expression.

However, in her criticism of hooks, Analouise Keating asserts that the rhetoric of the marginality in itself supports the hegemonic cultural system, because it encloses itself inside a relation of dichotomies and binary conceptions of self/other: “[These] objections to marginal positionality raise significant questions concerning the political (in)effectiveness of identity politics and other oppositional forms of resistance, especially when applied to writings of contemporary U.S. feminists who locate themselves on the margins and speak in the voice of the other(s)” (“DeCentering” 24). According to Keating, the binary center/margin produces dualisms that maintain the existing relations of power. The margins produce more margins, and the conceptions of self/other promote a worldview divided in oppositions. This is because acceptance of the marginalized voice reinforces the dichotomy oppressor/oppressed (24). Keating, however, points out that these dualisms can be challenged by giving up Western notions of a unitary self and replacing them with notions of liminal identities that are constructed differentially (25). An example of this is Anzaldúa’s *mestiza* consciousness and Borderlands thinking. According to Keating, Anzaldúa’s theories involve tactical renaming and enactment of a series of displacements that confound established margin/center divisions (25).

While hooks’s theory about the margin and center appears dualistic, Soja has pointed out that her notions have elements of a third space narrative. In his view, in

Yearning, hooks consistently and creatively uses the trialectics of spatiality as an alternative way of understanding space as a trans-disciplinary standpoint (Soja 104). The idea of the margin as a site of radical openness makes it an open space of resistance that is “continuously formed” (hooks, *Yearning* 153), where “we are transformed individually, collectively as we make radical creative space which affirms and sustains our subjectivity” (153). In this context, the margin becomes a space of different possibilities for cultural transformation and emerging subjectivities.

Historicity is another important element emphasized by many theorists. Although hooks warned us that remembering in itself can become a nostalgic longing for something that was (147), re-interpretation of history has been important to the liberation struggles of minority groups. For example, the Central American father of liberation psychology, Ignacio Martín-Baró, said that history and knowledge are important because they facilitate understanding of objective realities, contribute to the humanization of people and help the group to take charge of its own destiny (39). When marginalized people become aware of their past and the political forces of their present, they become involved in a process of personal and social transformation through which they begin to see the dialectic of their world (Martín-Baró 40). For Martín-Baró, as for liberation theologians, the development of a new epistemology and new praxis are important milestones in the liberation of oppressed groups (26). This resonates with hooks’s call for a radical cultural practice (*Yearning* 149) and Anzaldúa’s *mestiza* way, which involves rupture with all oppressive traditions, reinterpretation of history, and the adoption of new attitudes towards subgroups, previously discriminated against, i.e. women, other races, and queers (*Borderlands* 104). In the same vein as Martín-Baró, the Brazilian educator Paulo Freire

talks about *concientización* as one of the cornerstones of liberation — being able to articulate how history and existing power structures impact the here and now. Theresa Delgadillo adds to these ideas the concept of hybrid spirituality. This involves a spirituality that combines cultural and political resistance and different traditions of religious and spiritual practices (889). She says: “Through an emphasis on communities of women,⁸ a Chicana feminism fueled by a woman-centered spirituality emerges to challenge the subjugation of women within and without Chicana/o cultures, the marginalization of other sectors of U.S. society, and the destruction of the environment” (888). In Anzaldúa, the Borderlands spirituality borrows from what she calls “folk Catholicism” (*Borderlands* 49). This combines Roman Catholic beliefs with ancient indigenous spirituality and revives old connections to feminine Aztec deities. As an example, the Virgin of Guadalupe functions as the cross-over between the Christian Madonna and the Aztec goddess Tonantzin.

While both Anzaldúa and hooks talk about the violence and creative potential of the Borderlands in the United States, Ursula Biemann focused her video essay “Performing the Border” on the feminization and sexualizing of the present global economy south of the Mexican border. According to Biemann, in the technological space of U.S. multinational corporations, for example, in Ciudad Juarez, women not only find a way to become breadwinners and, therefore, reverse traditional sex roles,⁹ but also in the process become targets of sexual desire and violence. In Biemann’s view, the border is an “uncharted territory where people vacillate between rural and urban conditions, between street vendors and manufacturing of high-tech equipment for the information industry” (100). She points out that the machine culture has not only outsourced production south

of the border but also exported the urban pathology of serial killing, mostly of women (129). While this is especially true for Ciudad Juarez, other areas of the border have also become increasingly violent. In effect, the desert on the Mexican side of the border becomes “a U.S. wasteland of technology where the fragmented bodies of young Mexican women symbolize what Julia Kristeva calls ‘the jettisoned object’ that is radically excluded and draws a person toward a place where meaning collapses” (qtd. in Biemann 2).¹⁰ Paradoxically, the notion of border has become more fluid as multinational companies have moved south, extending their reach to Mexico, while military control on the northern side is increased to keep the unwanted from coming to the United States. For many women who come to Ciudad Juarez and other near-by cities, crossing borders (both symbolic and geopolitical) becomes an activity through which new subjectivities are negotiated. As Bertha Jottar notes, the border itself is rearticulated through the power relationships that are produced by the crossing of people (Biemann 162). The dialectical relationship between the space and persons inhabiting the border serves to redefine cultural practices, conventions, and a person’s sense of self. Violence, then, becomes a trademark of industrialization and militarization of the border, and the construction of border subjectivities. These border subjectivities and their expression in literary and art works are also the focus of my dissertation.

Politicized artistic efforts such as Biemann’s “Performing the Border” add to the existing discourse in an important way, despite the fact that it has been perceived, for instance by Rosa Linda Fregoso as an example of how a First World feminist power defines Third World women as “objects of capital” thanks to the film’s metonymic association of maquila-workers — sex workers — as victims of femicide (*meXicana*13).

At the same time, it is difficult to ignore the increasing violence on the border, especially towards young women. Mexican drug cartels and the trade in powerful firearms are partially responsible for the assaults. Killings on both sides of the border significantly impact everyday life in the border zone. The murders and disappearances depicted in Biemann's film mirror Anzaldúa's ideas about the border as a locus of violent collisions and bleeding, particularly after heavy industrialization of the area and growing economic inequities on the Mexican side that force migration to the north, across the U.S. border. Biemann's work reminds us of how masculine power structures and Western ideals of profitable industrial production have a direct impact on women's well-being. Women's dead bodies are part of what Kristeva calls the abject body: "A decaying body, lifeless, completely turned into dejection... the corpse represents fundamental pollution" (qtd. in Biemann 109). Mary Pat Brady adds to this notion by suggesting that the abjection machine of the border also "transforms people to 'aliens,' 'illegals,' 'wetbacks,' or 'undocumented,' un-intelligible (or unintelligent), ontologically impossible, outside the real and the human" (50). The theory of the border as a machine that produces abject bodies, complements Anzaldúa's notions of the zone being inhabited by *los atravesados*, people who are not considered normal, who are half-breed and half-dead (*Borderlands* 25).

On the other hand, the notion of the border appears frequently in the context of U.S. Latina/o writing. Literature itself can be seen as an ever-changing frontier, a site of creativity. For instance, Gustavo Pérez Firmat and José David Saldívar offer the following vision:

La literatura latina no es un territorio estable y continuo que pueda medirse,

trazarse y colonizarse; en cambio, es un borde, una frontera, un límite complejo y cambiante... el punto de articulación de diferentes culturas, lenguas y valores (qtd. in Loustau 40).

Closely connected to theories of border are notions of Chicana/o identity that have been a focus in U.S. Latina/o literature since the annexation of Mexican territories. Especially in Chicana creative works, the border has been an important theme because of the marginalization and silencing women experienced in the past as a result of official discourse.¹¹ Women writers in particular have worked to expand the borders and move beyond them, speaking from the interstices of the dominant culture, and making their voices heard. Within the official discourse, border or interstitial subjects are often described as unstable, changing, and plural, as evinced in the work of first wave Chicana scholars, writers and visual artists, who are the subject of this dissertation titled “Our Ladies: Third Space Identities in Chicana Artistic Expression, 1970-2000.” I use the appellation “Our Ladies” not only to refer to the central place of *La Virgen de Guadalupe*, *La Llorona* and *La Malinche* in Chicana feminist revisionist scholarship, but also to evoke the critical contributions of Chicana scholars, writers, and artists, such as Anzaldúa, Cervantes, Cantú, and Lopez, whose works I examine in the dissertation.

Chicano Struggle for Self-Determination

As pointed out by many researchers, such as Laura Gómez and Rodolfo Acuña, people of Mexican descent became an ethnic group in the United States after the Mexican-American War (1846-1848), and after the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo was signed. Since much of the present U.S. Southwest was appropriated from Mexico in 1848, its people were given the option of leaving or staying and obtaining the rights of

U.S. citizens, provided that they chose to give up their Mexican citizenship (Gómez 42, 43). Citizenship rights for newly incorporated Mexicans, however, were vague and confusing to the Mexican negotiators because federal citizenship was inferior to state citizenship (45). Those people who held federal citizenship were protected under the Constitution but had no political rights. For instance, in Florida political rights were tied to state citizenship (Gómez 43, 44). In practice, therefore, Mexican Americans, who were guaranteed only federal citizenship, had no political rights.¹² The dominant Euro-American population also viewed them as racially inferior. They were stereotyped as lazy, dirty, apathetic and unproductive in the growing economy, not worthy to be called citizens, in spite of the fact that they made up a significant part of the work force in industries such as railroad maintenance and mineral mining in the Midwest and Southwest (Acuña 88-89).

When Mexicans, for instance in California, resisted the Anglo occupation, they were outnumbered. In the mid-1850s, other forms of resistance emerged. Acuña writes of Francisco Ramírez who published his own newspaper in an effort to champion the Mexican American cause (112). He also protested the lynching of Mexicans, and Anglo American nativism, the goal of which, he argued, was to force out people whom he called the “first occupants of the land” (Acuña 112). Another form of resistance was through antisocial acts, for instance highway banditry. As an example, Acuña brings up the life of Tiburcio Vasquez who was indicted for horse stealing, robbing the Southern Pacific payroll train, and tying up and robbing thirty-five men in Kingston, California. While these were serious criminal acts, Acuña considers this behavior self-defense in a society that degraded Mexicans and did not afford them the possibility of earning a living within

the established economic and political structure (114). Although many Mexicans have turned Tiburcio Vasquez into a folk hero, antisocial acts like his often resulted in Mexican Americans being commonly labeled as criminals. Acuña summarizes Mexican resistance in the following way:

Most Anglo Americans believed that, based on their right of conquest, they were entitled to special privileges and a special citizenship status; this was reinforced by a belief in racial superiority. The Chicano, in contrast, was a conquered person, an alien and a half-breed. When a small number of Chicanos turned to highway banditry, Anglo Americans did not bother to investigate why they committed antisocial acts or why the Chicano masses supported them. They merely stereotyped the entire group as criminal, justifying further violence against the Mexican American community. These factors created the colonization of the Chicano in California... (118).

Fueled by attitudes of xenophobia and a perceived economic threat from successful Mexican gold-miners in California, many were lynched without access to a fair trial or to the justice system in general.

In the early 1900s, large numbers of Mexicans immigrated to the United States as agricultural labor or as refugees from the Mexican Revolution (1910-16). According to Yolanda Alaniz and Megan Cornish, the fact that Chicanos and Mexicans, who worked in the fields, were considered “foreigners,” made it easy to deport them in times of labor surplus (128). Still during the 1920s, Mexicans were considered an ideal agricultural work force (128). The growers reaped big profits from their labor. According to Alaniz and Cornish, in 1928, Mexican farm workers were paid 35 cents an hour. During the

Great Depression, the wages decreased to 14 cents an hour, slashing the laborers' already meager income (128-129). Mexican workers were also considered an ideal labor force because they could be cheaply deported (128). The practice of deportation became a more popular option in the 1930s, resulting in the repatriation of Mexican Americans, which occurred after the economic depression hit in the 1920s. Since deportation was considered an acceptable way to get rid of the labor surplus and preserve work for Americans, many Mexicans left voluntarily to avoid the humiliation of forced deportation. Some did this to avoid violent confrontations with native mobs, as occurred in Terre Haute, Indiana, where Mexican railroad workers were forced off their jobs by a large group of men and women (Balderrama and Rodríguez 99). Acuña points out that repatriation was a natural reaction to the Depression of the 1930s, when brown people were encouraged to return to their countries of origin: "During this time, the border was a revolving door that was open and shut depending on the industrial needs of the United States. It was never shut in the years when Mexican labor was needed" (218). Thus, Mexican Americans became a labor resource in times of need and scapegoats for the ills of Anglo society during periods of internal duress and turmoil. The economic inequities and discrimination of Mexicans resulted in protests. Alaniz and Cornish report that in the early 1900s there were periods of labor unrest due to low wages, poverty living conditions, and lack of citizen rights. These were, however, violently suppressed by growers (132). For instance, when Mexican laborers tried to bring in unions, the farmers brought vigilantes to intimidate them and discouraged labor organizers from joining them (132).

According to Elizabeth Jacobs, it was the annexation of 1848 and the loss of the

Mexican territory that later led to the militant resistance of the Chicano Movement, including the strike of the farm workers in California, for example, or land-grant struggles in Tierra Amarilla, New Mexico (3). The term “Chicano” itself refers to people of Mexican descent who live in the United States and who were radicalized and politicized during the struggle for Civil Rights in the 1960s and 1970s. The origin of the word Chicano is not fully known, although it is assumed to come from *mexicano* or its Nahuatl equivalent, *Meshicano*. It has been closely linked to the rising nationalist movements of Mexican Americans, both as a political and identity marker. As indicated earlier, the Chicano Movement resisted Anglo dominance, previously accepted notions of assimilation, and brought to the forefront old ethnic traditions and pride in the indigenous origins of the group.

Ignacio García divides the development of *Chicanismo* into four phases. The first phase involved rejection of the liberal agenda and the way that Mexican Americans had been assimilated into society.¹³ In the second phase, old heroes were revived and history was re-interpreted in an effort to dismiss negative stereotypes and replace them with more positive ones, in line with the new Chicano political and cultural ethos. The third phase involved a new focus on Chicano class and racial issues and alliance-building with other Third World liberation movements, while the fourth consisted of oppositional politics and the development of leadership (García 9-13).¹⁴

Although many women supported the overall goals of the Movement, it was largely a male organization, in which Chicanas occupied subordinated positions or functioned in supportive roles. As a result of the exclusionary, masculinist practices of the Chicano Movement, Chicana discontent increased, and an incipient feminist

movement developed with an agenda that focused on the issues of women. The first wave of Chicana literature and cultural production, including visual artists, gave a voice to some of these new concerns.

Migration and Questions of Identity

The traditional role of the Latina woman is that of mother and wife. Although research shows that Latina identity is shaped by ethnicity, class, and gender (Chavira-Prado 244), the traditional Latino family structure is dominated by men, according to the principles of *machismo*, while women are expected to bear, nurture, and socialize children, be submissive to their husbands and respect his parents (255). Although subservience to males has been a cultural expectation, women experience power in other areas of life, for instance as mothers and grandmothers (Espin 88). In fact, Aída Hurtado states that virginity until marriage, or the idea of the virtuous woman, gives Latinas the revered status of wife, mother, and eventually grandmother (398). Stereotypically, the Latina woman positions herself according to the principles of *marianismo*, or the cult of the Virgin Mary. Evelyn Stevens explains that there is a nearly universal agreement about the behavior of the ideal woman, which includes such characteristics as moral superiority, spiritual strength, humility, abnegation, sacrifice, and chastity (94). Although some feminists have questioned the existence of *marianismo* in modern Latin American culture, Catholic dogma has facilitated the continuance of these values, at least in some form. For instance, Carla Trujillo suggests that “the Church created the image of the Virgin Mary into ‘a role model for the feminine ideal.’ The men of the church support this image and teach their brethren to desire it in their women, while teaching women to emulate and personify it” (219). Similarly, Consuelo Nieto states that veneration of the

Virgin Mary has had a tremendous impact on the development of the Chicana (208). She sees this impact as crippling Chicana women because it has restricted their role and made it hard to fulfill their full personhood (208). Although some of these values may change or disappear as Latinas immigrate to the United States through acculturation to the mores of the new country, Latino families vary in the degree to which they retain traditional values (Chavira-Prado 256). For instance, Thomas Boswell and James Curtis note that language is most quickly modified in a new culture while religion and cuisine may persist for an indefinite period (qtd. in Chavira-Prado 256). Assimilation, acculturation, and migration are important areas of inquiry for this dissertation, as it explores the multiple expressions of Chicana subjectivities, developed at the crossroads of all these factors.

The process of migration has a psychological impact on the immigrant because it causes changes in his or her identity (Espin 116). As indicated above, acculturation and adaptation to the new culture take time, as does the re-organization of the psyche. This process will terminate only after the person accepts the good and the bad of the new country and incorporates its values and customs into her worldview. Although migration and the introduction of these new values may cause culture shock, many Latinas/os in the United States reject traditional gender roles (Espin 118) and seek out other alternatives.

There may, however, be a conflict whenever the immigrant tries to recreate her ethnicity and employ her own ethnic signs (Christian, "Performing" 172). This occurs primarily when she focuses on what differentiates her from the dominant culture, because she wants to avoid suppressing the ethnic characteristics she feels are her own (172). According to William Boelhower, this kind of multicultural project is associated with the memory of the ethnic subject, through which she maintains contact with the foundational

world of her ancestors: "The importance of this discourse lies in its capacity to create a new ethnic space, built upon the foundation of past and memory, yet ultimately independent of them" (qtd. in "Performing" 173). This space resembles the margin space discussed by hooks, the Borderlands of Anzaldúa and Soja's Third Space, because identity formation is a site where, mediated by memory, hybrid alternatives and new identities are created.

As shown above, Anzaldúa's theoretical formulation regarding the construction of multiple female identities offers an alternative that decentralizes the self/other, and margin/center dichotomies, and situates "the other within one's self," transforming the essentialized conceptions of identity formation into transcultural and transgendered models of subjectivity. The introduction of the Aztec goddess Coatlicue into Anzaldúa's discourse not only signifies an indigenous space of resistance against the hegemonic culture, but also the *intersticios* of ambivalence and acceptance of "patriarchal values within the Chicano culture that are equally exclusionary as the racism of the hegemonic culture, and moreover, these exclusionary structures are intricately connected" (Blom 311).

Anzaldúa talks about the *mestiza* consciousness that emerges from "racial, ideological, cultural, and biological cross-pollination" (*Borderlands* 99), or "crossing over," forming a "hybrid progeny" and a free consciousness (99). This is the result of a combination of many influences, many subjectivities and their simultaneous presence in many different worlds:

Because I, *mestiza*,
continually walk out of one culture

and into another,
 because I am in all cultures at the same time,
alma entre dos mundos, tres, cuatro,
me zumba la cabeza con lo contradictorio.
Estoy mortecada por todas las voces que me hablan
simultaneamente. (Borderlands 99)

Within this context, Anzaldúa's subject is situated in multiple locations and encounters different oppositions transforming them into an identity that combines everything and subverts the existing social norms and relations of power. Anzaldúa, like other Chicana writers, "locates herself on Trinh's ever-shifting marker separating I from Not I, us from them, and invents new spaces for convers(at)iones -- transformational dialogues -- between and among non-unitary plural subjects" (Keating, "DeCentering" 39). The benefit of this conceptualization is that it considers plural subjects and changing realities that form the basis for the identity. This way, Anzaldúa avoids vacillating between opposite poles and locates herself in the multiplicity of herself and her voice (Lunsford 43), where the different parts of her identity or subjectivity mix and overlap, creating new alternatives and a new consciousness: "*Soy un amasimiento*. I am an act of kneading, of uniting and joining that not only has produced a creature of darkness and a creature of light, but also a creature that questions the definitions of light and dark and gives them new meanings" (*Borderlands* 103). In the process of kneading and joining, the questions of language, class, ethnicity, gender and sexuality are re-configured as products of social and historical contingencies (Bromley 293), and the inaccuracies of a Eurocentric and racist history are opposed through a creative discourse (Adams, "Northamerican" 137). In

Anzaldúa's work, the mix of linguistic codes serves as an act of self-affirmation and pride (Leland 172). Furthermore, the function of her anger is to resist the silencing of her speech: "Though annexed, she is not conquered" (Reuman 310). On the other hand, the rage that the *mestiza* at times feels against her own person, may be an example of her internalized oppression. Only after she deconstructs her masculinist worldview and her internalized Eurocentric values can she create her own world (Keating, "Reading" 169).

The identity of immigrants in the United States is a combination of elements that they internalized in their own cultures, traumatic experiences of violence and migration, and values of their Borderlands, where the Hispanic and the North American worlds clash. The theories of hooks, Martín-Baró, Boelhower, Soja, and Anzaldúa help us reconstruct the experiences of women on the margins of dominant culture as they re-conceptualize their discourses from within their own spaces.

Theoretical and Methodological Considerations

In order to write about multiple female subjectivities in Chicana literature and artistic expression, it is necessary to review the theories of experts who have written about the construction of the subject. As mentioned above, the intersections between identity and Borderland theories inform the theoretical basis of my project. First, I define subjectivity as the conscious and unconscious thoughts and emotions that contribute to a person's sense of self and her ways of understanding her relationship with the world (Weedon 32). My work on subject formation engages a variety of theories from the fields of (multi)cultural studies, literature, psychology, geography, Third World feminisms, photography, art, and history. I start from the assumption that the United States is a country of different cultures with multiethnic, multiracial and multi-

geographical influences, thus moving away from the much-cited “melting pot” ideology, whose ideal is assimilation and dismissal of the multifaceted ways in which people of other cultures maintain their connection to their countries of origin and traditions, while developing new subjectivities that incorporate traces of the old homeland and of the host country. Much of the earlier research on multiculturalism focuses on biculturalism and acculturation to explain the identity development of immigrants, who are often called “new Americans.” While such research helps us understand some of the differences between immigrant groups and the mainstream American population, the argumentation still follows a binary division of American/not American, or degrees of “Americanization” that can be charted on a two-dimensional continuum. This does not take fully into account the plurality of ethnic subjectivities, or what Anzaldúa and Soja call a dialectically open logic of “both/and also” (Soja 60). Soja, moreover, explains that there exists an option to move away from binaries “by introducing an-Other term, a third possibility or ‘moment’ that partakes of the original pairing but is not just a simple combination or an ‘in-between’ position along some all-inclusive continuum” (60).¹⁵

This idea of creating a third dimension opens up possibilities from which to theorize about border experience. Some U.S. cultural critics have already pointed out, as does Boelhower in *Through a Glass Darkly*, the complexity of a multicultural project grounded in the memory of the ethnic subject, through which (s)he maintains contact with the world of his/her ancestors as (s)he reproduces him/herself as a member of the ethnic community. Boelhower argues that the ethnic subject always represents a destabilizing factor in the dominant ideology because it is plural and multiform, in and out of the culture, changing roles, and producing ethnic discontinuity on the national

map.

As explained before, Third World Feminists write about multiple subjectivities, developing from Third World women's experiences of multiple oppressions, and what hooks calls a *struggle of memory against forgetting* (hooks 153). This has transformational individual and collective power for minority groups, because it is from the experience of being-on-the-margin and "crossing over" that the oppositional world view develops and opens up a radical creative space. Similarly, Anzaldúa's notions about the *conciencia mestiza* stem from "racial, ideological, cultural and biological cross-pollination" (*Borderlands* 99). According to Anzaldúa, the border experience exists where two cultures violently collide against each other and wherever two opposing ideologies come together. Perhaps more than any other Chicana writer, Anzaldúa offers theoretical identity formulations that decentralize the dichotomy of "self/other" and construct "the other within one's self," challenging essentialist conceptions and moving towards trans-cultural and trans-gendered models of subjectivity. Her concept of interstices, corresponding roughly to Homi Bhabha's in-between space, is used in my research as a third location of creativity and identity formation. For Bhabha, cultural hybridity "gives rise to something different, something new and unrecognizable, a new area of negotiation of meaning and representation" ("The Third Space" 211). Similarly, I theorize that the Chicana authors I study write from the in-between spaces of the official discourse, where the contradictions and creation of new elements go hand-in-hand. In Bhabha's notion of liminal space, he pointed out that the borderline work of culture does not merely recall the past as an aesthetic precedent, but renews the past and refigures it as a contingent in-between space that innovates and interrupts the

performance of the present (“Beyond” 62).

Similarly, in “Mestizaje as Method: Feminists of Color Challenge the Canon,” Chela Sandoval presents a theory of oppositional consciousness, which includes five points of resistance to the U.S. social hierarchy. According to Sandoval, the first four points include: (1) the “assimilationist” mode; (2) the “revolutionary” mode; (3) the “supremacist” mode; and (4) the “separatist” mode. The fifth of these positions, called the differential or *mestiza* mode, deploys each of the other modes as a potential technology of power.¹⁶ Sandoval compares the differential mode to a trickster position in which “subjectivity as masquerade” is used to access different identity, ideological, aesthetic, and political positions. It requires differential movement through multiple systems of resistance and meaning to ensure egalitarian social relations in the political area of the culture (“Mestizaje” 360). Consequently, Sandoval’s notions about oppositional consciousness and modes of resistance provide a tool that is helpful for analyzing modes of Chicana resistance in literary and art works.

Norma Alarcón is another important Chicana feminist theorist who has contributed significantly to the field of Chicana literature and female subjectivities since the publication of the anthology *This Bridge Called My Back*, in 1981. Her article “A Re-Vision Through Malintzin/ or Malintzin: Putting Flesh Back on the Object” is an early effort to expose the mythical and historical distortions to which patriarchy has subjected the person of Malinche as the prostitute/mother of the new *mestizo* race, thus splitting off the sexuality of Chicana subjectivities according to a masculine tradition. Alarcón’s theorizing focused on Chicana feminist revisions around the person of Malinche as an agent and producer of history, speaking subject, and in-between translator, negotiator,

and survivor of violence. Alarcón has consistently argued against traditional notions of an autonomous, unitary subject, showing that women of color are subjects-in-process whose identity-in-difference (“Conjugating” 136) operates in the interstices of dominant identity politics. To her, women of color function in non-unitary and conflictive positions. Consequently, the multiple subjectivities arise in liminal conflict situations and are produced by contradictory discourses. Alarcón writes,

The critical desire to undercut subject determination through structures and discourses, in my view, presupposes a subject-in-process who constructs provisional identities, or Sandoval’s *tactical subjectivity*, which subsume a network of signifying practices and structural experiences imbricated in the historical *and* imaginary shifting national borders of Mexico and the United States for Chicanas... (“Conjugating” 137)

More recently, Mary Pat Brady has pointed out that in spite of Alarcón’s numerous essays on the subject and her role as publisher of Third Woman Press, she has received little critique for her ideas by other Chicana scholars. One of the problems in Alarcón’s theory on subject formation has to do with a negation of experience and its primary focus on discursive practices only. For instance, Shari Stone-Mediatore argues that experience can be conceptualized in non-essentialist ways. Citing the works of Chandra Mohanty, she explains that “efforts to remember and to narrate everyday experiences of domination and resistance, and to situate these experiences in relation to broader historical phenomena, can contribute to the development of oppositional consciousness” (qtd. in Stone-Mediatore 123), because recording, re-interpreting, and reprocessing lived experiences in a collective context makes possible identification with

oppositional struggles and the assumption of new subjectivities.

Paula Moya, moreover, has developed alternative ideas about female subjectivity in which she openly criticizes postmodern notions of identity, especially those of Sandoval and Alarcón. In *Learning from Experience: Minority Identities, Multicultural Struggles*, Moya argues that identities are social constructs that depend on the context of the person. They are not arbitrary, because they refer to verifiable aspects of the social world. She challenges the assumption that multiple subjectivities are incoherent, because identity is founded in social categories, such as race, class, gender and sexuality, and mediated by experience. For Moya, there is no proof that conflictive discourses are also contradictory. According to her, the idea that identities constantly shift in response to changes in circumstances is questionable because it does not leave room for a more stable construct of identity. As an example, she cites the image of a Mexican lesbian mother from the working class who presents herself as Chicana in one context, as a woman of color in another and as mother in a third. These identities are relatively stable although their representation varies in different contexts. Moya theorizes:

Within a realist framework, oppositional ideologies (and the identities they engender) are more than sites of political and theoretical resistance to be pragmatically or strategically occupied or abandoned. Rather they are ways individuals or groups perceive, interpret, and interact with the world around them. Thus, a change in ideology or identity can represent a movement toward a better (or worse) understanding of the social world. (91)

Overall, my study borrows from Third World feminist thinking and Moya's post-positivist notions, not to mention the French theorists in this context, although their ideas

are not often considered germane to those of women of color. At the height of the feminist movement, Audre Lorde stated at the Second Sex Conference in 1979, that “the master’s tools will never dismantle the master’s house” (“Master’s” 99). While the French feminists did not echo patriarchal masculine theory in their writings, white women’s liberal feminism was considered too narrowly gender-based and, therefore, not applicable into Third World circumstances. I, however, believe that these theories have more cross-cultural value than they are credited with. Jacques Lacan’s description of the mirror phase, elaborated in *Ecrits*, and Julia Kristeva’s notions about the *semiotic chora*, which refers to the articulation of unconscious processes that fracture images and maintain the *status quo* of language, can be helpful analytical tools. For instance, *chora* is an underlying nonverbal, non-spatial and non-temporal aspect of language that contains libidinal energy and has a direct connection with subjectivity, preceding its formation. Similarly, Luce Irigaray’s notions about the plurality of female eroticism and notions of *parler femme*, establish female sexuality as the basis for the unique way women communicate and write. Although they can be useful, I will utilize these theories only minimally in this dissertation.

Since my study involves a variety of genres, including photography, I engage concepts related to what Marianne Hirsch calls the “familial gaze,” which draws attention to the hierarchy of family members, and the conventions and ideologies through which family members see themselves and each other. Family photographs have a connection to narrative, memory, and mourning, each of which merit separate analysis. Still more interesting are the theories of photography that Roland Barthes presents in *Camera lucida*, making a distinction between *studium*, or the general affect of the photograph, and

punctum, which is an element that fragments it. A *punctum* is a sting, a peck, a little hole or, in photographic terms, an accident that “pricks” the viewer, or is poignant to him/her (27). If *studium* consists of the general affective impression (liking/not liking) of the picture, the *punctum* is a detail, a partial object, that potentially expands the vision. This introduces a third element, which brings to the forefront another reality, hidden from direct vision. The concept the *punctum* is relevant to my dissertation, because, like the notions of the third space, it brings in a third element that uncovers previously hidden elements.

Master’s Tools

Although there are a significant number of critical articles focusing on female subjectivities and border theory in Latina/Chicana literature, I will discuss only the most important early texts of relevance to my project. Among them, *Breaking Boundaries*, edited by Asunción Horno-Delgado, Eliana Ortega, Nina Scott and Nancy Saporta, while not a Chicana text, was an early effort to compile a *corpus* of U.S. Latina literary writing. The value of this book lies in its historical review of how Latina women were able to break into the literary field as a result of their increased educational level and the new cultural spaces, opened up to them by feminist discourse, emancipatory minority movements and participation in public poetry readings. This period was concerned with consciousness-raising, focusing to a large extent on the oppression and inequality of women, which were reflected in women’s literary texts as a role reversal (i.e., replacing the male head of the household by a woman). These themes are important in the texts of the authors I am studying.

At around the same time, María Herrera-Sobek edited a collection of critical

articles under the title of *Beyond Stereotypes: The Critical Analysis of Chicana Literature*. Again, these were early writings that featured Chicana authors from the early part of the twentieth century to 1983. Such themes as Chicano *machismo*, re-evaluation of *La Malinche*, and the search for female identity started to appear more regularly in anthologies. Two of the poets of my study, Lorna Dee Cervantes and Alma Villanueva, were included in this publication, the former as an example of Chicana humor and the latter as a creator of a primal world where woman is the root of all life. In these texts, the poets deal with the tensions of gender oppression, search for alternative female spaces, role reversals, and reinterpretation of myths. Later, Herrera-Sobek and Helena María Viramontes edited *Chicana Creativity and Criticism: New Frontiers in American Literature*, which includes both theoretical and creative writings of known Chicana authors. The range of themes in this publication is much broader and looks at innovation of form and content in the work of Chicana writers, in addition to more female-centered and political pieces. The tough, alienated image of the *pachuca*, the world of the dispossessed and illegal aliens, the ecological problems of Mexican farm-workers, sexual violation, erotic female passion, and criticism of the patriarchal culture are addressed more directly. Questions of direction for future Chicana literary analysis begin to take shape and lead to the formation of two divided camps, one accepting European, American, and feminist discourses as tools for analyzing Chicana writing, and the second rejecting white theorists and looking for an authentic Chicana critical discourse. Tey Diana Rebolledo's *Women Singing in the Snow* follows a similar pattern, although it includes a full historical review of Chicana literature since the nineteenth century. This publication is important because one of its themes was to show how "The colonized

subject breaks the silence and seizes subjectivity” (5). Rebolledo views this as a difficult process, as it involves first finding language, then voice, consciousness of self, and finally self-insertion as a subject into a literary text. Issues of becoming a speaking subject, having multiple identities in different cultures and weaving a subject-consciousness that is shifting, complex and changing, already reflect the larger Chicana cultural preoccupations in the 1990s.

Caren Kaplan, Norma Alarcón and Mino Moallem’s *Between Woman and Nation: Nationalisms, Transnational Feminisms, and the State* takes a more critical stand on nation-state formation, transnational subjects of feminism and Chicana resistance to patriarchal ideologies. In the essays of this book, problematics of gender, state and identity remain central. For instance, Laura Elisa Pérez’s chapter on Chicana/o aesthetics resonates with my study, because she examines paintings of the Virgin of Guadalupe by Yolanda Lopez as explication of identity categories, such as “woman,” “I,” and “Chicana.” The tone of Pérez’s writings projects a female image that defies norms established by the masculine society and the church, and re-establishes women in the cultural geography. Another chapter in the collection, thematically related to my dissertation, is written by Rosa Linda Fregoso. It examines how Chicana urban identities, such as the *pachuca*, were absent in Chicano Movement’s strategies for cultural resistance as an oppositional female figure (“Re-Imagining” 72), partially because of its “threat to the Chicano family romance” (90). Fregoso concludes:

Her [*pachuca*] comportment registers the outer boundaries of Chicana femininity; her body marks the limits of *la familia*; her masquerade accentuates her deviance from the culture’s normative domestic place for women. And perhaps the

production of *pachuca-chola*-homegirl subjectivities has not been celebrated by many of us precisely because her body defies, provokes, challenges as it interrogates the traditional familial basis of our constructions of the Chicano nation. (90)

While my dissertation does not specifically include notions about the *pachuca* as a figure of female resistance, it is a relevant example of yet another bodily expression of Chicana contestation of the domesticity to which the Chicano Movement and Chicano culture confined women.

Sonia Saldívar Hull examines more closely the meaning of the border and border crossings in *Feminism of the Border. Chicana Gender Politics and Literature*. She focuses on Chicana identity development, mestiza politics, women's struggles and formation of collective solidarities in the border literature, mostly by Anzaldúa, Sandra Cisneros, and María Helena Viramontes. Similarly, Debra Castillo and María Cordoba further develop border theory in *Border Women: Writing from la Frontera*, and examine the interplay of the dominant Mexican and North American cultures in border women's daily lives and writing. In addition to analyzing texts of known Chicana writers, they use Mexican women's texts to explore the specific conditions of literary production on both sides of the border.

Another interesting approach to Latina/o identity is Karen Christian's *Show and Tell: Identity as Performance in U.S. Latina/o Literature*. She uses Judith Butler's theory of identity as performance, and Bhabha's notion of "nation as narration" (14). This concept establishes a dynamic relationship between ethnic literature and ethnic identity, because, according to Bhabha, national identity is narrated through the cultural texts of

peoples (qtd. in *Show and Tell* 14). This can be seen as an on-going transformative process. In addition to the performative aspects of identity, Christian focuses on those daily practices that transform culture. Perhaps the more creative aspect of her theory is the idea of identity as drag, which calls for transformations and invention in interaction with cultural heritage, gender roles, and dominant culture. This is an especially useful notion for examination of queer images of the Virgin of Guadalupe.

As can be seen above, many critics have studied Latina/o subjectivities in literary texts using feminist, historical, sociological, and psychological theories to explore the meaning of identity categories, evolution of the female voice, development of self-consciousness in the context of gender and race, and finally the use of strategies of resistance against those who exercise power over minority subjects. In Chicano Studies, the presence of the U.S.-Mexico border adds a spatial view to theories about female subjectivities. There are, however, two publications (previously doctoral theses) that come close to my project. The first was published under the title *Extinct Lands, Temporal Geographies* by Mary Pat Brady. Her goal was to examine the role of narrative and narrative strategies in the production of space in Chicana literature. The book is divided into six chapters, in which she studies the centrality of space in Chicana letters, the state-sponsored aesthetic project of the border, the meaning of gender and sexuality in micro-spatial practice, and what Brady calls narco-spatiality. Her research is informed by the theories of Soja, Alarcón, María Ruiz de Burton, Rebolledo, Saldívar, and Marta Sánchez, and aims to refocus spatial analysis by highlighting problematics of gender, race, and sexuality in literary texts.

The second publication of relevance to my work is *Postmodern Cross-*

Culturalism and Politicization in U.S. Latina Literature by Fatima Mujcinovic. While the author engages a variety of theories, her main intent was to study U.S. Latina literature as an inclusive literary tradition, from the viewpoint of postmodern narrative strategies. She investigates biculturalism as a space that produces differential subjectivity and hybridity, diasporic identities, and geopolitical conditions that resist subjugation and oppression. Mujcinovic borrows from U.S. Third World feminisms, Bhabha's postcolonial theory, and Amy Kaminsky's notions of exile. While Brady writes about the production of space and spatial articulation in Chicana narrative, Mujcinovic looks for transformative subjectivities within the construct of biculturalism and postmodern fluidity.

As stated before, I utilize a variety of identity theories that complement and interrogate each other rather than rely on one ideology alone. The chapters of the dissertation will show that each genre, be it poetry, visual arts or autobiography, expresses multiple voices that are often contradictory although not necessarily incoherent. Moya's theorization makes it possible to move away from Alarcón's idea of constantly shifting subjectivities and to understand identity as "a historically and materially grounded perspective" (62), enabling a person to "read the world in a particular way" (17). The link between identity, social location, and experience is one of the cornerstones of this dissertation. While some identity categories are relatively fixed, such as race and gender, they are experienced differently in different social contexts. Thus, writing from the spaces in-between on Moraga's terms means "having a foot in both worlds" and "refusing the split" (qtd. in Moya 95). The very notion of in-betweenness facilitates dialogue and incorporates multiple aspects of a person's being and experience.

The dissertation is divided into five parts: an introduction, three chapters, and a brief concluding chapter. In the introduction (Chapter One), I have explained the research questions, hypotheses and theories that have guided my study, especially those related to female (and specifically Chicana) identities, border crossings, and spatiality of artistic production. I also utilize ideas from many different disciplines, including cultural and feminist studies, Third World feminisms, history, psychology, art theory, and geography. I include a small historical review of the context in which Chicana literary and cultural notions about women have developed.

In Chapter Two, “Poetic Voices and Chicana Identity,” I analyze Chicana poetry and its relationship to the creation of women’s space and border crossing. The poems date from the 1970s and 1980s, when women writers were trying to find their place in literary production and explore Latina (Chicana) identity as a sexual, racial, and political construct. In this section, I study *Emplumada* (1981) by Lorna Dee Cervantes; *Bloodroot* (1982) by Alma Villanueva; and *Borders* (1986) by Pat Mora. In *Emplumada*, the poet gives voice to the Chicana experience and its relationship to racism, sexism, poverty, sexual abuse, and domestic violence. Her famous “Cannery Town in August” depicts the silence, monotony, and loneliness of women in “bodiless uniforms” who perform labor “dumbed by the can’s clamor” (6). The poetic landscape changes in “For Virginia Chavez,” where the author speaks from the space of two young girls’ friendship, their rebellion against the cultural norms and their experience of male violence, which the poetic voice is able to mediate only through art and transformative imagination. Geographic border crossing, searching for one’s roots, and “being in and out of both the home and the host countries” are themes in “Poema para los Californios muertos,”

“Oaxaca 1974,” and “Visions of Mexico at a Writing Symposium.” For Cervantes, the alternative space of creation is found through language and self-empowerment. She associates the writing of poetry with the braiding of her hair, when she says: “I tie up my hair in loose braids, and trust only what I have built with my own hands” (14). In her poems, she searches for thematic and linguistic expressions of Chicana experience within mainstream society.

Like Cervantes, Villanueva talks about birthing oneself “I/woman give birth: and this time to myself” (21), to achieve greater self-definition. *Bloodroot* is written primarily “woman to woman” and seeks to create a mythical world of natural elements such as blood, rocks, minerals, and water, in which the poet desires reintegration into the maternal womb. The theme “bloodroot” (blood of a woman) refers to the fantasy of a mystical pregnancy that occurs outside of masculine power and gives life to all humankind. Thus, Villanueva creates a woman’s space, transforms it into the birth place of both genders, and although essentialist in many ways, attempts to escape binaries through mythical imagination.

Pat Mora’s *Borders* is more directly a “fronterizo” book of poems. For Mora, the border of El Paso/Juarez is both an aesthetic and a political construct. Like Debra Castillo, she travels north to south, observing the socio-cultural difference between poverty and privilege that follows the geographical division. While she seeks sources of female strength in her race and family, she also speaks from the “place in the middle” (Nepantla), to conserve the tensions and plurality of borderland existence (Murphy, “Conserving” 60). Much of Mora’s writing tries to capture the energy and positive value of binaries, such as woman/mother and mother/earth. For instance, in “Desert Women,”

she uses the cactus as a symbol of women's strength and capacity for resistance: "Like cactus, we've learned to hoard, to sprout deep roots..." (80). Similarly, from the start, she focuses on the divisiveness of borders. In "Bi-lingual Christmas," the last stanza reveals the hard realities of the geographical space on the U.S. Mexican border: "Not twinkling lights we see but search lights seeking illegal aliens outside our thick windows" (21). And in "Now and Then America," the poetic voice pleads, "Let me into board rooms, wearing hot colors, my hair long and free, maybe speaking Spanish. Risk my difference, my surprises. Grant me a little life, America" (33).

The selected works of Cervantes, Villanueva, and Mora in my study come from different historical moments in Chicana history, and their identity strategies, therefore, also differ. During the earlier period, finding a space from which the female voice could speak was important, while towards the end of the 1990s, resistance to the male order and the deployment of multiple positions for the subject formation became more prevalent. My intent is to analyze a variety of different identity positions and points of resistance that find expression in these collections of poetry.

In Chapter Three, "Chicana Visions Here and Beyond: *Our Lady*," I focus on the digital art of Alma Lopez. Following the revisions of traditional feminine and religious images by Yolanda Lopez (Appendix, Figures 3, 4, and 5) and Ester Hernández (Figure 2) decades earlier, Alma Lopez's Chicana-inspired picture of *La Virgen de Guadalupe* (*My Lady*, 1999, Figure 6) provoked such controversy that the Santa Fe Museum of International Art nearly removed it from an exhibition in 2001. Since Lopez produces digital images and uses her friends and other real-life models in the photographs, her work truly involves what Gaspar de Alba calls embodied aesthetics. In

addition to religious borders, Lopez traverses sexual, historical, and cultural frontiers, positioning herself frequently in Soja's third space. Her re-interpretation of Guadalupe consists of a picture of her friend dressed in a bikini of roses standing on a platform held by an angel with the wings of a Viceroy butterfly. This erotic re-conceptualization of the virgin creates an effect of sexual agency, while simultaneously functioning as part of a lesbian self-representation. The Viceroy butterfly symbolizes natural border crossings between Mexico and the United States, as well as genetic memory. Lopez says that the image also "mirrors parallel intersecting histories of being different or other even in one's own community" (Ramirez, "Borders" 237). The presence of a digitally imaged female body serves as a text that expresses the complexity of Chicana-lived experiences and positions the virgin at the intersection of racial and sexual desire. Yolanda Lopez, Ester Hernández and Alma Lopez perhaps more than other artists and writers in my study, combine notions of the lived experience as they re-interpret cultural myths and images from a third dimension. Moreover, Alma Lopez adds a queer re-imagining of the image of the Virgin.

In Chapter Four, "Fictions of Autobiography and Fictitious Family Photographs," I analyze Norma Cantú's *Canícula: Snapshots of a Girlhood en la Frontera*. The author calls this book a fictitious autobiography, explaining that "life en la frontera is raw truth, and stories of such life, fictitious as they may be, are even truer than true" (xi). The text itself is both an imaginary and real-life collage of events, memories, photographs, and dialogue that occur on many spatial frontiers, including the geographic, ethnic, sexual, and linguistic border. Time and narration are fragmented in *Canícula*, giving the narrative the effect of an emotional journey, a social history of sorts. In my

analysis, I engage theories related to women's autobiography and family photographs. I am interested in what Marianne Hirsch calls the "familial gaze," which reveals true and false identifications, relationships between family members, and efforts to control the images, memories, and narrative. Photos also produce agency and resistance. Hirsch argues that only a careful reading that confronts the personal with cultural, political, and economic meanings will be able to locate the resistant elements of the photographic image that are situated somewhere between the line of visibility and invisibility (xi-xv). In this context, Barthes's notion of the *punctum* as a partial object that expands the vision will add to the exploration of hidden meanings of the picture. *Canícula* does not follow a linear plot, but rather combines photographs and stories in a way that foregrounds contradictions and multiple subject positions of the Chicana third space.

Finally in the Conclusion of the dissertation, I discuss my findings in light of the theories and texts presented. I show the connections between space, border crossings, and the multiplicity of Chicana subjectivities. Using Anzaldúa's *mestiza* consciousness and Moraga's "theories in the flesh" as a starting point, I hope to stimulate further dialogue about the construction of the Chicana subject in the third space. The dissertation shows how Chicana feminist thought evolved over time and how the artistic work analyzed here served to challenge the sexist and masculinist values of the Chicano Movement, as well as the discriminatory practices of the dominant culture, thereby giving a voice to Chicanas. In this study, the female body itself is one of the sites of this contestation, as seen in the queer image of the Virgin in Alma Lopez's art or in texts that depict the marks left on the female body through violence, rape, killing, or the harsh conditions of factory labor. Chicana voices and subjectivities emerge from these

Borderlands conditions, as Anzaldúa proposed. In talking about the violation of women's bodies, Antonia Castañeda points out that "these forms of domination, power and oppression are rooted in the invasion of Americas, in colonialist domination that began over 500 years ago with Columbus" ("History" 312). It is these forms of domination carried into the present that the artistic expressions of my dissertation address.

Notes

¹ *Escondida* is a hide-and-go-seek game that the author played as a child. She is using it here to stand in for the hidden parts of her identity that she has tried to bring to light.

² According to Mujcinovic, Latino literature, created at the margins of the dominant culture, as a reaction against the stigmatization of its people, inevitably developed the modernist search for identity as one of its focal points. In the 1960s, demands for political power combined with ideas of *mestizaje* as a foundation for ethnic identity formation, gave way in the 1970s to subaltern and diasporic positioning of the identity question. During the 1980s and 1990s, the inclusion of female writers opened up a new space for the construction of gendered subjectivities.

³ Ester Hernández and Yolanda Lopez are the best-known artists of these images.

⁴ See also Mora, *Nepantla*, 5-6.

⁵ I use Mexico as a singular homeland since my focus is only on Chicano history. Torres broadens the concept of homelands to cover other countries such as Cuba and Puerto Rico.

⁶ Terry Eagleton explains, in *The Idea of Culture* (119), Raymond Williams' idea of common culture as a network of shared meanings and activities that strives towards an advance of consciousness and elicits full collaboration of all its members.

⁷ Homi Bhabha talks about "space beyond" and "in-between space" that innovates and interrupts the present. See *The Location of Culture*, 7.

⁸ This comment refers to the main characters in Ana Castillo's novel *So Far from God*.

⁹ The ethic of "high productivity and low cost of labor" that characterizes U.S. interest in setting up a *maquiladora* industry in Mexico has not brought wealth to Mexican border towns. For instance, in Tijuana only 5 percent of families today are able to provide for their basic needs, while morbidity and mortality rates remain high. See Gilbert Gonzalez and Raul Fernandez, *A Century of Chicano History: Empire, Nations and Migration*, 143-144.

¹⁰ See Julia Kristeva's *Powers of Horror* for an in-depth analysis of abjection.

¹¹ This point has been elaborated in *Breaking Boundaries* by Horno-Delgado, Ortega, Scott and Sternbach. The book was one of the first collections of critical articles about U.S. Latina writing, which had been virtually unrecognized by the literary establishment of the dominant culture.

¹² Gomez explains that Supreme Court Chief Justice John Marshall distinguished between state and federal citizenships. By 1870, this division became a law that affected former Mexican citizens under the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo granting them federal citizenship only.

¹³ García explains that Mexican Americans were only allowed in the American mainstream if they gave up their Mexican heritage and integrated into the United States through education, patriotism, loyalty to the government, and cultural assimilation (9, 10).

¹⁴ According to García, oppositional politics had to do with Chicano rejection of Anglo society by emphasizing Mexicanness and developing an autonomous

party, platforms, and grassroots organizations, which sought to involve participation of the whole *barrio*.

¹⁵ Soja's theories are based on Henri Lefebvre's conceptualization of a triple dialectic or *une dialectique de triplicate*, which seeks linkages between space, time and social being in the making of history. Soja also incorporates Homi Bhabha's notions of cultural difference, hybridity and the in-between space, which I used in the title of my project, to signify an-Other space of ethnic identity/cultural formation that defies binary logic.

¹⁶ According to Sandoval, the "assimilationist" mode can also be labeled a "liberal" mode of resistance. The "revolutionary" mode corresponds to "insurgent" resistance, and the "supremacist" mode to cultural-nationalist resistance while the fourth mode is "separatist." The fifth tactic, which Sandoval calls the "differential" or "mestiza" mode utilizes all the other modes of resistance for intervening in and transforming social relations ("Mestizaje" 359-360).

¹⁷ On identity production and discursive construction of experience, see Joan Scott, 796-797.

¹⁸ Adrienne Rich also explores the relationship between location, poetry, and the body.

CHAPTER TWO

Poetic Voices and Chicana Identity

Every day I am deluged with
 reminders that this is not
 my land
 and this is my land. Cervantes, "Poem for the Young White Man"

Viewing the borderlands as an interstitial site suggests a type of liminality. The betweenness leads to a becoming, a sense of cultural and personal identity that highlights flux and fluidity while connected by a string memory of (a discredited) history and (a devalued) heritage. The articulation of Chicano poetry is one embodiment of this becoming. Pérez-Torres, *Movements in Chicano Poetry*

The Chicano Movement forged ideals of the traditional family and motherhood, and considered women's rights a threat to the long-held cultural values of the community, given the need to keep intact the patriarchal order that existed prior to and during the conquest (Roth 138). Opposition to these attitudes emerged relatively early, and opening up a new social space soon became a subject of active debate among women who were seeking to move away from the patriarchal notions or *carnalismo*¹ of the movement's philosophy. As demonstrated in Alma Garcia's collection of women's activist writing, *Chicana Feminist Thought*, different voices emerged in the 1970s and 1980s "to overcome sexist oppression but still affirm a militant ethnic consciousness" (1). It was important for Chicana feminist thinkers to join forces with the Movement's efforts to

fight for Chicano civil rights and Mexican American socio-economic self-determination, while still striving towards gender equality. Chicanas, however, were concerned about the reception of these new ideals, as Francisca Flores noted in 1971:

More often than not, when the issue of women enters conversation... all of the defenses go up. The women become defensive because they do not want to be considered anti-men and the men immediately feel challenged. The composition of the group does not matter, lower economic or professional, the scene is the same... Women too: more Chicanas are fighting for their own identity, and they do not care who does not like it. Women must learn to say what they think and feel, and be free to state it without apologizing or prefacing every statement to reassure men that they are not competing with them. (6)

Such ideas, however, remained a source of debate. Inspired by the example of female role models from Mexican history, such as *La Malinche*, Sor Juana Inéz de la Cruz, *soldaderas*, and *Adelitas*, some Chicanas sought to develop a feminism that was rooted in indigenous beliefs, yet part of the ethnic liberation movement, even if Chicana women were labeled *vendidas* and *agabachadas* by many of their male counterparts.² Early on, Chicanas steered away from Anglo feminism, which they considered a movement of primarily white middle-class women, in an attempt to remain within the confines of Mexican American culture (Roth 162). Some activists felt that sexism was a problem of “the capitalist ideology that advocates male supremacist values” (Nieto Gomez, “Sexism” 97) and not particularly relevant to Mexican American women, who were also subject to racial and class oppression. Other Chicana feminists focused on changing widely accepted stereotypes about Chicanas/os that were reinforced by the politics of the dominant culture. To counter these common conceptions, Adaljiza Sosa

Riddell writes: “We certainly remember mothers and sisters who worked in the fields or at menial labor in addition to doing work required at home to survive. Submissiveness, chastity, and unworldliness are luxuries of the rich and/or nearly rich” (Sosa Riddell 93). While it was acknowledged that Chicana feminism should not imitate Anglo values or misperceptions of Mexican Americans, but should, instead, address problems of racial and economic oppression, there were women who challenged the ideals of male supremacy that for centuries had shaped Mexican American thinking and family structure. Lesbian rights advocate Carla Trujillo was one of the first Chicana feminists to focus on the liberation of Chicanas from traditional sex roles, which encouraged women to see themselves as whole only insofar as they were attached to a man or bearing children: “We are taught to undervalue our needs and voices. Our viewpoints, opinions and expertise are considered secondary to those of males – even if we are more highly trained... we must fight for our own voices as women, since this will ultimately serve to uplift us as a people” (qtd. in García 285, 286). Consequently, early Chicana *feministas*, such as Consuelo Nieto, recommended three steps to promote their liberation: 1) Work with other Chicanas to define their role, goals, and strategies; 2) Participate in the Chicano Movement and sensitize men to the issue of women’s oppression; 3) Become involved in the mainstream women’s rights movement (Nieto 210). Nevertheless, as much as Chicanas focused on creating a movement that would fit their own cultural history and dictates, it would be wrong, as Roth points out, to ignore the impact of Anglo feminism on its development. It was important for Chicanas to not fall into the trap of replicating the either/or logic of national loyalists who accused Chicanas of *vendidismo* (171). Instead, many Chicanas were influenced by mainstream left-wing and black feminist ideologies, because they linked gender oppression to other forms of oppression.

In fact, all three feminist liberation movements (black, white, and Chicana) focused on the inequalities and discrimination that women experienced in everyday life (Roth 176, 177). While Chicana feminists were influenced by mainstream liberal feminism in their quest for women's rights and were to some extent interested in establishing liaisons with it (Nieto 210), they criticized the movement for its narrow focus on sexism and lack of attention to race and class.³

Thus, Chicana feminist discourse has been linked to the larger U.S. Third World feminist movement. One of the first texts to address the problems of all women of color was *This Bridge Called My Back*, published in 1981. This text was an effort to piece together articles, journal entries, letters, interviews, and poems that reflected the thinking and artistic creativity of a diverse group of women of color, all of whom wanted to write to and about women and their racial, economic, and sexual oppression. In the Introduction, Cherríe Moraga stated that she wanted the book to become a revolutionary tool that would radicalize others into action (xxvi). While the editors' main goal was to address discrimination as it pertained to race, class, gender, and sexuality, the authors also wanted to make a statement about the divisions in the feminist movement and white feminists' intolerance regarding issues of difference and prejudice (Moraga, Introduction xxiii).

The division between white feminists and women of color was raised, for instance, by Audre Lorde in a letter sent to Mary Daly,⁴ in which Lorde criticized Daly's book *Gyn/Ecology* for dismissing the heritage of black women:

I feel that you celebrate differences between white women as a creative force towards change, rather than a reason for misunderstanding and separation. But you fail to recognize that, as women, those differences expose all women to

various forms and degrees of patriarchal oppression, some of which we share, and some of which we do not.

(“Letter” 97)

Lorde viewed white feminism as a separatist movement that did not promote understanding and unity between all women, nor see the strength in difference. As she put it so memorably, “the master’s tools will never dismantle the master’s house” (“Tools” 99). Criticizing women who felt they must seek support “in the master’s house,” Lorde believed that genuine change was possible only through empowering and connecting women.

Similar sentiments were expressed by Anzaldúa, who had felt different and alienated since her childhood. As she asserted: “In *El Mundo Zurdo*,⁵ I with my own affinities and my own people with theirs can live together and transform the planet” (“La Prieta” 209). Anzaldúa, like many other Chicana feminists, felt their strength came from their indigenous heritage, their Aztec spirituality, and their connection to the Earth. As previously indicated, Anzaldúa’s theorization of the *mestiza* consciousness is based on notions of cultural *mestizaje*, or the mixing of Indian, Mexican, African, and white heritage, each part equally important, and not blended together in an assimilationist way. Anzaldúa writes,

I am visible — see my Indian face — yet I am invisible. I both blind them with my beak nose and am their blind spot. But I exist, we exist. They’d like to think I have melted in the pot. But I haven’t, we haven’t. (*Borderlands*, 86)

Nurtured by new feminist ideals, Chicana poets of the 1970s and 1980s, such as Alma Villanueva, Lorna Dee Cervantes, Bernice Zamora, Denise Chavez, and

Evangelina Vigil started to publish their works. While Rafael Pérez-Torres points to 1965 as the birth year of Chicanismo and Chicano poetry, it was not until the mid-1980s that emerging Chicana literary criticism made Chicana writing more widely known (51). Much of Chicana writing focused on sociopolitical and more subjective themes about the position and identity of women. Even though not all writers labeled themselves feminists, many Chicana poets wrote on the emerging themes of empowerment, the celebration of femaleness, and consciousness-raising about the oppressive conditions of Chicano life.

Yvonne Yarbro-Bejarano writes:

Perhaps the most important principle of Chicana feminist criticism is the realization that the Chicana's experience as a woman is inextricable from her experience as a member of an oppressed working-class minority and a culture which is not the dominant culture. Her task is to show how in works by Chicanas, elements of gender, race, culture, and class coalesce. ("Chicana Literature" 214)

Like Anzaldúa, Yarbro-Bejarano links the terms "Chicana" and "mestiza" to show the multiplicity of racial and historical elements that factor into Chicana writing and identity.

Following these themes and developments in Chicana feminist thought and writing, I will explore in this chapter how Chicana poets of the 1970s and 1980s situated themselves within the larger context of Chicanismo and started to deploy feminist discursive strategies to subvert existing stereotypes and dispel essentialist notions about women. I will also utilize theorizations about border-crossing to analyze the development of multiple identities and the subject-in-process in the works of the poets Alma Villanueva, Lorna Dee Cervantes, and Pat Mora. I will argue that the location from which they write, the border itself and its multiple crossings, foregrounds their sense of

self and their artistic expression. In many ways, Chicana poets of this era developed works about their maturation into adulthood. Therefore, the poems could also be categorized as coming of age narratives.

Alma Villanueva

Alma Villanueva's first collection of poems, *Bloodroot*, was published in 1977 by Place of Herons Press, whose editors explained in its Foreword that the general goal of the collection was to help mold a new world of brother-, and sisterhood, breaking down barriers between people and nations and reforging mankind's ancient connections with animals and with nature (iii). Interestingly, in the preface, James Cody compared Villanueva's writing to that of Whitman and Neruda, praising its masculine qualities: "At first I thought she was a man or couldn't tell. I realized she wasn't and that her poems were of the universal quality, embracing all subjects and passions, that seemed... to come almost only from the writings of men" (i). Although Cody praised Villanueva's text as an exemplary piece of writing, it is easy to perceive the masculinist subtext underpinning his assumptions. He continues, "In addition, there was no self-pity that is in so much of 'feminist' poetry. Instead there was a poet who took full glory in her reality as a woman and yet saw, practiced and evinced no limitations because of that femininity. Instead there was full acceptance of her womanhood with no self-defeating hatred of men" (i). Despite the generally positive response to *Bloodroot*, Cody appears to perceive feminists as angry, self-pitying women, less worthy of recognition than men. As he states later in the text, "Alma Villanueva is not a feminist or a female poet, she is a poet taking on all the responsibilities of that title" (i). It was against these patriarchal attitudes of both the dominant culture and the Chicano Movement that Chicana authors started to write.

Specifically, by focusing on issues of race and social class in addition to gender, Chicana feminists differentiated themselves both from Anglo feminism and from the Chicano Movement.

Regardless of Cody's glowing appraisal of the book and his final focus on the inner joy of the author, *Bloodroot* is a collection that connects the feminine with a mythical creation story and its author's self-actualized birth and coming of age. It has autobiographical elements describing Villanueva's growing up with her Mexican grandmother and searching for a mother/father who had abandoned her as a child. This is a far-cry from the celebratory tone Cody praises, and reveals Villanueva's pain and lifelong quest for what she had lost. Finding a meaningful connection with nature and birthing herself as a poet completes her identity development and fills the vacuum she felt earlier in her life. Villanueva is a survivor, whose life experience motivates her to search for meaning and inspires her to write. As Tey Diana Rebolledo comments, "Great art does not exclude social commentary, but indeed, is nourished and vitalized by it" ("Soothing Serpents" 83). I would add to this that great literature often has a close relationship to psychological events experienced by the author, which adds depth to her work. Some of the poems in the collection stem from Villanueva's personal experiences of loss, abuse, and poverty. As Deborah Madsen puts it: "With the transformation of pain through the transfigurative power of the literary imagination comes the rebirth of the writer into a voice that is able to express defiance of patriarchal gender roles and inherited modes of thinking, feeling, and living" (168).

The title *Bloodroot* has historical significance referring to a plant of the same name, known by Native Americans to have curative power. Although it is potentially

toxic, Lesley Bremness explains that it has been used to treat a wide range of medical problems from respiratory difficulties and skin problems to cancer (214). Since it can survive and regenerate where other plants cannot, it stands as a symbol of survival.

Villanueva's references to blood emphasize its life-giving and life-maintaining properties. When asked in an interview by Frederick Luis Aldama about the significance of blood in her writing, she said, "As for the blood image, it's a very feminine image, as in fertility. With patriarchy it's been hijacked into a symbol of war/violence/ domination: blood" (291).

At the beginning of the book, Villanueva alludes to the collective origin of men and women from the womb of ancestral Motherafrica, while also simultaneously bringing to consciousness the importance of primordial elements of life and the alienation of Western civilization from ancient natural wisdom. By establishing an early connection to nature and her own indigenous roots, Villanueva moves beyond dualistic notions about self/other and creates a third alternative through the use of an archaic, visceral imagery:

We fear the slip
 into the fertile slime--
 the embryonic ooze
 too fecund
 for the civilized nose
 we were
 collectively, together
 born
 out of

motherafricas

womb. (*Bloodroot* 2-3)

Here the poet creates a myth of female origin, not unlike the male founders of the Chicano Movement who related their ancestry to Aztec history and a lost paradise of Aztlán, which was thought to have been located in the Southwest of the present United States. According to the myth, as explained in the next chapter, Aztlán was the site of plenty where the first Aztecs came from. In Villanueva's text, nature has a significant role as a life source. The origin of humanity is not tied specifically to Chicano history but rather to a distant matriarch and mother of both men and women. In spite of their common origin, Villanueva acknowledges a split between the consciousness of the sexes, and the difficulty men have acknowledging their feminine side, which she associates with the Earth. Villanueva asks, "...If man is out of touch with the Earth, how can he touch woman" (*Bloodroot* 4). The poet's reference to fertile slime appears to refer to an intrauterine environment and embryonic stage of development, rather than a sexual act between men and women. In fact, she acknowledges that we have grown fearful of slipping into this "embryonic ooze" that existed before any organized structure. The line arrangement of the end of the stanza changes with a separation of words, as if to emphasize the collective birth from a common womb. Villanueva's writing contradicts traditional sexist notions about women's bodies and bodily functions by giving a positive meaning to concepts that were considered taboo or "dirty" such as menstrual blood, womb and fertile slime: "Power of my blood, your secret/ wrapped in ancient tongues/spoken by men who claimed themselves/gods and priests and oracles – they/ made elaborate rituals/ secret chants and extolled the cycles/ calling woman unclean"

(*Bloodroot* 31). Accordingly, Elizabeth Jacobs states, “whereas Chicana sexuality and female body were traditionally repressed by movement ideology, Villanueva celebrates their potential as subversive areas of Chicana identity” (75). On a more abstract level, Luce Irigaray makes a connection between fluids and women’s speech: “Woman never speaks the same way. What she emits is flowing, fluctuating. Blurring” (*This Sex* 112). According to Irigaray, form and the masculine have been privileged without taking into account female difference. In Villanueva’s text, concrete bodily functions become mythified and closely related to the fertility cycles of nature:

I grow heavy with the sperm
of trees,
with the nectar
of hummingbirds (listen to their
motor, purring)
with the journeying
wind, it
fills me
with tiny kisses cover
my eyes, my neck,
my leafy hair: roots. (*Bloodroot* 1)

Being part of the natural world gives the poet special knowledge and special connection to the ancient plant and animal worlds, or rather the alchemy of nature through which her (identity) development spins into motion. While she perceives blood as life-giving, roots provide her with growth and form. It is as if they contained ancient wisdom: “My roots

are wise; they love me but not too much” (1). Here, nature also has sexualized healing power. The poet’s eyes are covered by the kisses of the wind as she grows “heavy with the sperm of trees” (1). The erotic and the maternal are fused, as another way of distancing the purely sexual act. As the poet clearly establishes parallels between nature and woman, she draws a connection to indigenous beliefs and the native world view, representing “a distinctively important feature in the works by Native American authors, which denote plain, unadorned aesthetics, seeking to express mutual interdependence inside creation, a world view that speaks for the harmonious relationship between humans and nature” (qtd. in Pohjanrinne 15).

Furthermore, her invocation of fertility refers not only to pregnancy and human birth but to a source of creativity (Ordoñez, “Body, Spirit” 61). As the author transforms her female self, her identity as a poet begins to form. She becomes a myth maker, a seer and a creator of a new world. According to Carmelo Virgillo and Naomi Lindstrom, “Myth maker generates images larger than life and is capable of taking a powerful hold on the human imagination” (1). In Villanueva, the creation of life and the creation of poetry are principal acts of procreation and have the potential to result in a new world order, that is more feminine and spiritual. Through creative acts the poet can take control of her life and alter her reality:

A poet’s job
is to see
the contours of the
world and make
a myth to share

for others to see
 to make a reality;
 a point from where the
 world spins-
 and if stubborn and persistent enough,
 the point from where the
 universe whorls:
 right here. (*Bloodroot* 17)

Naomi Quiñonez talks about Chicana writers having “decolonized the body” by touching on forbidden topics of sexuality: “As first wave Chicana writers began to explore their sexuality in prose and poetry, they not only entered forbidden waters, they dismantled the subject that trapped them in silence” (146). One way Villanueva accomplishes this goal is by subverting religious concepts and giving them new meanings. Thus, transformation of her self also means transformation of traditional belief systems. When the poet laments her husband’s neglect of her need for love/sex, she transforms the Biblical story of original sin into a birthing. Where in the Bible, Eve tempts Adam by offering him a fruit from the Tree of Good and Evil, Villanueva’s poet narrator seizes the opportunity to swallow the fruit, transforming it in her mouth, so that she is able to give birth to herself. Ironically, she contrasts the death-inducing consequences for Adam biting the apple and the role of woman, who is given the power to mold the fruit and give birth:

I will swallow you whole and
 accept and transform you

till you melt	(you/man only
in my mouth.	bit the apple:
	you must swallow
	death-
	I/woman give birth:
	and this time to
	myself). (<i>Bloodroot</i> 21)

The arrangement of the lines in two different columns left to right further emphasizes the split between the poetic voice, man and woman, life and death, creation and consumption. The first stanza starts with an assertion “I swallow,” followed by the transformation of the fruit, which culminates in a pregnancy and the poet’s giving birth to herself without the participation of a man. The “you/man” of the poem is presented as having no creative power, and is reduced to being a consumer of the fruit and condemned to “swallow death.”

Just as personhood and self-identity are closely tied to nature in Villanueva, so is silence. Although many minority groups in the United States have been silenced and left without a voice, in *Bloodroot*, silence takes on a different meaning. Being able to escape and become one with the stone, acts as a shield against disappointment and loss, maintains one’s continuity over time, and serves as a metaphor of Villanueva’s desire for permanence. Being enfolded in the rock’s mineral core gives the poetic self a refuge within the primal elements of nature and a durability that cannot be taken away by human manipulation. In this context, silence is different from being silenced — it serves as a protective armor beyond the cyclical ripening in the plant/animal worlds. Becoming part

of a rock, when procreation and birthing are no longer possible, signifies the human return to the original elements of nature, while leaving a permanent imprint in its very core. Again, this stanza starts with an active gesture, “I take/ refuge” that negates the stereotypical view of Mexican American women as passive bystanders in life. The poetic self makes her own choices as she merges with the mineral core of the natural world:

I take
 refuge in the
 silence and permanence
 of rock and stone,
 its presence enfolding
 me into its mineral core:
 deep and beyond
 the pregnancies and procreation
 of animals and vegetation,--
 stone is. (6)

In the autobiographical section of the collection, the poet acknowledges the rage and bitterness she feels over her abandonment by her father, mother, and husband. And although she is aware that the pain has been cast upon her by others, she accepts the fact that she herself is feeding “the soil of bitterness” (*Bloodroot* 20). Villanueva’s early life was characterized by loss and abuse. While she was curious about her mother’s sexual desire and emptiness, she swore never to become like her, a helpless and needy woman.⁵ In this context, becoming part of the mineral core and permanence of a rock has self-protective value. Her feminine identity has, however, suffered permanent scars.

Never having experienced a “father’s desire,” the poet remains both attracted to and repulsed by the desire she saw in her mother’s eyes:

I could weep and rage
 against the man who never
 stroked my child fine hair
 who never felt the pride of
 my femininity grow in his loins
 never desired me in a secret fathers
 way
 the man who
 dropped his seed in my mother’s
 womb, then called it quits.
 Her pain haunted me for years,
 the way she looked when she
 talked about him, the
 desire and need that rose to her eyes-
 it repulsed and attracted me. (*Bloodroot* 20)

The stanza starts with an angry “I could weep and rage” over the loss and abandonment by a father who used her mother only for sexual pleasure and left without any sense of responsibility or love for his little girl. Her own feelings, however, remain less defined when she focuses on her mother. The poet identifies with her mother who was disempowered by her own abandonment, and therefore experienced difficulty in her role as a parent. She is very clear that as a child she took care of herself and grew up with a

perseverance that she compares with the tenacity of a weed (*Bloodroot* 50). This sets her up as different from others in her family and community, overtly less valued, but possessing a capacity to survive, grow and take over. This gives rise to a sense of her resiliency, both as a victim and a member of a minority community. She is in charge of her own destiny and her development as a person and poet. No longer a hungry child, she is creating her own identity within a feminine cosmos of nature and poetry. She calls this identity “legendary,” again removing herself from everyday reality into a magical world of myths:

I grew up like a thin, stubborn weed
 Watering myself whatever way I could
 Believing in my own myth
 Transforming my reality
 And creating a legendary/self. (*Bloodroot* 50)

While Villanueva does not focus on her Chicana origin, the section of *Bloodroot* that describes her childhood and adolescence identifies joys and struggles of living with her maternal grandmother. Although she feels abandoned in other close relationships, she is especially attached to her Mexican *mamacita*, an important source of nurturing, life lessons and a positive force that completes her identity development as a Chicana. The child/poet is well aware of the difference between the tough rules of survival for minorities in the Anglo-American world and the abiding of love she experienced from her grandmother. In the end, the poetic voice proclaims her realization that securing material goods through force and lies is not enough. She has finally internalized what her grandmother taught her: that everything else in life passes, with the exception of love:

Aiiiiiiiiiiiiiiii mamacita, Jesus,
 I won't forget my visions and
 reality. to lie, to push, to get
 just isn't
 enough.
 (54)

The fact that the grandmother's name is Jesus establishes her as a religious figure, a Savior of sorts, who is likened to the Virgin Mother of the Bible, "eyes and hands lifted up/imploringly and passionately/the vision and power/ offered to us" (*Bloodroot* 54). Alejandro Morales points out that the *mamacita* is deified in the text as a representation of supernatural forces, vision, and power, not necessarily as a Christian God but as *Terra Mater*, the archetypical Earth Mother of indigenous mythology (125). *Mamacita's* statue-like image is also similar to that of the *Virgen de Guadalupe*, the indigenous brown virgin of Mexican history. In this context, Villanueva confirms the importance of grandmothers as caretakers, guides, and sources of inspiration. In the *Chronicles of Panchita Villa*, Rebolledo refers to the negative criticism she received when focusing on the role of *abuelitas* in Chicano literature, because she was talking about something that "everyone already knew" (44). With the poets whose texts I am analyzing, however, the grandmother figure has become internalized as the Mexican (or indigenous) maternal figure who provides continuity of traditions and beliefs "across the borders" and remains an important figure of identity development. Indeed, Rebolledo writes in "Abuelitas: Mythology and Integration in Chicana Literature," that grandmothers are often seen as nurturing, comforting, and stable, linked to the home and their cultural place of origin, as

they prepare traditional Mexican food and speak Spanish” (150). Interestingly, Rebolledo explains that the mother often has a different role, which produces conflict and misunderstanding when she turns her back on Chicano cultural values in an effort to assimilate within the dominant culture (149). While Villanueva focuses less on her Chicano roots and tends to speak from a womanist viewpoint, her writing reflects the importance of *mamacita* Jesus as a parental figure. Her mother is presented as a victim of abandonment and deprivation, unable to nurture her child. As Patrick Murphy writes: “A *mestiza* culture can draw on its grandmothers, from both sides of the border, and from both sides of human lineage, to empower its people to end oppression and alienation and, thereby recreate humanity in balance in its place” (“Grandmother Borderland” 38).

Like many Chicana border poets of her era, Villanueva also touches on the problem of living on the edge of two countries, yet being a stranger in both. In her “Mexican memos,” she writes about her grandmother and mother crossing into the United States “unseen/unclaimed by either side” (67), referring to the invisibility and lack of power from which border-crossers suffer in both countries. Neither woman has status on either side even after immigrating. Villanueva’s solution is not to depend on anybody, not to bow to a flag of either country, but to inhabit the feminine space inside herself. This is clearly a refuge for her in a life filled with misery and trauma, and she finds both peace there and the core of her feminine self: “I live in my womb, my beautiful womb/ And it flies no flag” (68). The retreat into her own body also speaks to the strength of her identity as a woman while her *Chicanidad* appears more diffuse and manifested mostly through early childhood memories.

Lorna Dee Cervantes

Unlike Villanueva, Lorna Dee Cervantes has been identified as an “ethnic” poet whose writing affirms her Mexican American identity (Seator 23). She writes from the space of a young Chicana who grew up in a poor barrio in San Jose, California. Her first collection of poems was *Emplumada*, published in 1981. This collection, more Chicana-focused than Villanueva’s *Bloodroot*, is also a story of coming of age. While Villanueva connects female identity to nature and a mythical self-birthing process from the archetypal Mother Africa’s womb, Cervantes focuses on problems of class, race, and sex as important influences on the lives of Chicano men and women (Wallace 6). The life she writes about is often fraught with poverty, physical violence, rape, sexual abuse, and teen pregnancy. Cervantes views herself as a political activist and “cultural worker” (Madsen 198). However, against this social landscape of economic and racial discrimination, male oppression, and crime, the poet paints more lyrical images of pristine nature and the animistic world of her *antepasados*, who lived in close connection to it. In a landmark analysis of Cervantes’ poetry, Marta Sánchez notes Cervantes’ focus on her dual identity as a Chicana and a poet, a socially aware activist, and utopian dreamer who “believes that social tensions can be reconciled by poetry” (Sánchez 86). Much of her poetry, Sánchez argues, vacillates between these two poles and is intended for two different audiences, Chicano and Anglo-American. The first group consists of poems that speak directly about Chicano issues, for instance, “Beneath the Shadow of the Freeway” and “Oaxaca 1974.” The second group of poems is more lyrical and does not foreground the sociopolitical context (e.g. “Moonwalkers” and “Shells”).

The title of the collection, *Emplumada*, invokes feathers, or being covered in

feathers. The writer translates this as “feathered; in plumage, as in after molting,” and its masculine form *plumado* refers to a “pen flourish.” Throughout the book, birds (and feathers) have a special place connecting the author to nature and to her Native American roots. The notion of feathers also refers to the image of Quetzalcoatl, the plumed serpent god from Mesoamerican mythology. According to the *Florentine Codex*:

Quetzalcoatl -- he was wind; he was the guide, the roadsweeper of the rain gods, of the masters of the water, of those who brought rain. And when the wind increased, it was said, the dust swirled up, it roared, it howled, became dark, blew in all directions; there was lightning; it grew wrathful.

And he was thus arrayed: he had a conical ocelot skin cape. His face was covered with soot. He was adorned with [spiral] wind and mesquite symbols. He had a curved turquoise ear pendant. He wore a gold neckband of small sea shells. He bore the precious pheasant device on his back. He had ocelot skin anklets with bells. He wore a cotton bone [ribbed] jacket. His were the shield with the wind shell design, the curved [inlaid] spearthrower, and also foam sandals. (9)

While Quetzalcoatl was known in different parts of Mesoamerica, his character changed over time, and he was considered in the Nahuatl cosmology to be one of the gods who created the cosmos by separating the sky from the Earth; he could read the good and bad signs in the calendar, reveal time, and hand down civilization, as well as predict human destiny and find ideal kingdoms (Florescano 51-56). For the Aztecs, he was initially a feathered serpent, associated with rain and fertility. He later became Quetzalcoatl, who helped create humanity, controlled the wind and rain and founded agriculture and industry (Wurtz 64).

In contrast to the worship of a male god, Gloria Anzaldúa identifies with the powerful female deity Coatlalopeuh, the fertility and Earth goddess, and Coatlicue,⁶ Serpent Skirt (*Borderlands* 27). She associates the serpent's mouth with womanhood, place of refuge and the most sacred place on the Earth: "Snake people had holes, entrances to the body of the Earth Serpent; they followed the serpent's way, identified with the Serpent deity, with the mouth, both the eater and to be eaten" (34). There is, however, an aggressive side to this goddess. Anzaldúa notes: "As the Earth, she opens and swallows us, plunging us into the underworld where the soul resides, allowing us to dwell in darkness" (68).

Based on the myths described above, *Emplumada* can be interpreted as a feminization of the male god Quetzalcoatl, a symbol of resurrection and rebirth. On the other hand, since she possesses a pen, like Villanueva, Cervantes speaks to her own development as a poet, because Chicana women authors had long been denied the right to write and publish (Rebolledo, "Tradition and Mythology" 106). Cervantes' poetry also raises questions about location, whether the north/south axis, city/countryside or inside/outside. The birds she describes migrate from north to south, as does the poet when she crosses the border. At the same time, she appears to locate her tools for writing north of the border: "I come north/to gather my feathers/for quills" (47).

Although Cervantes is considered a Chicana poet, she questions her cultural identity in a number of poems. In an interview with Ray González she discussed the influence that her family had on her:

My grandmother had a connection to her indigenous side. A lot of the images in my poems come from growing up with my grandmother who taught me that

Chicanos are not separate from their Indian roots. Many of us refuse to admit this fact. She taught me that things have a soul and speak to us. My numerous images with birds, my ideas, the things I see in my poems--I capture them as they present themselves, which is a gift my grandmother gave me. My mother spoke English and was literate... I grew up hearing her records of poetry. Yes she was very bitter. (González 8)

Thanks to her grandmother's heritage, Cervantes developed a sensitivity to Native American culture. However, growing up in Anglo culture and speaking the English language severed her from her Mexican roots, as she indicated in a number of poems. In "Refugee Ship," she describes her alienation from Mexican culture most clearly: "Mama raised me without a language/I'm orphaned from my Spanish name. The words are foreign, stumbling/ on my tongue. I see in the mirror/ my reflection: bronzed skin, black hair" (41). In *Écrits*, Lacan writes about the importance of the mirror stage for developing a person's sense of self and subjectivity: "The jubilant assumption of his specular image by the child at the *infans* stage ... would seem to exhibit in an exemplary situation the symbolic matrix in which *I* is precipitated in a primordial form, before it is objectified in the dialectic identification with the other" (2). According to Lacan, the identification with one's own image is also the image of the other, resulting in a split when the recognition does not occur (Grosz 39, 40). Laura Gutierrez Spencer explains: "Entry into the symbolic consists of the child's awareness of his role as subject of his own discourse and as object of that of others. It would seem natural then, that Lacan's mirror stage occurs roughly at the age at which most children begin to speak" (70). Cervantes' poem addresses the split, when her dark-skinned mirror image does not

correspond to her self-image, and she feels a profound sense of alienation. In the poem “Oaxaca,” she talks about wanting to dye her thoughts brown to be able to match her reflection in the mirror with her cultural/linguistic identity. However, the conflict between language and what the poet sees in the mirror reflects not only her inner difficulty of reconciling the difference within her, but societal conflict on both sides of the border. In the United States, she is a Mexican; in Mexico she is a “bland pochaseed” (44),⁷ a fake, who speaks and thinks like an American. In “Oaxaca, 1974,” the poet continues: “My name hangs about me like a loose tooth/...Blame it on the old ones/ They gave me a name that fights me” (44).

At the same time, Cervantes appears to be looking for her roots in Mexico but is never fully able to resolve the problem of her self-image. Having grown up with English as her mother tongue, she has incorporated much of the dominant North American culture into her thinking and cannot find equilibrium. This speaks to the fragmentation and multiplicity of the border subject. In her article “Making *Familia* from Scratch,” Norma Alarcón explains that “the female speaking subject, who would want to speak from a different position than that of a traditional mother is thrown into a crisis of meaning” (221). This same crisis of meaning is true of Cervantes who cannot speak from the same position as native Spanish-speakers in Mexico. Since for her, the language is the medium that defines her as a poet, the conflict of identity is brought into question one more time, when she describes how the children in Oaxaca greet her with glee, but how she is not fully able to join them on the linguistic level. She writes:

Mexico,

I look for you in the streets of Oaxaca.

The children run to me laughing,
 spinning me blind and silly.
 They call me in words of another language.
 My brown body searches the streets
 for the dye that will color my thoughts.

But Mexico gags,
 ¡Esputa!
 on this bland pochaseed. (*Emplumada* 44)

Although the poet identifies with the children of Oaxaca and participates in their games, in the end she is rejected by Mexico as a pastiche lacking authenticity as a Mexican. The last stanza suggests that she was not only rejected but practically “spat out” as if she were a prostitute. The stanza implies movement: “Mexico gags, ¡Esputa!” Gagging in this context implies an effort to expel her, a kind of or choking, as if being suffocated by the First World superpower. The poet herself explains the inherent word play in the glossary of the book: “Esputa/Es puta — is a whore [escupa--spit]” (67). The reference to “puta” can be construed as a reference to Hernán Cortés’ slave and translator, *La Malinche*, maligned in the popular history as a whore who betrayed her people by helping Cortés defeat the indigenous peoples of Mexico. *La Malinche*, then, becomes the negative side of the split image virgin/whore. Ana Maria Carbonell reminds us that this split has led to the common-place denigration of female agency in Mexican culture (56). Similarly, Sandra Cypess states that *La Malinche*’s role was considered to be that of the supreme evil while *La Virgen* represents supreme good in that culture (6). This sharp division can

be used to justify the behavior of men towards women. The relationship between Cortés and *La Malinche* was that of a white conqueror and a subjugated Indian woman, and even though new feminist interpretations focus on *La Malinche* as a language mediator, translator, and mother of the *mestizo* race, the negative cultural model stemming from her legendary image has been difficult to erase.⁸ In the poem, Cervantes is nothing more than a “*puta*” whose brown body blends in with the Mexican population, but not her thoughts and language. However, like *La Malinche*, she becomes a mediator, a translator of words, who possesses the plumes to write with.

The denigrating vocabulary of Cervantes’ poem also reflects tensions in the Borderlands and the problems of assimilation that make it hard for her to find a true home. Alfred Arteaga writes about the difficulty of border-dwellers to become subjects because “there is no metonymic link of nation, place, language, and identity” (94). Being a Chicano, in his view, means a continual negotiation of difference (95). While Cervantes is a Spanish-speaker, her poetic persona still experiences the clash of cultures in language.

The first poem in her book, titled “Uncle’s First Rabbit” opens with a little boy’s first hunting trip and his haunting memories of the dying rabbit. These merge with images of his father’s violence, his mother being beaten up and his baby sister dying. The boy yearns to run away from the traumatic memories and dysfunction of his family, only to discover the impossibility of such erasure. Going to fight in a war deepens his trauma and inability to run away. He continues the cycle of violence as he denigrates his wife, even while watching her die. The poem lays the framework for problems of male socialization, the history of trauma within the family and the impossibility of

transcending such circumstances. The boy— an old man— is stuck in his past, condemned to recreate his father’s history of violence in his own life. While men for Cervantes are often an oppressive presence in the lives of women, in this poem she shows how both sexes are trapped in the cycle of violence that is repeated across generations, the same way as the internalization of sexist oppression.⁹ As with internalized racism, this is the result of living in an oppressive, sexist environment, and internalizing the negative stereotypes enforced by the society (Hipolito-Delgado 319-320).

In “Cannery Town in August,” Cervantes focuses on the monotonous sounds of factory work and the inhumane, exploitative conditions in the canneries. In this work, she wanted to highlight the urban experiences of Chicanas in the *barrios* of San Jose and to write a “woman history of our *raza*” (2). The working women are described as bodyless and speechless, lacking both an identity and a voice, made dumb by the sounds of production, the noise of the machines in the cannery, and the noise of trucks outside. This speaks to the harsh working conditions in the factories of industrialized countries, and the higher value placed on production than on individual needs or conservation of nature.

... I listen, while bodyless
 uniforms and spinach specked shoes
 drift in monochrome down the dark
 moon-possessed streets. Women
 who smell of whiskey and tomatoes,
 peach fuzz reddening their lips and eyes-
 I imagine them not speaking, dumbled

by the can's clamor and drop
 to the trucks that wait, grunting
 in their headlights below. (6)

According to the poem the workers leave their jobs with “spinach-specked shoes,” smelling of tomatoes and with peach-fuzz reddened eyes, all signs of the hard labor that has left its marks on their bodies and clothing. The female body is identified only as a by-product of factory work: the smell of tomatoes, peach fuzz on the lips. The uniforms that the women wear create an anonymity, which makes it impossible to differentiate one from the other. In addition, the poet singles out the smell of whiskey, perhaps from nearby distilleries, but for some, alcohol could also have become their way of coping with the harshness of cannery labor, negating the stereotypical view of Mexican American women as dependent homemakers or virgin-like saints. The women in “Cannery Town” work outside the home, participating in economic production and industrial labor. The fact that they “drift down” late at night further removes them from their stereotypical virgin-like position, placing them on the tiring nightly swing shift as invisible actors in the global economy. The cannery itself and the factory production line are represented as a masculine oppressor, involved in “the complete emptying of the subject” (Jacobs 141). Symbols of masculine power include: the cannery “humping the air,” “dumbing” the workers, and trucks “grunting” with their headlights on (6). Since the moon is generally personified as a female entity (Biedermann 224), “the moon-possessed streets” of the poem appear under masculine control, dark and lonely. Jacobs points out that the poem highlights the alienation and invisibility of women who are “confined to the shadows” (141). And further, “Cervantes wants to bring these women

back to life but knows that poetry cannot deliver them from deadening experience” (Wallace 8). Poetry can, however, raise consciousness about conditions in the cannery.

Historically, thousands of Hispanic women sought work in the food processing industry in the 1930s. The conditions of labor were deplorable, consisting of long work hours, unsanitary and unsafe work environments, sexual segregation and an unequal division of labor. Women were not paid by the hour as the men were, but did piece work as cutters and canners (Ruiz, *Cannery Women* 29). However, despite the tough conditions, women’s labor “provided the safety net in their families’ day-to-day confrontation with poverty” (9), sometimes giving the household the chance to acquire a separate residence or to buy otherwise hard to afford “extras.” Although Cervantes depicts the cannery women as voiceless, “dumbed” by the noise and oppressive atmosphere, Mexican American women in California in fact established democratic trade unions in an effort to improve their lives. Ruiz comments that their daily experience of oppression, sexual harassments, and harsh work environments cemented their feelings of solidarity (70). Again during this historical period, Mexican American women took an active role in promoting change and did not remain passive victims of the “system.”

In the more autobiographical poems of *Emplumada*, Cervantes focuses on the significance of family and friendships. Even in this context she does not steer away from social problems, such as male violence, womanizing, and drinking. In “Beneath the Shadow of the Freeway,” she contrasts the natural migration of birds with the imposing structure of the freeway that runs next to a residential section of the city. Raúl Homero Villa points out in *Barrio-Logos* that Freeway 280 divided idyllic suburbia from the more urban Chicano neighborhood, disrupting the landscape and “reminding residents of their

place in the spatial designs of the city” (227). The freeway also contrasts the technological development of the city with the slowly disappearing natural environment of the past. As a reminder of this, Cervantes writes: “Every day at dusk/ as Grandma watered geraniums/ the shadow of the freeway lengthened” (*Emplumada* 11).

Against this landscape, the poet projects her own family history of three women, each from a generation that has a different approach to the world. She labels her grandmother as an innocent Queen, her mother as a fearless warrior, and herself as a scribe who not only “translated Foreign Mail” (11) but also performed fix-up work, traditionally assigned to men. The author positions herself in the interstices of border life: she interprets “foreign” letters (from both sides of the border?) and formal government documents to less literate family members, takes care of the house, and functions as the male head of the family, thanks to her education and to her familiarity with the English language. While the men attached to these women were violent, sexually abusive drunks, women (especially her mother) developed a tough façade and the coping skills to manage their lives on their own. The narrator’s grandmother, however, is described as having an inner softness that made it hard for her to break the cycle of violence. It is as if in her environment, only the birds were free and nurturing to their mates, so rare in human relationships. The poet continues:

In California in the summer,

mockingbirds sing all night.

Grandma says they are singing for their nesting wives.

“They don’t leave their families

borrachando.” (12)

And later:

She believes in myths and birds.

She trusts only what she builds

with her own hands. (12)

In these two stanzas, Cervantes juxtaposes different, if not contradictory, sentiments. In the first, her grandmother appears to acknowledge with resignation problems of male socialization, specifically drinking and violence, while contrasting them with the behavior of mockingbirds. According to Deborah Madsen, birds have a central place in the text not only as migratory animals, but also as representing the reincarnation of indigenous deities, such as Wankan Tanka, Manitou, and Quetzalcoatl (203), to name a few. In the second stanza, she is pictured as a more empowered woman who is capable of taking charge and working with her own hands after “living twenty five years with a man who tried to kill her” (12). According to the poem, the women of the house were victims of domestic violence, sensitive inside, but with a cynical, mistrustful exterior. The poet’s mother seems to have been especially hardened by her experience and blamed her mother for her own victimization because she was too soft. “Mama said, it is her own fault getting screwed by a man for that long” (12). Cervantes’ mother reportedly insisted that the poet and her brother only speak English at home so that they could escape the discrimination their ethnic group was subjected to. The text shows Cervantes’ close connection with her grandmother — valuing her sensitivity, belief in myths and nature, and concluding that she also will only trust what she herself builds. The poet’s vacillation between the internalized image of her mother and grandmother, and her subsequent identity confusion mirrors the fragmentation of the border zone; not

knowing, as the epigraph shows, what truly is one's land. The poet, however, reaches an equilibrium through identification with the grandmother, as "in time, I plant geraniums/ I tie up my hair in loose braids/ and trust only what I have built/ with my own hands" (14). She appears to have been able to stop the generational transmission of violence: "Every night I sleep with a gentle man /to the hymn of mockingbirds" (14). Wolfgang Binder elaborates further on the meaning of the grandmother figure in Chicano poetry as a "repository of oral, largely migrant history that transcends individual family history" (138), which lends "coherence to a fragmented collective existence" (139). Thus, Cervantes' identification with her grandmother may function as a bridge between two cultures and generations, mending the split she experienced in her Mexican American identity.

The book ends with the title poem "Emplumada." The poem refers to the end of the summer, as snapdragons wither and change color. The poetic voice, now in third person narrative, regrets the end of the warm season and the slow death in nature. Yet, in this barren landscape, two hummingbirds "stuck to each other" are looking for last drops of "what is good" before starting their migratory flight south:

...two hummingbirds, hovering, stuck to each other,
 arcing their bodies in grim determination
 to find what is good, what is
 given them to find. These are warriors
 distancing themselves from history.
 They find peace
 in the way they contain wind

and are gone. (66)

While birds and feathers have important symbolic meaning for Cervantes, hummingbirds are especially significant. According to Pérez-Torres, they may represent symbolism of escape and transcendence. He draws from Nahua history the fact that the Toltecs did not permit human sacrifice but instead, under the guidance of Quetzalcoatl, used small animals such as hummingbirds for that practice (236). This changed when male deities, such as the God of War, Huitzilopochtli, were introduced. As a result, Pérez-Torres sees hummingbirds as representing opposition to male dominance. Cervantes borrows the imagery, although she does not directly associate hummingbirds with matrilineal heritage. Rather, she indicates that they are warriors who distance themselves from history. They are free of domination and restrictions imposed by people. The poet distances hummingbirds from the bloody past of the Mexica, recent wars and border struggles, with the birds finding peace in the vastness of the sky, away from human boundaries and constellations. They can migrate freely from north to south without being constrained by border politics, immigration agents or geopolitical boundaries between the two countries on either side of the border. The flight of the hummingbirds may also symbolize the freedom that the author achieves as she starts her journey using their plumage (quills) to create a borderless universe of poetry.

Pat Mora

Pat Mora is considered perhaps the most *fronteriza* of the poets studied in this chapter. A native of El Paso, Texas, she grew up in an extended family with a very close tie to her maternal grandmother and her aunt, whom she calls Lobo in her books. In an interview with Héctor Torres, published in *Conversations with Contemporary Chicana*

and Chicano Writers, Mora explains that having two languages at home was a blessing. Unlike Villanueva and Cervantes she describes her family as loving. At the same time, the experience of other less fortunate women was of interest to her. The poet continues: “Persona poems like ‘Elena,’ is a poem that is trying to adopt the voice, or hear the voice, of someone whose experience is very different from mine... so the voice of women of Mexican heritage in this country, particularly those whose voices have not been heard, became and remain a very intense interest of mine” (Torres 262).

Thus, the El Paso-Juárez borderland, a bilingual childhood, and a connection to indigenous beliefs, as well as a growing sense of the inequities faced by Chicanos in the United States, give rise to Mora’s poetry. Robin Riley Fast also finds a connection between Mora’s work and traditional Chicano poetry. She suggests that Mora seeks refuge in the images of the indigenous mother and Mother Earth, whom she depicts from a strong feminist perspective:

She [Mora] affirms traditional Indian and Chicana women’s connections to the desert, and redefines the desert as a fiercely independent woman; both actions validate her as a Chicana poet and empower her to create. Her interest in redefinition is also evident in her depictions of strong women who contradict traditional Chicano notions of feminine propriety and who are clearly inspired by nature, specifically, by the mother desert (30).

Furthermore, as Pérez-Torres points out in the epigraph to this chapter, the use of mythic memory, typical of many Chicana poets, can be seen as a tool that helps construct a cultural identity and forges a connection to previously subjugated forms of knowledge, since it involves evocation of mythic figures of the past and reclamation of indigenous

spirituality (16).

Mora's first publication was a collection of poems titled *Chants* (1984), followed by *Borders* in 1986. In this section, I will examine *Borders* thanks to its focus on the Borderlands and conflicts that arise politically, socially and psychologically from its location "in-between" (Bhabha, *Location* 7).¹⁰ While Mora identifies with the plight of the less fortunate, she focuses on the healing power of nature, indigenous cultural practices, and the wisdom of past generations. Her special interest in the desert and its impact on the identity formation of women also merits attention.

Mora's linguistic capability and use of code-switching further manifests both connection to and separation from those who traverse the border regularly to work on the other side, or those whose status in the United States is marginalized due to their ethnicity or lack of citizenship. Elisabeth Mermann-Jozwiak talks about emblematic and linguistic code-switching. The first involves use of Spanish words that are culturally connected to ethnic identity, and the second has to do with the typical oral communication among bilingual peers (106). Cordelia Candelaria points out how changing from one language to another "conveys meaning quite apart from the lexical meanings denoted to the symbolic meanings connoted by the surface language forms" (92). While the linguistic interpretation of code-switching is interesting, its political and social meaning are perhaps more important here. The frequent use of both languages suggests movement between two cultural contexts and the fluidity of border identity. While code-switching has been studied as a linguistic and aesthetic device in poetry, it has a close connection to *mestizaje*, "in which," according to Pérez-Torres, "a third language, a third possibility, 'a line of flight' offers possibilities beyond simple dualisms" (215). He concludes that code-switching manifests itself in continuous crossings of language, voice, and genre

(216). The idea of crossing is central in Mora's poems. She often places herself as the poetic persona between two rooms, two distinct spaces that serve as lines of division between the privileged and the underprivileged in the same way the geographic border does. Mora uses code-switching sparingly to show border crossings between generations and social groups. For instance, in "University Avenue," she writes Spanish words to describe what Chicanos inherited from their ancestors: *hierbabuena*, *abrazos*, *cuentos* (*Borders* 19). Similarly, "Bilingual Christmas" starts with a clumsy use of Spanish phrases, like *Buenos días* and *hast luego*, can be heard in Anglo boardrooms (21) that are not accessible to poor Chicano families.

The second poem of *Borders* has a satiric tone and speaks to the desire of immigrants to become American by assuming stereotypical aspects of the culture, giving their children North American names in English and involving them in typical sports of the United States:

Immigrants

wrap their babies in the American flag,
 feed them mashed hot dogs and apple pie,
 name them Bill and Daisy,
 buy them blonde dolls that blink blue
 eyes or a football or tiny cleats
 before the baby can even walk,
 speak to them in thick English. (15)

The poem also speaks to the issue of internalized oppression that has to do with assuming negative societal attitudes towards one's self, and results in devaluing the immigrant's own heritage in the effort to be all-American, as the poem reflects in the choice of names

for their children, types of food and preference for white dolls. Espin talks about this phenomenon as the first stage of ethnic identity development. During this phase, the immigrant's self-image negatively reflects the attitude of dominant society towards populations that are different from the mainstream. In the process of change, this identity moves towards a positive one after the denied parts of self-image are rejected (41). In the poem above, Mora toys with these concepts, showing the ambivalence and anxiety that many Latinos encounter in the United States, and ultimately the absurdity of forced assimilation and ethnic self-denial.

Contrary to "Immigrants," the poem "University Avenue" focuses on the social heritage and indigenous traditions that have always nurtured Chicanas. While first generation women have now entered university life with some trepidation, generally coming from working class or economically deprived backgrounds, the poetic voice says, they are guided into this new life by "gifts of the land" that their *antepasados* left to them. Here, Mora draws a contrast between the newness and stifling atmosphere of academia, and the natural environment, in which herbs, song, stories and close relationships have always provided a foundation for life. In the end, the poet declares that in spite of their isolation and uncertainty, Chicanas will be internally accompanied by their ancestors and are, therefore, never alone:

Our people prepared us

With gifts of the land,

fire

herbs and song

hierbabuena soothes us into morning

rhythms hum in our blood

abrazos linger in our bodies

cuentos whisper lessons *en español*.

We do not travel alone.

Our people burn deep within us. (19)

In several poems Mora refers to the dichotomy of border life and its impact on identity formation. As in “University Avenue,” the poem titled “Sonrisas” contrasts the difference between women with educated backgrounds and immigrant women from Mexico who perform cheap labor “in the other room” (20). While schooling brings with it concerns about budgets, tenure and curriculum, fine clothing, and polite smiles according to the proper etiquette, the Mexican laborers are characterized by warmth, laughter and their natural demeanor. In the first room, a clicking sound comes from cups holding black coffee and in the other from the stirring of sweet milk coffee. This juxtaposition contrasts the blandness of middle-class, educated life, and women being more concerned about their weight and appearance, than the Mexicans with their own cultural customs — chatting, enjoying fresh tamales and milk coffee sweetened with sugar. The poet defines her life “in a doorway/between two rooms” (20). She clearly identifies with the women from the dominant culture, but still has access to Mexican culture through the doorway and through her heritage. At the same time, the poem implies distance. The narrator peeks into the other room and identifies with what is going on, but remains outside the group.

While the two sets of women in “Sonrisas” lead parallel lives in two separate rooms with little contact with each other, Mora’s “The Grateful Minority” speaks to the

problem of many Mexican Americans who become maids and perform low-paying tasks in the U.S. economy, such as cleaning bathrooms, scrubbing, and polishing, with gratitude over regular paychecks. The poetic voice highlights the otherness of these maids with the interrogative “Ofelia who?” between the stanzas, indicating that they are nameless and often unnoticed laborers within the dominant culture. And although she questions how these women can be content under such circumstances, she concludes that they possess the endurance of desert flowers, a survival mechanism she would like to have:

Like desert flowers you bloom
 namelessly in harsh countries
 I want to shake your secret
 from you. Why? How? (22)

Another aspect of oppression is described in the poem “Bilingual Christmas.” Borrowing from a popular Christmas carol it starts with the question: “Do you hear what I hear?” Ironically, the title speaks to the issue of language acquisition and how it seems to have given Chicanas/os access to jobs in dominant society. This is, however, a faulty assumption as bilingual individuals continue to be forced to adapt to American ways and are valued only to the extent that they “add slight South-of-the-border seasoning” to the corporate Christmas party. The reality of their community consists of whimpering voices and “children too cold/ to sing” (21). Both the English and Spanish languages of the poem are halting, as if to imitate non-native speech and the artificiality of such communication. The final oppressive act comes from the immigration agents:

Not twinkling lights

we see but
search lights
seeking illegal aliens
outside our thick windows. (21)

This reminds us of on-going enforcement problems along the U.S.- Mexico border. As José David Saldivar explains in “On the Bad Edge of *La Frontera*,” the border machine constructs subject positions to benefit North America. Migrant border-crossers are labeled illegal and denied their human rights (263). As mentioned before, economic turbulence often influences attitudes towards foreign labor. In “A History of Chicanos/Mexicanos Along the U.S.-Mexico Border,” Oscar Martinez points out that massive unemployment in the United States during the Great Depression led to a push to get rid of workers who were perceived as foreign. This resulted in the “repatriation” of about 500,000 Mexicans, many of whom were U.S. citizens (270)

Similarly, the economic downturn during Barack Obama’s presidency and increasing anti-immigrant attitude within conservative groups has resulted in some states proposing laws that would cut aid to the so-called “illegals” and tighten up border control measures. For instance, California Proposition 187 in 1994 was state legislation,¹¹ the goal of which was to deny undocumented immigrants public services, access to schools and even health care. More recently, Arizona Governor Jan Brewer ordered state agencies to deny driver’s licenses and public benefits to undocumented immigrants. While a big part of this law, known as SB 1070, was overturned by the U.S. Supreme Court, a provision was left standing giving the police the authority to ask people whom they stopped for proof of their immigration status. In its initial version the bill made it a

crime for a person not to carry his or her immigration papers as proof of U.S. residency. Also, through the Secure Communities provision, Prince William County in Virginia maintains similar legislation, authorizing its police to check the immigration status of anybody arrested for a crime. Although these legislative initiatives have occurred in more recent years, the status of undocumented immigrants certainly has not improved since Mora wrote the poem “Bilingual Christmas.” If anything the search lights of the *Migra* are a reality for more people than before in the Chicano and wider Latino community, adding to their fear and oppressive conditions under which many still live.

On the other hand, Mora uses the theme of the desert and hardy desert flower in many of her poems to signify endurance and life. She finds herself at home in this environment, to which she returns in her verses. Her desert women are strong, used to tough living conditions, perhaps austere on the surface, but beautiful when in bloom. The desert itself has feminine and maternal qualities. In “Traditions and Mythology,” Rebolledo comments that the power of landscape transmits a sense of identity in Chicana writing (123). This power can be seen in Mora’s poetry. In fact, her connection to the land is so intimate that Patrick Murphy calls her sensibility “ecological multiculturalism” (“Conserving” 68). This notion also brings to the fore questions about eco feminism, which links nature and culture, the exploitation of nature and the oppression of women (Murphy, “The Women” 23). Greta Gaard and Murphy explain how the ideal relationship between humans and nature involves physical, psychological and spiritual embeddedness in nature (3). In her poetry, Mora focuses on the interrelationship between nature and women. This can be seen, for instance in “Success,” in which she writes about *hierbabuena* as a “stubborn green weed” (*Borders* 88) that “scents the desert air” (88) and

provides comfort for women who “savor old ways” (88). Similarly, in a poem titled “Mi Tierra,” Mora establishes a symbolic connection between the poetic persona and the hot desert sand. Murphy also points out that Mora’s concept of *mestiza* is tied to conservation of nature and ecology because “humans are part of the natural world” (“The Women” 27). Much of early Chicana poetry makes this same connection and draws comfort from it. It is another form of in-betweenness that Pérez-Torres refers to in the epigraph to this chapter.

In the poem “Desert Women,” Mora focuses on the theme of survival, presented here as an adaptation to a harsh natural environment:

Desert women know
 about survival.
 Fierce heat and cold
 have burned and thickened
 our skin. Like cactus
 we’ve learned to hoard
 to sprout deep roots,
 to seem asleep, yet wake
 at the scent of softness
 in the air, to hide
 pain and loss by silence,
 no branches wail
 or whisper our sad songs
 safe behind our thorns.

Don't be deceived.

When we bloom, we stun. (80)

The poem starts with a description of the hardening natural conditions that have forced its female inhabitants to develop a tough skin, a protective measure against heat and cold. The reference to cacti reinforces the notion of being able to live in an environment that offers little nourishment, a condition that the poet seems to identify with, as she changes from the third person pronoun to the first person plural. As Villanueva talked about withdrawing into the natural core of stone, Mora focuses on the protective function of the cactus's thorns, while it sprouts roots inside the Earth. Although the poem describes women's close relationship with nature, its political and social context refers to the silencing experience of Chicanas in dominant culture. This silence also means that the history of pain is internalized within each person, not publicly dealt with or empathized with: "... to hide pain and loss by silence/no branches wail/or whisper our sad songs..." However, in spite of a nearly clandestine existence, the desert women remain observant, develop their own internal resources for living and root themselves firmly in the ground. It is as if silence and being unnoticed has positive effects, for they provide refuge from society's oppressive forces. In an interview with Torres, Gloria Anzaldúa also notes that the creation of an imaginary inner space has helped her feel safe when the environment itself was filled with danger (*Conversations* 125). Similarly, appearing to sleep but being awake suggests that appearances can be misleading. The external thorniness and quietness hide an observant eye and resistant strength. In spite of the sadness and hardships the author attributes to Chicana life, the poem ends with an affirmative statement about the stunning, unmistakable beauty of cacti during blooming season. This

perhaps looks ahead to the blooming process of Chicanas and Chicana writers, as their art reaches larger audiences.

Similar ideas are also expressed in “Now and then, America.” The poem itself contrasts the artificiality of North American traditions with the natural life surrounding native customs, and ends on a satirical note of full-fledged cultural criticism:

Who wants to rot

beneath dry, winter grass

in a numbered grave

in a numbered row

in a section labeled Eternal Peace

with neighbors plagued

by limp, plastic roses

springing from their toes?

Grant me a little life now and then, America. (33)

The poem starts in a North American graveyard, described as orderly with numbered sites and marked under the title “Eternal Peace.” Far from providing a quiet resting place, it is a lifeless place with plastic roses and bodies rotting under dry grass. The arrangement of the graves follows linear Western tradition, although the graveyard itself with its corpses can be seen as an abject space of decay. The poet continues to describe the artificiality of life, symbolized by pin-striped suits, chains, and insanity. In this suffocating environment the poetic voice is asking for “a little bit of life.”

This dullness is contrasted with Latino attributes of vibrant colors, long hair, and expressive Spanish language, a difference that the dominant culture does not accept as

equal:

Let me in

to board rooms wearing hot
 colors, my hair long and free,
 maybe speaking Spanish.

Risk my difference, my surprises.

Grant me a little life, America. (33)

The third stanza continues the same theme of natural life and freedom. Here the poetic voice presents an idyllic image of her own grave, covered at one end by marigolds, flowers of the dead, and a cactus at the other. The reference to Oaxaca speaks to the Mexican roots of the speaker and reminds the reader of border crossings. In this stanza eco-feminism's postulate about human embeddedness in nature comes to fruition as the speaker paints a rich image of plants, desert creatures, and birds embracing her grave site after the death and enabling life to continue through poetry or Nahuatl "flower and song." The evocation of orange blooms and yellow marigolds makes a further connection to the sun as a source of life:

And when I die, plant *zempasúchitl*,

Flowers of the dead, and at my head

Plant organ cactus, green fleshy

Fingers sprouting, like in Oaxaca.

Let desert creatures hide

In the orange blooms.

Let birds nest in the cactus stems.

Let me go knowing life
 flower and song
 will continue right above my bones. (33)

While Mora focuses on the *frontera* more directly than Villanueva and Cervantes, all three poets speak from the third space that Bhabha and Soja talk about. Each crosses the border of ethnic origin, race, gender, economic privilege, language, and locality. Their close connection to myths, nature, and indigenous cultural practices adds to the complexity of the Chicana border persona.

Soja sees in borderland writing, especially that of Anzaldúa, a space of radical openness because the bleeding wound, caused by friction between the First and Third Worlds, forms a scab and merges the two into a third country (*Borderlands 3*). The *mestiza* consciousness is manifestation of this third option.

Although much of the poetry analyzed here has the function of consciousness raising and reclamation of Chicana identity, it also serves as a resistance to the patriarchal views of both the dominant society and the Chicano Movement. Chicana poets attempt to rewrite the official history that has contributed to the denigration of Mexican Americans and labeled women as “putas” and “vendedoras,” when they express ideas that oppose traditional views. Pérez-Torres echoes these sentiments: “When dominant society configures the Chicano as an outsider instead of a constituent, a foreigner instead of an American, a labor force instead of a complex human being, an awareness of the limitations and delimitations of social discourses grow” (130). Chicana writers bring gender inequality to the discourse on the Borderlands.

Since many of the poems discussed in this chapter are coming of age narratives,

they highlight positive and negative aspects of growing up in a Chicano family. Men are often depicted as abusive drunks, insensitive to women's needs, while grandmothers are accorded a very special place as transmitters of culture and feminine models of identification. It is as if the poets can see in the mirror image of their *abuelitas* their own desired Chicana reflection. And while the poems move between the old and new, myth and current material reality, it would be a mistake to see them solely as idealizations of the natural life of the past. As Villa points out: "I would, instead, characterize the resilient agriculture as a symbolic figure and women's horticultural practices as a cultural model, of adaptation, and survival in the present, not just remembered in another place and time of *el pueblo*" (223). Indeed, the poems speak to the resiliency and survival of women, even in the face of poverty, abuse, and abandonment.

Notes

¹ Roth, *Separate Roads to Feminism*, explains that *carnalismo* of the Chicano Movement focused on male brotherhood and the belief that it was important for men to have public roles while women were to serve mostly as their support in the private sphere, 136. See also Alma Garcia, *Chicana Feminist Thought*, regarding the connection between *machismo* and the development of Chicana feminism, 5.

² Roth asserts that the loyalists of the Chicano Movement accused Chicana feminists of *vendidismo* or being sell-outs to white Anglo feminism, which they saw as a threat. They supported traditional gender roles as part of Chicanismo while the feminists argued that more egalitarian roles would be advantageous in the political struggles of the movement by strengthening the “family,” 176.

³ See Hewitt for criticism on the metaphor of “waves of feminism” for its stereotypical and hegemonic portrayal of the different time periods in the women’s movement.

⁴ Mary Daly (1928-2010) was a radical, lesbian feminist whose book *Gyn/Ecology* (published 1978) was criticized by Lorde for its narrow focus on patriarchy and gender oppression.

⁵ In *This Bridge We Call Home*, Ana Louise Keating explains that Anzaldúa’s *El Mundo Zurdo* or Left-Handed World is a visionary place for people of diverse backgrounds and needs who work together for revolutionary change. She points out that through this vision Anzaldúa rejects oppositional politics of difference and brings forth a relational approach (520).

⁶ Villanueva explains in a later poem: “...I didn’t like fish/ I just liked to fish-/ and I vowed/ to never/ grow up/ to be a woman/ and be helpless/ like my mother”

(*Bloodroot* 50). However, changing her voice to an adult voice she acknowledged that it took guts for her mother just to keep standing.

⁷ See *Borderlands* for Anzaldúa's notions regarding the Coatlicue state. There she emphasizes Coatlicue's Earth Mother symbolism, and her life giving and life taking power. She associates her archetype to the underground aspect of her psyche (46). The author translates *pocha* seed as an assimilated Mexican American

⁸ Cypess considers *La Malinche* to be a root paradigm or a cultural model that is reinvested time after time within the social drama (*La Malinche* 7).

⁹ Espin explains that oppressed men may displace their anger on children and women, because it is the only way to recover their power (52). See also Carlos Hipolito-Delgado, "Exploring the Etiology of Ethnic Self-Hatred: Internalized racism in Chicana/o and Latina/o College Students" (*Journal of College Student Development* 319-321).

¹⁰ Homi Bhabha explains, in *The Location of Culture*, the in-between as a space between past and present. It renews the past and innovates and interrupts the performance of the present.

¹¹ This was the first time in California history that the state, instead of the federal government, passed legislation related to immigrants. This has been followed by similar efforts in Arizona, Virginia and Georgia in recent times.

CHAPTER THREE

Chicana Visions Here and Beyond: *Our Lady*

Like other performances, the writing of history is framed as a bodily practice... Bernardo P. Gallegos, “Whose Lady of Guadalupe?”

The borderline work of art demands an encounter with “newness” that is not part of the continuum of past and present; nor is it a “newness” that can be contained in the mimesis of “original and copy”... Such art does not merely recall the past as a social cause or aesthetic precedent, it renews the past, refiguring it as a contingent “in-between space” that innovates and interrupts the performance of the present. Homi Bhabha, “Beyond the Pale: Art in the Age of Multicultural Translation”

In this chapter, I will discuss the work of three prominent Chicana visual artists, Ester Hernández, Yolanda Lopez, and Alma Lopez, and their controversial renditions of the image of the Virgin of Guadalupe. I will focus on the latest piece by Alma Lopez (*Our Lady*, 1999), which invokes the previous Guadalupana works but expands the notion of the subject through queering the image of *La Virgen de Guadalupe*. I am especially interested in how Alma Lopez’s imagery of the Madonna challenges existing sexual, racial, religious, and national frontiers, positioning her work in the interstices of her own Chicano culture and that of the dominant culture. I suggest that the images created by the artists evoke what Alicia Gaspar de Alba calls embodied aesthetics,

meaning that Chicana artists do not necessarily express their attachment to place, as did their male counterparts when claiming Aztlán as their lost home, but have a more intimate, bodily connection to it: “Instead of dispossession, ownership, or reclamation of a place outside the self, embodied aesthetics uses the body as a signifier of place” (127). Accordingly, the body itself becomes a site of origin, as I showed in the poetics of Alma Villanueva in the previous chapter. Since the artists in question created their Guadalupeana pieces during distinct moments of history, I place the work of Ester Hernández (*La Virgen de Guadalupe Defendiendo los Derechos de los Xicanos*, 1975), Yolanda Lopez (*Guadalupe Series*, 1978) and Alma Lopez along a temporal continuum as feminist contestations to the sexist politics defining Chicana women. Finally, this chapter explores the connection of Guadalupe’s bodily inscription in art and theories in the flesh.

Arts and Chicana Empowerment

Visual art has had a significant role in Chicano activism and cultural expression. Rooted in the history of the community and the Chicano Movement, art became a tool through which Chicanos expressed their struggles for improved political, economic, and social conditions (Eckman 19). Also, as explained by Judith Baca, art had an important role in affirming Chicano cultural identity and making the reality of its people visible (CARA 21). Rodolfo Acuña echoed similar sentiments:

Defense of this community is through retention of culture: collective liberation instead of individual co-optation. This is the message of the Gutierezes, Gonzaleses and Tijerinas as they bid good-bye to the forces that have controlled them in the past. The Chicano people seek self-determination in what were

formerly and rightfully their lands, not those of “Anglo-America.” (CARA 21)

This progress toward self-determination, however, did not happen without conflict, and as in the case of many minority liberatory movements, it did not easily gain acceptance. According to Judith Baca, by bringing their particular reality to the forefront, by resisting marginalization and assimilation, and by using art to engage in larger social struggles of the time period, Chicanos became “an irritant in the mainstream vision” (CARA 21). This was not necessarily a negative project, because it increased awareness of Chicano politics and arts. Consequently, Chicanas whose works to a great extent had been made invisible in the U.S. landscape of creative expression were able to begin to challenge the hegemonic ideas of “a singular American culture” (Gaspar de Alba, *Chicano Art* 31), opening for themselves a path into the mainstream discourse. At the same time, it was hard to gain equal status, as Chicanas often utilized in their art a special vernacular aesthetic, *rasquachismo*, that grew out of the every day experiences of the community, especially of *los de abajo* (Ybarra-Frausto 156), and used whatever material was readily available to create art. Tomas Ybarra-Frausto explains that *rasquachismo* “draws its essence within the world of the tattered, shattered, and broken: *lo remendido*” (156). Although popular among Chicanos, this “stitched-together” aesthetic was not valued among the mainstream schools of creative expression. At the same time, much of Chicano art can be seen as a working-class production that, as Gaspar de Alba suggests, functions as an alter-Native culture, “which is both indigenous and alien to the United States,... whose identity has been carved out of a history of colonization and struggle” (*Chicano Art* 15). While Gaspar de Alba developed this concept when analyzing art productions in the 1990 CARA (*Chicano Art: Resistance and Affirmation 1965-85*)

exhibition in Los Angeles, alter-Native culture also appears to be a fitting label for a more general study of Chicano art. As pointed out in previous chapters, the Mexican American populations, although native to the U.S. Southwest, have often been given an Other if not “foreign,” status by the dominant society. Even though their symbolic straddling of both sides of the border can be an asset since it gives Chicanas/os, like other marginalized peoples, a sensibility that helps them understand the world in a broader context, “outside in and inside out” (hooks 149), it can also subject them to discriminatory practices.

Tracing History from Aztlán to the Virgin of Guadalupe

In “*El desorden, Nationalism, and Chicana/o aesthetics*,” Laura Pérez points out that Chicano cultural practices have operated as a paradox in the dominant discourse, “bi-discursively... from both within and without the oppressive ideological territories of ‘Occupied America’” (19). “Occupied America,” of course, refers to Rodolfo Acuña’s groundbreaking history of Chicanos, as well as to the U.S.-Mexico War, which led to the annexing of nearly half of Mexico to the United States, an invasion that, as noted previously, not only produced serious losses for Mexico but also serves as the origins of a distinct Mexican American community in the Southwest (Pérez, “*El Desorden*” 21). Following a long history of oppression, displacement, and identity crisis, it was important for Chicanas/os in the 1960s and 1970s to create a space that was specifically theirs. In this context, Aztlán can be seen as “a nation within a nation” (29) that enabled them to envision a common foundation from which to construct a Chicano identity. As a symbolic construct, Aztlán has often united all the Chicanas/os culturally and spiritually (Leal 8) in the United States. It was used as an ideological platform in *El Plan Espiritual*

de Aztlán,¹ and first made public at the National Chicano Youth Liberation Conference in Denver in 1969. The third paragraph of the plan declares:

Brotherhood unites us, and love for our brothers makes us a people whose time has come and who struggles against the foreigner “gabacho” who exploits our riches and destroys our culture. With our hearts in our hands and our hands in the soil, we declare the independence of our mestizo nation. We are a bronze people with a bronze culture. Before the world, before all of North America, before all our brothers in the bronze continent, we are a nation, we are a union of free pueblos, we are Aztlán. (Anaya and Lomeli 1)

As seen above, *El Plan de Aztlán*, usually referred to as the Plan, focused on building a *mestizo* nation of autonomous *pueblos mexicanos* with a separate economic system, comprised of Chicano commerce, free of European capitalism. According to Yolanda Alaniz and Megan Cornish, the Plan defined the Chicano struggle as a movement for national sovereignty; its other demands were for equality in their U.S. homeland, independent political governance, economic self-determination, culturally specific curriculum in the schools, and community self-defense. The Plan advocated for bilingual education and, on the whole, emphasized racial solidarity (193). While the Plan focused on the founding of a specific “bronze culture” across the lands that the Anglo American invaders took from Mexico in 1848, it borrowed from the myth about the original home of the Aztecs in the North before their departure to new territories and new riches.² At the same time, if we understand the notion of Aztlán, as did Daniel Cooper Alarcón, to be a palimpsest of competing narratives that have been superimposed over earlier ones, never quite erasing them fully (4), we begin to see a multilayered construct of cultural

and national identity that has been modified over time and across cultural boundaries, acquiring new significations in the course of history. To explain the concept of palimpsest, Cooper Alarcón theorizes:

If we remember that definitive characteristic of the palimpsest is incomplete erasure and superimposition, and we begin to look for this characteristic in uncharacteristic sites, we begin to locate the palimpsest as the nexus of power, empire and discourse. (4).

This is an especially useful construct, since much of what we know about Aztec origins was re-told and re-interpreted by the indigenous elite and the Spaniards after the Conquest. The palimpsest approach also challenges drawing strict boundaries between history and myth and enables competing narratives and different voices to be included (7). Cooper Alarcón also suggests that reading Mesoamerican history this way, against the master narratives of the dominant group, helps to address issues that have hitherto attracted little attention. The multilayered concept makes it possible to understand Chicano identity as a result of the interrelationships between Chicano and Mexican cultures, different ethnic groups, multiple geographic origins, and diverse historic/mythic pasts.

Historically, although the facts have been much debated, Aztlán was considered the home of the Aztecs approximately until the eleventh century A.D. when they left and started their journey south towards the valley of Anáhuac. In 1325, they settled there and established their temple at Tenochtitlán,³ in what is now known as Mexico City. According to early narratives, such as the Codex Ramírez, Aztlán was a paradisiacal place of “whiteness” that existed in the north and was surrounded by water. Seven *calpulli* (clans) lived there in seven caves around a curved mountain (Pina 28). It was a

place of plentitude, according to the chroniclers. Fray Diego Durán's *The History of the Indies of New Spain* describes Aztlán in the following way:

In that place there is a great hill in the midst of the waters, and it is called Colhuacan because its summit is twisted, thus it is Colhuacan, meaning "Twisted Hill." In this hill there were caves or grottoes where our fathers and grandfathers lived for many years. There they lived in leisure, when they were called Mexitin [or Mexicas] and Aztecs. There they had at their disposal great flocks of ducks of different kinds, herons, cormorants, cranes, and other waterfowl. Our ancestors enjoyed the song and melody of the little birds with red and yellow heads (213).⁴

Although the Aztecs ultimately gained power that was to "radiate to the four corners of the world" (Pina 28), at the time of their departure and during their peregrination they had an inferior status. They were considered ignorant barbarians, and remained initially unwelcome in the areas they tried to settle. During their migration, however, the Aztecs conquered other tribes and city-states, acquiring both wealth and knowledge of sciences such as astronomy, architecture, and agriculture, ultimately gaining imperial power over the whole region. By the time the Spaniards arrived in the New World, the Aztecs were seen as greedy colonizers by other Indians in the area (Todorov 59). On the other hand, as Cooper Alarcón has pointed out, the Aztecs had a tradition of assimilating the religious practices of other cultures (12), which helped them to incorporate new skills and knowledge but seemingly also principles of Christianity. After all, it was the Aztec religious belief system that originally sparked their journey from Aztlán, under the guidance of their sun and war deity Huitzilopochtli, making it "a pilgrimage directed by a supernatural being" (Pina 25). It is also worth noting that war

and religion had a close connection in Aztec society. As reported by Miguel León-Portilla, the religious goal of the Aztecs was to capture enough sacrificial victims for Huitzilopochtli to satisfy his hunger for human blood. According to León-Portilla, it was this ceremonial attitude toward war that can be seen as a decisive factor in the fall of the empire (León-Portilla xliii). On the other hand, since the three motives of the Conquest were economic, political, and religious, as Virginia Bouvier reminds us in *Women and the Conquest of California 1542-1840* (3), the Spaniards found it important to root out, often with extreme violence, indigenous ritual practices that did not accord with their Christian beliefs or Western world view. Among them, human sacrifice was used to justify aggression of the colonizers, as Hernán Cortés explained in a letter to Charles V:

One very horrible and abominable custom they have which they certainly should be punished and which we have seen in no other part, and that is that whenever they wish to beg anything of their idols, in order that their petition may find more acceptance, they take large numbers of boys and girls and even grown men and women and tear out their hearts and bowels while still alive, burning them in the presence of those idols, and offering the smoke of such burning as a pleasant sacrifice. (qtd. in Schwartz 83)

Although the Spanish Conquistadores benefitted from *partial* erasure of Mexican culture in order to build their power structures upon indigenous institutions (Cooper Alarcón 4), most of Tenochtitlán was destroyed. Thus, as mentioned before, the recording of historical facts was left to a great extent to lay chroniclers and Spanish clergy, whose interpretation of events, customs, and religious ceremonies was tainted by their own values and understanding of history. It was even harder to find out about earlier periods

and peoples, because the Aztecs themselves had destroyed their books and rewritten their history after the establishment of Tenochtitlán, most likely to recreate a past that was more in tune with their newly acquired power. Investigators have pointed out that, in general, Mesoamerican societies altered history to reshape it for their present circumstances, because they believed that it was a repetition of past events (Gillespie xxiv). For instance, Roberta and Peter Markman have emphasized that myth was always used to re-interpret history, which in return became the realization of myth (270).

Consequently, as the anthropologist Ross Hassig points out, in the accounts of the Aztec migration from Aztlán “history merged uneasily with myth, increasingly so as one goes back in time” (112). It is therefore hard to separate fact from legend, and many historians still disagree about the location of Aztlán or whether it ever existed. The myth known today shares similarities with other “creation stories” in its depiction of Aztlán as a place of abundance and a utopian existence. Interpreted symbolically it can be seen as the maternal womb (seven caves) from which the Aztecs emerged before starting their peregrination to their promised land. Susan Gillespie points out that according to one interpretation of history, all ethnic groups were believed to have descended from a primordial couple, Iztacmixcoatl and Ilancueitl. They were said to have lived in Chicomoztoc (also called Aztlán), which was considered the legendary womb of many groups of people around the Valley of Mexico (57). These interpretations are important because they suggest a maternal imagery that was later shunted aside by a patriarchal ideology.

What does this mythical history really have to do with twentieth century Chicanos? Is it a re-creation of an idyllic homeland where “injustice, evil, sickness, old

age, poverty, and misery did not exist” (Leal 8)? How did the myth of Aztlán affirm a political agenda of resistance and allow Chicanas/os to claim a new identity during a period of political turmoil? What is Aztlán’s connection to Chicano art? To answer these questions, I will first point to the notion developed by Rudolfo Anaya that spiritual yearning for a homeland appears to be inherent in the collective memory of any group (239). As Anaya points out, this longing has to do with the need to identify one’s origin in order to name oneself. For Chicanas/os the idea of the lost homeland in the U.S. Southwest gave impetus to their political agenda and the establishment of a distinct identity. Aztlán, then, can be seen as a symbol that has multiple meanings. It is not only an ancestral land of displaced peoples but also can be understood more broadly as the spiritual and psychological center of cultural *mestizaje*, which, in John Chavez’s words, can be applied “to any place north of Mexico where Chicanos hoped to fulfill their collective aspirations” (qtd. in Cooper Alarcón 33). Also, Chicanos in the mid-1960s identified with Aztec history because it spoke to the loss of their original home, migration, struggle for status, and establishment of power, before being brutally crushed by the Spanish conquerors, who “took the lands,” “exploited the riches,” and “destroyed the culture” of the Mexicas. These concepts resonated in *El Plan Espiritual de Aztlán*, a manifesto against Anglo Americans, who were seen as the more recent colonizers of the U.S. Southwest in the aftermath of the War of 1848. Land then became a trope that connected with the Chicano psyche and its longings: it signified loss, exile, and the need to re-conquer what had been taken away. Interestingly, if the land is personified as a female,⁵ the Spanish Conquest of the New World and the Chicano desire to re-possess the lands of the U.S. Southwest can be seen principally as male endeavors. Further, Gaspar

de Alba talks about place-attachment, which she views as a process sustained by “an affective tie to the land and to the community that has occupied, used, and cared for the land since time immemorial” (“There’s No Place” 113). Aztlán, then, is an ideal of a place connected to ancestral memory, and to Chicanos’ masculinist attachment to their roots.

As indicated above, many investigators point out that as a construct Aztlán combines history, mythology and a search for meaning. On the other hand, while the Conquest and the Christianizing of the New World historically resulted in the destruction of Pre-Columbian religious icons and belief systems, according to Anaya, Aztlán can also be seen as a place of synthesis that was influenced by the Old World traditions, Indo-Hispanic religiosity, and the spirituality of the *pueblos* (239). One example of this was the merging of the Virgin Mary of the Spanish Catholic faith and the indigenous goddess Tonantzin, resulting in the cult of the Virgin of Guadalupe, who was believed to have appeared to a Christianized Indian, Juan Diego. Declared the Patroness of Mexico City in 1737, she became an important Mexican national symbol. The spiritual transition to the new religion was made easier by the fusion between the two female deities: “The fact that the European Mother God had power over fertility, disease, and natural disasters, facilitated syncretism between her and the native mother goddesses” (Peterson 40). The process was not, however, always as smooth as the clergy would have wished. For instance, in the 1500s, Fray Bernardino de Sahagún (1499-1590) complained in his *Historia general de las cosas de Nueva España* that the natives came to the Church of Guadalupe to worship their old goddess Tonantzin, an act that he considered “a satanic device to mask idolatry” (Wolf 35). Stafford Poole, who has analyzed many original

documents, does not find any evidence that Sahagún knew about the apparitions to Juan Diego but rather interpreted the indigenous worship as a revival of pagan devotion (80). Overall, the Christianity practiced by the Aztecs needs to be understood within their cultural context, since it was built on their own religious beliefs and thought patterns (Vieira Powers 52). After Sahagún's investigation, there were only brief mentions of the Virgin of Guadalupe until 1648 when the theologian and preacher Miguel Sánchez wrote about the miracle of her appearance. Jacques Lafaye is of the opinion that it was Sánchez who "invented" the Mexican Guadalupan tradition, providing it with a theological foundation that was based on earlier anecdotal evidence and the description of the Woman of the Apocalypse in the Bible (244-245). The images that Sánchez evoked in his writings recalled the Book of Revelation: "And there appeared a great wonder in heaven, a woman clothed with the sun, and the moon under her feet, and upon her head a crown of twelve stars" (Rev. 12.1). And later: "The woman was given the two wings of a great eagle, so that she might fly to the place prepared for her in the desert where she would be taken care of for a time, times and a half time, out of the serpent's reach" (Rev. 12.14). Sánchez saw in the Conquest a re-enactment of the apocalyptic battle, and when Montezuma's empire fell, giving way to Christianity, he saw Mexico as God's chosen "sun-planet" where the Virgin Mary was to appear in the image of Guadalupe (Brading 59). It is of interest here that Sánchez wrote from a *criollo* perspective, which explains the popularity of his text after it was revised for much later publication. The idea of a new homeland where the Virgin of Guadalupe had the role of "our *criolla* sovereign" (Poole 104) was one of the central motives for Sánchez's religious work. Again, we see the yearning for a homeland and a political investment in gaining a favorable status in the

Americas as one of the founding principles of Sánchez's work.

Even today, the image of the Virgin is so powerful that the anthropologist Eric Wolf called her the master symbol of Mexico, a symbol that "encompasses the hopes and aspirations of a whole society" (34). As indicated above, she has been venerated since the early seventeenth century as the Queen Mother of the Americas. In 1629, her image was carried from Tepeyac to Mexico City to save it from floods, which had been a serious problem since the Aztec period. Similarly, in 1737, it was believed that the Virgin had intervened during an epidemic of plague. The Virgin of Guadalupe has often been seen as a symbol of liberation. In 1810, during the War of Independence, her image was used for the insurgent movement. Later, both Emiliano Zapata and Pancho Villa fought the Revolutionary War of 1910 under her patronage. In the United States, César Chavez used Guadalupe as a symbol for the farm workers' strike in the 1960s. Wolf asserts that the Virgin provokes two distinct imaginaries: she is perceived, first, as a source of maternal warmth and infantile longing for "a pristine state in which hunger and unsatisfactory social relations are minimized" (36) and, second, in the context of Mexican male domination, as having the power to rebel against the father, that is to subvert patriarchy. These images correspond to two types of kinship relations that Wolf observed in Indian and Mexican families. Yet, in the context of the Conquest the meaning of Guadalupe takes another form. Jeanette Peterson, while not dismissing the importance of Guadalupe as a symbol of liberation, argues that it was imperative for the *criollo* program in the New World to verify the apparitions as a genuinely American phenomenon to justify the conquest and to glorify Mexico (42). She views Guadalupe also as an emblem of control and submission. This is especially true within the masculinist context of the

Catholic Church and the meanings it has attached to the Virgin.

Broadly speaking, it is possible to see in Guadalupe both a political figure for Mexican nationalism and a religious icon, associated with Catholicism and popular beliefs. In addition, her image has been used to set a standard for female behavior. Researchers have long discussed the character traits attributed to the ideal (read virginal) woman in the Mexican imaginary: she is submissive, asexual, morally superior, self-sacrificing, sad, and humble (Stevens 94). Unlike her negative counterpart, *La Malinche*, the Indian woman who served as a translator and concubine to Cortés during the Conquest, Guadalupe symbolizes purity. However, to fully understand the meaning attached to Guadalupe, it is important to look at two other female archetypes. As indicated previously, myths surrounding the image of *La Malinche* or Doña Marina, as she was known to the Spanish during the Conquest, implicated her as the fallen woman who betrayed her people by leading Cortés to victory over the Aztecs. In *The Labyrinth of Solitude*, the Mexican poet Octavio Paz labeled her as the violated mother, *la Chingada*, representing all Indian women who bore the signs of violation “in their very flesh” (86). The myth surrounding her figure has had such profound cultural impact that according to Sandra Cypess, it continues to be a paradigm for female conduct, and for relationships between men and women (7). The fact that the female image has been split between two polarities reinforces a *virgen/puta* dynamic that sets the stage for male domination of women. The third female archetype is *La Llorona*, who, according to a popular legend, was an Indian woman who had born children to a married Spanish man of higher status. When rejected by him, she drowned her children and killed herself. From then onward, she was said to walk at night near bodies of water crying for her lost

children. Although the myth has many versions, and appears to have European roots, its similarity to Indian legends gave it a place in the Mexican tradition (Limón 408). One of its indigenous versions was reported by Sahagún, who explained that the Aztec goddess Tonantzin (one aspect of whom was called Cihuacóatl)⁶ was believed to appear dressed in white attire in a crowd of women leaving behind the cradle of her child, and a piece of flint with which to make a spear point for human sacrifice (qtd. in Lafaye 212). Limón argues that this and other similar legends inform Indian versions of the narrative, to which the Europeans then added other motifs (408). Most interesting for the present analysis is that the splitting, made possible by the Guadalupe/Malinche nexus, is often addressed in Chicana feminist cultural production. In “From Llorona to Gritona,” Ana María Carbonell discusses the antecedents of this split from the colonial period on. The Aztecs, in their demand for sacrificial victims, manipulated the role of Cihuacoatl as a patron of midwives, and replaced her child with a sacrificial knife, turning her into an agent of destructive forces and a bad mother (Carbonell 55). Consequently, as a descendant of Coatlicue, she was separated from her siblings Tonantzin and Coatlopeuh, the good mothers (55). Cihuacoatl can therefore be associated with *La Llorona*.⁷ Within this context, *La Llorona*, *La Malinche* and the Virgin of Guadalupe can be understood as a trinity of legendary female figures whose images have been distorted by a masculine interpretation of history, and whose presence lives on in the works of many Chicana/o artists and writers.

Chicana Artists, Chicana Subjects

As mentioned previously, *El Plan Espiritual de Aztlán* was a product of masculine imagination, since the Chicano Movement tended to exclude women as equal partners.

Gaspar de Alba among other feminist critics asserts that the myth of Aztlán has been at the core of the Chicano male identity affecting the Chicano psyche and cultural production, and forging sexual politics into its ideology and representation in the arts (“There’s No Place” 104, 105). The artistic expression of Chicanos was dominated by men until the mid-seventies, with women primarily depicted as spouses, mothers, goddesses and sex symbols (Nixon 1). It was no coincidence that in 1977 Sybil Venegas described in the November issue of *La Gente* the celebrations of *el Dia de los Muertos* as an art tradition that would play a significant role in strengthening the Chicano Cultural Renaissance. She predicted that,

As more and more communities become increasingly aware of these currently existing and well-established celebrations, it is no doubt that many more such events will begin to take place in other communities in the near future. And as more groups borrow and exchange ideas of similar nature, Chicano communities throughout the Southwest will experience a cultural renaissance of unique proportions (15).

Although the Day of the Dead was already an important cultural event in East Los Angeles and other Chicano communities, it is curious that Venegas saw it and other similar celebrations as the tradition that would project the influence of Chicano arts on a larger scale. Even though Chicana artists presented their altar work at *Día de los Muertos* museum exhibits, critics argued that because their work was relegated to a single annual festival of Latin American origin, it could serve to marginalize their creative input (Pérez, “Writing” 54) reinforcing their position and cultural production as the exotic other. It was not until the year 2004 that the Los Angeles County Museum of Art began

discussions about how it could house permanent exhibitions of Latino artists (Pérez-Torres 235).

On the other hand, also in 1977, Venegas wrote an article for *Chismearte*, in which she claimed that the time was ripe for Chicana artists to participate in creative production: “No longer bound to the conceptual chains of passivity or obliged to recreate the image of *la Virgen de Guadalupe* on a daily basis, Chicana artists have emerged as successful and talented counterparts to Chicano artists” (4). This declaration speaks clearly of a shift from the stereotypical behavioral code for women, associated with the Virgin, and changing sex role expectations, as Chicana feminism started to emerge and develop new strategies to challenge the masculine discourse. As suggested by Laura Pérez, Chicanas wanted to occupy their own space in the Chicano Movement, sharing in but also transforming the vision of Aztlán and becoming participants in *la Causa* (“*El desorden*” 23). This desire was expressed poignantly by the poet Margarita Cota Cárdenas in a poem:

He’s very much aware now
 and makes fervent Revolution
 so his children
 and the masses
 will be free

 but his woman
 in every language
 has only begun to ask
 - y yo querido viejo

and ME? (qtd in *Infinite Divisions* 22)

The poem shows the vacuum in which many Chicanas were left when their men joined forces with the Chicano Movement. In an article titled “And Yes. . . The Earth Did Part,” Angie Chabram-Dernersesian explains that Chicanas consciously disassociated themselves from male hegemonic constructions of group identity during the 1970s, striving to reclaim a subject position by “parting with male-centered ethnic qualifiers that inscribed Chicana subjection” (41). According to Chabram-Dernersesian, this meant situating themselves in Aztlán, while rejecting male domination and sexism. Part of the process of redefinition emerged through creative works that replaced old female icons by new empowering images and new subject positions, because one of the goals for Chicana artists was to overcome oppression. As Judith Huacuja writes, this was an undertaking that involved exposing all the imperialistic strategies that disempowered and devalued Chicanas as women and members of their ethnic group (105).

These deconstructions of Chicanismo were important, not only because the Movement left women out of its ideology of liberation, but also because it created a (unified) male subject within a monolithic concept of Chicano nationalism that left no room for sexual and gender differences. *El Plan* very clearly stated that, “Brotherhood unites us, and love for our brothers makes us a people whose time has come...” (Anaya and Lomelli 1). Furthermore, it borrowed somewhat uncritically the concept of Aztlán as the mythical site of Aztec origin, ignoring the bloody history of the Aztec imperial acquisitions. As Pritchard points out, Chicanismo utilized “a symbol that has served the Mexican state and its ideological apparatuses of repression and oppression” (24). Although Aztec women had a parallel status with men in matters of labor and enjoyed

equal legal rights, this changed quickly under Spanish rule, resulting in gender inequality that persisted in Mexico through the colonial era, and beyond. Thus, the Aztec/Mexican/Chicano connection was articulated in ways that were problematic for women, in spite of the fact that many first-wave feminist writers and artists were inspired by the Movement's cultural ideals (Quiñones 131).

Lifting the Veil of(f) the Virgin: Ester Hernández and Yolanda Lopez

Anna Nieto Gómez, an early Chicana feminist wrote a proposal for Chicana education that identified a need “to lift the veil of the Virgin’s face to show a real woman who is not exempt from the trials of life” (“The Chicana”131). The recognition that the image of Guadalupe had very little in common with flesh-and-blood Chicanas resulted in numerous attempts to depict her in a different, perhaps more contemporary way. The notion that the material realities of Chicana life, for instance, skin color, place of birth, conditions of growing up, and sexual orientation should be at the center of the production of politics and of theory, was voiced by Cherrie Moraga in *This Bridge Called My Back* in 1981. Moraga proposed her theory in the flesh, in which women of color named themselves and bridged the contradictions of women of color among white feminists, lesbians among straights, and feminists in the patriarchal culture (23). She argued that theory in the flesh would lead to healing.

In her image titled *La Virgen de Guadalupe Defendiendo los Derechos de los Xicanos* (black and white etching, 1975, Figure 2), Ester Hernández stirred up both interest and discomfort. In her more life-like rendition of Guadalupe, Hernández depicts a Virgin, dressed in a karate-uniform standing on one leg as she launches a powerful sidekick. In stark contrast to Hernández’s action figure, the traditional rendition (Figure

1) depicts Guadalupe as a passive but beautiful olive-skinned female, whose hands are frozen in prayer and eyes downcast in silence. She is dressed in a red robe with a floral pattern, cloaked in a blue mantle decorated by gold stars, and she is supported by a small winged angel. She stands on a crescent moon with the rays of the sun forming an oval halo around her. As a holy woman, she appears silent and far removed from the world around her. The downward cast of her eyes hides them from the viewer, shielding her demure gaze. In traditional paintings her eyes appear closed as in humble meditation. This image of Guadalupe radiates purity: she is *nuestra madre*, holy and asexual. As suggested earlier, like the Marianist construct of Aztlán, she has come to symbolize maternal nurturing and protection.

In contrast to the traditional image, Hernández's Virgin is a black-belt warrior who is fiercely fighting for Chicano rights, focusing her gaze on her opponent and clenching her fists. She no longer represents the ideal, submissive woman but is transformed into a feminist action figure, now in a position of gender equality and activism. Her leg is aimed straight at the other side of the aureole. Since her reach is no longer limited by the confines of what is usually viewed a sign of divinity, Hernández invites redefinition of both the religious icon and consequently of stereotypical gender roles, from which the historical image draws. She depicts the Virgin as a strong, brown woman in the act of eloquently springing off the crescent moon, no longer needing to be "held in place" (Pérez, *El desorden* 34) by the angel underneath. Hernández's figure of a male cherub, does not have the conventional neutral expression but a look of awe, stretching his arms upward. The star-decorated mantle of the Judeo-Christian tradition is in the background, as if the karate fighter had cast it off as an impediment to her active

stance. In essence, she seems to be indicating that she is as capable of fighting for *la Raza* as her male counterparts. The karate uniform places her within the dominant culture, no longer subjugated because of her gender, race, and class but in a position of parity. Although the *mestiza* features of the Virgin are clearly depicted, her gender is more ambiguous. thanks to the karate suit, perhaps indicating that this Guadalupe is confident in traversing the world of both sexes and different cultures, in the same way as Anzaldúa's new *mestiza* who "has a plural personality" and "operates in a pluralistic mode" (*Borderlands* 101). Yet, her stance subverts the traditional image of femininity, as she clenches her fist and gives a powerful kick. In Judith Butler's terms, the performance of the warrior Guadalupe can be understood as scripting a new self: more active, more aggressive. The elimination of many gender-markers provokes questions about their partial erasure, inspiring the viewer to ask whether sexuality was not of interest to the artist during this time period or whether she wanted to leave it open for new possibilities.

In *Gender Trouble*, Butler talks about gender as an identity that is socially constituted. She writes:

The effect of gender is produced through the stylization of the body and, hence, must be understood as the mundane way in which bodily gestures, movements, and styles of various kinds constitute the illusion of an abiding gendered self. This formulation moves the conception of gender off the ground of a substantial model of identity to one that requires a conception of gender as a constituted *social* temporality (140-141).

This raises the question of whether, in addition to being a bi-cultural, feminist Chicana, Hernandez's Guadalupe is also seen fighting for lesbian rights. Previously,

Hernández did not comment on the topic, when told that in her piece, *La Ofrenda*, the halo and the figure of the Virgin resembled a vagina (Yarbro-Bejarano, “The Lesbian” 185). But as Emma Pérez asserts, “to queer the border is to look at the usual documents with another critical eye” (“Queering” 128), thus filling the gaps and including sexuality in the narratives of the Borderlands. We can also question to what extent this karate Virgin may have paved the way for a more clearly queer Guadalupe connection in Hernández’s *La Ofrenda*. At the very least, the karate image is reminiscent of the self-defense classes that were offered to women in the heyday of the feminist movement, to empower them so that they could protect themselves from victimization by men. The warrior Guadalupe appears not only capable of defending herself but also fighting for the rights of her community. Thus, Hernández connects the individual struggle for liberation to the collective struggle for equality and recognition, within her Chicano *raza*.

Emma Pérez views the whole notion of Chicano nationalism as “a return to the pre-oedipal mother whose symbolic equivalent of Aztlán moves back in time, as a regression, a return to the mother, but the mother cannot be Malinche. She must be Virgin of Guadalupe; she cannot be sexual” (*Decolonial* 122). According to Pérez, the history of Chicano nationalism relies on a pre-oedipal maternal imaginary of Aztlán that splits the Chicana identity by erasing the possibility of female sexuality for the sake of virginal purity. Luz Calvo develops this idea further, asserting that Chicano nationalists relied on relations of patriarchal power and the incest taboo as they tried to structure Chicano identity towards compulsory heterosexuality (“Art Comes” 207).

Importantly, Hernández’s Virgin like other creative work must be seen in the perspective of the time and political context in which it was created. Shifra Goldman

talks about the function of art in time-space continuum, and the need to consider where and for whom a specific piece was created (282). Although the idea of Guadalupe as a karate fighter was thought to be insulting by some Chicanas/os and even incited bomb threats after its publication, it is now considered a signature piece of Hernández's generation (Mesa-Bains 137), which called for feminist participation from all Chicanas after a period of repressive gender ideology. In that sense, it was a contestatory work of art that challenged the mainstream and Chicano patriarchies. In the artist's own words,

The figure represents woman becoming an active participant, breaking out of some traditional images — the colonial mentality, while maintaining her culture, informing, teaching and learning from her people; taking a militant stand on all fronts, on behalf of La Raza: La Chicana at the forefront of the arts, in schools, as writers... (Quirarte 21).

Similarly, Yolanda Lopez is known for her Guadalupe series. An activist involved in the farm workers' struggle, helping organize a *barrio* health clinic, and participating as a court artist at the trial of *Los Siete* (the seven) political activists, accused of killing a policeman (LaDuke 104),⁸ she became interested in visual representations of women after seeing a slide show sponsored by Women against Violence against Women, a grassroots organization founded in 1976 to protest violence and displays derogatory to women in the mass media. Concerned by the ways that mainstream magazines objectified and victimized women, she began to explore visual material produced during the Chicano Movement, finding a scarcity of female images apart from stereotypical images of the Virgin of Guadalupe (Stott 56, 57). She consequently became interested in transforming the meanings attached to the Virgin:

As for the movement media, the Virgin of Guadalupe was the most prevalent,

continuous image of women... so I looked at this religious icon of the Virgin, who was the symbol of Mexican nationalism, to see what it did for us as women. She was a role model; that was what public images do, they feed us back a way that we should be, a way for us to compare ourselves to what we are. (Martinez, "Artist" 18)

Teresa Eckman also notes in her analysis of Chicano and Neo-Mexicanist art that the official iconography of Guadalupe has remained unchanged, in its numerous instantiations since the mid-sixteenth century. Her glance is cast downward, her hands meet in prayer, and she stands on a crescent moon supported by a winged angel, wearing a red floral robe. She is covered by a blue mantle, and rays of sun surround her body (7-8). The original image in the *basilica* in Mexico City portrays many of these characteristics of Guadalupe: hands in prayer, radiant light as a sign of the Immaculata, crescent moon indicating her grace, and a posture suggesting humility and obedience (Davalos 87).

Challenging the conventional rendition, Lopez created her triptych (oil pastel on paper, 1978) depicting the Virgin in everyday situations, as a working-class woman who earns a living by sewing, as a grandmother, and as a marathon runner. According to Karen Mary Davalos, in *A Ver: Revisioning Art History*, the triptych challenges traditional gender constructions, attitudes towards race, and the patriarchy of the Catholic Church, and explores Chicana subjectivities (86), as Anzaldúa did when she wrote about the new *mestíza* consciousness. The artist herself found it comfortable to work with photographs since she was trained as a photographer. She also found it disconcerting that the Chicano Movement produced pictures of male heroes, such as César Chavez and

Zapata but not of women (Martínez, “Artist” 18). The Virgin of Guadalupe, besides being an important religious emblem, signified conquest to her:

The last place of resistance of the Mexican Indians to Spanish colonization was their spiritual life, their religion, which was not Christian. When that image of the Virgin happened, it accomplished the conquest. It combined the indigenous great mother earth, and a Christian icon. That was its function: a tool of the conquest. (qtd. in Martínez, “Artist” 18)

In *Margaret F. Stewart: Our Lady of Guadalupe*, Lopez placed her mother, a middle-aged *mestiza* woman, on a chair behind a sewing machine stitching the star-spangled cape that Guadalupe typically wears over her dress (Figure 2). A small male angel sits on the floor, looking up like a child. His wings are the color of the Mexican flag, and the roses that are usually associated with the apparition of Guadalupe to Juan Diego are scattered next to him. Although initially hard to discern, there is a snake wrapped around the sewing machine. This image brings Guadalupe into the real world of working women, each of whom is as sacred to Lopez as the Virgin of Tepeyac. Davalos reports that, in the eyes of Lopez as a child, her mother was beautiful, and therefore, her portrait as Guadalupe sets a new standard for female beauty that is not tied to age or youth (91). Her mantle is the result of hard work, and the snake that is wrapped around the sewing machine suggests the indigenous wisdom and power that Lopez attributes to ordinary women and their labor. The image of the serpent can be understood as a trace of pre-Colombian pagan religions, and perhaps the Aztec goddess Coatlicue, “Serpent Skirt,” the mother of the other deities, and in the meanwhile, also fulfills the practical (and ironic) function of a pin cushion. The male angel does not support the Virgin as in

the conventional images, but sits on the crescent moon partially covered by the cloak that Guadalupe is sewing. Although he can be seen as a child, resting safely at the Virgin Mother's feet, he is also a masculine reminder of the Chicano connection to the Mexican nation state.

A second portrait, *Victoria F. Franco: Our Lady of Guadalupe*, features an older woman sitting on a stool, draped with the Virgin's cloak (Figure 3). She is centered in front of the aureole with a flayed snake in one hand and a knife in the other. This time the angel is pictured behind the Virgin, holding a garland of flowers in the air. One of his wings is visible and carries, again, the colors of the Mexican flag. In this picture, Lopez depicts her grandmother as Guadalupe, presented as an older woman with the divine rays of the sun all around her. She is wearing a dress that is decorated by a pin with a tiny crescent moon, which no longer serves as a pedestal of her holiness but rather as a simple adornment and possibly as a reminder of her feminine connection to the moon cycles. Rather than being supported by the male angel, she has her feet firmly planted on the ground while the angel is hidden half-way behind the stool. The wreath of flowers he is holding up could be a garland of roses to honor and celebrate the Grandmother-Virgin. Holding a snake that she appears to have killed not only gives this Virgin control over the animal world, but also reconnects her to the goddesses of her indigenous heritage, and metonymically arms her with power over cycles of birth and death, sexuality, and womanhood itself. Coatlicue, the Serpent Skirt, has generally been understood to represent duality of life, as Anzaldúa points out:

Coatlicue depicts the contradictory. In her figure, all the symbols important to the religion and philosophy of the Aztecs are integrated. Like Medusa, the Gorgon,

she is a symbol of the fusion of opposites: the eagle and the serpent, heaven and the underworld, life and death, mobility and immobility, beauty and horror.

(*Borderlands* 69)

For Anzaldúa, spiritual *mestizaje* is a critical part of Borderlands identity. She states that Chicanas/os are people “on the knees of the gods” (103). This is to say that the heritage of old Aztec gods and goddesses underlies their psyche, integrated by the figure of Coatlicue.

Thus, as in Lopez’s image, the grandmother evolves as a figure of wisdom and authority in whose person the dualities coalesce. Her image becomes even more powerful if we consider that Serpent Skirt symbolized the “complete cosmos” (Markman and Markman 223). The fact that the grandmother has flayed the snake is also reminiscent of the Aztec ritual practices during which a revered victim was sacrificed to the god (Markman and Markman 181). Flayed alive, his skin was taken and worn by a priest who became the god. Markman and Markman emphasize that the important element of sacrifice was the transformation of the victim into a god whose “physical body functioned as a ritual mask in making the inner reality outer, spiritualizing the physical” (181).

Thus, the flayed snake in Grandmother Guadalupe’s hand can be understood as an embodiment of her regenerative powers, as in the Aztec traditional death ritual, the killing that made new life possible (Markman and Markman 4). If we interpret the primitive flint knife as a tool of sacrifice, then the grandmother can be seen to occupy a divine indigenous position, with a close connection to the deep layers of the Aztec spirituality. Lopez herself says that the snake was part of the Virgin’s iconography in her

own church in San Diego, where a statue shows the Virgin standing on a globe and trampling a snake (Davalos 92). She also pointed out that, additionally, the snake symbolism refers to sexuality, which she appears to treat with some ambivalence. The snake as pincushion and the flayed snake, possessed by Guadalupe, lack potency and are perhaps ironic allusions to indicate that the male sex is now dominated by a woman. The artist explains further:

The snake is flayed. It symbolizes end of life. She is holding the knife herself because she is no longer struggling with life and with sexuality. She has her own power. It is neither sad nor celebratory. (qtd. in Davalos 93)

Overall, this Guadalupe depicts a *mestiza* who is used to working with her hands, an image missing in the original *Plan Espiritual de Aztlán* because of its masculine focus on brotherhood. Nevertheless, for Lopez, this type of an omission served as an inspiration, as the aesthetic goal of her work was to confront those historical distortions about women that placed them in inferior positions; Lopez wanted “to make Chicanos think” (Martínez, “Artist” 14) and to act as a *provocateur* who helps her audience to become more aware of the power inequities that Chicanas face and to empower them.

In the last painting of the triptych, *Portrait of the Artist as the Virgin of Guadalupe*, Lopez transposed her own image onto the Virgin (Figure 4). In this painting, she is wearing tennis shoes and a pink dress that reveals her muscular legs as she leaps gleefully towards the viewer off her pedestal-moon. The cloak is hanging loosely over one of her shoulders, and she is holding a snake in her hand as a sign of sexual power. The rays of the sun surround her while she steps over the angel whose wings now display

the colors of the U.S. flag. Interestingly, Lopez described the angel as a “middle-aged agent of patriarchy” (Gaspar de Alba, *Chicano Art* 141), and as such a member of the dominant society. On the other hand, it seems that he is not only a symbol of male patriarchy but also the colonizing power of the United States, as indicated by the red, white and blue symbolism.

Critics have disagreed about the significance of this image. Many see U.S. colors on the wings of the angel, as cited above. Laura Pérez, however, found a mixture of blue and green in it, symbolizing the flags of both Mexico and the United States. This is an interesting observation that adds strength to her argument that Lopez radically displaces “the patriarchal and colonist underpinnings of the Mexican, Mexican American and dominant U.S. cultures that have shaped the Chicana, in complex, gendered ways” (Pérez, “*El desorden*” 35). Historically, turquoise was the color of Aztec royalty, which adds to the interplay between past and present, evident in Lopez’s *Guadalupe*. As we know, Chicana subjectivities cross over multiple national/transnational borders, making possible a continuous process of identity formation across cultures and the creation of new values, symbols and images that challenge the hegemonic systems supporting the concept of a monolithic America. *Guadalupe* as a marathon runner is a strong, self-directed Chicana who has agency and the convictions of an activist. Her cloak resembles the cape of a superwoman, conferring on her extraordinary powers.

At the same time, the fact that the artist runner is holding a snake in her hand can also be portrayed as a reference to Coatlicue, the ancient deity that according to Anzaldúa resides in the underground part of the psyche (*Borderlands* 68). The liberating aspect of her presence has to do with her function as an Earth Mother, who conceived all celestial

beings and is the incarnation of cosmic processes, the goddess of life and death (68).

Hence, the empowerment of Chicanas is not only due to the re-interpretation of the power of the goddesses but also to the new knowledge, hybrid consciousness, and the crossing into a new territory that brings new awareness or *facultad*, the “capacity to see in surface phenomena deeper realities” (*Borderlands* 60). That is also the function of the artist when she seeks new connections and re-interpretations of history through her pictures.

Yolanda Lopez’s Guadalupe series reflects Anzaldúa’s notions about the *mestiza* consciousness, the work of which is to “break down the subject-object duality... and to show in the flesh... how duality is transcended” (*Borderlands* 102). The bodily transformations of the Virgin place her in different socio-political environments, broadening her reach and the meanings attached to her. Lopez has explained that one of her motives for creating this series was her interest in the multiplicity of female bodies. Importantly, the Guadalupe triptych consists of three generations of *mujeres valientes*, and speaks to the importance of the family and interconnectedness of its female members. This, however, is not the family of the Chicano Movement’s discourse but rather a family of gendered female subjects who are no longer “subjected” (Chabram Dernerseian, “And, Yes...” 41), but who along with their men “plant the seeds, water the fields, and gather the crops” (Anaya and Lomeli, “*El Plan Espiritual*” 1) of their Aztlán. Furthermore, if we agree with the historian Antonia Castañeda that “the story/history of the individual and the community is constituted by, and inscribed on, the body of people in that community” (“Que se pudieran” 123), Lopez’s work can be understood in the larger social context. It is noteworthy that Chicana feminists, Hernández and Lopez included, turned Guadalupe into an activist figure, as Guillermo Gómez-Peña points out

in the much-cited volume titled *Goddess of the Americas* by Ana Castillo. Underlining the overarching feminist symbolism that Chicanas have assigned to the Virgin, Gómez-Peña sees her role in that discourse as similar to an activist of human rights struggling against many societal injustices, for instance, “against racism, the border patrol, the cops, and supremacist politicians” (180). In his view, among Chicana feminists, “*la Guadalupana* stood defiant and compassionate as a symbol of female strength, right next to *la Malinche*, Frida, Sor Juana, and more recently Selena” (Gómez-Peña 180). Thus, Mexican-born Gómez-Peña brings to our awareness the multiple meanings and contradictions ascribed to the Virgin as well as her politicized images, which have been alien to the intelligentsia of Mexicans south of the border. On the other hand, placing her on the list of famous women from both sides of the border both secularizes her and punctuates her transnational *mestiza* character.

Most clearly, the Chicana Virgin represents what Chela Sandoval calls an “oppositional agent” who occupies different identity, ideological, and aesthetic positions (“Mestizaje” 360) in order to resist existing relations of power. Sandoval’s notion of “subjectivity-as-masquerade” is especially appealing here due to the continuous play of meanings that artists project onto the figure/body of Guadalupe. Sandoval views oppositional forms of consciousness as tactics of transforming social relationships, and specifically the subjectivity-as-masquerade as “a movement through, over, and within any dominant system of resistance, identity, race, gender, sex, class, and national meanings (“Mestizaje” 260), that interests me. In the Oxford Dictionary, masquerade is defined as appearing in disguise or assuming a false appearance. The clothing details of the many Virgin figures depicted by Hernández and Lopez “prick the eye” like Barthes’s

punctum, a part object that has the power of expanding the vision (Barthes 45). The changing apparel brings to mind an identificatory performance of a transvestite that according to Ben Sifuentes-Jáuregui always calls into question “the performance of the original” (130). Here, I would like to invoke the term transvestism, not as a synonym for crossing over to another gender space, but rather to another social location through clothing and a bodily performance, an especially interesting notion when analyzing the Guadalupana of Alma Lopez. As a result, the viewer feels compelled to ask which of the Virgins is assuming a false appearance. Could it be that the original Guadalupe whose sexuality as Tonantzin was cut off, first by the Spanish Catholic Church and later by the national patriarchies, is the one we should question?

Alma Lopez and Her Queer Virgin

When Alma Lopez’s digital image of the Virgin of Guadalupe, *Our Lady* (1999), was displayed at the Santa Fe Museum of International Folk Art as part of an exhibition titled “Cyber Arte: Tradition Meets Technology,” it created so much controversy that a group of Chicanos as well as church activists demanded its removal. At the height of the controversy in June 2001, Sarah King wrote a brief article for *Art in America*, stating that, “... California artist Alma Lopez portrays the Virgin wearing a bikini made of roses; held aloft by a buxom, bare-breasted angel, she gazes out defiantly.” This popular perception of the sexuality of the image inflamed both politicians and the religious community. The Archbishop of Santa Fe, Michael Sheehan called the picture “offending,” “sacrilegious” and “tart” (Lopez, “Silencing Our Lady” 251), and nine legislators threatened to cut funding for the museum. Although Lopez received critical acclaim for this print, she felt put on trial. To her, rather than being offensive, the image signified the lived experience

of Chicanas:

When I see *Our Lady* as well as works portraying the Virgen by many Chicana artists, I see an alternative voice expressing the multiplicities of our lived realities, I see myself living a tradition of Chicanas who because of cultural and gender oppression have asserted our voice. I see Chicanas creating a deep and meaningful connection to this revolutionary cultural female image that appeared to an indigenous person at a time of genocide... (“Silencing Our Lady” 253).

Our Lady depicts the Virgin of Guadalupe as an attractive Chicana (Raquel Salinas), whose upper and lower torso are covered by roses, as if by a bikini. Over it, she is wearing a robe with images of the pre-Columbian moon goddess Coyolxauhqui. The star-spangled cloak of the traditional Virgin forms a platform on which the whole constellation stands. Rather than blue, it is greenish, taking us back to the Aztec roots of the image. Guadalupe herself stands barefoot on a crescent moon surrounded by the conventional aureole. Instead of the typical male cherub underneath, there is a bare-breasted female angel (Raquel Gutiérrez) whom Lopez calls “a nude butterfly angel” (“Silencing Our Lady” 254). The angel is superimposed on a Viceroy butterfly whose wings merge with her. For Lopez, the symbolism of the Viceroy is important because, in order to survive, it mimics the poisonous Monarch butterfly, which is known to migrate between the United States and Mexico equipped with a special genetic memory (“Alma Lopez” 90, 91). Since the Viceroy pretends to be something (poisonous) that it is not, for Lopez, “the Viceroy mirrors parallel and intersecting histories of being different or ‘other’ even in our own communities” (“Mermaids, Butterflies” 190). Moreover, as a Chicana lesbian, the story of this butterfly was especially meaningful to Lopez, because

she felt that like the Viceroy, homosexuals had been generally ostracized in the Chicano community. Becoming something it (she) was not, was a strategy of survival for both. Making a direct connection between her and the “queer” butterfly, Lopez writes: “The Viceroy is part of the butterfly communities of Monarchs, Queens and Soldiers, and yet, she is different. The Viceroy is queer. As a Chicana, as a lesbian, and as an artist, I am different, I am queer” (“It’s Not About” 275).

Linguistically, the Spanish word for butterfly, *mariposa*, according to the cultural critic Luz Calvo, also evokes the terms *marimacha* and *maricón*, which refer to female and male homosexuals. Since the prefix “mari” is also linked to María (Mary) of the Bible, it is possible to assign on the semiotic paradigmatic axis a queer meaning to Lopez’s Virgin (Calvo, “Border Fantasies” 217). Other symbolic elements of the print, such as the bare-breasted angel and the images related to the Aztec goddess Coyolxauhqui speak to a connection between women across temporal, geographical, and sexual borders. Furthermore Coyolxauhqui, the powerful daughter of Coatlicue, has been adopted by many Chicana artists as a symbol of identity reclamation (Huacuja 110), because she was mutilated and decapitated by her power-hungry brother Huitzilopochtli. After he threw her skull to the sky she became the moon. Her fragmented body as seen in sculptures came to signify, among other things, the indigenous body/spirituality torn apart by colonizing powers in Chicana feminist thinking (Huacuja 110). Along these lines, Anzaldúa talks about “putting Coyolxauhqui together” (“Now Let Us Shift” 558) and the Coyolxauhqui consciousness (562) that has to do with reconstructing oneself with the help of the goddess’s (moon)light:

Coyolxauhqui personifies the wish to repair and heal, as well as rewrite the stories

of loss and recovery, exile and homecoming, disinheritance and recuperation, stories that lead out of passivity and into agency, out of devalued into valued lives. (563)

This is where Anzaldúa shows her optimism: it is possible to rebuild what was lost, broken, and wounded through heightened awareness. And the process of healing happens by mending the “historical indigenous/*mestiza* body” (Huacuja 111).

For Lopez also, Coyolxauhqui’s body “becomes a space re-membered and... a terrain for sacrifice and remaking” (Huacuja 111). On the other hand, Lopez’s print projects an image of wholeness, sexual agency, and confidence, bringing the power of Tonantzin into being. In many ways, *Our Lady* represents what Yvonne Yarbro-Bejarano calls the “lesbianization of heterosexual icons” (“The Lesbian Body” 182), and as such brings forth in a subtle way the question of queer (or female) desire. The fact that Lopez had been inspired by Sandra Cisneros’s essay titled “Guadalupe the Sex Symbol” infuses her picture with libidinal energy. Although Lopez’s citation of Cisneros primarily alludes to the problematic of gender and ethnic identification, the sexual underpinnings of the image are there: “She is a face for a god without a face, an *indigena* for god without ethnicity, a female deity for a god who is genderless, but I also understand that for her to approach me, for me to finally open the door and accept her, she had to be a woman like me” (Cisneros 50). Thus, we understand that, for Lopez, Guadalupe is an object of identification: a woman, a *mestiza*, and a queer. When she continues to describe how Cisneros in her essay muses about whether the *Virgen* had a dark vagina and nipples underneath her dress, she explains that at that point she imagined roses — Castilian roses — as a sign of her miraculous appearance to Juan Diego. The

roses pictured, interestingly, are in multiple colors and not native to Tepeyac, which speaks to the hybridity of this image.

Aside from the traditional symbolism of love and passion that the symbolism of the red rose evokes, Lopez also addresses the mystery and multiplicity that surrounds the persona of Guadalupe. If in Christian iconography, the rose is a symbol for Mary, Queen of Heaven, and virginity (Biedermann 290), Lopez has revived Guadalupe as a contemporary desiring Chicana, a transnational border-crosser, and racialized *mestiza*, in whose body the indigenous, Mexican, and Spanish coalesce. In another detail, the print shows a baby blue rose around the Virgin's crotch. Unlike Cisneros, who wanted to lift the Virgin's dress to see "if she comes with *chones*, and does her *panocha* look like mine, and does she have dark nipples too" ("Guadalupe Sex Goddess" 51), Lopez leaves the question of sex, including Guadalupe's queer potential, open.

In her article "Queering the Borderlands," Emma Pérez talks about de-colonizing historical imaginations by uncovering those voices that honor multiple experiences and by looking beyond the white colonial hetero-normative ways of interpretation (123,124). Further, she asserts that "a white hetero-normative imaginary has defined how researchers and historians as well as cultural critics have chosen to ignore or negate the populations who are on the margins, outside of normative behavior, outside of twentieth century nuclear, white heterosexual family systems" (129). *Our Lady* defies normative interpretations related to Guadalupe, and her bodily inscription in art. Unlike Hernández and Yolanda Lopez, Alma Lopez takes a step further in her print-making: *Our Lady* is not solely an oppositional figure armed with masculine power, but a truly plural subject whose power derives from her own Viceroy's survival mechanism, in taking the form of

a poisonous Monarch butterfly.

The artist projects a strong maternal symbolism in the breasts of the butterfly angel (“Silencing Our Lady” 254-255). Her Guadalupe is connected to a mother image, but is not cut off from her sexuality, as in the traditional renditions. In creating two sexualized women, one with *mariposa* angel wings and the other in the persona of Christian *Mari-a*, Lopez avoids the typical Guadalupe/Malinche splitting of the subject by attaching a queer/mother meaning to both. This also heals the split created by the traditional heterosexist Catholic symbolism of the *Virgen de Guadalupe*, which has made her especially hard for Chicana lesbians to access. In the words of Carla Trujillo, “Chicana lesbians who confront their homosexuality must, in turn, confront (for those raised in Catholic households) religion, bringing to resolution some compromise of religious doctrine and personal life style” (García 284). Hence, it was exactly because of her “troubling the heterosexual matrix of Chicano/a nationalism” (Calvo, “Art Comes” 207) that *Our Lady* as a queer Madonna created a shock-wave after its publication in the Chicano Catholic and political community.

Nevertheless, in the work of Alma Lopez, the female body becomes a site of contestation and transformation. Much of her creative production challenges masculine and heterosexual interpretations of Latino icons, which she frequently places in her prints against the Los Angeles cityscape and the barbed wire fence of the U.S.- Mexico border. More clearly than feminist artists of the 1970s and 1980s, Lopez situates herself directly in the Borderlands, where according to Anzaldúa, “the prohibited and forbidden” are located (*Borderlands* 25). By attaching a queer meaning to Guadalupe, one of the most powerful female images of the Catholic iconography, Lopez begins to redefine the

meaning of the divine, of woman, and of the Chicana.

In her essay “Queer Aztlán: The Re-formation of Chicano Tribe,” Cherrie Moraga began to develop the concept of queer Aztlán as “a Chicano homeland that could embrace *all* its people, including its *jotería*” (147). Unlike Lopez, she makes a connection between women’s bodies as territories to be conquered, and therefore seeks their decolonization in the same way as “brown and female earth” is decolonized (“Queer Aztlán” 150). Moraga, however, still clings to the Chicano Movement’s notion of nation building, albeit as a radicalized and restructured entity that embraces all Chicanas/os. Although she talks about freeing the female (brown Chicana) body, Lopez goes a step further by creating a Virgin of Guadalupe whose very flesh serves as the site of liberation, connected not to the Chicano nation as such, but to women’s lived experiences, desires, and dreams. By using her friends as models for her work, Lopez depicts bodies of contemporary “real-world” Chicanas, steering away from the popular Hollywood-inspired ideal of a flamboyant and “curvy” Latinidad as seen in the movies and on stage. It is of interest that some critics see her Virgin as an oppositional figure with a defiant gaze, even though her figure has the downcast eyes of the traditional image. Her posture could possibly be interpreted as defiant, as well as self-confident and determined. She no longer bears signs of the violated Indian mother, the murderous *Llorona*, or the humble, self-abnegating *Virgencita* of the Catholic Church, but she is surrounded by empowering symbols from both sides of the border: the bluish green mantle of Aztec royalty,⁹ the aureole of Christian divinity and the robe with images of the Aztec moon goddess. The nude butterfly angel has a small halo of light around her head, adding spiritual meaning to the figure’s associations with maternity, and sexuality.

Her migratory power is evinced in her viceroy/monarch wings, which symbolize both a mechanism for survival and her capacity to migrate between the United States and Mexico. While the Monarch is free to migrate back and forth between the two countries, those who are labeled unwanted or unauthorized, by contrast, are prohibited from crossing over to this side of the border.

Further, the aesthetic of *rasquachismo*, which Lopez uses in the collage-like impression of her print, enhances the idea of Chicana subjectivities and their bodily inscription as a mosaic that is multiple and no longer fragmented but “pieced” together from experiences past and present, local and transnational, indigenous and Catholic, sexual and chaste. No longer the art of “the tattered and shattered,” the image of the Queen Virgin has acquired a quality of wholeness: “*lo remendido*” (Ybarro-Frausto 156). Curiously, Anzaldúa, when writing about the Coatlicue state, mentions that “every increment of consciousness, every step forward is a *travesía*, a crossing” (70). This, once again, raises the question of transvestism. If we understand *travesía* like Sifuentes-Jáuregui as a Spanish equivalent of the Latin *trans-vestire*, to dress across (4), Anzaldúa’s use of the word, in the sense of the English term travesty, can be understood both as a gender performance and as reflecting a sense of falseness, a lie. It also evokes her concept of *atravesado*, referring to those who cross over, or “go through the confines of normal” (*Borderlands* 25). Following Sifuentes-Jáuregui’s notions, this contradictory dialectic has to do with another identity performance, as “by showing the other’s travesty through denaturalization of genders, transvestism produces a ‘realness’ for itself; and by reproducing the other’s realness by re-presenting the other... transvestism also reveals the falseness of the other” (4). While Lopez’s art does not concern itself with dressing across

genders per se, it is about a *travesía* of bodily signifiers that place her Guadalupe at the cross-roads of sexual desire, and thus questions the authenticity of the original. Returning to the epigraph by Homi Bhabha at the beginning of this chapter, it is exactly through this corporeal dialectic that Lopez places herself in the “in-between space,” or a third territory that renews the past and creates alternative meanings for the present.

This should not, however, diminish the spiritual significance of *Our Lady*. For Lopez, the Virgin of Guadalupe was a revolutionary female figure of liberation at a time when the Spanish Conquistadores had decimated nearly the whole Aztec society. The fact that she appeared to an indigenous man is equally important. Consequently, Sarah Ramírez, among others, connects Lopez’s work within the *indígena* feminist world view. She characterizes it as mestiza or Xicanisma spirituality that draws from everyday lived experiences with a close tie to the political (“Borders” 226), in this case political liberation. In my view, *Our Lady* also represents what Moraga called theory in the flesh, or rather new politics developed through the material realities of Chicana life and the beginning of the process of healing of “our wounded knee” (*This Bridge*, 23).

When Ester Hernández and Yolanda Lopez “lifted the veil of the Virgin’s face” (Nieto Gómez, “The Chicana” 131), they revealed ordinary but strong Chicana women working, fighting for their rights, growing old, and shaping culture through art. As the best-known artists of their generation, who started to revise the image of Guadalupe and bring her closer to contemporary women, they dispelled stereotypes and transformed history. In the same way, as the Aztlán of the Chicano Movement can be imagined as a palimpsest and a liberatory construct, the persona of *la Virgen* acquired new layers, and new empowering narratives through Chicana art. In Guadalupe’s body, issues related to

race, class, ethnic origin, and gender found their expression. While Ester Hernández created a more secular feminist image, Yolanda Lopez sought strength from the Aztec goddesses and situated the Virgin's spirituality in pre-patriarchal, indigenous beliefs. While these artists broached sexuality in ambiguous, inverted ways, Alma Lopez, by contrast, gave expression to Chicana queer desire and Chicana agency in the Borderlands.

Notes

¹ See Anaya and Lomeli, *Aztlán: Essays on the Chicano Homeland* (1-5) for a copy of the Plan. The Plan outlines seven organizational goals and six action plans for the establishment of a Chicano Nation with its own economic, educational, institutional, cultural, political and self-defense organisms.

² The *Crónica Mexicayotl* (qtd. in Markman and Markman) is considered one of the most important sources of Aztec historical information, describing their journey from Aztlán to Tenochtitlán, where they settled under the guidance of their god of war, Huitzilopochtli, and were given the sign of an eagle perching and feeding on a cactus. Also, Codex Mendoza depicts the actual founding of Tenochtitlán in 1325.

³ According to Markman and Markman, the *Crónica Mexicayotl* describes the finding of Tenochtitlán in the following way: “And when they came out into the reeds/there at the edge of the spring, was tenochtli/ and they saw an eagle on the tenochtli, perched on it... And the god called out to them, he said to them/ ‘O, Mexicans, it shall be there!’/(But the Mexicans did not see who spoke.) It is for this reason that they call it Tenochtitlán./ And then he Mexican wept, they said/ ‘O happy, O blessed are we!/ We have beheld the city that will be ours! Let us go now, let us rest...’” (409-410)

⁴ According to the chronicle, this was recounted by Tlaccaelel, the royal historian, to Montezuma the First, who wanted to find Aztlán.

⁵ See Tey Diana Rebolledo’s comment, in “Tradition and Mythology” about Chicana identity and its connection to the land (96).

⁶ See Markman and Markman for “Cihuacoatl, Her Song” from the *Florentine*

Codex. The analysis emphasizes the connection between Earthly fertility and human acts of war through the embodiment of Cihuacoatl (217).

⁷ In *The Labyrinth of Solitude*, Octavio Paz makes a link between *La Llorona* and *La Malinche*, two maligned female figures in Mexican folklore (86).

⁸ Los Siete were seven Latino youths from the San Francisco Mission District who stood trial in 1969 for the murder of an unarmed policeman. They were acquitted because the defense presented a strong case, showing generalized police brutality towards the local Latino population. The youths received considerable public support, and the community mobilized to take an active stand for Latino rights. Reported in the *San Francisco Examiner* on April 30, 1999.

⁹ Green also symbolizes regeneration in the Aztec belief system.

CHAPTER FOUR

Fictions of Autobiography and Fictitious Family Photographs

As a practice... memory work offers a route to critical consciousness that embraces the heart as well as the intellect, one that resonates, in feeling and thinking ways, across the individual and collective, the personal and the political. Annette Kuhn, *Family Secrets: Acts of Memory and Imagination*.

If looking entails a relationship of power, of domination and subjection, of mutuality and interconnection, how is power deployed and contested within the family's visual dynamics? Marianne Hirsch, *Family Frames: Photography, Narrative and Postmemory*.

Photography, Narrative and Postmemory.

In the previous chapter, I showed how Chicana visual artists re-visioned Aztlán as a feminist site of contestation through bodily expressions of the Virgin of Guadalupe, thus expanding notions of female subjectivity to embrace a broad range of sexual, racial and religious categories. This was accomplished by overlaying feminist notions with both Christian icons and ancient Mesoamerican symbols that date back to the worship of powerful female deities prior to the Conquest and the evangelization of the Americas. Like Gloria Anzaldúa, who developed her theory of *mestiza* consciousness “crossing” time periods, territories and languages, many Chicana artists “crossed over” old stereotypes and envisioned a contemporary sexualized, racialized, and embodied Virgin, because the visual arts lent themselves to re-imagining the female body. These artists contributed to a theory that draws on the very flesh of its subjects. Similarly, analyzing texts by Anzaldúa, Sidonie Smith concluded that the new subject she was writing about

must be “the bodied rather than the disembodied subject” because “if the body is the source of an identity that leads to oppression... then the body must be taken back and honored on the way to speech and writing” (*Subjectivity* 177). This was one of the goals of Chicana feminisms, and particularly of first-wave Chicana feminist writers, such as Ana Castillo, Gina Valdes, and Estela Portillo. Bringing up such issues as sexuality, identity, exploitation, and pleasure, as examined in Chapter One, was a critical step toward the goal of liberating the female body (Quiñonez 146). Anzaldúa states: “The work of *mestiza* consciousness is to break down the subject-object duality that keeps her a prisoner and to show in the flesh and through the images of her work how duality is transcended” (*Borderlands* 102). It is the *mestiza consciousness*, in the sense of making whole the psychic, material, and historical aspects of the *mestiza*, that brings in the third element.

In this chapter, I will examine Norma Cantú’s *Canícula; Snapshots of a Girlhood en la Frontera*, in which old family photographs often invite further stories about the author’s childhood in the U.S.-Mexico Borderlands. Because there are discrepancies between the narrative text and the image Cantú presents, I include a brief overview about the unreliability of memory. Since this chapter also analyzes a form of autobiographical writing, I discuss the authoritative work of Smith, an expert in the field of self-writing. Autobiographical practices are of interest to me because they often involve multiple subject positions and re-working of official histories. As Smith points out, women are “not merely passive subjects of official autobiographical discourse, they become agents of resisting memory and creative misprision” (*Subjectivity* 22). Women’s autobiographical writing frequently engages strategies of resistance or what Smith calls

“talking back” (*Subjectivity* 20). The idea that women are agents who question memory gives them an active role in transforming cultural scripts and master narratives of history. The autobiographical subject, according to Smith, also “carries a history of the body with her as she negotiates the autobiographical ‘I’, for autobiographical practice is one of those cultural occasions when the history of the body intersects the deployment of subjectivity” (23). Furthermore, border writing according to Debra Castillo, tends to be discontinuous and fragmentary, making it hard to reconstitute a unity because it consists of small pieces from the author’s bicultural past (*Border Women* 96). Castillo continues to explain that border autobiographies are stories that frustrate expectations because they do not have a coherent linear structure or a “beginning at the origin” (97), but rather are structured by a common image, often at the end of life (97).¹ I will explain how Cantú’s work fits this description, given its lack of a linear plot and the contradictions between the image and the text.

I will thus explore how the use of photographs in an autobiographical text expands or complements notions of female subjectivity and contributes to an understanding of Chicana self-writing. To achieve this, I will also study the role of border crossing, the connection to the ethnic group, and the significance of the family in Chicana identity formation. I am especially interested in how notions of the body, whether in corporeal or literary body, find their expression in creative production, particularly in narrative and photography. As shown previously, Cherríe Moraga and Anzaldúa consistently raise issues of race and sex when they discuss their theories in the flesh, especially in relation to the queer body. In *Chicana Art*, Laura Pérez explains that since the 1960s Chicana feminists have “scrutinized the racialized gender and/or

sexuality politics of European and Euro-American Christianity” (8), and in Alicia Gaspar de Alba’s words, “As such, the body functions as a site of origin, bridge between worlds and locus of liberation” (“There’s No Place” 127). Edith Vasquez describes an additional function of the body in poetry:

The body is both a container of, as well as implement for, poetry. In the hands of a poet, whose search for justice and historical redress is equivalent with poetry itself, the female body goes beyond mere representation of oppressive conditions, histories, and ideologies.² (“The Body as Parchment” 57)

According to Vasquez, the body, then, becomes an object of conditions and histories, according to which it constructs itself and responds to oppression (57).

Against this backdrop, I examine Norma Cantú’s *Canícula: Snapshots of a Girlhood en la Frontera* as a text that combines multiple narrative strategies that defy generic labeling, while opening up a dialogue about Chicana identity and the author’s own coming of age, as seen in family snapshots. Yet, the book is more than a *Bildungsroman* of one girl’s development to adulthood; it is what Cantú herself labels “fictional autobioethnography,” a mix of personal *testimonios*, autobiographical vignettes, ethnographic details of life in the bordertowns of Laredo and Nuevo Laredo in the mid-twentieth century, and stories inspired by family photographs. In short, *Canícula* contains “personal narratives turned tales” (Cantú, “Writing of *Canícula*” 98). Overall, *Canícula* includes twenty-one photos with narrative explanations, two immigration documents with an accompanying story, and a number of vignettes from the author’s life not accompanied by pictures. The novel’s blurring of fiction and nonfiction speaks to the changing nature of memories, showing how the objective merges with the subjective, and

how memory is constructed across time, place, culture, experience, and the unconscious (Kuhn 5). Consequently, Cantú emphasizes that her stories are not always true to fact, making it known that her selection and combination of materials involves not only ethnography and autobiography but also fantasy. This lends an artistic dimension to her work and places the Borderlands with its inhabitants within multiple crossings of ethnicity, race, culture, history, geopolitics, and imagination, destabilizing and expanding traditional concepts of *Chicanidad*. Indirectly, the text also questions the common perception of memory as a source of true information. Cantú's notions about the unreliability of memory are supported by research. In the 1930s, a British psychologist, Frederic Bartlett, wrote that remembering is "imaginative reconstruction" that is "hardly ever exact" (qtd. in Loftus, "Memories of Things Unseen" 147). More recent studies also show that memories are malleable, and according to Elizabeth Loftus, shaped by what a person has thought, has been told or has been led to believe ("Make-Believe Memories" 872), rather than being accurate representations of past events. In the context of *Canícula*, this means that its autobiographical history, as far as it is based on memory, is the result of continuous working and reworking of the narrator's conscious and unconscious mind, and all that she has read, witnessed, heard, and been made to accept as facts. Thus, Cantú labels her text as "fictional." To create the impression of fiction, she attaches a story or a meaning to her family snapshots that does not always coincide with the visual image, creating doubt about their veracity. As an example, in the chapter titled "Dahlia Two," the picture shows a young child next to a table with a birthday cake. Instead of two candles, it has four on it (105). Similarly, in the chapter "Cowgirl," Cantú writes: "I smile a toothless second-grade chimuela — grin" (33). However, the girl in

this picture does not appear to be missing a tooth.

In the Introduction to her book, Cantú explains the process by which she randomly picked pictures from a box, and how,

the story emerges from photographs, photographs through which, as Roland Barthes claimed, the dead return; the stories mirror how we live in our memories, with our past and our present juxtaposed and bleeding, seeping back and forth, one to the other in a recursive dance. (xii)

The reference to Roland Barthes in the “Prologue” and the mention of his seminal text *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography* serve as curious details that introduce the reader to the meaning of photos in *Canícula* and bring him/her through the borders of time and space: from Barthes’s Paris to Spain, where the narrator, Nena, reminisces over the photographs of her lover, and back to the U.S.-Mexico Borderlands, the place of her childhood. This establishes her as a transnational traveler who looks nostalgically back to her family’s past “in that land in between that she calls, *la frontera*” (*Canícula* 2).

Unlike Anzaldúa, who envisioned the border as a space of conflict and cultural resistance, Cantú finds security in that special space, as she skillfully weaves together her family history with that of the nation state, within a collage of photos and tales. In an interview, she specifically stated that her intention was to show how cultures mix together on the border and do not necessarily collide (Dominguez Miguela 668), as Anzaldúa theorizes. And although the imaginative and subjective experiences are present in the narrative vignettes, history can also be seen as an important subtext: “Cantú offers a revisionist history, a history that is constructed through a multitude of private stories situated at the crossroads of official history and politics” (Mermann- Jozwiak 66). The collective and

the political, as indicated in the statement by Kuhn that serves as the epigraph to this chapter, are woven into the body of the text and intersect with the personal. And although it is important to note that *Canícula* does not offer cultural criticism per se about Chicano life in the Borderlands, as seen through the narrator's eyes, the narrative brings to consciousness the special problems and inequities that the protagonist and her family members experienced as part of the collective. However, the difference between this and other, more politically focused texts, such as Anzaldúa's, is that Cantú brings history to life through individual stories and vignettes that loosely mirror larger social problems, leaving it to the reader to make connections and fill in the gaps. This enhances the interactive quality of the book (Gutiérrez-y-Muhs 116) because it enables the readers to identify with, (dis)agree and respond to its themes and characters from their own experiences. At the same time, the snapshots included in the book may look like accurate representations of family life and historical moments, but they also leave openings that the reader may fill in. Hirsch takes this one step further when she suggests that family photos tend to sustain an imaginary cohesion, unattainable in real life (*Family Frames* 7).

Family photographs have an important place in *Canícula*. According to Sontag, photography has become the means of capturing an experience, giving it the appearance of participation (101). Photographs are used to establish veracity, to show how things were or are in the present. For instance, in our judicial system, photos of crime scenes and injuries resulting from a car crash can be used as the evidence of wrong-doing. Sontag, however, explains that photographs also give people an imaginary ownership of the past enabling them to take possession of the space, in which they feel insecure (19). Hirsch focuses in *Family Frames* on the relationships of power, domination, mutuality,

and interconnection in the images (9). She suggests that the act of looking at an object is a mutual act, in which the object also looks at the subject (9). In the family context this means looking and being looked at. Following this theme, she says: “Familial subjectivity is constructed relationally, and in these relations I am always both self and other(ed), both speaking and looking subject and spoken and looked at object” (9). Family pictures represent not only the lived family experience in a given historical, social, and cultural context but also a mythology of the ideal family (Hirsch 8). For example, typical studio portraits tend to present the image of an attractive person or a happy family, often against an imaginary cropped or artistically arranged background. Of interest to me here is the idea of family mythology and how pictures, like memory, may confirm or fictionalize the events of a life.

Cantú establishes a curious connection between death, her photographs, and memory. The epigraph of *Canícula*, borrowed from Sontag, labels all photographs as *memento mori* through which, in the author’s words, “the dead return” (*Canícula* xii). But the book’s *memento mori* is not so much a reminder of mortality as it is a re-creation of memories by which the past and its principal actors come to life, for that moment captured in the picture. Although the author “remembers” many enjoyable moments of her early childhood, their narration often recalls moments of sadness. *Canícula* is not solely a text of happiness and content but reveals an internal conflict, a dialectics of living and loss being played out. Barthes himself explained that historical photographs always include a defeat of time (96). Cantú expresses a similar sentiment when she writes about a picture that was taken of Nena (the author) at the age of three, and asks: “What will happen to the photo once I’m gone, who will remember the sad child? No

child will think fondly of it as its mother's photo" (*Canícula* 54). The lived moment is captured in the picture, but will it mean anything after Nena/Azucena/Norma is gone? Cantú's commentary suggests that a photograph is a frozen copy of people and events, leaving the reader with a more profound question about the relationship between the person, the image and the meaning of representation. Unlike Barthes, who "became" his mother in order to resolve his conflict over her death (72), Cantú sees in the serious-looking child a progression of time and a loss that is threatening to erase the meaning of the image. In other words, as theorized by Debra Castillo: "In contrast with Barthes, then, who uses noise to make meaning less acute, the Mexican American woman struggles not to let her fragments of meaning dissolve in the overwhelming presence of a background dissonance" (102). This is evident, for instance, in a picture where the author's grandfather, Buelito, stands next to his beloved Ford truck with a teddy bear on the steps, looking content. While the picture itself shows a man in his finest clothing, proud of his car, the memory attached to it recalls the traumatic events of repatriation when many Mexican Americans lost their belongings to U.S. border officials. The loss of his Ford was more painful to Buelito than other material losses. This reflection can also be seen as post-memory because the narrative is related by an aunt, tearful over the traumatic events of the past while the author remains a witness to it, seemingly unaware of the context of the picture. According to Hirsch, post-memory refers to recollections of historical traumas constructed by a second generation, often fragmented and full of gaps that interface with personal stories (*Family Frames* 22).

Looking retrospectively at the narrator's own history, Cantú consciously attaches to some photographs a meaning that anticipates a later loss: "By giving me the absolute

past of the pose (aorist), the photograph tells me death in the future. What *pricks* me is the discovery of this equivalence” (Barthes 96). Thus, the part object here, the *punctum*, which captures the viewer’s attention while attracting or distressing him/her, is in the interconnection between photographic presence and death. However, as pointed out by Ellen McCracken, in *Canícula*, the *punctum* is often evident in the narrative attached to the picture, rather than in the picture itself (274), as, for example, in the childhood photo of little Tino extending his hand like a gun, and the account of his death ten years later. Relationships with the dead are also of inherent interest in the degree to which they have affected the development of specific sensibilities and subjectivities.

The anticipation of death is expressed most clearly in the chapter titled “Bueli,” wherein Cantú displays a photograph of her aging grandmother with her sister Dahlia, Esperanza and herself. The narrative reveals that this was an important occasion, as the children crowded into the small living room eager to be included in the picture. Grandmother’s special status is evident, as the author describes her crown-shaped braided hair, decorated with small combs that Nena bought for her for Mother’s Day after thirty long minutes of deliberation at the Kress store. Mention of a crown elevates Bueli above others (Biedermann 84) and establishes the position of distinction, culturally awarded to the older members of the family. In many ways, this is reminiscent of the grandmother in Yolanda Lopez’s Guadalupe series, portrayed as a figure of authority and wisdom. Coincidentally, the photo of Bueli, more than any other picture in the book, shows signs of age — the color is faded, and the surface has scratches from wear and tear over the years. The narration ends with a memory of the grandmother’s death, her coffin placed in the very room where the photograph was taken. The family cohesion is disrupted by

mourning:”But Mami’s crying. We both cry, hug” (*Canícula* 25).

As mentioned previously, the presence of death also surfaces in the chapter titled “Tino.” The photograph above the narrative depicts four children. A handwritten notation indicates that the picture was taken at Easter in 1952. Although the rest of the extended family is not shown, the author mentions a *piñata* and a birthday cake, alluding to a party. Her brother Tino stands on one side of the picture pointing with his hand as if playing with guns, suggesting that he was interested in war games well before he went to Vietnam as a soldier. Again, the story attached to the photograph depicts images connecting family events to broader Chicano history. While we do not know exactly why Tino enlisted in the U.S. Armed Forces against his father’s wishes and before graduating from high school, it is clear from the author’s subsequent commentary that he was a proud soldier, an “Army-uniformed seventeen-year-old, dreamy eyed, thin-lipped brown face, wearing pride like a badge” (*Canícula* 117). Judging by the author’s descriptions of his interest in guns, and the poverty of the family, it is likely that that he saw a good future for himself in the Army. As Lea Ybarra tells us, a large number of Chicanos volunteered for the service because they felt that it was both an honor and a duty to serve their country. At the same time, the Army offered status and attractive economic benefits to those who enlisted (Ybarra 5). Consequently, one of the tragedies of this war was the disproportionate loss of life sustained by Chicanos. According to Ralph Guzmán, Mexican Americans accounted for 20 percent of U.S. casualties although they made up only 10 percent of the population in the country (qtd. in Ybarra 5). In national accounts of history, there is little acknowledgement of the magnitude of Latino participation in the war. A fact sheet collected by Frederick and Linda Aguirre on the internet (November

2000), reveals that in states such as New Mexico Latinos paid even a higher price for their service, accounting for 44 percent of the dead.³ Tino was one of many thousands who lost their lives in combat. His loss was specifically symbolized by an empty space on the wall of Cantú's family home, previously occupied by an image of *Nuestra Señora del Perpetuo Socorro*, who was believed to have saved him from illness as a young child. That the image was removed by Tino's father opens up questions about faith and the overriding power of grief that seeks to erase painful memories. The fact that the Virgin of Perpetual Help had once protected Tino from death but failed to do so in Vietnam was extraordinarily difficult for his father to bear. The picture, thus, became a symbol of Tino's corporeal existence and a painful reminder of the family's tragic loss. Consequently, all these losses, on a personal or communal level, become internalized and form yet another layer of identifications. The dead not only return through Nena's memories but continue to live in her person, expanding her subjectivities.

On the other hand, Kuhn explains that family photographs are meant to capture moments treasured later in life: "The memories promised by the family photography industry are characterized by pleasure and held-off closure — happy beginnings, happy middles, and no endings to all the family stories" (19). While this describes the photographs in "Bueli" and "Tino," the narrative provides closure through images of death. The end, however, is left open, to suggest spiritual continuity that cannot be erased: "Pray so her spirit can be at peace" (*Canícula* 25) and "The votive candle on the tiny shelf still burning to an empty space" (*Canícula* 15). As Cantú shows in the narrative, the space where the image of *Nuestra Señora* used to hang, revealed figures of green fern leaves on the wall paper "like new" (*Canícula* 15). The catastrophe of death

that Barthes assigns to every photograph (96) is reworked in the text to show that life is cyclical and that each erasure reveals another layer of experience and a possibility of renewal. The pictures convey a reality that the author deepens and sometimes complicates in the narrative, omitting, adding, and combining details, and making all boundaries more fluid and questionable, as if to suggest that continuous re-visioning, reshaping and transitioning are characteristic of Chicano life on the border and consequently of Chicano identity formation.

In the text, death and loss also bring forth spiritual beliefs and practices that were transmitted from one generation to the other, whether their beliefs of praying for the souls of the dead, visiting family tombs, waiting for the spirit of the person to return in the form of an owl (Gutiérrez-y-Muhs 114), celebrating the first communion, or carrying out typical rituals for the Day of the Dead. While Cantú explains that as a preadolescent Nena started to question church rules and that her mother continued to believe in living the Bible instead of just reading it (*Canícula* 58), the text reveals a hybrid spirituality, reminiscent of the beliefs and practices expressed by Lopez and Anzaldúa. This spirituality borrows from Catholicism, ancient Mexican beliefs and popular religious traditions. Although Cantú writes fondly about religious ceremonies of the family related to baptism, weddings and funerals that were important in her childhood, she also opposes institutionalized Christianity. She writes: “One special Friday I ask permission to go with Ester and her family to Nuevo Laredo. I ask for enchiladas because it’s Friday. I can’t eat meat. They laugh. I don’t believe them, it’s not a sin in Mexico to eat meat on Fridays. But I ask Papi and he says it’s true. It’s not a sin” (115). Following this explanation, Nena not only ordered *milanesa con papas*, but also started to question the

arbitrary and unfair rules of the church (115). On the other hand, Cantú reveals how Pre-Columbian beliefs at times merged with Catholicism in her childhood culture. After a death, “As we walked back to our own home, Bueli would cross herself and point to a tall *cubreviento*, but no matter how much I tried, I couldn’t see the owl she claimed was there watching us. Sometimes, though, I heard the song of the angels sang over and over in my soul” (68). Perhaps most of all, Cantú’s syncretic spirituality is expressed in her acknowledgements of her book: “Finally, and always, I acknowledge the Creator, the Universe in all its manifestations that guides my every step” (ix). Through religious rituals, Cantú focuses her text on the importance of the community and the social transmission of beliefs, customs and celebrations, weaving together the threads that form a Chicano collective identity (Dominguez Miguela 668).

Fluid Borders of Language

Cantú’s narrative tone is more cheerful in the chapter titled “May,” in which she gives an idyllic description of how she and her siblings posed with Bueli in front of their San Carlos Street house in their first communion dresses, later picking flowers to bring to church as an offering to Mary. The narrator of *Canícula* explains: And later after the rosary and the walk and the cup of yerbabuena tea, I lie on the floor out on the porch on a thick colcha and count the stars, *sin cuenta!* I smile at the joke, *without count* sounding like the number *fifty* — *cincuenta* — all at once. And maybe wish on a falling star that May will always be like this. (*Canícula* 5) The vignette is about a special moment in the author’s life that she wants to memorialize, a moment of well-being and content. The description is full of visual, olfactory and taste images and includes a pun on the phrase “*sin cuenta*” sounding like the number “*cincuenta*,” perhaps comforting in its own way.

The English words *without count* and *fifty* are set in italics, while the Spanish equivalents are not, in opposition to the common practice of italicizing foreign-language words.

Although the author stated in an interview that she does not italicize Spanish words “so that the languages remain on equal footing” and to show the fluctuation of the linguistic borders (Penaz 153), it also lends a momentary importance to the Spanish, granting it the status of the “official” language. This challenges the monolingual English-only ideology that culminated in such anti-immigrant initiatives as the English-Only Movement and California’s Proposition 187, in more recent times. The text later reveals that the languages were not at all on equal footing, when Cantú’s mother, as a child, was forced to read and write in English because Spanish was prohibited at school (*Canícula* 40). Nena herself was a fluent English-speaker entertaining her Mexican cousins by reciting nursery rhymes in English to them (23), although clearly her childhood was lived in the contact zone of both languages. The presence of Spanish is made evident throughout the book and penetrates the language of Nena’s memories, as shown in her musing over the words “sin cuenta” and “cincuenta.” More subtly, Cantú infuses the book with Spanish words that the mainstream reader might have difficulty understanding, such as “I lie on the floor on a thick colcha” (*Canícula* 5), “I’ll read a escondidas” (8), and “She is just chípil” (11). This makes the text more opaque to an English-speaking audience but reenacts the code-switching that shows how growing up between two languages and two cultures shaped Nena’s identity development, especially in the early years of her childhood. Not italicizing the Spanish also emphasizes the ease with which Nena moves from one language to the other. The intermittent inclusion of Spanish in the text can be seen as a form of linguistic empowerment or resistance to assimilation, as language is an

important indicator of cultural heritage and plurality in the mainstream society (Aparicio 200).

In an interview, Cantú discusses at length the issue of code-switching and how she was interested in producing a text that was linguistically hybrid. She concluded that including Spanish in the narrative invoked the reality of her growing up, her truth: "... y esa verdad es que hay dos idiomas que han formado un tercero" (Dominguez Miguela 678). This brought her closer to a Chicano readership that could identify with the language. The interview itself, while it was conducted in Spanish, was also a linguistic mix, showing the continued fluidity of the linguistic borders and how code-switching is an integral part of Chicana identity. Since subjectivities are expressed discursively, it also speaks to life on the *Frontera* as a whole.

Crossings

In the Introduction to *Canícula*, the author talks about the recursive dance that occurs in our memory lives. This creative back-and-forth movement, between past and present and different geographical spaces, is repeated over and over again as the narrator describes her excursions to "the other side." Although the context is different, it bears comparison with the migrational pattern of the Monarch butterfly so central to the art of Alma Lopez. For Cantú, however, migration appears to be a more porous concept, because crossing the border was a regular part of her life and served to maintain work, family and ethnic connections on the other side. Unlike Anzaldúa, whose new *mestiza* consciousness was a product of multiple cultures *sin fronteras* (*Borderlands* 217), Cantú depicts the border through a construct of photos, stories and ethno-historical facts, "not as a stable line, river or bridge but a shifting locus of identity and displacement" (Brady 73),

the crossing of which functions as an important part of her identity development. The weaving together of different elements speaks to the complexity of this process and adds a multi-layered quality to the image. Travel across the borders, between South Texas and Northern Mexico, informed Cantú's personal development and that of her family. José David Saldivar talks about a bridge consciousness, which involves a double vision that Chicana writers can project across multiple discourses (*Border* 109). As Norma Klahn notes, the spacial configuration of the *Canícula* refers to places of colonization and exclusion, and can be seen as a sociopolitical contestation of the marginalization of Chicanos (123).⁴ Cantú herself emphasizes that Chicanos are a colonized people: "Nos quitaron el idioma, las costumbres, nuestro orgullo y más que nada la dignidad" (Domingues Miguela 669). At the same time, she focuses on the importance of home and family relationships. This connection between the author/ narrator's self, home life and Chicano history, forms an important nexus for her identity.

As noted earlier, memory work evokes a critical consciousness that embraces the personal and the collective; family pictures have a meaning within the cultural context, in which they were taken (Kuhn 8, 12). For instance, in "First Steps," a typical portrait of a child who is learning to walk, the author is standing and smiling at the photographer, ready to take a step. She wears an embroidered baby dress, which the text reveals was sewn by Cantú's mother in 1947, after her husband had gone to Indiana to find better-paid work so that he could bring the family to the United States. The photograph speaks to the loneliness Cantú's father felt in the gray and dark North, surrounded by the sounds of a meaningless foreign language, and to his desire to reunite with his immediate family. For his wife, the experience had a different meaning, because it meant that she was able

to spend more time with her own mother, and sew clothes for her first-born daughter. Underlying the sunny, traditional baby picture, is a family history of separation, low wages and migration, linking Cantú's personal history to that of Chicanas/os and ultimately the nation itself. Her father was one of many men, who travelled north for better-paying employment during the period of economic decline and the *Bracero* Program,⁵ only to find the geography of the Midwest and the sounds of a new language alienating and cold. Although the narrative focuses on his homesickness and his difficulty in adjusting to the Midwestern way of life, Cantú does not directly talk about the exploitation and abuses of Mexican men who crossed the border as *bracero* workers, most of whom, like her father, dreamed of making a lot of money and ending the poverty in their lives. She explains that he was eager to move the family to the United States as soon as he had earned enough, but "not too far north" (*Canícula* 29). Thus, in this context the Borderlands signify comfort and safety, living on the other side for better economic opportunities, but close enough to Mexico to remain connected to the family and its cultural roots.

Borderlands and Moving Away from the Assimilation Trap

In the introduction to this dissertation, I argued against the concept of bi-culturalism that is often associated with acculturation and the linear development of an identity that progressively incorporates aspects of a person's culture of origin with those of the host culture. Some critics feel that U.S. policies' insistence on assimilation have colonial roots that have always aimed at wiping out the racialized other, to annihilate his/her traditions, religion and customs, to make him/her "the same" under the premise of equality (Martínez, *Phenomenology* 104). To move away from these binary

constructions, I have suggested that theories, such as Soja's third space and Bhabha's in-between space, offer useful alternatives because they are based on a more open logic of "both/and also," making it easier to theorize multiple identity development. Because the assimilation theories assume an American (read North American) subject who has over time adopted the cultural mores and values of the United States, for Chicana writers the U.S.-Mexico border became a site of resistance against the monolithic ideologies of both nation states, and a site of creative hybridity. Klahn has identified *Canícula* as an example of "new regionalism" that not only draws attention to the negative consequences of national politics and policing in the area but also redefines constructs that are central to the U.S. assimilation ideology by

engaging questions of purity and authenticity, property and propriety, legality and illegitimacy. In the process, the narrative disrupts traditional categories of self and other, sameness and difference, national and foreign culture. It deconstructs the teleology of assimilation between identity and alterity. (Klahn 131)

Cantú herself indicates that her photographs point to the past and the present, which are "juxtaposed" and "bleeding" (xii), perhaps referring both to her own and her community's relationship to the U.S.-Mexico War and the subsequent oppression in the region that has continued through the twentieth century and "seeped" into individual Chicana/o histories. The hybridization and renewal associated with living in the Borderlands happen when, according to Anzaldúa, the wounding caused by friction between the Third and the First World begins to heal. This may be an ideal only for the future, because, in reality, the border is being policed more heavily than ever to stop illegal immigration from Mexico.⁶ The border zone has also become the site of violent

drug wars resulting in kidnappings, torture and death with unforeseen intensity.

Regardless, the state promotes assimilation of the so-called new Americans when it limits the South/North border crossing, and grants citizenship only to those who pass an English language and American history test. This process, however, is more complex than conservative politics allow because, “before a scab forms, it hemorrhages again, the lifeblood of two worlds merging to form a third country” (*Borderlands* 25). This third country, I propose, is not only a blend of the earlier two, but also an interstitial space of multiple transitions that combine and produce a variety of new possibilities. Theorization about the third space means that regardless of the strong emphasis on assimilation in the national politics, the mixing of different cultures with the dominant culture always produces alternative spaces from which new hybrids emerge. This is summarized in *Culture and Difference*, where Antonia Darder suggests that the process of hybridization challenges structures of domination creating a space for new identity formations (13).

Canícula, itself, is situated in the interstices. In the Introduction, Cantú refers to the meaning of the book’s title, the dog days of summer, as “a particularly intense part of the summer when most cotton is harvested in South Texas” and “because of the intense heat, it is said, not even the dogs venture out” (xi-xii). If we understand this time to be, as Cantú later explains, a mini-season *between* summer and fall, when cotton is harvested and when she wrote most of her material, it is not only a month of extreme heat when even the dogs stay at home, but also a temporal zone of hard work and creativity. Cantú is well aware that popular myths assign a negative value to the dog days, and she transforms it. Being confined in this case to the home means not discomfort and idleness but new crossings and untraditional solutions. The subtitle that follows, *Snapshots of a*

Girlhood en la Frontera indicates that the author will provide vignettes about the protagonist's (her own) growing up on the U.S.-Mexico border, from early childhood to adolescence. She explains later, "The subtitle merely prepares the reader for what is to come, for this is not a narrative strung out in keeping with Freytag's pyramid: it does not adhere to conventions of plot development" (xii). Cantú purposefully creates confusion by not confining herself to a single genre, linear time or historically accurate explanations of the pictures. As many critics have noted, there are discrepancies between the photos and the descriptions attached to them, just as memories have gaps and additions that do not completely correspond to actual events. This blurring of boundaries produces the effect of the in-between space that enables a shifting and reshaping of identities. These shifts can be observed, for instance, when the author (Norma) names her narrator first as Nena and then as Azucena. Similarly, the racial classification in her passport picture is first "white" and later "brown" (Adams, "Heightened" 62). This perhaps is reflective of the conflicting racial attitudes on both sides of the border. Jacqueline Martínez points out that the assimilating effort of the dominant culture is racist by its very nature and results in negating a person's racial subjectivities under the name of equality (*Phenomenology* 104). The racial inscriptions, as well as the naming of *Canícula*'s main character/narrator, are surrounded by ambiguous social and political lines. These same concerns have also been expressed by other Chicana writers. For instance, as a bi-racial Chicana, Moraga talks about her own struggle with racial classifications and the familial value system that tried to whitewash her (*Loving* 43). Similarly, Cantú brings up the dissonance of color in her passport pictures to show that both on the personal and political level race matters. The light-skinned "white" baby immigrated with her parents

to the States, while the “brown” adolescent was allowed to cross to Mexico. Thus, the South/North crossings have been racially and economically value-laden, as theorized by Avtar Brah:

The USA-Mexico border typifies the conditions of contemporary migrancy. It encapsulates certain common thematic, which frequently come into play whenever “overdeveloped” countries institute measures to selectively control the entry of peoples from economically “underdeveloped” segments of the globe. This border speaks the fate of formerly colonized people presently caught up in the workings of a global economy dominated by transnational capital... (24)

For instance, during the Bracero Program (1942-1964), the selective control of migrant workers was motivated by economic gain. Citing an earlier study, Alicia Schmidt-Camacho notes, that Mexican laborers were subjected to physical examinations to determine which were eligible to migrate across the border (Schmidt-Camacho 93). Among other physical characteristics, those with blistered hands, which implied hard work, were given priority. The desire for a highly profitable labor force led to a colonizing body politic and regulation of migration based on “reading the racialized body” (93). This led to exploitative labor practices and U.S. border policies based on labor needs and market profits, rather than considerations of ideology or border safety.⁷ Border policies alternated between importing labor from Mexico when necessary and deportation in times of economic distress, as noted in previous chapters.

What Is It about the Place?

The events of *Canícula* unfold from South Texas to Northern Mexico. Cantú’s childhood home was located in Laredo, which has a rich history as a border town. Daniel

Arreola and James Curtis explain, in *The Mexican Border Cities: Landscape and Place Personality*, that after 1848, Nuevo Laredo became the Mexican counterpart to Laredo, which was founded in 1755 on the bank of Rio Grande, having remained dependent on it thanks to social and economic connections between the families of the two towns since colonial times (18). After the border shifted south as a result of the war, Laredo's Mexican population moved to the opposite shore to avoid being subjected to Yankee rule (Ruiz, "Asymmetry" 84). The towns were, however, linked by the railroad and remained an important transportation hub (Arreola and Curtis 18). Laredo (present-day Texas) was rapidly modernized after the arrival of the railroad and consisted of two "societies," Anglo and Mexican (Montejano 95). By 1910, its counterpart, Nuevo Laredo was the second largest of the Mexican border towns, the business districts of both facing each other. By the 1920s, the Laredos became major centers of export. The establishment of the first *maquiladora* in Nuevo Laredo in 1962 promoted the industrial and economic growth of the city. Its main north-south artery, Guerrero, runs from the port through the center and has four plazas around it. Arreola and Curtis describe the central role that the plaza has played in Mexican urban geography, analyzing its social character and significance as an important outdoor meeting place (139). The four plazas in Nuevo Laredo have benches, shoe shine stands, taxi and bus stops, and pushcart vendors of food (140). Connected to Laredo by three international road bridges and one railway bridge, Nuevo Laredo serves as an important trade link to the United States. In Cantú's youth, it was possible to shop "on the other side" simply by walking across the bridge, at least until 1954, when it was swept away by Hurricane Alice and replaced by a structure made of wood and rope (*Canícula* 9). As noted earlier, Cantú describes how Nena and her

family walked to Nuevo Laredo with some regularity. “Crossing” the border was not only an act of migration but also had a more pragmatic purpose, enabling people to make purchases, go to movies, and visit relatives, among other things. If anything, the walks over the bridge helped Nena maintain a connection to her heritage and establish her position as an ethnic subject (Boelhower 88). It can also be theorized that the ease of physical border-crossing facilitated her acculturation, which involved participation in both cultures and the maintenance of both cultural identities to varying degrees (Berry, Phinney, Sam, and Vedder 323). This process was made easier at a time when border crossers, like Nena, possessed a Mexican passport that declared her a Mexican national, enabling her to walk to the other side without her parents, even as a child.

For her family, crossing, however, had multiple meanings. They remembered being forced to return to Mexico in 1935 as part of the U.S. repatriation efforts, and later coming back. In Cantú’s words, this latter crossing “meant coming home, but not quite” (*Canícula* 5). The fact that South Texas was no longer the home the family had previously known reflects what many other victims of repatriation had experienced. They had been coerced to leave the country under racially charged policies intended to make jobs available to North Americans and cut welfare cost (Balderrama 108). At the same time, they lost most of their material possessions and had to adjust to the harsh realities of Mexico. For many, both countries proved to be oppressive environments. For those, who were U.S. citizens, it was shameful that the United States had deported them from their own country. The children, who were often U.S. born, had a hard time adjusting to a foreign country and to the Spanish language. These experiences left “scars on the Mexican American psyche” (Lee 269). And although the survivors of repatriation had

significant ties to each country, they remained on the margins. This resulted in their “being in and out of place on both sides of the border” (Torres, “Transnational” 177). Thus, the United States was for Nena’s family “a home but not quite,” the other being Mexico. Such displacement can lead, as Maria de los Angeles Torres asserts, to fragmentation of identity because when “nation states eroded, they were not replaced by a homogeneous super-state or a single identity” (179), but multiple identities. This diversification follows Norma Alarcón’s notions about a Chicana subject-in-process that constructs provisional identities from a position that incorporates history, race, gender, and class and operates in the interstices of the U.S. and Mexican nation-states. In this context, Alarcón refers to combinatory trans-culturations that develop when old cultural material is reintroduced in a new context (“Conjugating Subjects” 137-138).

While Cantú was able to cross to Mexico and back freely as a child, the border has become more militarized in recent years than before. Historically, its jurisdiction on the U.S. side was initially divided between the U.S. Customs Service (1853) and the U.S. Border Patrol (1924) with guarded check points, while on the Mexican side there was less screening (Arreola and Curtis 193). In fact, the Mexican border cities had been dependent on the North American entertainment and tourist industries since the early twentieth century. Although much of this involved brief trips to eat, drink and shop on the other side, the border cities’ nightlife and prostitution also attracted visitors. North Americans had a tropicalized view of Mexico that was reinforced by attractions such as photograph stands where visitors could have their picture taken wearing Mexican clothing and sitting on *burros*. As artificial as these attractions were, according to Arreola and Curtis, they fulfilled the tourists’ fantasy for foreign adventure because of “a

certain ineffable satisfaction or wish-fulfillment when a place lives up to pre-existing images, even if it does so by contrivance” (Arreola and Curtis 92). In fact, many of the border towns developed cityscapes and zones selling goods (and bodies) tailored specifically for North American taste. One of the main photos Cantú presents in *Canícula* shows her mother in Mexican attire standing against a fake background, like any North American tourist visiting the other side. This photo raises questions about her ethnic identity. After all, she was Texas-born, and as the text shows, she had been, “A carefree teen with family on both sides of a river that’s never a barrier . . . , her land lies beyond borders” (*Canícula* 42). Cantú leaves ambiguous her mother’s ethnic identity and nationality, to emphasize the fluidity and transformative character of the Borderlands existence.

The Embodied Subject of Herstory

Cantú calls her narrator Nena⁸, a fitting name for the oldest girl in the family. At the same time, the name affords her anonymity, as she could be any *nena* of a Latino family. This makes it easier to theorize that although *Canícula* is about a specific life history, it intersects with other Chicano lives on the border. On the other hand, in her official childhood passport photos the subject is not Norma but Azucena, obviously a made-up name that is pasted on a piece of paper over the original citizenship documents. The name Azucena is of interest because it refers to a flower, like the names of Nena’s several other siblings: Dahlia, Azalia, Margarita, Xóchtil, and Florentino. Through the name Azucena, the narrator groups herself with her siblings, as if to emphasize the importance of family unity within the sibling subset. The white lily (*azucena*) is considered a symbol of pure, virginal love (Biedermann 207) with strong Biblical overtones. Purity of the lily, in this connection, can be seen as a symbol of childhood

innocence or as an ironic reference to the narrator's growing sexual concerns as against the assumed asexuality of a young girl. As a bodily expression, it speaks to beauty and natural perfection, again in direct opposition to the everyday concerns of a developing girl, such as her growing breasts, body hair and a broken tooth.

The flower symbolism, as conventional as it may seem, takes another turn when later in the book, Cantú calls the girls of the family, "Mami's flowers" (*Canícula* 116). The reader has already learned that the narrator's mother and grandmother worked in their garden together. For instance, after the big flood that followed Hurricane Alice, they "begin again, all year they plant, sharing cuttings from neighbors' plants that survived; hibiscus, jasmines, ferns and roses, and a brand new gardenia bush right under the bedroom window to sweeten the air" (*Canícula* 10). This is one of a few vignettes that directly refers to the mother's care-giving role: she planted a garden of beautiful flowers and herbal health remedies. This not only undid the destruction of the hurricane but also permits the reader to imagine the metonymic connection between the growth of these plants and "Mami's flowers." Some of these plants originated from cuttings that were tough enough to have survived the flood, suggesting that it was possible to flourish even under life-threatening conditions, just as Villanueva identifies herself with the sturdy weed, noted in Chapter Two. The flood following Hurricane Alice can be seen as a foundational event that entailed much destruction, but was experienced differently on either side of the border. *Time Magazine* reported the following:

At midnight, 19 hours after the Ozona disaster, the Rio Grande crested some 150 miles away at the trans-river cities of Eagle Pass and Piedras Negras. Forewarned, the Texans of Eagle Pass had moved out to watch in safety as their homes flooded. Across the river, the Mexicans of Piedras Negras placed their faith in an

earthen dike; they were huddled in their straw-hatched adobe homes when the dike collapsed and the Rio Grande swept over. “I heard hundreds crying for help in the dark,” said one witness. “You could hear houses collapsing, then screams, then nothing.” More than half the town was destroyed. (n. pag.)

The disaster had a very different impact on either side of Rio Grande; on one side, the narrow economic and socio-cultural margins made it an experience of death, while on the other, the losses were mostly material. After lining up for painful vaccinations against diseases such as polio and typhoid, Nena concluded that soon only the watermarks and photos of newspaper clippings would be left as a reminder of the fear and loss caused by the flood. The family and the community, like Mami’s tough cuttings, had survived and were safe again.

While the narrative shows multiple mothering influences in Nena’s life, in the photographs her maternal grandmother repeatedly appears in a caretaker role in the company of the children, although her tall figure in some pictures appears distant and gazing away from the youngsters. In “Blue Stroller,” she looks off to the side, while in “May” she poses among the children, yet farthest from Nena, who stands apart from the others. This might reflect Nena’s individualization as the oldest sibling, as well as her emotional distance, although on a spiritual level Bueli played an important role in her life, and her presence was felt by Nena even after her death. The mother is absent from many photos and is present visually only twice in the book as the main subject: once as an attractive teenager in a *china poblana* folk costume, and a second time in her wedding picture. It is of interest that Cantú repeatedly brings up the physical appearance of her mother conferring on her the aura of a famous Mexican actress. Nena describes her

mother in her wedding picture as “movie star beautiful” with “María Félix eyes” (*Canícula* 109), comparing her to a female icon, who was once thought to have been the most beautiful woman in Mexico. This suggests that Nena had an interest in Mexican movies and was fully familiar with the actresses. Although she felt homesick when staying with her cousins “on the other side,” missing the series she watched on U.S. television, Nena had also identified with Mexican idols. While her U.S. life was surrounded by Ed Sullivan, Lucille Ball, and Dinah Shore, she secretly read a women’s magazine *Confidencias* and imagined herself as the leading female star of its tragic love stories. At the same time, as a Mexican American, Nena was different from her cousins on the other side. They called her *pocha*, and although this was uttered in a playful spirit, it speaks to the perception that many Mexicans held of Chicanos as *pochos*, or being sold out.

In depicting Mami as “movie star beautiful,” Nena differentiates her from traditional images of working-class women. Like Nena, her mother had been a regular border-crosser who commuted between a home in Rodriguez, Mexico, and a job in the United States. The fact that she was born in Texas made it easy for her to travel back and forth. The daily border-crossing reinforced her biculturalism so that she felt comfortable with both the fox trot and *danzones*. In another vignette, “On the Bridge,” the author writes: “In the photo Mami squints in the sun, she is beautiful and angry, impatient. The weight of all of us on her shoulders” (*Canícula* 8). This suggests that she was not a submissive mother who sacrificed all her needs to mothering without a complaint, but was also aware of the hardships a large family entailed. Although the photographs focus on her looks, the narrative histories broaden the image: she was a teenage factory worker,

who later gave birth, sewed, planted, boiled dirty diapers, read *Confidencias*, made purchases, and mediated conflicts between her husband and children. She was also the family historian, as she photographed, labeled and safeguarded pictures in a shoe box. She is presented as practical and focused when taking care of one baby after another, perhaps to the neglect of Nena herself. As the oldest child, Nena's job was to help take care of the younger siblings. Cantú describes some heartfelt moments when Nena seeks out closeness pretending that she has lice so that she can put her head on Mami's or Bueli's lap and have them caress her hair (*Canícula* 125).

Cantú is determined to celebrate the strong women from her childhood in *Canícula*: "I wanted to tell the stories of women who survived, who struggled, who worked as schoolteachers, who sold Avon and Stanley door to door, as well as the mothers who went to work on the fields alongside the men" ("The Writing" 105). In addition to her mother, these women included grandmothers, extended family members, neighbors and godmothers. In the chapter titled "Comadres," Cantú paints a picture of three neighbor women who look directly into the camera and give support to one another (36). They shared each other's successes and misfortunes and above all were "women sharing life, tending to each other" (*Canícula* 36). The description contrasts with the stereotypical perception of Mexican, and other Latin American, women as bearers of the Marian cult, which views them as long-suffering, morally superior, and dependent (Stevens 94-95), unable to assert themselves or express feelings/desires that challenge the Catholic dogma or the tradition of male privilege. On the contrary, Cantú's *co-madres* are caring and strong. They look straight into the camera, laughing, hoping, and loving. They are the backbone of the family unit and the community.

Cantú shows Mami as beautiful, angry and impatient. With a young girl's infatuation, Nena attributes film-star quality to her mother, especially in the look in her eyes in the wedding picture that reminds her of Maria Félix's sensuality. Maria Felix's wit, outspoken manner, and refusal to follow the conventions of her time may have attracted Nena's attention, since she had started to question her own religious and cultural traditions. By comparing her mother to a film-star known for several amorous liaisons, Nena opens up another taboo subject, female sexuality. While she does not directly address the topic, she approaches it from a child's perspective: Nena herself imagines that she is the star of love letters. She also has a loving relationship with her friend Henrietta and dreams of a marriage to a young Mexican man, Rene, while rejecting the idea of becoming a Mexican wife.

Furthermore, Mami's job as a factory worker and skilled seamstress during her youth placed her in the world of paid labor (Rebolledo, *Chronicles* 145-146). During her marriage, she used these skills to help her husband cover the family's expenses. She operated in the public/private spheres of economic production, and although she did work that was usually performed by women, she was able to provide alternative values for Nena, who remained ambivalent about marriage: "I am frightened to imagine myself living the life of my married cousins; I imagine myself married, with babies like Mami, and with a jolt I realize I don't want that" (*Canícula* 127). This suggests that Nena, on some level, experiences her mother as succumbing to the burdens of motherhood, and dreads that fate. For herself, Nena learned from her mother how to sew and value clothing of fine fabric. She was also encouraged to learn a skill and go to beauty school, becoming an adolescent hairdresser of some repute among her friends and family

members. While this did not develop her academic skills as such, a vocation was important for many working-class children, so that they could become economically independent or contribute to the family income. Becoming a hair-stylist helped Nena to individuate from her immediate family. The same happened with religion. Cantú explains that Mami had accepted some of the religious and cultural expectations of her era by joining the *Teresitas* and the *Hijas de Maria*, and wanted her oldest daughter to continue this tradition (“Chicana Life Styles” 15). While Nena is presented as a dutiful older sister and an obedient child who shared in household chores, she quietly rejected some of the family’s expectations of her. This was evident when she started to question church rules, protest with farm workers, march for the ERA, and read Marx.

While she praises her mother’s film star-like beauty, Nena’s description of her own body was more ambivalent. As the oldest child of a working-class family, she had to help in the cotton fields at a young age. Although there is no photograph to record this, the hard work outdoors left its imprint on Nena. She described how her body ached, and how insects bit her arms, legs, and neck, leaving them full of welts and puss-filled blisters: “In the photo, smiles belie tired, aching feet and backs; smiles on serious faces, stiff bodies posed for life” (*Canícula* 3). Although Nena had fleeting moments of feeling like the Chalupa of the *lotería* game or the actress Dolores del Rio, when she was dressed in her *china poblana* costume as a child, her reality was that of a Mexican American youngster of limited economic resources. Life was hard, and the “stiff bodies with frozen smiles” in the snapshots were testament to that. Medical resources were also scarce, and, when cooking for her siblings, Nena suffered a serious grease burn, missing school for two days as a consequence. Unlike her well-off class mates, she was not able to go to a

doctor but relied on her mother's home remedies. When her middle-class teacher asked whether she had gone to the hospital, she knew better than to talk about the herbal *remedios* that her mother was using to treat her, and remained silent. Her silence was an indication of class and cultural conflict—not feeling understood in her own context as a young Chicana from a financially struggling family. After all, her mother's remedies worked well, and the burn healed without even leaving a scar.

One of Nena's preteen concerns had to do with her breasts, and she worried that carrying babies on her hip while growing up would make one breast bigger than the other. Interest in her body, wearing bras, and becoming a woman were the typical concerns, of other adolescents of the time. Nena described herself as an “awkward teen, shy and reticent” (60). She was struggling with her ethnic identity, as indicated in her preoccupation with her hairy legs and un-plucked eyebrows, which her mother did not allow her to shave, unlike the mothers of her rich, white friends. In her culture shaving meant behaving like a *gringa*. Her identity as a female was also called into question when she heard a Jewish girl comment that “hairy legs and underarms make a girl look like a boy” (60).

Meanwhile, Nena managed to convince her mother to buy her black leather flats with colorful rhinestones, only to hear her father say that they were shoes “for a puta, not a decent girl” (61). Although Nena got to keep them, she did not wear them very often. She comments, however, that she wore them in her *quinceañera* photo in front of friends and family, thus asserting her will and refusing to accept the masculine good girl/bad girl split image that her father had invoked. Although the *quinceañera* represents the transition of a girl into adulthood and enables her to wear make-up, put on heels, and go

to dances (Cantú, “Chicana Life-Cycle” 15), wearing rhinestone shoes was perhaps not only an act of rebellion, but also an assertion of her independence from Papi. In effect, Nena’s defiance was a statement of her own views of sexual identity, which did not define a woman as a whore, even if she wore stylish, feminine shoes. At the same time, Cantú points out how deeply embedded these gender stereotypes were, and how Nena tried to overcome them through an alliance with her mother who bought the shoes with her own money. A mother/daughter female coalition was formed between Nena and her Mami to enable her to get the shoes in spite of her father’s negative view of them.

In spite of Papi’s old-fashioned views of female sexuality, he is portrayed as a source of security for Nena, a caring father, who was deeply hurt when his only son died in Vietnam. In “Parade,” when he holds his eldest daughter on his shoulders, she recalls: “So comforting, so secure to be held aloft and to feel the security, the strength of his arms. So many times he held me” (*Canícula* 37). This helped Nena to be close to him and to identify with him. Papi also provided the family with welcome breaks from the day-to-day routines, for instance, when he would take a shower after work, pack everybody into his car, and drive to the lake (91).

Another influence on Nena was Tia Piedad, her big-city aunt who was much concerned about etiquette and good posture, and who was the subject of admiration in the family, even though something of an anomaly. During the period when Nena worked in an office, she admits to having a shoe fetish and owning more shoes than clothes. This is reminiscent of Tia Piedad, who had a matching pair of shoes for every outfit. Nena’s consumption of footwear was later moderated to one pair of summer *huarachas* and boots for the winter. Regardless, Tia Piedad with her good manners and health concerns,

symbolized by her 1962 edition of *Corrección de Postura*, remained an influential figure in Nena's life. Her name, Piedad, also suggests a strong religious faith. It was, however, clear that Nena was pleased not to have to go spend time with Piedad in Mexico City, as some of her cousins did. Again, despite her aunt's insistence on propriety, Nena demonstrated her individuality and values, which included lying on the couch, squatting on the floor or throwing her legs over the arm of a chair (*Canícula* 85). Similarly, the ordering of events in *Canícula* is not straightforward but zigzags here and there, suggesting that Cantú wanted to avoid conformity and create a book that defied tradition by combining genres, experiences, and truths, reflecting life in the Borderlands.

Sexual conflict in Cantú's family is most clearly expressed in the figure of cousin Elisa. Seduced and impregnated as a teen, she was expelled from her home, and moved to Los Angeles where she worked and sent money to her little daughter. When she came for a visit to Matamoros she caught the attention of everyone "in her daring two piece black bathing suit" (*Canícula* 76). Elisa's sensual feline-like quality and caring nature, is illustrated in the narrative, when Cantú describes her voice as caressing "with soft purrs" (*Canícula* 76). Although at the time her single life seemed exciting, and Nena was eager to hear about it, Elisa ended up in a traditional marriage to a Chicano widower, who expected her to cater to his needs after a full day of work: "She washed, ironed and daily laid out his clothes, down to the very handkerchief he would carry that day" (*Canícula* 78). While marriage was certainly a conventional solution to Elisa's life tragedy — sadness about not being able to raise her own daughter or be near her family — Cantú underscores her strength as a wage-earner who could economically support her child and later do a *doble jornada* as a working wife and her husband's care taker, maintaining her

happy-go-lucky attitude and daring personality despite her family's rejection of her.

Belief in *curanderas* and faith healers played an important role in Nena's family and social network. Papi traveled to a small place in the Mexican mountains to get help for his arthritis. There, Nena encountered a young girl who appeared disturbed, with a blank, emotionless stare. The girl, Manuela, had been raped and never recovered psychologically from the experience. While her ailment was only whispered about and publicly explained that it stemmed from puberty, in reality, she had been a victim of an assault and bore its marks both on her body and in her psyche. According to a common stereotype, her symptoms were explained as consequence of her sexual development, although Nena suspected that there was more to her story. The only way that Manuela could cope with her pain was by dissociation and turning inward, away from the outside world, perhaps in the same way as the torture victims that Elaine Scarry studied. As Scarry puts it, "Intense pain is also language-destroying: as the content of one's world disintegrates, so the content of one's language disintegrates; as the self disintegrates, so that which would express and project the self is robbed of its source and its body" (35). Manuela was just an empty shell, without speech or cognition, as a result of her rape. As a child, Nena did not fully understand issues of sexual violence. According to the narrative, Nena walks away and thinks about Papi's illness with arthritis and his multiple trips to healers, superimposing the two stories of suffering. And although Nena sees a shooting star and wishes Papi well, she is overcome by sadness: "Alone in the moonless night I feel the tears well up and let them come" (124). Perhaps the tears were also for Manuela.

Manuela's trauma was produced by male violence; yet it was only one of many

crises in the lives of Nena, her family, and her community. While Cantú focuses on events that might happen in any cultural group, the narration weaves in Chicano history and the specific experiences of a young girl growing up on the border, in the contact zones of Mexico and the United States. In the background, national traumas such as the War of 1848, the repatriation of Mexican Americans in the 1930s, and the tragic losses of Vietnam are shown to impact both the collective ethnic psyche and the subjectivities of the protagonist. Loosely speaking, one can label present narratives of these losses as post-memory, a term developed by Marianne Hirsch for second-generation accounts of Holocaust survivors (*Family Frames* 22). *Canícula* demonstrates the constructed nature of these and all memories and the human tendency to fill in the gaps with subjective experiences and even with imagination. In the book, facts and fiction merge, leaving questions about what life was really like in Cantú's childhood, what her relationship really was with her mother and grandmother, and what really happened in her community. The fact that we do not know leaves us open to the possibility that life and subjectivities in the Borderlands combine all the possibilities (Soja's both/and logic) or none. Cantú's prophetic words "crossing meant coming home, but not quite" (*Canícula* 5) are descriptive of life in the interstices, in and between many home bases.

Notes

¹ Debra Castillo concludes that in Norma Cantú's text the important symbol is the *huesario*, which represents a heap of unclaimed bones, that function as a metaphor for the fragmentary narrative, 97.

² This analysis pertains to the poetry of Lorna Dee Cervantes. I broaden the idea of the body as a container to other works of literature where self-writing is an important focus.

³ In *Aztlán and Vietnam*, George Mariscal points out that it is very difficult to ascertain how many Chicanos died in Vietnam, because in public records Mexican Americans were listed as "Caucasian," 3.

⁴ Cantú explains that the title of the book refers to the dog days of summer in Texas, when she wrote the material, and experienced such intense heat that not even dogs ventured out, xi- xii.

⁵ The Bracero Program was instituted during and after the Second World War to bring cheap Mexican labor to agriculture and to supplement the loss of U.S. workers who joined the Army or went to factory work. The policy was codified under the 1942 Emergency Labor Program. See Alaniz and Cornish, 130.

⁶ More recent efforts to stop illegal immigration and deport those who are illegally in the country can be seen, for instance, in Arizona SB 1070, which authorizes the police to verify the immigration status of persons they stop, even for small violations such as traffic stops. See *The New York Times*, Sept. 6, 2012.

⁷ See Acuña, 168-171, for a description of the *Bracero* Program and how it was used to supplement the labor market, depress wages and break strikes. Although it violated the international labor laws, the program cemented U.S. power over

Mexico.

⁸ Nena refers to a young girl in Spanish.

CHAPTER FIVE

Conclusions

Cuando vives en la frontera

People walk through you, the wind steals your voice,
 you're a *burra*, *buey*, scapegoat,
 forerunner of a new race,
 half and half – both woman and man,
 neither – a new gender;

.....

To survive the Borderlands

you must live *sin fronteras*
 be a crossroads. Gloria Anzaldúa, “To Live in the Borderlands
 Means You”

The lines above written by Anzaldúa capture the paradox of living in the Borderlands. Life there is about wounding and collisions. It is also about the plural identity of Borderlands dwellers, who are not only scapegoats and burras,¹ men and women, but also forerunners of a new race and a new gender. This identity, by combining multiple categories, breaks down Western dualisms that, in Anzaldúa's view, imprison Chicanas/os and maintain oppressive societal relations of power. Her answer is to be a bridge, a crossroads. Anzaldúa writes:

The answer to the problem between the white race and the colored, between males and females, lies in healing the split that originates in the very foundation of our lives, our culture, our languages, our thoughts. A massive uprooting of dualistic thinking in the individual and collective consciousness is the beginning of a long struggle, but one that could, in our best hopes, bring us to the end of rape, of violence, of war. (*Borderlands* 102)

These notions are expressed in the writing of feminist theorists, such as Cherríe Moraga, Norma Alarcón, Sandra Cisneros, and Paula Moya, and are complemented in this dissertation by theories of location. As explained in previous chapters, Anzaldúa was one of the first writers to focus on the plural positionalities and the *mestiza* consciousness that combines the Indian, Mexican, and North American heritages: “The new *mestiza* . . . learns to be an Indian in Mexican culture, to be Mexican from an Anglo point of view. She learns to juggle cultures” (*Borderlands* 102). Similarly, Chela Sandoval’s notions about Third World feminist tactics of resistance embrace a differential (or *mestiza*) mode. She utilizes the idea of oppositional consciousness, which is “consciousness-in-opposition to U.S. social hierarchy that is capable . . . of aligning a variety of oppositional movements with one another across differing gender, race, culture, class, or national commitments” (358). And although Sandoval developed her theory of technologies of resistance after examining broader U.S. Third World feminist works, the *mestiza* (differential) mode as a tactic of resistance resonates in the writing of the authors studied in my dissertation.

On the other hand, notions about the importance of location, as theorized by bell hooks (margin/center), Homi Bhabha (in-between) and Edward Soja (third space) play a

significant role in my analysis, because these spatial constructs enable conceptualization about multiple subjectivities and their relationship to location. For Anzaldúa, this space is the U.S.-Mexico border, but she notes that the Borderlands can be cultural, sexual, psychological, racial and spiritual, not only geographic. The concept of new subjectivities emerging in-between cultures and combining, as Soja states, a multiplicity of perspectives that in Western dualistic thinking are considered incompatible, helps us to understand the dynamic movement and shifting, so central in Anzaldúa's thinking about the Borderlands. This same re-shaping and shifting subjectivities inside and between the borders is evident in the artistic expressions that I analyzed in my work.

The first goal of this dissertation was to show how Chicana writers and artists in the 1970s to 2000 responded to the Chicano Movement's masculinist practices and dominant society's discriminatory conditions by engendering a rich *corpus* of creative works that gave Chicanas a voice. My secondary goal was to demonstrate that the development of multiple subjectivities is a result of what Anzaldúa calls "racial, ideological, cultural, and biological cross-pollination" (*Borderlands* 99), enhanced, as stated above, by the shifting presence of the U.S.-Mexico border. And although Anzaldúa echoes the Movement's reclamation of Aztlán and *el otro Mexico* as the Chicano mythical homeland, she also acknowledges that, "as a *mestiza*, I have no country, yet all the countries are mine, because I am every woman's sister or potential lover" (*Borderlands* 102). This raises another paradox of the Borderlands: the dislocation of the *mestiza* means living everywhere *sin fronteras*. While Anzaldúa's perspective appears idealistic in a world that has become more alienating and more hostile to its border-crossers, it does convey accurately the idea of "being at home, but

not quite” (*Canícula* 5) on both sides of the border. Anzaldúa takes this notion a step further, creating a cosmos that serves as a borderless country for *mestizas*, whom the homeland has rejected or even “thrown out.” This stands in contrast to the myth endorsed by the Chicano Movement when it imagined Aztlán as the homeland of all Chicanos. Female writers focused on a different locus, their bodies, which they could claim as their homes, when for instance, Alicia Gaspar de Alba, developed her theory of embodied aesthetics (“There is No Place” 127). It is the female body that functions as “a site of origin, bridge between worlds, and locus of liberation” (127). Similarly, this notion resurfaces in the numerous transformed images of the Virgin of Guadalupe by Chicana artists.

In the works of poets Alma Villanueva, Lorna Dee Cervantes, and Pat Mora, identity is explored intensely and tied to Chicano family life, indigenous cosmology, and nature. As I have shown in Chapter Two, Villanueva’s *Bloodroot* is a woman-centered text, in which the author focuses on the mythical origin of men and women as emerging from the womb of ancestral MotherAfrica. Close relationship with the natural world gives the poetic persona both special knowledge and a connection to the primal elements of the ancient animal and plant worlds. Through a sexualized relationship with these worlds, the poet gives birth to herself, demonstrating her transformative powers as a woman and as a writer. Although Villanueva’s poems are better described as woman-centered rather than strictly feminist, they provide a critique of men’s alienated relationship with the Earth, and consequently with woman in general, whom the Earth symbolizes. Villanueva also challenges notions of male privilege in social institutions that label women inferior, and their bodily functions dirty. Given their strong focus on womanhood, Villanueva’s

poems can be seen as essentialist. However, she moves away from dualistic conceptualizations through the creation of a mythical story of the origin of all people, a world of indigenous beliefs/practices, and the ancient natural world, with which women are interconnected.

Cervantes focuses much more on Chicana ethnic identity and the impact of class, race, and sex on its development. Her interest in political activism and her cultural criticism are directly expressed in her texts. Thus, she writes about the problems Chicanas encounter in their daily lives, such as domestic violence, rape, and oppressive work conditions. She contrasts these themes with idyllic images of a disappearing landscape and the ways of older generations, more intimately connected to nature and a natural way of life. Cervantes, like Villanueva, is concerned about her identity as a poet, hence the reference to plumes in the title of her book, *Emplumada*. In fact, Cervantes temporarily stopped writing after the death of her grandmother and murder of her mother, because she felt that “poetry was not possible in this world” (González, “I Trust Only” 8).

In Cervantes’ poetry the “I” and the poetic persona become one. Many of the poems appear to include autobiographical facts about the poet’s maturation into adulthood. These personal poems stand in stark contrast to the more lyrical poems of the collection, because of their strong emphasis on the negative aspects of male *machismo*, manifested in heavy drinking, wife-beating, and sexual abuse of children. Cervantes contrasts these behaviors with the natural world, and the way birds nest together, for example. The poet explains: “In California in the summer/ mockingbirds sing all night/Grandma says they are singing for their nesting wives/ They don’t leave their families/ *borrachando*” (*Emplumada* 12). Throughout the text, the poet provides a

woman- centered criticism of male violence and dysfunction in Chicano family structure. As a corrective to the destruction in the wake of *machismo*, Cervantes finds strength in women, presenting her own family as a three-generational female-led household, and herself as a scribe who, like Malinche, translates foreign letters and helps the older generation manage English-language documents.

Identity questions are the focus of several poems in *Emplumada*. “Refugee Ship” and “Oaxaca, 1974” address the poetic persona’s difficulty in reconciling the difference between her Chicana heritage and her North American upbringing. This split in her identity occurs in language, at the point when she is not able speak with the authority of native Spanish-speakers in Mexico. Such fragmentation of identity has been a frequent topic of investigation for a number of Chicana feminist critics. As explained earlier in the dissertation, a split in subjectivity occurs when the speaking female subject is thrown into a crisis of meaning, trying to occupy a different position from the culturally normative one (Alarcón, “Making *Familia*” 211). Similarly, Alarcón’s notions about identity-in-difference and subject-in-process can be theorized in some of the poems of this study, as these subjectivities assume a discursive presence that is ever-shifting and changing, through an affirmation of difference that questions and disrupts existing categories, such as nation, class, and race (“Conjugating” 136-137). Accordingly, in Cervantes’ poetry, the crisis of meaning occurs in language when the poetic persona remains an outsider, a “pocha” among native Spanish-speakers in Mexico or when her name and mirror image do not reflect her North-American upbringing. In describing herself as a “pocha” seed whom Mexico rejects as “esputa,” Cervantes makes another reference to Malinche, this time to her stereotypical image as the traitor of her race and

the sexually compromised concubine of Cortés, the violated mother, *La Chingada* (Paz 79). *Emplumada*, however, does not offer a concrete solution to the identity fragmentation of the poetic persona. Like Villanueva, Cervantes finds comfort in her Indian heritage, the plumes of the Aztec deity Quetzalcoatl that provide her with tools to write, and the wide horizons open to birds as they freely migrate across the borders.

Pat Mora is considered the most “fronteriza” of the poets studied. The poems of *Borders* not only reflect her own experiences in the El Paso-Juarez Borderlands, her bilingual childhood, and connection to indigenous beliefs, but also her sense of the inequities suffered by Chicanos. Accordingly, Mora wanted to give voice to silenced Mexican women in the United States, such as the cleaning woman Ofelia in “Grateful Minority” and the maids of “the other room” in “Sonrisas.” Unlike Villanueva and Cervantes whose poems reflect experiences of poverty, abuse, and abandonment, Mora’s dilemma lies in the injustice of the difference between poverty-stricken Mexicans and privileged society. She also focuses on the first generation of working-class Chicanas who were able to get a university education, as “we move cautiously/ unfamiliar with the sounds,/ guides for those who follow/Our people prepared us/ with gifts from the land” (*Borders* 19).

In Mora’s poetry, the female body is not marked by violence and unbearable working conditions as it is in Villanueva’s and Cervantes’s work, but rather seeks refuge in nature. While Mora writes less about the concrete crossing over to the Mexican side than Cervantes, she is concerned with the “two rooms” that separate poor immigrant women from privileged white women. Somewhat like Cervantes in her experience in Oaxaca, Mora’s poetic persona does not have full access to the “other room” with

Mexican maids and remains an observer at the door. She hears the familiar sounds of laughter and the clicking of coffee cups, but is unable to participate. Thus, in *Borders*, Mora's resistant voice speaks against inequities between socio-economic and ethnic groups, lack of educational opportunities, and the oppressive border control of *la Migra*. In "Immigrants," she also demonstrates how Latina/o immigrants try to assimilate into the dominant culture, by purchasing American products and giving their children American names. Mora, like Anzaldúa herself, takes a stand against the forced (and often internalized) assimilation and the anti-immigrant politics of the dominant culture.

Mora has been called a multicultural eco-feminist who grounds the Chicana identity of her poetic persona in nature, and sees similarities in exploitation of natural resources and oppression of women (Murphy, "The Women" 23). The desert appears in her poems as the embodiment of the mother figure, a source of sustenance and symbol of endurance. Like clandestine Mexican border-crossers or subjugated Chicanas in the U.S. Southwest, Mora's desert women have a tough skin that repels the natural elements. They thrive with almost no nourishment and "whisper our sad songs behind our thorns" (*Borders* 80). Despite the extreme conditions of sadness of their existence, Mora concludes that like the cactus, "we stun when we bloom" (80).

All three poets Villanueva, Cervantes, and Mora write from a feminist perspective opposing male privilege and all forms of oppression. Each collection of poetry includes a small section that could be labeled autobiographical describing the author's maturation into adulthood. These can be seen as coming of age narratives. As the poetic persona crisscrosses the U.S. Mexican border, and racial, sexual, psychological, and economic borders, she incorporates into her identity traces of the history of powerful Aztec female

deities, indigenous practices of her *antepasados*, the healing power of nature, and the heritage of her Chicano family. In this border-crossing, the grandmother figure surfaces as the most important bridge between the new and the old country.

While the poets of this study engage in consciousness-raising about Chicana life, protesting against male domination, and celebrating strong brown-skinned women, visual artists Ester Hernández, Yolanda Lopez, and Alma Lopez take an additional subversive step by transforming the image of the Virgin of Guadalupe into an image of the contemporary Chicana. The new interpretations depart so radically from the conventional image of the Virgin that they provoked violent criticism, even death threats. The artists did not expect this reaction, because they saw in Guadalupe an important religious icon and powerful figure of liberation, but wanted to bring her closer to the everyday experiences of all Chicanas, and empower her with female agency. In their imaginary, the Virgin is portrayed as a karate-fighter, a hard-working seamstress, an aging grandmother, a marathon-runner and an assertive queer woman. The fact that most of these pictures are images of real people, including, for instance, the artist herself, her mother, grandmother, and friends, emphasize the idea that all Chicanas are reflected in the image of Guadalupe.

In the images of contemporary Chicanas, these artists incorporated symbols taken from Chicano and Aztec history, for example, the flayed snake and the figure of the Moon Goddess. *Our Lady* of Alma Lopez also addresses the issue of migration and her sexual difference as a lesbian artist, through the image of the Viceroy butterfly. The Viceroy is said to mimic the poisonous Monarch butterfly for purposes of survival, while the Monarch is known for its genetic memory and annual migration to its region of origin

in Mexico. For Mexican-born Alma Lopez the butterfly's freedom to migrate to its place of origin carries the same weight as the birds' flight in the borderless sky in Cervantes' poetry. Thus, the artistic sign of the Virgin of Guadalupe is charged with symbols of female agency, indigenous spirituality, and regenerative powers of the older generation. Each meaning challenges the hegemony of the nation state and the Catholic Church. The function of patriarchy is diminished by transforming the image of the small male angel portrayed underneath the Virgin into "a middle-aged agent of patriarchy" (in Yolanda Lopez's work) and by presenting a bare-breasted Chicana (in Alma Lopez's work) as a reference to natural female beauty and the Virgin's queer potential.

Norma Cantú's *Canícula* serves as the context for multiple border-crossings and the construction of third space identities. This ethno-biographic narrative is based on the life of a Chicano family residing in the geographic space of Monterrey, Mexico, and San Antonio, Texas, in the period spanning the late 1800s to 1960s. It is a story about multiple border crossings between the two countries, some produced by the conditions of the Mexican Revolution or by U.S. government deportation efforts, and others generated by everyday life in South Texas. Cantú's narrative follows a non-linear plot and includes family snapshots whose descriptions do not always match the image. That strategy conveys the impression that memories are malleable and that the mimetic representations in family snapshots do not always match family members' explanation or interpretations. Cantú's mixing of genres evokes the impression that Chicana/o subjectivities are multiple and regenerated through history, family myths, and the shifting border itself. Cantú's text raises questions about the veracity of autobiographical writing and family narratives. The mismatched images and details in the snapshots sometimes "prick the eye," like Barthes's

punctum, revealing new truths or giving rise to new interpretations of previously cited facts. The blurring of boundaries produces the effect of in-between that contributes to the reshaping of Borderlands subjectivities. The narrative itself was produced in-between seasons, during the asearingly hot time of harvesting in Texas (*Canícula* xii). While *Canícula* speaks to many injustices and losses, such as poverty, unemployment, rape, dominant society's intolerance of Mexicans and the use of Spanish language, the Vietnam war, and the death of family members, it also draws strength from indigenous beliefs, ancient healing practices, rituals of everyday life, and close family relationships, especially with the grandmother. The women of *Canícula* are strong and capable. Notions of body surface in the text when the narrator describes the hard work in the agricultural fields, her own bug-bitten limbs, and the illness, rape, and death in her community. The cultural and linguistic re-shaping of the narrator's identity is made possible by her border crossings as a child to visit extended family "on the other side" in Mexico.

While Norma Alarcón's theories about multiple subjectivities have provided a useful theoretical framework for my investigation, it is clear that identity development is also affected by the lived experience of race, class, gender, and location. This perhaps receives insufficient emphasis in Alarcón's theorizations. In *Learning from Experience*, Paula Moya has provided a critique of Alarcón's theory, arguing that her vision falls short because she denies the concept of identity. According to Alarcón, Chicana subjectivities are produced by multiple discourses, and remain incoherent subjects-in-process. Moya writes: "Alarcón's woman of color can have multiple subjectivities (in that she is produced as a 'subject' by multiple discourses), but she cannot have an identity because

‘to grasp or reclaim an identity in this culture means always already to have become a subject’ (Moya 69). Moya argues that women of color try to work through the conflicts they experience in order to create a better social order. She adopts the notion of politics of transfiguration from Paul Gilroy: “Through political action oppressed people are engaged in imagining new desires, social relations, and modes of association for themselves and their oppressors” (qtd. in Moya 77). The politics of transfiguration resonates with bell hooks’s views about margin and center and Freire’s concept of *concientización*. Through lived experiences and a new awareness, women of color can begin to identify linkages between socially produced categories of identity, and the unequal distribution of power, goods and resources (Moya 77), which are situated in specific historical locations. Moya’s notions appear relevant because they can help mobilize a consciousness and turn incoherent subjects of discourse into active agents of change. In raising awareness about Chicana life and offering empowering images that reshape the narrative of Chicanas, the authors and the artists studied in this dissertation have contributed toward the goal of opening up new possibilities for emerging Chicana subjectivities in the Third Space and the creation of new world orders that Anzaldúa envisions in “El Mundo Zurdo.”

Note

¹ In this stanza, Anzaldúa refers to the negative connotation of Borderlands dwellers in the dominant society. However in the end, they are the creators of a new race and new world order. In an interview with Andrea Lunsford, Anzaldúa explains her concept of *burra* as a Trojan Horse, the stomach of which opens up, and “out comes the other trying to make changes from the inside” (13).

Appendix



Fig. 1. Traditional Image of the Virgin of Guadalupe. Artist unknown.

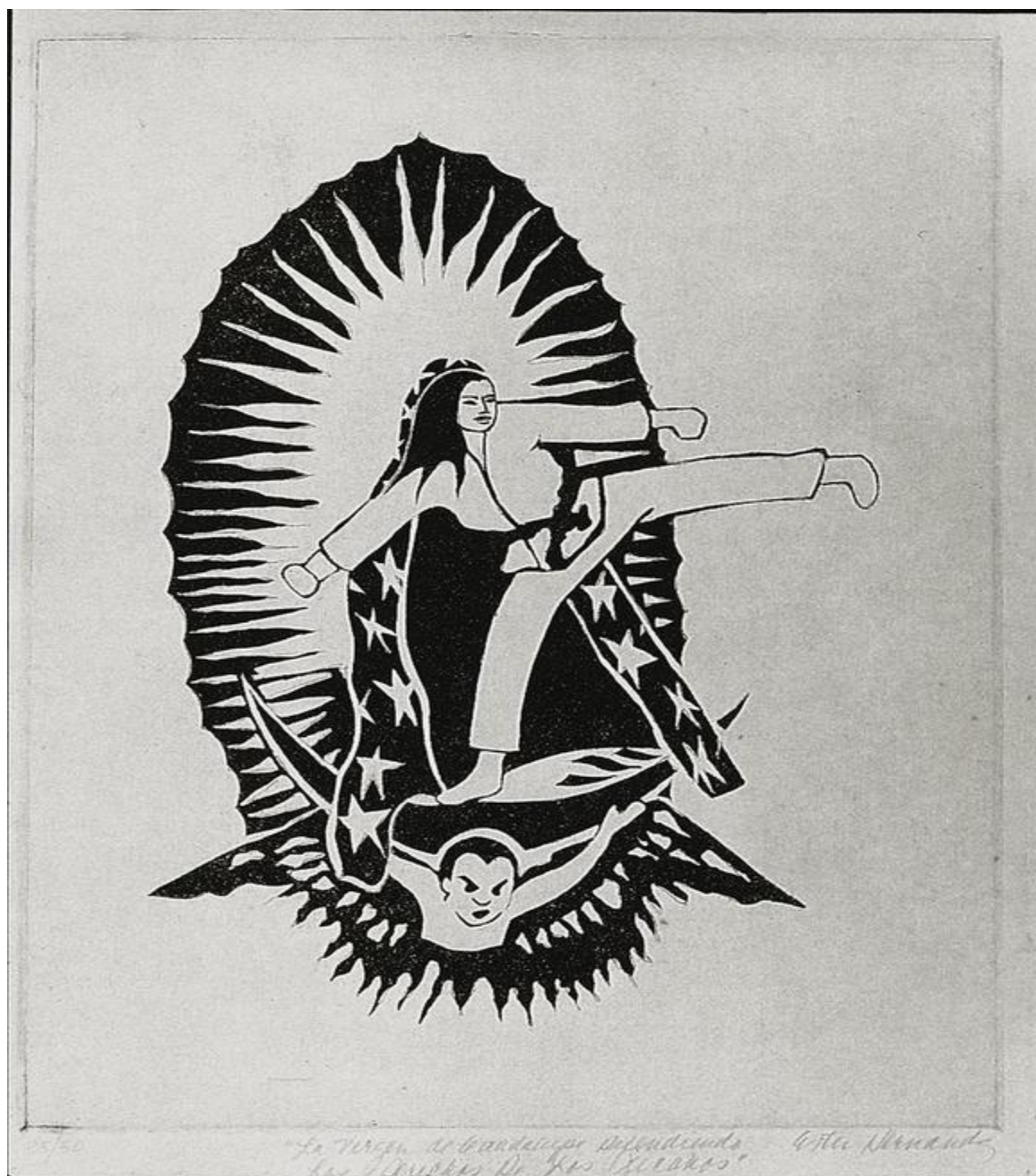


Fig. 2. Ester Hernández. *The Virgin of Guadalupe Defending the Rights of Chicanos*. 1975. Black and white etching. Collection of the artist.

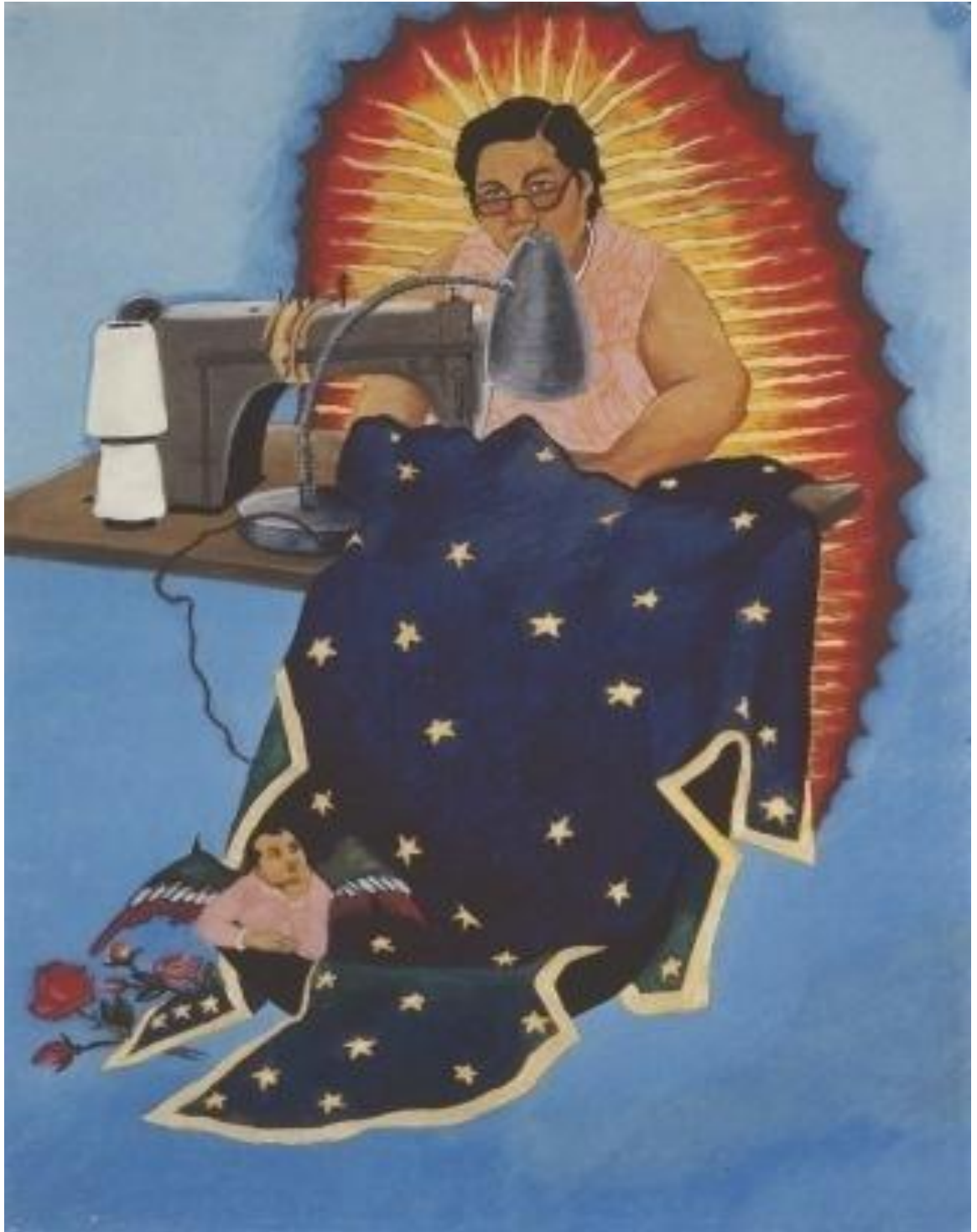


Fig. 3. Yolanda Lopez. *Margaret F. Stewart: Our Lady of Guadalupe*. 1978. Oil pastel on paper. Collection of the artist.



Fig. 4. Yolanda Lopez. *Victoria F. Franco: Our Lady of Guadalupe*. 1978. Oil pastel on paper. Collection of the artist.



Fig. 5. Yolanda Lopez. *Portrait of the Artist as the Virgin of Guadalupe*. 1978. Oil pastel on paper. Collection of the artist.



Fig. 6. Alma Lopez. *Our Lady*. 1999. Digital image. Collection of the artist.

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