

BRIDGING THE GAPS: LATINA AND LATIN-AMERICAN “SELF-WRITINGS” AND THE
CONSTRUCTION OF THE US LATINX IDENTITY

By

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This dissertation is dedicated to my parents and my little-big sister. Your sacrifices have not been in vain.

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Introduction

Literature and history intersect to narrate a version of society. I have always found the literary version of history, or more accurately herstories, to be at the margins of canonical and popular literature. Not until the advent of works written by women of color and other marginalized authors (such as authors of enslaved peoples' narratives) did I see a more complete and loyal narration of humanity. Naturally, the following questions arose: Who are these authors? What realities do they convey? What does the nation and concepts of nationality look like from their perspectives? What stories are left untold? Why are their stories not included? How do they tell their stories and how have these stories survived? I found that reflecting reality cannot completely frame the discourses of history and literature without including “othered” voices and “othered” stories. Since literature imitates reality and serves as a way to analyze society, it is necessary to reorient the margins and place in the center authors from underrepresented communities. To this point, in this dissertation, I examine texts from marginalized subjects—Latin American and Latinxⁱ people of color and women from different geographic locations and political persuasions: Cuba, Mexico, and Puerto Rico— as markers of identity and authors whose works provide a more comprehensive reflection of society. I explore the overlap of antislavery writings, autobiographical/testimonial literature, and female-authored texts as representatives of marginalized self-writings. I reexamine and analyze the sociopolitical and cultural contexts of texts authored by women from Mexico and the Spanish-speaking Caribbean, focusing mainly on Puerto Rico and Cuba, as together they comprise the largest population of Latinx in the United States. I contribute to the debates on Latin American and Latinx literatures and their role as cultural agents in the United States in regard to nation building and identity formation. When similar studies exist, they tend to focus on either Mexico and

Chicano/a writers or the Caribbean and Caribbean American writers. By focusing on Latin American and Latinx literature my dissertation explores the origins and contributes to the understanding of a contemporary Latinx community. I use the term “contemporary” to suggest that these Latinx communities are no longer geographically exclusive (Mexican-American or Chicanx in the southwest, Cuban/Cuban-American in south Florida, Puerto Rican in New York and Chicago).

I work with literature from mid-twentieth century to the present. I study Cuban and Cuban-American authors Daisy Rubiera Castillo (*Reyita sencillamente* (1996) and Cristina Garcia (*Dreaming in Cuban* (1992)). I analyze Mexican and Mexican-American authors Gloria Anzaldúa (*Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza* (1987) and Laura Esquivel (*Como agua para chocolate* (1989)). I explore Mayra Santos Febres (*Fe en disfraz* (2009) and Yolanda Arroyo Pizarro (*las Negras* (2012) from Puerto Rico. I propose that these works transform conventional understandings of self-writing—not to be labeled as a sub-category or foreign literature category—and delve deeper into first-person narration (which combines a bicultural/transnational lived experience and creative expression, personal and collective memory, and private and public history). These authors’ experiences cross literary boundaries that reflect their status as subjects who straddle multiple metaphoric and literal borders. These are works that focus on identities and communities that did not make their way into the major narrative of history, those that have since culminated into the Latinx identity. Further, I support the argument that Latin-American literature should be considered a prototype of Latinx literature. I do not deny complications of labeling all people and literature from Latin America or with Latin American heritage as Latinx, rather, I aim to highlight the diversity of the Latinx community, trace the sense of *latinidad*ⁱⁱ—which presents an opportunity to bond with people

from different Latin American nations because of the cultural similarities that arise from living in the United States, where they are viewed as a subcategory of “Americans”: Latinx. I aim to unpack the problems that arise from cultural and ethnic essentialisms—such as labeling all Latinx as Chicanx or as Cuban-American or as Nuyorican, etcetera, because such essentialism promotes the erasure of Latinx peoples from other Latin American nations and perpetuates an assimilation into a dominant Latinx group based on population size. Another problem that merits more attention when cultural and ethnic essentialism occurs in using “Latinx,” is that the term continues the erasure of non-White and non-binary gender conforming Latinx people, thus continuing the traditions of racism, colorism, and *machismo*.

Sociopolitical Context, Culture, and Discourse in Spanish-American and Latinx Identity

Politics

Incorporating Latinx literature as an integral part of “American” literature—both in English and Foreign Language departments—positions Latinx and other marginalized groups at the crossroad of academic and popular discourses. This attention creates an opportunity for Latinx to voice, define, and shape their own self-perception. Among top graduate programs in the country,ⁱⁱⁱ *Como agua para chocolate* tends to exist as a required text in Latino/a Studies, often an interdisciplinary program, but does not form part of Departments of Spanish’s literary canon. Whereas some Spanish departments support Santos-Febres as part of their literary repertoire (canon), she is rarely included in English, American Studies, African American Diaspora Studies, and Latinx studies.^{iv} Again, because literature reflects and serves as a way to analyze society, this is not just important in literary, but also in historical, social, racial, and

political terms; therefore, it is essential to prioritize the sociohistorical context when studying literature that either excludes marginalized subjects or that is authored by marginalized subjects.

Within the Latin American and Latinx community, there is great diversity—in terms of race and country of origin, for example—after all, Latinx are one of the fastest growing ethnic—not racial—groups and the largest minority group in the United States.^v Still, there is a sense of panethnicity (read: *panlatinidad*) that can be traced back to Latin American literature and that manifests more concretely in Latinx literature. One of the reasons for this panethnicity is the shared experience of colonial oppression among former colonies/territories in the Americas, first by Spain, a European colonial superpower, and then more recently by the United States. Spain colonized much of Latin America and the United States' Southwest, West Coast, and Florida. By the mid-nineteenth century, as Spanish colonial power weakened, the United States' imperial ambitions expanded exponentially; indeed, the United States replaced the void left by the Spanish colonial power (see “Long Live the Empire: The Rise and Fall of Empires in the Spanish Caribbean in the Nineteenth Century”). This shared history of colonialism—encompassing the first diaspora—produces common themes across national borders. By tracing this panethnicity to its history in the Spanish-speaking-Americas, the process of decolonization—including a removal of internalized patriarchal values (such as removal of machismo within the Chicano movement, for example)—comes to the foreground. The second diaspora is the displacement, due to migration, immigration, exile, refugee status or otherwise, into and within the United States. This experience adds a layer to the decolonization process and creates a shared sense of contemporary diasporic status among Latin Americans despite their country of origin and, accentuates the void left by those who have moved away. In other words, the way in which Latinx are viewed, othered, and consigned to Latin America—as if it were one homogenous

country— permits a similar “othered” experience among Latinx people. Furthermore, it allows for a uniquely racialized and gendered social structure within the Latinx community, and facilitates a contemporary Latinx live and fluid identity that lives in an indefinite space.

To trace the first shared diasporic experience, it is necessary to revisit nineteenth-century literature. Sociopolitical and historical discourse dominated nineteenth century “foundational fictions,”^{vi} texts that reflect themes of independence (or the struggle towards it) from the Iberian Peninsula. Moreover, the shared traumatic colonial experience and anti-colonial discourse created a point of contact amongst neighboring nations. The shared oppression allowed for a solidarity and unity that proved a real force of power against the colonial powers. This evolved into a sense of social justice against the threat of US expansionism as a replacement imperial power. Both historical accounts predominately come from educated white men and oftentimes exclude the perspective of women^{vii} (especially of rural women), and for this reason, they present a limited view. After independence, the criollo class continued to rule in ways that were reminiscent of the colonial center. Consequently, the foundational fictions failed to serve as a counter discourse and instead perpetuated the colonial and patriarchal narratives they set out to expel.

According to Benedict Anderson, these new notions of the nation were based on exclusion. Summarizing Anderson’s notions, the nation is a social construction; nationalism is a recent and modern creation, even though it is assumed that nations are ancient and timeless. Moreover, nationalism is universal in the sense that everyone belongs to a nation, however, each nation is completely different from any other.^{viii} The third paradox that Anderson addresses, reveals that nationalism is such an influential idea that people would die for their nation while, at the same time, they may not fully understand the concept of the nation and of nationality. This

phenomenon only occurs when people begin to reject certain key beliefs about their society; first, certain languages, such as Latin-based languages, are superior to others with access to universal truths. Thus, the divine right to govern is granted to the rulers of society (usually monarchs) and the emergence of print technology, or print capitalism, facilitates the idea of a community.

It is therefore not surprising to find that many Spanish American countries share a common literary (mis)representation, *blanqueamiento*, of a national literary creation. Their act of writing a new nation failed in that it created a similar misrepresentation; however, it still served as the model for nationhood. Nation is like identity in that it must be performed constantly or it will fail (see Butler's *Gender Trouble*). Unlike the foundational fictions, self-writings do not fit the previously established nation-building mold. In great part, the break from the early models of nationhood has to do with the rise of authors from a lower cultural, economic, and sociopolitical status as well as from other underrepresented areas. It was unsurprising to encounter a communal concept of the "self" amongst Latina Americana and Latinx texts. That is, culturally considering oneself as part of a group, reflects the group as the individual and *vice versa*. Therefore, Latinx authored texts, tend to expand upon the ideas of self-writing to include the multiple cultures the authors belong to. This is not meant to be reductive of the works written by Latinx authors, but rather, acknowledging that it is impossible to fully remove the "self" from writing, I hope to demonstrate that the "self"—in Latinx authored fictionalized and non-fictionalized accounts—is presented as a "communal self."

In contrast to the foundational fictions, national narratives found in the self-writings I examine, destabilize literature in both the United States and Latin America. And they have entered the dominant national discourses. For example, Esquivel's *Como agua para chocolate* was reviewed and praised by *USA Today*, *Glamour*, and the *Washington Post* (Niebylski 189).

The novel has sold over a million copies, it has been translated into several languages, and made into a film. The film version of the novel was highly celebrated and according to Dianna C. Niebylski, the film was “favorably reviewed and popularly acclaimed in the United States and elsewhere, Arau’s film has become the highest grossing Spanish-language import of all time” (189). Additionally, the film won the “Best Picture Award” (among nine other Ariel Awards) in Mexico and was nominated for a Golden Globe Award for Best Foreign Language Film in the United States. Because representation matters, these works have also contributed to popular notions of the nation and of identity formation—they promote *panlatinidad*; but, at the same time, perpetuate a divisive and problematic discourse based on exclusions (Anderson).

About Self-Writing

Self-writing as a genre, provides a new perspective and layer of inquiry for writers who have conventionally been considered, or whose writings were otherwise considered novels and fictionalized accounts, both in Latin America and within Latin American diasporic subjects in the United States. My understanding of self-writing^{ix} is a manifestation of oneself, expressed in first person narration, that serves as the overarching umbrella, or genre, that includes autobiography, *testimonio*, memoir, and historical fiction. Michel Foucault’s essay “Self-Writing” in his book *Ethics: Subjectivity and Truth*, speaks of various forms of self-writing. Foucault cites the *Vita Antonii* of Althanasius to demonstrate that writing was fundamental to ascetic practice; and, in essence, the author postulates him/herself in front of another who would humiliate and judge him/her. In this way, writing is a practice for altering the self, rather than merely chronicling thoughts; the act of writing functions as a catalyst for altering character and conduct. After the ascetic practice, Foucault speaks of the *hupomnemata* as notebooks or

journals that functioned to document and assist with memory. It is widely accepted that memory and space function differently in Latin-America.^x The individual notebooks and journals of the ancient Greeks, or the hupomnemata:

Do not constitute a “narrative of oneself” . . . The intent is not to pursue the unspeakable, nor to reveal the hidden, nor to say the unsaid, but on the contrary to capture the already said, to collect what one has managed to hear or read, and for a purpose that is nothing less than the shaping of the self. (*Ethics* 210-11)

For Foucault, the purpose of these self-writings highlights the ancient Greeks’ “epimeleia heautou” that translates to “care of the self.” The logic follows that self-writing is a tool for healing and, when superimposed onto Latinx authors, a tool for healing communal, rather than just individual, traumas. Furthermore, Foucault argues the hupomnemata contribute to the formation of the self in three ways: “the limiting effects of the coupling of reading with writing; the regular practice of the disparate that determines choices, and the appropriation which that practice brings about” (Foucault 211). Building from Foucault’s concept of self-writing, when a sense of self is as a part of a community—such as a Latinx community—, then self-writing’s functionality “form[s] an identity through which a whole spiritual genealogy can be read” (*Ethics* 214). Using the term that Foucault coined, I propose self-writing, specifically the hupomnemata as more than memoir, biographical or autobiographical writing; self-writing becomes a reflection of the community the author belongs to, a type of “collective-biography.” Because of the collective quality that often reflects an “otherness,” Latinx-authored texts create a sense of longing—or relatability by proxy: “I know someone who has a similar true story.” In other words, because the texts are not necessarily exclusive only to the author’s story, there are points of contact amongst other “othered” groups. The sections that contain autobiographical references

in a text are more artistically/aesthetically driven rather than restricted by this, because such authors are not limited to an individual's experience. This should not be read as a limiting quality specific to Latinx authors that reduces their capability to only create self-writing works, but rather, because no one escapes from including a part of themselves in their creations, the autobiographical references in Latinx authored texts, tend to be a communal self-reflection. As such, I propose an expansion of the term "self-writing" that develops from Molloy's distinction of Latin American autobiographies from their European predecessors, to include Latinx writings as a continuum, not as a separate successor.

Although autobiographical writings can be difficult to categorize and define, I propose that autobiography as a self-written account of one's life, to some degree, occurs in all forms of writing. According to Paul de Man, autobiography brings together history and art, so it "is not that it reveals reliable self-knowledge—it does not—but that it demonstrates in a striking way the impossibility of closure and of totalization (that is the impossibility of coming into being) of all textual systems made up of tropological substitutions' (922). What de Man implies is that autobiography is not about finding a verifiable truth, but rather, it is a process of interpretation and an open discursive system in which various ways of retelling are in dialogue.

Autobiography also focuses mostly on cultural and historical events. Specifically, Latin American autobiographies function as hybrids exerting more than one discourse; on the one hand, autobiographies document, on the other, they praise the self. These in turn, serve as forms of historical accounts and national projects (Molloy). In other words, the authorial "I" functions as more than an eyewitness, it is an active participant in the historical process. I work from Sylvia Molloy's notion of autobiography which distinguishes the Spanish American^{xi} autobiography, from European autobiographies.^{xii} Reading a text as an autobiography plays a

role in the text's categorization as such; and, denying this classification, in turn, reveals a disquiet in the text itself. The Latin American autobiography has been subject to marginal positions and from those positions emphasizes what is missing, "it is an invaluable tool with which to probe into the other, more visible sanctioned forms of Spanish American literature. As that which has been repressed denied, forgotten, autobiography comes back to haunt and to illuminate in a new light what is already there" (*At Face Value* 2). For Molloy, the function of the Latin American autobiography is to explicate this void/emptiness. These authors create a platform from where they can speak from an autobiographical lens, and from this perspective a new reading emerges. Autobiographies, as a genre, are less researched in literary studies, not unlike Latinx literature in conjunction with Latin American literature; therefore, to bring an understudied genre to enlighten an understudied group, is a way to mirror the context.

Molloy argues that one of the most distinguishing characteristics of Spanish-American autobiographies is its divergence from European models. Perhaps it is the shared history of diaspora and trauma—stemming from a shared experience of oppression by European empires as well as processes of decolonization—specific to the Western Hemisphere that allows for *Lo real maravilloso* (the magical and spiritual as quotidian in Latin American literature, but is not present in European autobiographies), the textual and literal body, and a crisis in the self—to name a few differentiating elements of Spanish-American autobiography.^{xiii} According to Molloy, the divergence from European models is particularly interesting because of its "peculiar awareness of self and culture brought about by ideological crisis, ..., that crisis is reflected, better yet, incorporated into the very fabric of Spanish American self-figurations" (*At Face Value* 3). For Molloy, the crisis of authority stems from the nineteenth century when Spanish America obtained its independence from Spain:

The nineteenth-century Spanish American autobiographer is hard put to define himself as a subject who writes within the yet unstable limits of budding national literatures. Often a direct participant either in the struggle for independence or in the process of consolidation of the national state, he usually perceives the autobiographical venture as a didactic and not wholly disinterested task. (“The Autobiographical Narrative” 459)

The reaction to this resembles a “self in crisis,” one who writes from a space that has no voice—a void. Molloy further argues the autobiographical depends on a relation with a textual prefiguration. Using Juan Francisco Manzano^{xiv} as an example, Molloy finds that in some cases, these pre-figurations do not exist in the written form:

When Manzano writes prose, and more specifically when he writes himself down in his autobiography as a black man and a slave, there is no model for him, no founding fiction—no *master image*—to be rescued from texts. In order to validate his autobiographical gesture and thus authorize himself, Manzano cannot pick and choose from his scraps because those scraps do not contain the makings of his image, or rather contain them, unwritten, as an absence. (“From Serf to Self: The Autobiography of Juan Francisco Manzano” 416)

Without a model to turn to, Manzano has to write to fill the textual void, a process that, for Molloy, entails the self-realization of the author. Through his writing, and without this “master image,” Manzano learns to be the owner of his text, and the owner of his written “yo.” Similarly, for people who are either illiterate or who do not have the social power to wield an audience, sharing oral narratives can serve to fulfill the same authorial ownership Molloy ascribes to Manzano. In spite of a lack of model, Manzano writes a text that fulfills the features of Spanish American autobiography as defined by Molloy, but, of course, he does it in a *different* way. By

writing free of models, free of a master text, and creating his own textual prefiguration, Manzano like Latin American, Latinx, and other marginal writers, simultaneously claims and reappropriates his textual life. This quality is what separates Latin American autobiographies from European models. However, Molloy is not saying texts are always national allegories; rather, allowing this concern with “national identity” serves to renew the necessary crisis in the *rhetoric*. It is equally important to see it as a critical space “fraught with the anxiety of origins and representation, within which the self stages its presence and achieves ephemeral unity” (5). Therefore, the autobiography is always a retelling. Although it may appear to apply to all autobiographies, I insist that slavery, colonialism, exile, and immigration, makes Latin American and their now twice diasporic population, living in the United States or Latinx, autobiographies different.

For Manzano, the crisis and the anxiety of writing self-reflexively has to do with another feature of Spanish American autobiography as theorized by Molloy: the reading scene. In “The Reader with the Book in His Hand,” Molloy writes that Spanish American autobiographers often emphasize the act of reading. Molloy highlights the act of reading as central for Spanish American autobiographers with examples from the nineteenth and early twentieth century. For Molloy, autobiography is as much a way of reading as it is of writing; that is, the reading scene focuses on the role of reading and how authors create themselves and their works. Molloy begins with Borges’ “The Gospel According to Mark,” a story about a man who reads the Bible out loud to illiterate people who end up crucifying him. This story serves as Molloy’s example for Spanish America’s adaptation to the European model. “Cultural paupers in a way, they are still dazzled by the Book and deprived as they are of letters, can only enact their gruesome misreading...Borges seems to stress a salient aspect of Spanish American literature: its capacity

for inventive (if, in this story deathly) distortion” (16). The image of the reader with the book in his hand functions as a metaphor for the difference between Spanish American readers and European readers. Molloy does not declare Spanish Americans are illiterate although she implies they may as well be (when following with the metaphor that the Gutres are illiterate). The metaphor represents that enchantment in which the Spanish American reader is trapped. Molloy further observes:

The stance chosen by the Spanish-American writer...is the exact obverse of Mallarmé’s dictum and, as such, refers back to it, like a parody. The Book is not the ultimate goal but a prefiguration: a dissonant concert of texts often fragmented, of broken bits of writing, it is the substance for beginnings. (16)

In essence, the act of writing and reading is a way of unlearning that which has been acquired from European literary models. In Spanish America, the autobiographies parody and call attention to European literary traditions. Therefore, these autobiographies grant permission to start anew, a liberation, and a way of disremembering. Indeed, “For the autobiographers books *are* real life” and they existed in those books (17). However, this crucial encounter between writer and text is again different. It does not take the same form, nor can it take the same form, because that scene is a forbidden act for an enslaved person. Furthermore, these authors must depend on memory. It is interesting to note that the definition for “memory” includes five definitions that speak to recollecting an event, commemorating, and a device; however, in Spanish, the *Real Academia Española* has fourteen definitions—including those in the English dictionary. One of the definitions of “memoria” not found in English is: “8. En la filosofía escolástica, una de las potencias del alma.” This seemingly insignificant added Spanish definition of “memory,” speaks to one of the greatest differences between European self-writings

in comparison to Spanish American and Latinx examples of self-writing. If in Spanish, memory is tied to the soul and is, by definition, a metaphysical potency, then the argument stands that Latin American and Latinx authored texts contain an ampler definition of other concepts such as the self, time, truth, and society. The European model, the intertext of Spanish American autobiographers to which Molloy refers, is beyond Manzano's reach. And, yet, the result of their reading moments seems to produce the same material: "the substance for beginnings." In other words, the Latin American autobiography written by a marginalized subject, is as impactful as its European predecessor. Unlike the European model, the Latin American autobiography does not benefit from an extensive literary tradition and still produces the same aesthetic quality.

Lastly, Latin American autobiographies create discomfort. The autobiographer participates in a consciousness of his/her vulnerability; self-writing is then more than asking for permission, it is a way of asking for life and of surviving through writing (that the autobiographer's life is spared, that their life is retold from their perspective, and that they are then immortalized). As Molloy has observed, "Spanish American autobiographers are most efficient self-censors, who, within their life stories, map out silences that point to the untellable" or, as defiant omissions and manifestations of resistance and self-realization (*At Face Value* 6). Molloy warns of the danger and attempts to eliminate what is different from the text; to clean it would be a whitening and an erasure of this different "yo." The "scars" that mark these textual bodies and make them "different" are the inscriptions of the Latin American and therefore the Latinx identity. These autobiographies work as road maps to the silences (stereotypically thought to be) inherent in the Latin American subject; and it is this quality that creates a sense that both the memory and the past are fluid. In turn, these qualities of Latin American self-writing become a practice for individuals to reflect shared events, most often, occurring through maternal

reminiscence (9).

Similarly, *testimonio* is also an example of self-writing, although it combines ethnography and literature. *Testimonio* is a hybrid writing that provides a personal account of a historically verifiable event, mostly, by way of interviews (journalistic style) and often contains a political tone. In a way, these can be read as oral autobiographies. With the establishment of the 1970 Casa de las Américas prize in the category of *testimonio*, came a defined genre, albeit one that is still debated (Beverley, Zimmerman). In the introduction to Miguel Barnet's *Biografía de un cimarrón*, the *novela-testimonio* is defined as

A term coined and developed by Barnet that describes the process of interaction between the subject or informant and the writer or *gestor*. The subject is often the forgotten, marginalised [sic] voice of history, described by Barnet in the brief essay *Alchemy of memory* as: “the ghost[s] who couldn't make it into the travel books or into the tales of the enthusiastic chroniclers.” (3)

William Rowlandson goes on to explain:

The mission of the testimonial novel is to provide a platform for the speaker who traditionally has been silenced, to provide a forum where the speaker and the reader (and the *gestor*) can meet, to express the abstract data of the history books in a tangible and direct language. The role of the *gestor* is crucial here, as he or she needs to mould [sic] the words into a comprehensive unit, yet not allow his or her own voice to stifle the subject. (3-4)

Testimonios are edited volumes of first-person narratives and, often, of resistance movements. In other instances, *testimonios* are ethnographic accounts, first-person accounts, witnesses to a momentous incident, or “interviews with subjects representing little known segments of

Caribbean culture. They have the traditional ethnographic purpose of preserving a record of culture that may soon vanish” (Lindstrom 70). Further, *testimonios* highlight self-accounts of people who traditionally have not had the opportunity to publish their autobiographies or statements about their communities and culture (Lindstrom). Thus, *testimonio* is associated with less-literate people.

For many reasons, Latin American literature includes an unusually high number of nonfiction narratives (Beverly, Zimmerman, Lindstrom). In discussions of *testimonio* literature, it is necessary to mention the US anthropologist Oscar Lewis (1914-1970), whose work centered on collecting first-person accounts of life in poverty. “Lewis obtained from Mexican, Mexican-American, Puerto Rican, and Cuban subjects the tape-recorded reminiscences that formed the raw material of his widely recognized books” (Lindstrom 75). One of Lewis’ most important contributions to anthropology is a presentation of cultural poverty—specific to Latin American people that surpassed country of origin and ethnic differences. For literary critics, it is Lewis’ technique that is most innovating. It is also worth noting, Barnet recognizes Lewis’s work. Still, *testimonio* is composed by the speaker and the author, that is, the interviews take shape and transform according to the more literate writer. “Testimonial narratives contain substantial factual material but also an element of invention that deserves acknowledgment. This includes both the creativity of the collaborator who provides the oral story and that of the writer who reorganizes it to make a written narrative” (Lindstrom 91).

With all of this in mind, and because it is impossible for the author to completely exclude the self from the text, to a certain degree, all text contains elements of self-writing. I treat the texts written by García, Rubiera Castillo, Santos-Febres, Arroyo Pizarro, Anzaldúa, and Esquivel as examples of self-writing, even though they may not have been categorized as such. By

examining these self-writing works within the framework of contemporary considerations of autobiography, *testimonio*, identity politics, women, and gender studies, and Latinx studies, I intend to shed light on the “yo” expressed in these works that contest, destabilize, confront, and end up reshaping national, racial, and linguistic concepts. I enter into historical records to talk about their lives—because autobiographies and *testimonios* are life stories—that were formally excluded.

Structure and Methodology

Working with these definitions of self-writing, I view García, Rubiera Castillo, Santos-Febres, Arroyo Pizarro, Anzaldúa, and Esquivel’s texts from a postcolonial-feminist perspective. To this end, Gayatri Spivak’s “Can the Subaltern Speak?” (1983) is a fundamental text that develops the notion of the subaltern subject in contrast to the poststructuralist theories of subjectivity.^{xv} Spivak begins her article by raising the idea that both French philosophers Michel Foucault and Gilles Deleuze operate within a model of subjectivity in which the subject is not autonomous and sovereign but constituted through a discourse of power and desire that propagates through sociocultural institutions. For them, each subject participates in this system and each oppressed subject is able to know his/her situation and talk about it. Foucault and Deleuze argue that when they write about oppressed people, they are not representing or speaking for these people; rather, they only observe the effects of the forces of power and how it acts in the world. They further argue that their theoretical reflections are not composed of representative language; and they claim to avoid the problems of representation because they simply make transparent the forces of power and its effects. Spivak then analyzes a passage from

Marx to show that the term “representation” applies in two ways, each of which shows the separation of the subject from the discourse of power.

Spivak argues that the subaltern is excluded from the network of power described by Foucault and Deleuze, and that this subject only enters the circuit of production through representations. On the one hand, the word “representation” implies a representative who speaks on behalf of the subordinate in the political process. On the other hand, the word “representation” emphasizes that the French-European discourse only dialogues with the narrative, the image, or the simulacrum of the subaltern carried by its representative. Spivak holds that representation interrupts the discourse of power and desire and fragments it, which then separates the subaltern from discourse. The discourse of power and desire creates some subjects and erases others. Spivak further argues that epistemic violence is used to constitute the colonial subject as the “Other.” In the colonial context, epistemic violence occurs when imperialist power interrupts and displaces the operative episteme for the conquered people, replacing it as much as possible with their own and installing their own institutions of control. British power creates a class of elites with a Western education capable of governing subordinate groups according to the norms of the European system. In this way, the administration of the colony remains within the discourse of the European power; whereas the subaltern groups in the colony are effectively controlled although they exist outside the discourse and without voice. Therefore, according to Spivak, Foucault’s model invalidates the concept of the sovereign subject because it has the effect of installing first world discourse (read Western European) as a subject-in-itself, or as Spivak says, “West as Subject.” Furthermore, Spivak does not disagree with Jacques Derrida in regard to the intellectual’s transparency. Rather, Spivak adds to his position—that there is a praxis in European writing to define and evaluate foreign cultural

practices in European terms through their own cultural practices—by suggesting this process installs an ethnocentric European subject who constructs the “Other” from his/her own position. In other words, “recognition of the Other by assimilation” (89). The need for representation to participate in the social system of the subaltern society separates and hides the subaltern from the French-European discourse of power and desire. Lastly, Spivak uses the example of the widow’s sacrifice in India to show that the subaltern woman is doubly concealed. Colonial imperialist power and the traditional patriarchy are two discourses that silence the voice of the woman from this group. Spivak concludes that the two historical narratives determine the representation of women’s consciousness in the social discourse, and that this subaltern woman can never express her own experience. The texts I examine in this dissertation have led me to disagree.

In addition to post-colonial feminist theory, I incorporate and rely upon with José Esteban Muñoz’s modes of identification. According Muñoz’s *Disidentifications: Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics*, there are three modes of identification: first, identifying with the status quo/hegemonic code (not opposing/challenging); second, counter identification in which, “‘Bad Subjects’ resist and attempt to reject the images and identificatory sites offered by dominant ideology and proceed to rebel, to ‘counteridentify’ and turn against the symbolic system” (11); third, provides disidentification,^{xvi} a strategy of survival for people of color. Historically, people of color and queer people are depicted and represented through the dominant-culture’s eye. This gaze turns into a monolithic representation of what it means to be a person of color and a queer person. Some “disidentify,” but still do so within the system rather than create new versions that challenge all stereotypes that have been used to marginalize and oppress people of color. Therefore, what starts as a counter-discourse, such as an anti-colonial stance, ends up serving as an agent of colonialism and perpetuating that which they set out to

dismantle.

I approach this investigation from a feminist post-colonial and subaltern studies theoretical framework by integrating Benedict Anderson and Homi Bhabha's concept of the nation with Gayatri Spivak's post-colonial subaltern studies and the Combahee River Collective's statement. Postcolonial and subaltern studies are relevant due to the following themes in self-writing: marginalized groups and their position within society, their contributions, and historic revisionism or retelling from their point of view (Bhabha). Returning to the impact of colonialism, these texts serve as a voice for their own representation—one that, historically, has been denied.

The texts I study serve as examples of self-writings that reflect on the social context of the Latinx experience as multidimensional and complex for their exploration of religion, sexuality, social class, and race. Moreover, these texts present conflicts and solidarity in their depictions. Similarly, in contemporary Latinx literature, the Latinx community is portrayed as comprehensive and includes, but is not limited to previously geographically isolated ethnic enclaves of Mexican-American, Mexican, Chicanx, or Puerto Rican, Puerto-Rican American, Nuyorican, or Cuban, and Cuban-American. In works written by Joy Castro, Teresa Dovalpage, Julia Alvarez (to name a few contemporary Latinx authors), the Latinx community is the central community, moving Latinx cultural identity from the margins to the center, countering its status in the dominant culture as a subcategory. This allows for presentations of a complex Latinx community—one that embraces and contests essentialist *Latinidad*—where points of contact among Latinx people are complicated by the community's diversity and by personal subject positions.

Chapter 1: Cuba

In chapter one, I start with García's *Dreaming in Cuban* and I continue with Daisy Rubiera Castillo's *Reyita, sencillamente: Testimonio de una negra cubana nonagenarian*. Specifically, I examine *Dreaming in Cuban* as a Cuban-American Latinx experience and *Reyita*, as an example of a Black Cuban woman's experience. García's novel presents the complexities of Cuban and Cuban-American politics, through the lens of three generations of women, and the formation of contradicting identities that are equally "Cuban." García upends the traditional binary gender norms by centering women and consigning men to the periphery. Themes of religion, history, culture, exile, love, memory, and nostalgia, and exile take center stage. Rubiera Castillo's *Reyita, sencillamente: Testimonio de una negra cubana nonagenaria* presents a previously unpublished and untold perspective of Black women in Cuba and Cuban history. *Reyita* is the intergenerational oral history collected by Daisy Rubiera Castillo, the protagonist's daughter who serves as the ethnographer/editor of Reyita's story. Plagued by inequality, poverty, racism, and sexism, *Reyita* expands the *vox populi* to include Afro-Cuban women's experiences as told by Afro-Cuban women. *Reyita* speaks to—and illuminates—their contributions, struggles, and resilience.

Chapter 2: Mexico

In this chapter, I focus on Mexico and Mexican-American examples of self-writing for their contributions to nation building within the Latinx community and more broadly in US culture. I examine Esquivel's *Como agua para chocolate* (1989) through the lens of Anzaldúa's *Borderland/La Frontera: The New Mestiza* to explore the fluidity of Mexican and Mexican-American identities.

Esquivel's *Como agua para chocolate* is the intergenerational story of Mexican society presented by women. Esquivel's presentation of Mexico highlights the importance of women's storytelling and preservation of culture. The novel opens with the grandniece of Tita de la Garza—the protagonist—recounting her great-aunt's life story, her family history, and consequently, a part of Mexico's history. Themes of love, family, food and the kitchen, magical realism, religion, spirituality, tradition, rebellion, race, class, *machismo*, and life on the border (figuratively and literally) are necessary inroads into the stories of women from different generations and at different stages of Mexican history.

Chapter 3: Puerto Rico

In this chapter I study Mayra Santos Febres' *Fe en Disfraz* (2009) and Yolanda Arroyo Pizarro's *las Negras* as examples of Puerto Rican self-writing. These texts present an insightful depiction of the complexities of identity politics. *Fe en Disfraz* takes us back in time to the colonial era to explore slavery, specifically the experience of female enslaved women throughout Latin America, their struggles, their pain, and, at times, their pleasures. Taking a non-traditional approach, Santos-Febres recomposes history to present it from the perspective of a black woman whose story is transnational. I make the argument that Santos-Febres' research is a form of testimonial recuperation where she has taken some creative liberties. Indeed, Santos-Febres' use of archival documents—including explorations of the first-person narration, and its many manifestations—merits a deeper analysis. Santos-Febres delves into a collective diasporic memory. *Fe en Disfraz* imagines reconciliation with the past to heal generational trauma. The work also presents the strength of desire and its negotiations with the power of others. It is important to examine how the novel considers the erotization of Black bodies or participates in

its reproduction. *Fe en disfraz* serves as an example of self-writing for Santos-Febres, Afro-Puerto Rican women, and Afro-Latinx women.

Lastly, I look at Arroyo's *las Negras*, where themes of memory, trauma, slavery, racism, multiculturalism, multilingualism, and second-class citizenship take center stage. Arroyo Pizarro's *las Negras*, tells three stories where the protagonists are Black enslaved women—some of which predate their arrival to the western Hemisphere. In writing stories with Black female characters, Arroyo Pizarro reclaims the past, creates a history, and presents what historical documents and historians have left out. Through a subversion of stereotypes, Arroyo Pizarro redefines representations of the Black woman as more than a poor, submissive, maid and slave, or sexual object. The title *las Negras*, with a lowercase “l” and a capital “N,” foreshadows the content of the text. That is, before opening the book, the reader is warned that even the grammar is inferior to the protagonists: Black women. In a simple and direct manner, Arroyo Pizarro transmits the multilayered emotions specific to enslaved women's experiences—a previously edited or silenced narrative.^{xvii}

Chapter 1

The Bridge in the Hyphen: Tracing Cubanidad in Cristina García and Daisy Rubiera Castillo

Cuba's history is as diverse and rich as it is complex. In literature as in life, or perhaps because literature often mirrors life, Cuban literature has played an influential and important role for all of Latin America—including its diaspora in the United States. Likewise, to speak of Cuba and its cultural production is to speak of Cubans inside and outside of the Caribbean nation. Often considered the father of modern history, Giambattista Vico proposed the idea that there is the possibility of correcting history. As such, it is imperative to challenge that history; in this process, the following questions arise: What is considered history? Can historians be trusted? Where are women in male-authored accounts of the past? How faithful is history if the perspectives of women are excluded? What if women of color are left out of the narrative or found only in the periphery as patriarchal constructions and stereotypes? The assumptions under the definition of "history" risk perpetuating cycles of exclusion and discrimination. Vico argued that the creation of nations, their history, and their common knowledge, occurred in three cycles: god, heroes, and men. This eighteenth-century philosopher then proposed a new course, one recognizing that history can correct the past. That is, history can include a "course correction."

When someone speaks or writes of their own history, they experience it again. The act of remembering requires accessing long-term memory. Experiences that are recorded as memory, pass through the emotional and cognitive filters of each individual; hence, the same event can produce different remembrances. Memories themselves are not the problem, the emotional charge associated with a particular memory is what makes it so powerful. In other words, if an occurrence involves pain, anger, or another strong feeling, then the memory and those feelings

are stored together. When remembering, the mind re-experiences those same emotions. Therefore, the creation of a new course for history necessitates a visit to the past. Revisiting, reviewing, and rewriting histories, or more accurately, herstories, serves to correct the past, heal the present, and create healthier cycles of history. Furthermore, a revision includes a preventative measure against a damaging historical pattern with which future generations would have to grapple. Thus, this process of revision is necessary to create a more holistic history and can be considered an investment in the future. Although the gendered binary of Vico's language was typical of his time, and, of centuries to follow, his third cycle ("men"), speaks to the necessity of a fourth. I do not propose a mere reversal of the gendered authorial dichotomy, as doing so presents another similar cycle of exclusion and incompleteness. Rather, I suggest the need to include women of color and those who are analogously, literarily, and thereby, historically, excluded, in a fourth historical era.

An exploration of Latina authored self-writings in the United States, analogous to women-authored texts in their respective home country, offers a panoramic and intimate view into the world of Latinas. In this chapter, I explore Cristina García's *Dreaming in Cuban* (1992) and Daisy Rubiera's *Reyita, sencillamente: Testimonio de una negra cubana nonagenaria* (1996) as examples of what I call Cuban-American and Cuban collective self-writings, respectively. Specifically, I examine *Dreaming in Cuban* as a Cuban-American Latinx experience and *Reyita*, as an example of a Black Cuban woman's experience. García and Rubiera Castillo present a point of view that not only captures their experiences, but also presents perspectives of those who are similarly excluded. Authoring such stories presents what Vico would call a "ricorso" that begins to correct the previous exclusion of women by highlighting their perspectives and creating a more comprehensive representation of society. In this way, texts authored by Latina

and Cuban women, initiate a new literary way or “corso.” An evaluation of these texts results in a more complete, and, therefore, more accurate societal depiction than the dominant culture’s official historical narrative. In essence, their representation of an inclusive society offers an opportunity to create a different historical cycle.

Both authors belong to what has been called the Global South. Nour Dados and Raeywn Connell find that “European colonial expansion provided the historical context that underpins the way we use the terms now... Developing countries (mainly former colonies), began to articulate the idea of a Global South whose interests conflicted with those of the industrialized powers, both capitalist and communist—cutting across Cold War divisions” (12). I use the term to refer to countries and regions with an interconnected history of colonialism and its persistent legacy. This legacy includes economic and social disparities, socioracial discriminations, limited access to resources, and unequal living standards.

The field of subaltern studies has emphasized a saga of resistance from the Global South (13). One of the most distinguished postcolonial feminists, Gayatri Spivak, states there are two discourses that silence the voice of the woman who comes from the Global South: the discourse of colonial imperialist power and of traditional patriarchy. Chandra Talpade Mohanty further explores the colonial and postcolonial discourses that Spivak studies and subjects to feminist critique. Mohanty’s article “Under Western Eyes: Feminist Scholarship and Colonial Discourses” (1984) argues against the homogenization of Third-World women,^{xviii} and against their juxtaposition with Western notions of feminism/women. Mohanty argues that Third-World women must be demystified if feminist coalitions across race, ethnicity, and geographic location are going to be a true possibility. She acknowledges similarities, mostly known as the argument that women are “othered,” and that there is a difference between real tangible women and the

idea of women propagated by cultural and patriarchal expectations. Mohanty argues that Western feminism imposes certain cultural ideas, myths, and stereotypes onto Third-World women while simultaneously homogenizing them.

Building from both Spivak and Mohanty's postcolonial feminist stance, Uma Narayan's article "Contesting Cultures: 'Westernization,' Respect for Cultures, and Third-World Feminists" (1997) further promotes the argument that Third-World feminism is not merely a copy of Western feminism. Narayan introduces the article with a personal account of her positionality and identification as a "Third-World feminist," regardless of her multiple privileged positions (middle-class, scholar, living and writing in the West). Narayan argues that feminism is not foreign to Third-World women and speaks from her personal experience—having watched the women around her as they recounted their experiences of silence and oppression—to report the hypocrisy surrounding the West's "ownership" of feminism. Not surprisingly, she arrives at feminism through lived experiences of oppression. Narayan writes, "many Third-World feminists confront the attitude that our criticisms of our cultures are merely one more incarnation of a colonized consciousness, the views of 'privileged native women in whiteface,' seeking to attack their 'non-Western culture' on the basis of 'Western values'" (396). She acknowledges the hypocrisy of accepting certain Western influences (those that benefit economic and political interests), while rejecting others (sexuality, social, and political voices), and she calls it "westernization." Moreover, Narayan maintains that national and cultural identities are problematic living constructs, and she discusses the polarization of women based on race, nationality, class, and women's dichotomous relationship between the "material west" and the "spiritual east." In essence, this homogenizing discourse of "sisterhood" can be harmful because it hides the relationships between women in Third-World nations (treated as inferior to men) and

women in developed nations, as well as the racial and class differences between women inside the same nation. Not unlike García and Rubiera Castillo, Narayan finds herself in a position (as both an insider and an outsider) from which she can become alert to the needs of Third-World women while maintaining the integrity of these constructs (read: race, nationality, class, and women's negotiations between the spiritual east and the materialistic west).

Postcolonial feminist thought and the concept of the Global South are intrinsically entangled. Race and gender are key concerns in both. Still, the manifestations of anti-Blackness and patriarchal norms are not uniform. They vary according to region. Regarding race, for instance, in the US south, Blackness is measured by the “one-drop rule.” The “one-drop-rule” is a social and (formerly legal) classification that anyone with an African ancestor, and therefore “one drop” of Blackness, is considered Black. In the Caribbean, like in much of Latin America, the racial hierarchy is not a Black-white binary and categories like “india/o,” “jaba/o,” “mulatta/o,” “negra/o,” and “blanca/o” dominate the quotidian vernacular. Furthermore, language plays a strong role in the perpetuation of these socially constructed inequalities, for example, in some Spanish-speaking Caribbean areas, it is not taboo to call someone a *mulatta*, but it is considered offensive to do so in English in the United States. The acknowledgement of the different manifestations of racism is not an attempt to lessen the impacts of racism—or, worse, to place these manifestations in competition with each other. Ultimately, both the Southern United States and the Caribbean remain impacted by colonialism's nuanced patriarchal hegemony and anti-Blackness. As Narayan argues, feminism is not an imported concept to Third World women. As such, Rubiera Castillo and García both witness the oppression of women in the western hemisphere.

Borrowing from the postcolonial and feminist perspective of Narayan, I caution against

homogenizing tools that promote an overarching rubric of Latinx identity. Instead, I explore the nuanced and intimate perspective of Cuban and Cuban-American Latinx identities. Indeed, the experiences of Cubans in Cuba differ greatly from the experiences of Cubans in the United States, and these experiences are also altered depending on the historical moment. There are hierarchies of privilege in the dominant cultures of the United States, Cuba, as well as within subdominant communities. In comparison to other Latin American immigrants, Cubans have benefitted from a series of privileges unique to the political agenda and sociohistorical context of the Cold War. But privilege should not be reduced to nation, race, or colorism. Because race is a social construct, it is also important to remember that it manifests uniquely in every country. Therefore, I would warn against superimposing US racism onto Cuba. This would create an ethnocentric approach to the island's sociocultural history. To better understand the works of these twentieth century and early twenty-first century Cuban and Cuban-American authors, I will sketch a brief sociopolitical history of the Caribbean island.

Setting the Historical Stage

“This country doesn't care about Cubans, ... We're just pawns of politics.”
-*Harvest of Empire* 288

The history of Cuba is interwoven with that of the Americas. Notwithstanding, in the United States, Latin American countries are often discussed in regard to their relationship with the North American world power rather than by presentation of their unique history, culture, and political structures. I do not intend to perpetuate this ethnocentric practice; however, I examine the Cuban-American borderland, that is, the relationship between the small Caribbean nation and its larger northern neighbor as particularly relevant to my study of the two novels. In this section, I hope to establish a shared base of knowledge to set the parameters and provide a sociohistorical

context by which to analyze the literature.

The country's history of chattel slavery ensured racism existed in Cuba prior to the United States' occupation. Racism can be traced to slavery in the United States as in Cuba and, arguably, most of the Americas; Cuba's history with slavery, being one of the last two countries to abolish it, creates its own complicated history of racism. Examples include the infamous "Conspiración de la Escalera" (1844) that disguised an underlying effort to neutralize the white abolitionist Creoles, suppress the growing non-white class and their influence, and chastise the enslaved people who had participated in uprisings. Among those convicted of the so-called conspiracy are Gabriel de la Concepción Valdés, more commonly known as "Plácido" (1809-1844) and Juan Francisco Manzano (1797-1854).^{xix} Indeed, the name "Conspiración de la Escalera," is taken from the practice of tying and flogging enslaved people to a ladder to solicit a confession. Additionally, the US presence on the island brought a more nuanced and outward variety of racial discrimination.^{xx} In other words, the United States introduced its own anti-Black culture to Cuba. In the United States, the one-drop-rule establishes a stark Black and white divide, in contrast to Latin America's "rainbow racial spectrum." Still, US imperialism in Cuba concealed itself under economic and political control rather than outright political annexation.

After the success of the Saint Domingue revolt (1791)—led by self-liberated enslaved people—against France, there was a growing fear of a domino effect among other enslaved populations throughout the Americas. Consequently, the United States would continue to intervene in Cuba—as in much of the Americas—effectively removing non-white people from political life.^{xxi} Ironically, the United States used military force to quash all uprisings that demanded racial equality, accusing those who fought for equality of starting race wars.

As Lisa Brock argues, the United States used Cuba as a cautionary tale for African

Americans.

[T]he Afro-Cuban population en masse—three generations and countless thousands—had disproportionately supported Cuba’s wars of liberation. During the 1890s they had been the backbone of the Cuban Revolutionary Party; they had given their money, lost their property, and sacrificed their lives to the struggle for the republic. . . . A broad range of legislative and social techniques—educational and property qualifications, for example—were used to restrict Afro-Cuban participation in civil and state institutions. Just as important, Oriente was being ravaged by US capital. (23)

In 1908, Afro-Cuban veterans from the wars of independence expressed their disillusion by founding the Independent Party of Color (PIC). The party advocated publicly against racism and social divisions. However, Cuban elites quickly evoked the threat of a “race war,” and ultimately, “Cuban Congress used this threat as a justification to legally bar any party based on color, arguing that the PIC, not state policy, was racist” (23). In 1912, the PIC invoked article three of the Platt Amendment asking for protection. Eventually, and reluctantly, many Afro-Cubans responded in kind to the violent anti-Blackness in Cuba, a racism sustained by US military forces (Perez 151).

The US’s political and economic control, along with its imported anti-Blackness, created a revolving door of oppressive government leaders in Cuba. Considered Cuba’s first modern dictator, Gerardo Machado eased the fears of foreign investors (Gonzalez 180). By 1933, President Roosevelt favored the popular resistance and sent support. Led by Ramón Grau San Martín, Cuba’s new government set out drastically to repair the country. Under the short-lived progressive government, Cuba abolished the Platt Amendment, granted women voting rights, created a minimum wage, and set limits to a workday (181). The United States was perturbed by

Grau's progressive reform and failure to fall in line the way previous leaders had. US emissary to Cuba, Sumner Welles, persuaded the commander of the Cuban army, Fulgencio Batista, to stage a coup. And, so, the creation and rotation of Cuban dictators went from Machado's reign of terror (1925-1933) to Grau (100 days in 1933), to Batista (1934-1944), back to Grau (1944-1952), and Batista again (1952-1958). It is important to note, Grau's second term proved one of the island's most corrupt; following suit, Batista's second term was much more merciless (182). Batista's first term as head of state created stability for investors, social reforms to help the poor, (although these initiatives were taken from Grau's plans), and a democratic and progressive constitution. In 1952, Batista staged a second coup effectively and permanently removing Grau from office. During Batista's second reign, the Cuban economy was completely attached to the US market. Of even more importance, and in line with the US's economic interests in Cuba, the United States did not intervene to right the political situation. Rather, the dictatorship only collapsed because of Fidel Castro's Twenty-sixth of July movement, ushering in the Cuban Revolution.

The Cuban Revolution effected drastic changes, enraging the Cuban elite, endangering foreign investments, and spreading a new fear of economic loss for the United States in Cuba and throughout Latin America. Cuba's government had proclaimed itself a socialist political system. Nevertheless, for the last sixty years, Cuba has had a one-party system: communism. For almost fifty years, Fidel Castro ruled Cuba as the head of the Cuban Communist Party. In the early aftermath of the Revolution, the government ended the racial segregation laws and worked towards gender equality. While the Revolution brought change and progress to many marginalized people, the changes were not comprehensive and inclusive of all Cubans. The new government perpetuated longstanding homophobic sentiments and did not decriminalize

homosexuality until 1979. In 2010, Fidel Castro took responsibility and apologized for his treatment of the LGBT+ community.

The United States' initial support of the new leadership was ephemeral, lasting less than six months, initiating the four modern waves of immigration. Immediately after the Batista regime was overthrown, many of Cuba's upper and professional class fled the country. The immigration trends are indicative of "social classes, race, education, gender and family composition, and values" (Pedraza 1). In 1972, Nelson Amaro and Alejandro Portes first describe these waves in "Una Sociología del Exilio: Situación de los Cubanos en los Estados Unidos." By 1977, Silvia Pedraza further develops Amaro and Portes's findings in "Mass and Class and the Origins of the Cuban Revolution" (Selcke 43).

Each consecutive wave increased tensions amongst Cuban-Americans. In essence, the first wave of immigrants desires repatriation and a return to their wealth while the latter waves hope to escape a lack of opportunity and poverty. Today, the Cuban immigrant community is much more diverse—racially, economically, and socio-politically:

They oppose Castro's revolution, while at the same time not disputing that its early years brought much actual progress to Cuba's poor majority. They agree that many of the Batista backers who fled in the early days of the revolution to Miami were indeed criminals and exploiters of the nation. They do not seek to recover confiscated estates and fortunes they never possessed. They long for a Cuba free of violence, terror, and one-party rule, but they wish the unrelenting U.S. embargo against Cuba would end so they can freely visit the island and assist those relatives still there. (287)

Political events in Europe also greatly affected Cuba. In November of 1989, the East Berlin communist party announced changes to their relationship with the West. Citizens could now

cross the Berlin Wall. By 1991, the reunification of Germany had led to the collapse of the former Soviet Union. The disintegration of the Soviet Union had immediate and devastating effects in Cuba, ushering in a time known as the Special Period in Time of Peace (1991-2000). The end of communism in Europe resulted in the end of Cuban-Soviet relations and great isolation and economic adversity for Cuba.

By 1994, fear of the Cold War had diminished. Because fear and nationality often serve as unifying factors, especially in times of war when people come together against a common enemy. Once the Cold War threat subsided, people in the United States recycled an old fear: fear of immigrants. Further segregating the bipartisan political divide amongst the Latinx community, President Clinton ended the special provision for Cuban arrivals. Clinton declared “illegal” entry to the US by Cubans. Cubans were now subject to the same treatment as arrivals from other countries: detained and denied entrance. In later decades, efforts to rebuild and strengthen ties between the two countries has fluctuated. In 2002, President Jimmy Carter visited Cuba and in March of 2016 President Obama visited Cuba. The normalization of Cuba-US relations comes to a halt under the racist policies of the Donald Trump presidency,^{xxii} hailing a similar situation to the “Special Period” of the 1990s.

The Special Period piloted fundamental ideological changes that were previously prohibited. The government began to allow freedom of religion, including the clandestine practices of Afro-Cuban religions. The visit of Pope John Paul II and political and economic disarticulation precipitated new expressions of art—including race and homosexuality in literature. Research and literature on race in Cuba hardly existed before the Special Period because few had considered Black Cubans as fundamental components of Cuban literature and history. And, in the rare occasions when this existed, race depictions did not faithfully represent

Afro-Cubans. Since the Special Period, a time marked by scarcity and the need to survive, Cuba exists in a transitional state that seeks to adapt to a technologically advanced and rapidly evolving world while hindered by embargo. Despite intense difficulties, new narratives in literature and other art forms have emerged, allowing fresh themes into the conversation that is cultural production. During the Special Period Afro-Cubans and Afro-Cuban religions moved in from the margins. Therefore, Cuba's cultural production cannot stand in isolation of women—on and off the island; to do so, is as problematic as separating Cuba from its history. It is interesting to note, for example, that both García and Rubiera Castillo published their texts during the Special Period. Although the writers take unique approaches to their storytelling, both center the politics surrounding Cuba and Cuba-US relations.

Cristina García's *Dreaming in Cuban*

“No, I mean, what *are* you? You're not Mexican.”
Oh. “I'm Cuban.” “What's that?” ... Wow. How to explain communism, the Cold War, the domino theory, the Cuban missile crisis, and the Bay of Pigs to a child who was born after the Berlin Wall came down? (*Island of Bones*, Castro 210-1).

The lacunae of women-authored stories is made all the more visible precisely because of the efforts to exclude them. Canonizing literature can be read as synonymous with a social process that has historically silenced women. Ironically, this void highlights an absence in the literary canon. Made more visible by their absence, Latinx authored texts often reveal a nostalgia that glamorizes their parents' home country. However, the sense of not-belonging can lead to a homogenization of a diverse Latinx community. Painting a racially, ethnically, and culturally diverse people with a brown Latinx brush insinuates an essentialist, culturally nationalistic, and divisive discourse. For example, the nostalgia that permits a glamorization of Cuba by Cuban-

Americans, often resides at the extremes of a perspective that either completely omits, or, solely focuses on Cuba's systemic faults. The polarizing reactions, result in a subconscious perpetuation of the patriarchal and heteronormative way ("corso") of history that preserves the injustices, that reformed accounts of history set out to dismantle.

The Latin American diaspora in the United States inhabits a hybrid and borderland existence. Existing in this gray area entails living at the intersection of privilege and disadvantage. The disadvantages Latinx people experience in the United States should be considered a byproduct of social othering. The shared relegation to the margins experienced by Latinx people in the United States, and by their parents in Cuba, creates a point of contact. The commonality allows Latinx writers, like Cristina García, to see people (in essence, people of color, queer people, and women) that their parents did not include in their nation-building constructs. In other words, the otherness García experiences in the United States, allows her to identify with the people that have remained in her parent's country of origin. In a way, this shared trauma permits her to see other similarly marginalized people.

García was born in Havana, Cuba to a Cuban mother and a Guatemalan father. In 1961, at just two years old, the García family was among the first (modern) wave of emigres to the US. Once in the US, the family settled in New York City, and García became the oldest of three children. She went on to graduate from Barnard College in 1979 and pursued graduate studies at Johns Hopkins University. Her career in journalism includes writing and researching for *The New York Times*, *Boston Globe*, *Knoxville Journal*, and *Time* magazine. In 1984, García returned to Cuba for the first time since leaving as a toddler. She credits this trip as one of her greatest inspirations. In 1990, García departed from journalism to pursue a career as a full-time writer. Two years later, she published her first novel, *Dreaming in Cuban*, receiving extensive praise

and a National Book Award nomination. Since then, García has won the Janet Heidiger Kafka Prize, a Whiting Writer's Award, a Guggenheim Fellowship, and a Hodder Fellowship at Princeton. She has published several novels, essays, and poetry; the Cuban-American author has also edited several books and chapters about Cuban and Latin American culture and literature. Currently, García lives in California, with her daughter, Pilar.

Often not considered Cuban because she was raised in the US, but not “American” because she was born in Cuba, García exemplifies what Gloria Anzaldúa calls the borderland. She inhabits a hybridity that limits her in both cultures, but at the same time, this grants her access to both cultures: something like, but the opposite of what Puerto Rican poet Tato Laviera calls “nideaquinidealla.” Instead, García is both “deaquiyealla.” As a Latina, albeit a white woman, García shares a point of contact with other women, and the efforts of inclusivity and intersectionality are stronger than those of her male compatriots. Still, because race and gender cannot exist separately from one another, García's depiction of the Cuban experience solidifies her privilege as an early wave émigré and a socio-economically advantaged person. At the same time, what privileges her in one community, puts her at a disadvantage in the other. Borrowing from the postcolonial and feminist Global South perspective, which cautions against homogenization, but allows for a nuanced and intimate outlook, *Dreaming in Cuban* reveals the complex and imperfect borderland community.

Dreaming in Cuban is the story of three generations of the Cuban and Cuban-American del Pino women. Starting in the 1930s, the novel extends over the next fifty years through the lives of the matriarch of the family, Celia del Pino, her daughters, Lourdes and Felicia, and her granddaughter, Pilar. As such, the novel reveals the diversity of what it means to be Cuban in the twentieth century. Ultimately, *Dreaming in Cuban* is the story of Cuban and Cuban-American

displacement and identity as experienced by the protagonists. Celia's story functions as the scaffolding of the novel. Since 1935 Celia has written monthly letters to her first love, Gustavo, a Spanish man who returns to Spain in 1935 prior to the Spanish Civil War. Celia's children and grandchildren are introduced in 1972—the present time in the novel. Over the course of the next eight years, the protagonists' individual stories intersect to fill in the blanks of each other's herstories.^{xxiii}

In 1972, Celia is a proud supporter of Fidel Castro. Although she had three children, two daughters and a son, Celia does not feel particularly close to any of them. Instead, the matriarch longs for Pilar, her first-born grandchild. Celia and Pilar share a mystical connection. The magical realism and mysticism are so deeply entangled in the character's daily life, the novel suggests spirituality and religion as central to Cubans and Cuban-Americans despite political affiliations and geographic locations. Celia and Pilar communicate telepathically, Lourdes' father visits her in New York after he has died, Felicia finds refuge in Santería,^{xxiv} and they all have a connection that gives each the ability to feel when the other is in danger. Similarly, each one is aware of the other's wellbeing.

The reader learns that at four years old, Celia was placed on a train and sent to live with her aunt Alicia in Havana. As an adult, Celia marries Jorge del Pino, but their marriage is tainted by Celia's yearning for her first love. In a postmortem visit to Lourdes, Jorge admits as much: "After we were married, I left her with my mother and my sister. I knew what it would do to her. A part of me wanted to punish her. For the Spaniard. I tried to kill her, Lourdes. I wanted to kill her. I left on a long trip after you were born. I wanted to break her, may God forgive me" (195). Celia was committed to a psychiatric hospital and therefore, had a detached relationship with her first daughter, Lourdes. Celia then grew to love her second husband and the father of her

children, but her third love was not a romantic relationship with a man. Instead, Celia fell in love with, and found purpose in, her devotion to the Cuban Revolution.

Lourdes, who has never had a close relationship with her mother, despises everything that has to do with Cuba and the Revolution. Instead, Lourdes bonds with her father, who moves to the United States when he falls ill. In Cuba, Lourdes is raped by a soldier of the revolution. The first born del Pino is then displaced to Miami but settles in Brooklyn. Today, Miami is known as a predominately Cuban and Cuban-American social enclave, but this was not always the case. Lourdes, her daughter, and her husband's arrival to Miami informs the reader of a discriminatory practice many first wave emigres confronted. Although not a race-based prejudice, the newly arrived were othered for their status as foreigners—a discrimination that was xenophobic in nature. As such, Lourdes and her husband settled further north.

Although Lourdes's husband never truly adjusts to their life in the United States, Lourdes flourishes. Similarly, while the sea and the warmth sooth Celia,

Lourdes considers herself lucky. Immigration has redefined her, and she is grateful.

Unlike her husband, she welcomes her adopted language, its possibilities for reinvention.

Lourdes relishes winter most of all—the cold scraping sounds on sidewalks and windshields, the ritual of scarves and gloves, hats and zip-in coat linings. Its layers protect her. She wants no part of Cuba, no part of its wretched carnival floats creaking with lies, no part of Cuba at all, which Lourdes claims never possessed her. (73)

Lourdes has a larger-than-life personality. She is described as overweight and hypersexual. The owner of several “Yankee Doodle” bakeries, she embraces US patriotism, denounces Fidel Castro, and struggles to have a relationship with her rebellious daughter, Pilar. When Lourdes's father moves from Cuba to New York for medical treatment, Lourdes turns to food and sex in to

deal with the emotional distress that occurs because of her father's presence, which triggers memories of her sexual assault. An unhealthy coping mechanism, Lourdes gains 118 pounds while her husband is physically exhausted by her and begs for a few nights of rest, which she denies him. "Lourdes was reaching through Rufino for something he could not give her, she wasn't sure what" (21). Indeed, the eldest del Pino yearns to fill a void she does not allow herself to face. Much like a metaphorical microcosm of Cuba, and as an individual reflection of how history recycles itself, Lourdes has a turbulent relationship with her daughter who rebels against her by embracing her grandmother and everything that is Cuba.

Pilar embodies the Cuban and Cuban-American identity process. As such, Pilar's story is one of the few that is told in the first-person. The young woman's account is the most autobiographical reference for Garcia. The teenager, much like Lourdes, does not have a relationship with her own mother. Instead, she feels closer to her father—an immediate "corso" repetition, as Lourdes similarly despises her mother and is close to her father. Similarly, Pilar notices her father only looks alive "when he talks about the past, about Cuba" (138). After seeing her father with a lover, Pilar tries to run away to Cuba, but only makes it to Miami. In other demonstrations of rebellion, Pilar experiments with art, punk rock, boyfriends, and rejects her parents' "dinosaur politics" (177). Like Lourdes, Pilar rebels against everything that represents her mother, and yearns for the past—albeit an inherited past. Feeling detached from her mother, Pilar rationalizes a nostalgia for her grandmother and everything that Cuba is to her, "Every day Cuba fades a little more inside me, my grandmother fades a little more inside me. And there's only my imagination where our history should be" (138). In a way, and until Pilar visits Cuba with her mother, this can be read as a meta commentary for García and other Cuban-Americans and Latinx peoples who have inherited stories and nostalgia about their parents' home country.

Felicia is Celia's youngest daughter who subsists in Cuba in an emotionally and mentally unstable state. Like her mother, Felicia has her own struggles with mental health. She is a threat to herself and others, suffering from violent outbursts and bouts of dementia. Felicia has three children: twin daughters (Luz and Milagro) and a young son (Ivanito) that she is unable to care for and even tries to kill. She is indifferent towards the revolution because of her inability to engage with it. Felicia has had a tumultuous relationship with men, married three times, but never happily. Her abusive first husband, Hugo Villaverde infects her with syphilis. Felicia's second marriage is short and tragic. Warned by a *santero* that she cannot keep what she wishes for, she is then given instruction for how to prevent the will of the gods (147). However, Felicia does not comply, despite having had the intention of following his advice; instead, Felicia falls in love on her way home. As fate would have it—as divined for her—Felicia cannot heed the *santero*'s advice or the warnings that would have come from family and friends for marrying too quickly and Ernesto dies tragically in a grease fire at a seaside hotel. After the fire that kills her husband, Felicia blacks out for several months. In that time, Felicia marries Otto Cruz, whom she has no recollection of. While at the asylum, Celia makes a friend, Felicia Gutiérrez, who was committed for murdering her husband. Felicia becomes like the Felicia she was named after and likewise kills her third husband—a self-fulfilling prophesy of her namesake. As a refuge from her declining mental and physical health, Felicia turns to Santería becoming a *santera* herself. However, rather than healing, Felicia is dying. Celia arrives, curses the ceremony, destroys the orisha's vases, and holds her daughter while she dies.

Celia's youngest and her only son, Javier del Pino is born with a caul on his head, as are all the del Pino men, signifying good luck. Javier silently defies his father by quietly leaving for Czechoslovakia in 1966 “without saying good-bye to anyone” (118). After his father's death,

Javier writes a long letter informing his mother that he “became a professor of biochemistry at the University of Prague, lecturing in Russian, German, and Czech” and telling Celia he speaks to his daughter in Spanish so that they can communicate. Birthing her son makes Celia remember her own mother and relive her first abandonment and exile (100). Javier serves to help Celia heal after her own childhood abandonment.

Jorge del Pino appears to his daughter Lourdes to inform her that he can no longer visit her. Incapable of doing so himself, Jorge asks his eldest daughter to return to Cuba and apologize to Celia on his behalf. At the same time, Pilar is advised to complete religious and spiritual rituals; on her way home, Pilar is sexually assaulted. On the ninth day,^{xxv} and upon completion of the cleansing baths, Pilar realizes she must go to Cuba. Through supernatural messages, the mother and daughter decide to return to Cuba. Lourdes and Pilar arrive the day after Felicia’s funeral to find Celia wearing Felicia’s swimsuit. During the trip, Lourdes revisits the Puente estate where she was raped, and angrily contemplates the (in)significance of these events. Celia bonds with her granddaughter, and as Pilar listens, she describes feeling her “grandmother’s life passing to me through her hands” (222). Celia gifts Pilar her unsent letters to Gustavo—her history, her family’s history, the history of Cuba and Cuban-Americans. Ivanito also confides in Pilar; Pilar chooses to help her younger cousin leave, thus betraying her grandmother, and Lourdes facilitates his escape through the Peruvian embassy. In a circular pattern, the novel ends like it begins: Celia is alone in Cuba and wanders into the sea. It is not clear if Celia drowns herself or returns to the shore.

In *Dreaming in Cuban*, Latinx women in the United States and women in Cuba, are portrayed as members of the dominant culture. García moves the doubly marginalized social constructs—women and Latinx—from the sidelines to the center stage, countering their status as

members of subcultures. This allows for presentations of a matriarchal Cuban and Cuban-American Latinx community—one that paradoxically embraces and defies essentialist *Latinidad*.^{xxvi} Points of contact among the Cuban and Cuban-American communities are complicated by their diversity, individual subject positions, and generational differences.

In an interview about her novel, García explains that there are autobiographical references in the protagonist, Pilar: “I think of Pilar as kind of an alter ego for me” (251). García’s statement justifies treating the novel as a form of Latinx self-writing, particularly as it concerns the themes of exile, biculturalism, religion and spirituality, racism, gender, and memory.

García says,

Memory is more a point of departure than a repository of facts. It’s a product of both necessity and imagination, of my characters’ needs to reinvent themselves and invest themselves in... They need their memories in this sense to survive. (251)

The novel uncovers an identity crisis suffered by a people at the borderland: the population that exists in between the Cuban exile community in the United States and the Cuban community on the island. This population at the borderlands does not fully fit in either space or in the void left by the absence of both communities. Thus, imagination and memory are crucial to their survival and their identities.

The novel is arranged around the Cuban Revolution as experienced by Cubans in Cuba and Cubans in the United States. Presenting the sociopolitical history from the perspective of four women of the same family, strategically presents the polarizing effects of the revolution. To this, García has stated:

I wanted to highlight not only generational differences between my characters but also

the differences that were compounded by contrasting perspectives on the Cuban revolution. The generation gap was not only familial, but political, and it made ordinary rites of rebellion more complex and fraught with tension. (253)

In this way, the del Pino women serve as a microcosm of Cuban and Cuban-American families. Elinor Burkin describes the novel as “a sampler of every Cuban character boiled down into a single divided family” (ChicagoTribune.com). As such, the autobiographical references are layered and complex. Much like Gabriel García Márquez’s infamous intergenerational Buendía family is a metaphor for Colombia and for the history of Latin America, so are the del Pino women metaphorical reflections of Cuba, Cuban-American, and their nuanced Latinx borderland.

García focuses primarily on women’s experiences and their perspectives. Using a mix of narration styles, the novel highlights women as keepers of culture and history. In the chapters about Celia’s grandchildren, the narration filters through in the first person. However, the novel is mostly narrated in the third person, vacillating between an omniscient and a limited third-person narrator. Amanda Easton finds, “A narrative strategy of multiple voices not only allows for the revelation of hybridity that García insists is a familiar positioning, but it also uncovers a space of resistance through telling” (1). The act of telling explores narrative tools for discussing borderlands.

The novel is not told in a linear manner, and it takes place in both Cuba and the United States. Much of the historical retelling occurs in the epistolary chapters where Celia writes in the first person to her past lover, Gustavo. In an interview with García, Professor Scott Shibuya Brown asks about Celia’s letters, to which García affirms, “I wanted her to have her own voice. I wanted her to speak directly to the readers through the guise of this haunted love affair. The

letters provide a window into her inner life and yearnings” (246). Maria Musetta finds the epistolary chapters document and preserve the present and the past. Celia’s monthly unmailed letters to her Spanish lover, who returned to Spain in 1935, interrupt the text and are told in a chronological order. That is, while the rest of the text does not follow a linear chronology, if the letters were read in isolation, they trace a time-sequenced trajectory.

The epistolary chapters reflect the history of Cuba from 1935-1959 as experienced and told by a woman: Celia del Pino. The chapters trace the history of the island through Celia’s real-life account and provide the reader with examples of quotidian life leading up to and amidst the turmoil. “Celia’s Letters” can be interpreted as Celia’s embodiment of the divisive and complex nature of the sociopolitical history of the island. The Cuban and Cuban-American borderland are not clearly defined; much like Cuban identity, it is too diverse to homogenize and restrict. Celia’s Letters demonstrate that a woman’s version of history allows multiple and contradictory views to exist and define what it means to be Cuban and Cuban-American. García provides an avenue to correct the omission of women’s voices by assigning Celia the role of historian. This course correction begins to fill in the gaps left by male historians who have neglected women and women’s voices. There are five epistolary chapters covering the years from 1935 to 1959. The chapters are titled “Celia’s Letters” followed by the years they cover 1935-1940, 1942-1949, 1950-1955, 1956-1958, and 1959. Celia writes one letter a month until January of 1959, when the Revolution triumphs.

In “Celia’s Letters 1935-1940” the del Pino family matriarch writes to Gustavo from inside the asylum providing an intimate insight into her broken mind. During these years, Celia realizes she loves her husband, and although not passionately, she feels love nonetheless. At first glance, these letters seem random and superficial. However, upon a closer inspection they set the

stage for the course that she and her children are destined to repeat if it is not corrected. Celia provides insight into mental health, abandonment, diversity in love, and she reveals that women's bodies serve as repositories of trauma. Celia uses marriage to escape her sadness and loneliness and deal with depression. In doing so, she offers an intimate glance into post-partum trauma. Returning to the metaphor where Celia embodies Cuba, it is no coincidence she has a love affair with a Spaniard who leaves her in disarray—a difficulty she carries with her throughout her whole life. In the same way that Celia represents Cuba, Gustavo would then symbolize Spain and the island's record of colonialism.

In "Celia's Letters 1942-1949," Celia opens by informing Gustavo that the results of a civil war have led to a dictatorship in both of their countries. Likening Cuba to Spain in 1935 is a strong statement as Spain was preparing for a civil war that would result in the dictatorship of General Francisco Franco. Furthermore, Celia implies there is a comparable call to action in both nations. The comment should be read as an assertion of Celia's politics, laying the groundwork for her devotion to the revolution later in life. Her approval, in contrast to her husband's, indicates the divisive nature of the political positions of the Revolution. Additionally, Celia's endorsement of the revolution, reveals a woman's support for change and a critique of the Batista regime.

Aside from the sociopolitical climate, Celia further informs the reader of impactful events in Cuba. Asking her "amor" if he had heard "about the tidal wave that hit Cuba," Celia then explains the effects of the catastrophic 1944 Cuba-Florida hurricane that killed over three hundred people (97). Blurring the lines between the first and second person, Celia begins to question readers and thus to implicate them. The reader must delve deeper to understand the references Celia makes to the civil unrest and to the overall wellbeing of the island. Now that the

authorial voice has revealed information, it is the readers' responsibility to further investigate the material presented. Much in the way silence equates complicity, so too do inaction and ignorance of politically charged decisions. What readers do, or choose not to do, makes them complicit by either acting or failing to act.

In Celia's May 1946 letter, she directly addresses the notion of borders and nationality. Speaking to what she is grateful for about life on the island, she states: "the tides rearrange the borders. At least I have the illusion of change, of possibility. To be locked within boundaries plotted by priests and politicians would be the only thing more intolerable.... To survive is an act of hope" (99). From the perspective of the Cuban and Cuban-American borderland, to live free means an eradication of colonial era boundaries, nations, and nationalities. The implication is that birthright citizenship is as much a construct as nations and borders. Celia makes a strong proclamation: borders and nationalities are fragile. Indeed, the man-made ideas of nation and nationality are incomprehensible and claustrophobic as they are abstract political constructs. The fluidity and the possibility of eradicating these borders provides "the illusion of change." Linking survival to the unravelling of the restrictive lines in the sand results in a source of hope. Furthermore, Celia is indicating that the Cuban and Cuban-American border(lands) necessitate movement and fluidity. Stagnation prohibits the borders from being rearranged by the tides and provides the inhabitants with agency over their existence. As such, survival is an act of hope.

Coincidentally, 1946 is the year Celia gives birth to her son, Javier, whom she names after her own father. For Celia to survive, she has to face her own past; Javier's birth facilitates a return to her own personal history. The reader learns Celia's father was murdered when she was thirteen and that catalytic events allow her to grieve and process. The narrative voice suggests that triggering events reveal a need for healing through a return to the past. For example, Celia

states she does not remember her mother; instead, what she remembers, is her first abandonment. About her mother's abandonment by her mother. Of this, Celia declares, "on the way to Havana, I forgot her. Only the birth of my son makes me remember" (100). Thus, Celia's children are destined to repeat their mother's history.

Celia's letters not only provide the historical context for the text, but also mirror the sociopolitical life of the island. Metaphorically embodying the turmoil of the rotating dictators (Grau, Batista, Grau, Batista), in 1946 Celia describes her first bout of bed-ridden depression stemming from Gustavo's abandonment as well as her new relationship with Jorge. Reading Molière plays makes Celia wonder what the difference is between suffering and imagination, which García associates with memory. The implication is that memory is painful, and with the assistance of imagination, it can contain its own "course correction" or remedy. This is noteworthy because in the future, Felicia uses the plays to help her friend recover from a severe depression, thus suggesting coping mechanisms and tools for healing can be inherited or tied to art. The rotation in leadership (Grau, Batista, Grau, Batista) not only sets the foundation for her own personal political beliefs, but it also parallels her relationships with Gustavo and Jorge. In this way, Celia's relationships with Gustavo and her husband, prepare her to take charge of her own life: Celia's personal revolution. Spanish historians and Cuban historians (both of which have traditionally been men), remain oppressive agents for the way in which they do not consider women. Their omission and silencing serve an oppressive function.

In the third epistolary chapter that covers from 1950-1955, Celia is no longer subtle about her politics. She not only calls Batista "a bastard" who has stolen the country, but she also worries her son will become a man like him. Indeed, Batista's second term was fraught with corruption and he proved himself a ruthless dictator. In a way, these letters demonstrate the

exigency for change. Since racism and sexism are interconnected, it is not surprising that in these letters, Celia expresses her skepticism towards Santería and spouts anti-Black sentiments reflective of the widespread and taboo Cuban and Cuban-American sentiment at the time. In Celia's experience with the Afro-Cuban religion, she listens to a Santería priest predict Batista's destiny, declare him a son of Changó, and declare there may be no justice for him, but perhaps there is hope for the people at large. These details are informative precisely for what they do not explicitly state or explain—in other words, Celia implies that the clandestine spiritual and religious practices are common knowledge. This could be indicative of popular cultural information; but, perhaps, the subtler implication is larger than an insight into Cuban life and is indicative of Celia commencing her "ricorso."

Initially, the penultimate epistolary chapter, "Celia's Letters: 1956-1958," seems to diverge from the directness of the previous inter-chapters. However, in keeping with the metaphor that Celia embodies Cuban history, the chapter provides a personal insight into Celia's reasoning for her distaste of the Batista regime. Celia states her approval of Rufino, Lourdes's husband, precisely for his disregard of elite social norms. In essence, Celia likes Rufino because despite his high economic and social class, he is hard working and gentlemanly. In a metaliterary manner, Celia interrupts her own storytelling to confront Gustavo for his abandonment—disappearing into the plaza amidst a crowd of protestors and never returning or saying goodbye. While she writes these letters, during this reflection, and in real time, Castro lands in Cuba from Mexico and takes the Sierra Maestra mountains. Celia wonders if Gustavo's departure was better than watching him grow indifferent to her and the reader wonders if she is speaking of the Revolution and the symbolism of Gustavo.

At a dinner with Rufino's parents, Celia and Jorge listen to Don Guillermo's pro-US

intervention sentiments and learn he is friends with Batista, socially and economically outranking him. Finally, Celia speaks her mind:

When I reminded him of the Platt Amendment, of the way the Americans have interfered in our affairs from the very beginning, he waved his fat, jeweled hand dismissively and turned to Jorge, continuing his pontifications. Everyone knows that the Mafia runs Don Guillermo's casinos and that he lunches with Batista on Thursdays at the Havana Yacht Club. People say that Batista had to pay a million dollars to become a member because his skin is not light enough. (207)

Celia is not graced with a rebuttal or even acknowledged, rather she is silenced as Don Guillermo speaks directly and exclusively to Jorge now. Not unlike the way official historians have silenced women and relegated them to the margins, so does Don Guillermo. This passage provides a direct example of the sexism and racism that plagued the island. The elite class quite literally ignores, silences, and drowns out women's voices. Additionally, Celia's word choice is not lost on the reader as the word "pontifications" is often reserved to describe Catholic clergy, specifically the Pope. Therefore, in this sentence, Celia subtly blames Spanish colonialism and directly implicates US intervention for Cuba's suffering. When she speaks to the rumors of Batista's membership into the Havana Yacht Club, Celia provides another instance of the way in which racism manifested in Cuba and continues to exist in the borderlands as colorism.

Celia further sheds light on the racial discrimination in Cuba; aside from an anti-Black sentiment, there is the intentional silencing and erasure of indigenous people—Rufino's mother literally hides her native mother and drowns out her screams of protest. Therefore, despite the rainbow spectrum of racial categories in Cuba, and, in comparison to the Black and white binary in the United States, both nations promote a Eurocentric (read: white) standard of beauty and

power.

By the December 1956 letter, Celia declares everyone wants Batista out of office and speaks of the rebels romanticizing the leader. Celia also believes Cuba will be better once there is no US presence on the island. Lourdes's wedding was a prominent socialite event that she considered a disgrace and a circus. Of her daughter's new mother-in-law, Celia declares: "she'll be among the first to hang, no doubt." Indeed, the revolution brought change that enraged the elite class; however, Celia's distaste is not unprecedented as women, specifically rich white women, have a history of upholding and promoting patriarchal and elitist values.

The novel closes with the last of Celia's letters explaining to Gustavo that "The revolution is eleven days old. My granddaughter, Pilar Puente del Pino, was born today. It is also my birthday. I am fifty years old. I will no longer write to you, *mi amor*. **She will remember everything**" (emphasis added, 245). Celia declares she will stop writing her unsent letters because her granddaughter represents hope for a more inclusive future. Nonetheless, it is inconceivable to assume a new-born baby could carry on her grandmother's tradition. As such, there are several implications as to why Celia would stop recording history from 1959–1972. It could be that Celia has decided to share the responsibility and platform with her grandchildren and Herminia as evidenced by their speaking in the first person. Celia's "ricorso" allows for the inclusion of other "othered" voices, such as that of a Cuban-American young woman living in New York and the inclusion of Afro-Cubans. What is certain is that ending the letters, and by extension ceasing to speak directly to the reader when the Revolution succeeds, implies it is a dangerous act to speak of the Revolution and its after-effects. Perhaps Celia has left it up to the reader to determine for themselves what has happened during that time. It is unclear if Celia is now confident that history and literature will accurately reflect and represent her, if she is afraid

to speak, or if she is simply too tired to continue. Nevertheless, Celia confirms history is her legacy and wills it to her granddaughter who is growing up in the United States—despite having a living grandson in Cuba—thus extending the Cuban borderland to include Afro-Cuban women and Cuban-American women. In this way, Celia’s letters take on the strategic function of inclusivity as they create a space for readers to form an opinion based on various subject position.

Presenting her day-to-day experiences takes on a pedagogical function as it relays the progression of tensions and the normalization of oppressive situations. In essence, Celia’s letters evince the need for change, the imbalance of human rights for those outside of the heteronormative and *machista* norms. In Celia’s case, it is women who remain outside. Unlike a historian’s documentation that excludes these perspectives, Celia’s retelling shows the reader how the Revolution comes about and how personally invested women were. The personalization of such narratives proves more effective since Celia humanizes events that have been deprived of human qualities (that have been reduced to dates and names). By providing her personal context, Celia makes intangible facts personal and relatable. Celia’s letters contextualize the Revolution and create a space for understanding Cuban and Cuban-American polarizing and intense sentiments regarding Cuba and the Revolution.

Much in the way Celia’s letters present the first-person perspective of a Cuban woman, in Herminia’s first person chapter, the reader finds the imbalance of human rights for those outside of the heteronormative and *machista* standards which includes the added layer of Black people’s marginalization. In the chapter titled “God’s Will,” subtitled “Herminia Delgado (1980),” the narrative voice informs on the Afro-Cuban presence in Cuba. Felicia’s best friend, Herminia Delgado, is a Black woman and a practitioner of Santería, one of the most well-known of the

Afro-Cuban religions. Herminia and Felicia became friends when they were little girls. Herminia teaches Felicia about the Yoruba pantheon deities, explaining about the Orishas, their gifts, what Catholic saint they are syncretized with, and their meaning. Felicia's chapters are not told from a first-person perspective, rather, the narrative voice speaks in the third person. Had Felicia's chapters been told directly from her point of view, they would have proven unreliable due to her severe and untreated mental health issues. In this way, García uses Herminia to speak to Felicia's character. Returning to Narayan, it could be argued Herminia defies the polarization of women based on race and class. Rather, Felicia's attraction to her best friend is rooted in the manifestation of the material West syncretized with the spiritual East.

Pedagogical moments in Herminia's testimony occur in the retelling of her and her family's experiences. In doing so, Herminia speaks directly to the anti-Black sentiment and the tradition of Afro-Cuban erasure.

For many years in Cuba, nobody spoke of the problem between blacks and whites. It was considered too disagreeable to discuss. But my father spoke to me clearly so that I would understand what happened to his father and his uncles during the Little War of 1912, so that I would know how our men were hunted down day and night like animals, and finally hung by their genitals from the lampposts in Guáimaro. (184-5)

The war that killed my grandfather and great-uncles and thousands of other blacks is only a footnote in our history books. Why, then, should I trust anything I read? I trust only what I see, what I know with my heart, nothing more. (185)

Herminia's statement presents evidence of her family's knowledge that the official history does not include the history of Afro-Cubans. Additionally, her commentary on oral history demonstrates an existence of an alternative epistemology that includes her and her family.

Indeed, the frustration of an incomplete history is palpable as the contributions from Afro-Cubans have been persistently relegated to the margins of society and to the “footnotes in our history books” (185).^{xxvii} Unlike the official records, Herminia’s family ensures an accurate depiction of the atrocities committed against Afro-Cubans, the dangers of speaking out, and how the silencing was intentional. Indeed, an assassination of character and a dangerous legacy of anti-Blackness sentiment. In other words, to safeguard history was a life-threatening risk. Therefore, these stories were kept hidden—not unlike religious practices—because of the hazard they posed.

When speaking of religion, Herminia explains her father is a priest in Santería. As such, people “told evil lies about [her] father.” The simple commentary reveals a deeper practice of demonizing Black spirituality and explains the secrecy required for the religion’s survival. The comment sheds light on the sociohistorical tradition of the Black race representing evil in contrast to white upholding purity. As a child, when Herminia is called a “bruja,” as an insult, and is made fun of for being Black—teased about her hair and her skin—Felicia not only defends her friend, but she also asks her for salvation. Herminia’s relationship with Felicia is more than a simple inversion of stereotypes, rather, it is the revolutionary act of love and equality. Felicia sees Herminia as a supernatural person, exalting her friend in her request for salvation. Indeed, at just six years old, Herminia tells Felicia of the orisha Yemayá—the great mother who lives in the sea—to which Felicia responds by asking for salvation. Though others found the youngsters strange, these two little girls saw beyond the mundane racial constructs that would have kept them divided. The way García uses Herminia is not unlike the stereotypical mammy and Black savior stereotype. This inversion of stereotypes is not without complications nor is it exactly a perpetuation of that which should be dismantled. In other words, these cycles need to be broken,

not inverted, to leave room for a “corso” that destroys these limited representations of women and women of color.

Using the voice of a Black woman to say things have gotten better is a strategic, albeit problematic, critique of the revolution. Herminia speaks to the need for change for a large part of the Cuban population. As she explains, at least now Herminia is getting paid to manage and oversee factory workers rather than to take care of white women’s children to provide for her own. In essence, the revolution made significant progress towards gender and racial equality, but it is not perfect, and women, especially Black women, could use more equality. In other words, although there have been strides towards racial equality, in reality, those initiatives lag for Black women. Herminia further provides insight into how other cultures consider mental health issues: “I guess you could say she adapted to her grief with imagination. Felicia stayed on the fringe of life because it was free of everyday malice. It was more dignified there” (184). Perhaps the only person to truly see and know Felicia, Herminia considers her friend to have a special gift. Indeed, García has tied imagination with memory and survival; and, in doing so, the author makes a strong declaration: mental health issues are not necessarily seen as such in other cultures. What is more, mental health illnesses are often seen as supernatural gifts.

As a diasporic subject, and with Pilar as her alter ego, García is part of the process of rewriting history. García’s desire to belong—in the United States and in Cuba—reveals, in her writing, a process of Cubanization. García’s Cubanization is the practice of making something Cuban, both perpetuating and dismantling stereotypes, and writing to exist in a Cuba that is not a foreign land. Paradoxically, García’s inclusion of Black Cubans is done in a manner that is dismissive and continues to place Black Cubans at the periphery of society. Which begs the question, how much of Cuba would be recognizably Cuban, without Black people? And why

does the author not give Black Cubans a more central role? García's approach to Cuban identity is not unlike José Martí's utopian Latin Americanism: a desire to have a racially inclusive paradise that dismisses the differences and diversity of non-white people's experiences. In this way, García's novel suffers from racial achromatopsia. Her color blindness limits her ability to create a truly matriarchal society—in Cuba and in the US—since it upholds the erasure of Black women and propagates the stereotypes of Black women's servitude.

Daisy Rubiera Castillo's *Reyita the Life of a Black Cuban Woman in the Twentieth Century*

So I sacrificed everything, I sacrificed myself as a woman to be just a mother, I had to break with tradition and being to struggle alone . . . I started building a life independent of your dad in order to be able – off my own back – to give all of you what I yearned for: an education, personal development, minding the atmosphere in which you'd grow up, keep you away from the difficult aspects of life. . . . I couldn't be happy at the cost of your happiness, and raising and educating you was to help you become free men and women. (85)

Cristina Garcia's statement is bold. With it, she posits women as the keepers of history and culture. In this way, the Cuban-American author emphasizes the necessity of an inclusive and diverse story-teller. A literature that reflects society requires multiple perspectives including marginalized voices. In Cuba, like in much of the western hemisphere, the voice of women should not be exclusive to the most privileged. The definition of women cannot be fully represented by those who belong to the upper echelon (either in dominant culture or in the subdominant community). As such, Rubiera Castillo's testimonial *Reyita, sencillamente: Testimonio de una negra cubana nonagenaria* provides a more comprehensive, inclusive, and accurate depiction of life in Cuba and thereby of literature reflecting society.

Born in Santiago de Cuba in 1939, Rubiera Castillo is an Afro-Cuban author, editor, historian, and instructor. She is most well-known for centering^{xxviii} Black women's testimonies and works. She has published articles, essays, anthologies, and a testimonial novel as early as 1978. Among other themes, she focuses on women's roles in Santería, or Regla de Ocha-Ifá,^{xxix} including "La mujer en la Regla de Ocha: una mirada de género" (1999) and "La Iyanoifá: un problema de género en la Regla de Ocha-Ifá" (2007). In 2011, she co-authored an anthology *Afrocubanas: Historia, pensamiento y practicas culturales* with Inés Maria Martiatu. Arguably her best-known text, *Reyita*, was a finalist in Casa de las Américas' 1996 testimonial genre.

Rubiera Castillo gives voice to a previously unknown and often underrepresented perspective, that of an Afro-Cuban woman. Indeed, "*Reyita* is of historical importance: It is the first narration to provide a personal and collective history from the perspective of an Afro-Cuban woman, who often demystifies history and provides her own interpretation of events" (*Cultures and Customs*, Luis 127). The testimonial biography recounts the life of Maria de los Reyes Castillo Bueno (1902-1997), known simply as "Reyita," but also the story of her parents, and grandparents and their roles in the Cuban War of Independence, in the fight against slavery, as well as in the early twentieth-century's Black uprisings in their fight for equality. As a witness to major events in Cuban political life, *Reyita* recounts her interactions with the Independent Colored Party—as well as its violent demise. Additionally, *Reyita* describes her experiences with Antonio Maceo and her childhood friend, Fulgencio Batista. An experience and a perspective not previously recorded and a version that calls into question official records. *Reyita* is a journey through the protagonist's life, alongside a retelling of Cuba's history.

To speak of the importance of *Reyita*, it is necessary to understand the history of testimonial novels in Cuba. Often considered Latin America's first biography, *Biografía de un*

cimarrón (1966) presents the fluidity of testimony as a genre: it is both autobiography and biography and blurs the lines between fiction and non-fiction, resulting in a testimonial novel. The Cuban Esteban Montejo was a runaway enslaved person, centennial, and protagonist of the (auto)biography written and edited by Miguel Barnet. According to the introduction to *Biografía*, in 1963 Miguel Barnet found a newspaper article about two ex-enslaved people, a 100-year-old *santera* and a 103/4-year-old man, Esteban Montejo. Miguel Barnet decides to interview the latter because Montejo lived as a *cimarrón*—a runaway enslaved person.

The testimonial novel is the life story, told in the first-person, of Esteban Montejo, but features the researcher's life filtered through the story. It is worth noting the methodology consisted of a series of interviews in which Barnet uses a recording device, since this method proved to be most effective in the collection of Montejo's narrative and allowed him to reorganize the chronology of his subject's life. Moreover, the tape recorder captured the variations in speech, tone, but also the silences, and nuances in Montejo's language. Barnet asks intentional questions that provoke a flow of memories from Montejo. Additionally, the questions compress time, forming parallels of the past with the present.

By taking the oral account and transferring it to writing, Barnet rearranges Montejo's story. The fact that this testimony is not an exact transcript of the recordings, nor includes Barnet's questions for Montejo, suggests that the content is influenced by the perspective of the anthropologist. Furthermore, Montejo has no control over the chronology of the text because Barnet rearranges the narrative and divides it into three sections: slavery, the abolition of slavery, and The War of Independence. These sections are presented under more subtopics, such as life in the barracks, in the mountains, in the sugar mills, and, finally, during the war.

It is interesting to note that Montejo does not speak of the Revolution and that Barnet has

made the conscious decision to end the narrative with the invasion of Cuba by the United States in 1905. Ultimately, the reader is presented with a narrative where the narrator's speech is heavily manipulated by the researcher and/or the political climate. This hybrid genre has the potential to generate doubt due to this strong historical manipulation.

Although debate persists regarding the veracity of the testimonial novel, this genre acts as a speaker for those sectors of society who do not have a literary representation in dominant culture and otherwise face a societal silencing and erasure. In this flawed way, Montejo and Barnet recreate the past by providing insightful and personal details of the atrocities of slavery and the unjust history of Cuban society. Other events that Montejo recounts are scarcely reported by popular history. For example, he talks about the role of the Catholic Church, but does not present an underlying anti-clerical message; rather, Montejo simply recalls what he saw: the hypocritical behavior of priests. He also speaks about the history of the Chinese in Cuba and how they belonged to the periphery of Cuban society, likening them to enslaved people or indentured servitude, due to endless debts. Montejo's life is much more than an interesting tale about an enslaved runaway who survived in solitude. Rather, the importance of Montejo's testimonial novel lies in his statement, "Así y todo pasaron años y en Cuba había esclavos todavía. Eso duró más de lo que la gente se cree" (52). His biography reveals that history is not absolute, it is not as definitive as it is reported by historians, and the perspective of marginalized survivors presents an alternate reality.

In the same way that *Biografía* is the story of Esteban Montejo and Miguel Barnet, *Reyita* is the story of two Black Cuban women: Daisy Rubiera Castillo as the *gestora*^{xxx} of her mother Reyita. Reyita's story requires the literacy and disposition of her daughter to be told. In a 2003 interview with Daisy Rubiera Castillo, William Luis asks, "Why is the discourse of women

nowadays important? What were the historical factors that allow *Reyita* to be written?" To which she answers:

In the fight for a more just society in which gender relations are more human, the female discourse offers a cumulative of information that allows for an understanding of her identity, her perception, her personal and collective consciousness. This discourse transmits experiences, values, gives meaning, revives and recreates life, and *tries to fundamentally invert the established order.*

With very few exceptions, the Black woman has only been present in our literature and our audiovisual products of communication through characters that reproduce traditional roles assigned to women of that socioracial group and that mark their lives within two great loops/rings: *her condition as a woman and her condition as a Black woman.* Reason for which one of the historical factors present in my intention to create that book was *the necessity to give voice to a Black woman*, as I said previously, in a culture, like ours, where historically she has not had one and, in that way, offer readers the possibility of comprehending the *interrelationships that exist among gender, race, and class. To put in print the discrimination, the inequality, the prejudices, the stereotypes, and the marginalization that were seen, and that, in many cases, Black women are still facing.* In the same way, to make known their great defiance directed at the conquest of a social space historically negated to various generations of them. (66, my emphasis and my translation)

Rubiera Castillo expresses a sense of social justice and a responsibility to tell and document stories of Afro-Cuban women. Her mother's experiences highlight the interconnectedness of colonialism, gender, and race. In essence, Reyita's experiences demonstrate that in Cuba,

oppression still exists at the intersection of race and gender. Together, their story is even more powerful and benefits from a wider reach in terms of readership. Rubiera Castillo is not unlike Narayan. In *Reyita*, the two women demonstrate the hierarchy of privilege within Cuban society; however, together, they can use their subject position to bring attention to an untold herstory. Like Narayan, Rubiera Castillo witnesses how her mother, and the women around her, recount their experiences and express strong sentiments related to survival and empowerment for women. In essence, they, too, arrive at feminism through lived experiences of oppression.

Reyita—who has little power in Cuban society—shares her memories and speaks her truth. Her truth is one of admiration, participation, confrontation, and criticism of Cuban culture that starkly contrasts the official records. In this way, the testimonial novel serves as an act of resistance and resilience. Moreover, the Afro-Cuban women speak of racism as entangled with sexism and in describing Reyita’s experiences, as emblematic of Cuban society. Reyita offers her life as proof of the problematic nature of national and cultural identities. Rather than create a homogenizing and superficial discourse of “sisterhood,” Reyita highlights the way in which women are treated as inferior to men, as well as the racial and class differences amongst women. To remedy or to correct this damaging “corso,” and as a type of legacy, her daughter’s privilege uplifts her mother’s voice. The subtext implies that together these women are stronger and have a wider reach, effectively confirming that potency in numbers and solidarity. Rather than perpetuate cycles of exclusion based on class, education, and race, the two women join forces to create an insightful and powerful but previously untold narrative about women, Afro-Cuban people, while providing a more inclusive and detailed history of Cuba. Rubiera Castillo uses her position as both insider and outsider—where she is aware of the needs of Black women—to publish her mother’s story and to make these stories accessible to the population at large. In this

way, Garcia exposes many of the injustices and inequalities that have long existed in Cuba (and Latin America).

Reyita's experience as a Black woman in Cuba differs greatly from García's poetic rendition of Cuba. Much like Garcia's characters serve as microcosms of Cuban and Cuban-American identities, Reyita's testimony similarly serves as an indicator of Latin America's intrinsic history of racism and sexism. To this end, Rubiera Castillo recognizes the importance of women's language:

There is a great difference between female and male discourses. Reyita's discourse transmits a sense of her existence, of her condition as a woman, as a Black woman in the struggle for liberation from the marks of gender, race, and class that society imprints onto them and that they have had to live. It also reflects the socially limited horizon in which she lived engulfed by the struggle to overcome it. The male discourse is characterized, fundamentally, by transmitting what they feel is important and it reflects their position in accordance to their values, stereotypes, and paradigms of our patriarchal culture. (My translation, "La mujer negra en Cuba...", Luis 65-6)

Indeed, Reyita—along with her daughter—underscores the importance of Black women's voices in contrast to the voices of men, specifically white men. The feminine tradition of autobiographical writing adds a layer to the already complex genre of Spanish American autobiography by not only creating spaces/gaps, but by creating a more comprehensive cultural space for an inclusive modern nation (Sommer 288). Furthermore, unlike their male contemporaries, these female authors create works that are organic (not dizzying) because they are based on an interdependence with what has come before (288).

Thrice oppressed, Reyita communicates her struggles for equality against racism, sexism,

and poverty. Nevertheless, Reyita firmly distances herself from a position of victimhood. She places blame on Afro-Cubans for their complacency, and she blames a broken political system. Finally, she asks both the elite and society at large to believe in and work towards a fully integrated Cuba. In the same way that hybridity is needed for this story to be told, Reyita's message underscores the importance of collaboration—if not complicity—and mutual investment from the privileged and non-privileged alike. When the protagonist recalls her childhood memories, she does so in a way that parallels historical accounts; however, Reyita's version of history offers more detail than the official historical renditions. The exclusionary practices of history go beyond a professional negligence in overlooking the presence and impact of Afro-Cubans, rather it is part of a continued practice of erasure and exclusion. The subtext is a declaration that non-white Cubans were never meant to be part of Cuban society. Reyita's narrative includes personal details that unsettle the reader because they show how fragile these constructs are and how much easier it would be to repeat the cycles of violence and oppression. Her detailed account makes the distanced and cold historical accounts seem tangible and repeatable. Reyita further contributes to Cuban cultural and customary practices by providing examples of her role and knowledge in history, spirituality, gender, class, and race.

Historical Insights

Contrary to official historical records, Reyita divulges the diverse and active roles women held as cultural agents in Cuba's socio-political structure. In doing so, she highlights the systemic efforts to exclude Afro-Cubans and women and reveals the fused relationship between racism and sexism. Rather than simply fill-in the blanks, *Reyita* exposes the fragility of a system that is based on colonial era oppressions, exclusions, and toxic masculinity. In this way, her story

threatens power structures. Reyita's personal life story serves a didactic function. The ninety-year-old woman provides intimate personal details about the Marvin Gaye movement, her family history (from enslavement in the sugar mills to their personal ethnic background), the massacre of the PIC, and the cultural quotidian events commemorating historical moments involving the participation of Afro-Cubans.

The *testimonio* offers both an unpopular point-of-view and a dangerous practice. To humanize and speak positively of the figures who fought for social justice and civil rights is both unpopular and dangerous because it has proven deadly for members of the political opposition, especially when those are people of color. In doing so, *Reyita* highlights injustices committed by the ruling class and disproves the racial, political, and gender equality myth. Furthermore, the narrative supports a need for change in Cuba—for a revolution. As a child, Reyita mentions her role as a lookout where she meets Pedro Ivonet and Evaristo Estenoz, the latter described as a kind man who warmly embraces her. When Reyita mentions senator Morúa Delgado, it is in the context of Afro-Cubans deciding to organize and an epiphany regarding support from their white compatriots: “white ones weren't helping at all” (50). Reyita emphasizes the diplomacy, political and legal paths of the PIC's leadership. However, Estenoz was lied to by the Cuban War of Independence leader and president of Cuba, José Miguel Gómez who then betrayed them by sending a commission into the hills with a message for the Blacks:

Don't surrender, I'll keep trying to solve the problem.' And to prevent them finding out what he'd promised the blacks, what he did was send the army under General Monteagudo against them ... Poor souls! I saw them when they brought them down from the hills, tied up. They killed them, threw them in pits and set them on fire.... They also killed my uncle Juan. Those are the things you don't forget easily. (50)

The Black population was tricked into assisting in the transfer of power and ownership. Unbeknownst to them, the leadership of the Independence wars was fighting for their right to control Cuba and Cubans. Immediately after helping to free Cuba from imperialist Spain, Afro-Cubans continued to organize and fight for the liberation of all Cubans, but they were faced with duplicity and genocidal violence. Although an independent Cuba could not have happened without the contributions of Afro-Cubans, an independent Cuba refused to exist as a racially equal society, thus creating suspicion about the island nation's sovereignty. *Reyita's* rendition captures the intimacy of Afro-Cuban's betrayal by people historically hailed as national heroes. The promise to remember and the act of recollecting the genocide committed against Cuban nationals who believed in a just society explains why *Reyita* finds refuge in the Revolution and underscores the way in which Afro-Cubans (women and children included) were actively involved in politics. In this way, the act of sharing her life memories functions as a critique of Cuban society, its treatment of Afro-Cubans, and its flawed history. In essence, *Reyita* disputes the widely accepted national narrative and reveals how nationality and nationalism are fragile social constructs. For *Reyita*, this is not a distanced history lesson, rather, this is her experience, first as a child and later as an adult participating in the fight for equality. In it, *Reyita* articulates the humanization of the PIC's leadership, the hope, the betrayal, and the multiple layers of her personal loss.

Reyita speaks to women's direct and indirect roles, undermining their absence from historical records. *Reyita* provides details *Cristina García's* *Celia* does not fully capture; together, both texts outwardly demonstrate women's personal investments and suggests their omission may have been strategic. Ironically, the existence of Afro-Cuban women, in major socio-political events, is made more visible precisely because of the efforts to make them disappear. For

example, Reyita's aunt Mangá was falsely accused of looting only because she served as the President of the Committee of Ladies for the Independent Colored Party. When considering conspiracy theories against Afro-Cubans, the "Conspiración de la Escalera" often comes to mind; however, Reyita demonstrates the tactic was still in use and not exclusively applied to men. False accusations were a popular ploy used by the Cuban government against Afro-Cubans and sympathizers of racial equality. The seemingly insignificant detail serves to amplify the efforts at erasure and reveals the importance ascribed to women as cultural agents and revolutionaries. Indeed, their omission has a counter-productive result as it serves to highlight, rather than weaken, the women's presence.

When the protagonist speaks to her participation in the literacy campaign, her personal experience serves a pedagogical function. That is, Reyita sheds light on women's involvement in political movements as well as provides an intimate view into women's quotidian affairs. In her own words,

When the revolution triumphed I was living in that same neighborhood. I taught a few people to read during the Literacy Campaign.... The October Crisis^{xxxii} also found me in that neighborhood. I worked very hard alongside the *compañeros* in the Revolutionary Defense Committees collecting wood, axes and machetes. I also took a course in first aid: we had to be prepared for whatever might happen. Those were very tense moments, but we were firm and determined to defend our independence and our sovereignty. (124)

Often, revolution presents a stark division between those who support and those who oppose it. Furthermore, the censorship in Cuba often forbade critiquing the Revolution. It would be understandable to read Reyita's staunch support of the revolution with skepticism. What is not debatable is that the text informs the reader that the revolution provided a refuge for Reyita and a

source of hope. In this way, Rubiera Castillo validates the unquestioning devotion of Garcia's matriarch Celia. Reyita's account is informative of the customs immediately after the Revolution, specifically showing that the Revolution was a communal effort not exclusive to men. Therefore, regardless of Reyita's intentions—whether her text shows a resolve to defend the cause or a safety precaution due to Cuba's censorship—the authors demonstrate that women were active participants in Cuba's major historical events. It is interesting to note women's roles were not relegated to the gender norms ascribed by the patriarchy; women participated in literacy programs *and* in the Revolutionary Defense Committee. Reyita reveals that when women speak about history, they tell a more comprehensive and thereby more accurate depiction than what had been provided by than male historians.

In the previous passage, Reyita's resolve to defend the revolutionary cause is open to debate. However, she later declares what the Revolution represents for her, "I joined the Revolution: the Defense Committee, the Federation of Cuban Women, the National Revolutionary Militia. You enrolled at the university, I was so happy! – finally, one of my children had this opportunity, even if it was only one" (137-8). In Reyita's words, the Revolution offered a path to freedom, implying that freedom did not occur with the abolishment of slavery, especially not for women. The Revolution provided instant gratification that renewed her sense of commitment as she saw the fruits of her sacrifice create previously unavailable opportunities for her daughter and future generations of Black women. The Revolution allowed Reyita to continue her commitment to empowering women. This passage underscores Cuban people's determination to protect the gains of the Revolution. Despite efforts to erase and exclude women, Reyita demonstrates that they have been crucial to nation-building projects and to the fight for equity.

Reyita's language is imbedded with superstitions and religious idiosyncrasies. Often, the protagonist reveals both a strong belief in the supernatural and a heavy level of skepticism regarding organized religion, involving *Santería* and Catholicism alike. Reyita cooks with love and faith, she even feeds Saint Lazarus and her *Virgencita*, a reference to the Virgen del Cobre. "Why these things? Because I read it in a book that explained the different foods to offer the saints. Since I do it with faith and love, I know they receive it gratefully, and enjoy it with satisfaction" (116). The practice to feed the saints embodies the mix of African, Native, and European religious traditions. Reyita further speaks to what she calls *espiritismo cruza'o*, a spiritualist practice that encompasses dream analysis and *curandera* practices. Throughout the testimonial novel, Reyita speaks to her faith and to her spirituality revealing a strong relationship between Afro-Cubans and the ethereal.

Misogynoir a Transnational Pandemic

Reyita establishes over and over the interconnected nature of misogyny and racism, demonstrating a transnational expansion of what Dr. Moya Bailey coined as "misogynoir." From a collective perspective, the reader learns about the history of systematic oppression in Cuba; from Reyita's life, the reader can bear witness—albeit an intrusive and discomfoting glance—to an intimate depiction of the intertwined workings of racism and sexism. Reyita's childhood desire to marry a white man was not due to an internalized racist longing to *mejorar la raza*, but rather to save her children from enduring the same racial discriminations she faced. In this way, the protagonist contradicts the assumption that these decisions were based solely on self-hate and internalized racism; rather, she stresses the importance of collecting multiple perspectives

directly from Black women to avoid making and superimposing erroneous assumptions onto all people. The declaration is so important that the protagonist affirms it outwardly three times:

Blacks, and especially older blacks, always considered it important to marry white, because the lighter your skin the fewer vicissitudes of discrimination you'd have to undergo. I can understand my great-grandmother's preoccupations having suffered greatly for being black. (41)

I didn't want a black husband not out of contempt for my race, but because black men had almost no possibilities of getting ahead and the certainty of facing a lot of discrimination. Their best change was in sports: being a boxer; giving but also receiving many blows, and with age ending up all disfigured and traumatized, you know? (166)

And a black woman didn't have a less unsettled destiny: Work as a servant, laundress, or fall into prostitution, to end up in the hospital or the penitentiary, if she hadn't already taken the turn-off for the cemetery. This is what I didn't want for the children I was going to have. That's why I asked my *Virgencita* for a white husband. I wouldn't have been able to put up with seeing my children humiliated, mistreated, and much less living a life of vice. That's why I married a white man. (167)

Reyita demonstrates a literary double consciousness: The protagonist understands what the literature suggests about Black women who choose to marry white men and at the same time, asserts their agency in choosing who to marry and their reasoning for it. In her reflections on choosing to marry a white man, she first mentions why Black people are encouraged to marry white spouses and reflects on her own great-grandmother's suffering, as an extension of her own. Her second thought, in which she asserts that her desire to marry a white man is not out of contempt for her race, sheds light on Black men's limited options for success, and this

acknowledges the cost of such success. Lastly, she speaks directly to Black women's options and their sense of self. Reyita did not want to marry a white man to *mejorar la raza*; she chose to marry a white man to avoid seeing her children—an extension of herself—suffer the repercussions of a flawed, anti-Black society. After witnessing how Black people were used to achieve sovereignty and then destroyed for wanting equality, Reyita took charge of her destiny. She chose a form of survival that created room for the next generations to thrive. She married a white man to bend the “corso” of discrimination against Black people.

Another instance of Reyita's break with the past is in her experience as her mother's only Black daughter. Reyita felt especially discriminated against in her private and personal life, but as an adult and mother to interracial children, Reyita does not mistreat her Black daughter (Daisy). Since her mother was particularly distanced from and disdainful of Reyita for her Blackness, Reyita's conscious decision to not mistreat her daughter for the same reason ruptures the cycle of racism and interrupts cyclical colonial oppressions. Reyita remembers a time when her “husband” would come home from work and the kids would take turns fanning him: “The only one who didn't was you, remember what you said to him? — None of that, I may be black but I'm not a slave” (87). Unlike Reyita's mother who despised her for being Black, Reyita expresses pride in her Black daughter's resistance and self-love. What is more, she teaches her daughter to speak up for herself against white authority figures. The irony is not lost on the reader, Reyita's efforts towards equality made it possible for her own voice to be heard. In this way, Reyita's personal empowerment efforts towards her daughter have immediate effects on her own life, revealing a communal sense of self.

As has happened historically and on an international scale, the reader finds Reyita's personal life is not immune to white men's deceit; the reader learns Reyita's white husband

tricked her, and they were never legally married. Still, in her rejection of victimhood, Reyita's resilience permeates every sector of her life. In response to this betrayal, she admits to never having been in love with her "husband." Instead, Reyita says she often made love to her partner, imagining he was her first love, a Black man. The betrayal is symbolic of a larger transnational issue: Black women's oppression and their fight against white men's deceitfulness. Ultimately, white men are the keepers of colonial-era norms. However, it should be stated the fight for equality was not of people-of-color against white people; men of color are oppressed, but they are also oppressors as they tend to silence women of color's contributions. The patriarchy continues to serve as the ultimate puppet master.

Conclusions

García and Rubiera Castillo's novels provide a more inclusive history of Cuba as well as the groundwork for a Cuban-American identity. However, where García mystifies Black women, the opposite of what Mohanty suggests—Rubiera Castillo presents a sobering reality of Afro-Cuban women. García's self-writing presents a mainstream Cuban and Cuban-American experience, a limited perspective that is just as informative for what it omits. Understanding familial and socio-cultural history affords Reyita the luxury to decide her future by breaking with the toxic colonial-era cycles. Choosing to marry a white man was a compromise and a sacrifice for her. It was a conscious step in her fight for equality. Reyita uses the oppressor's tactics against the system of oppression and as a resolve to do what is within her power to make the world more equitable. Indeed, Rubiera Castillo's legacy is empowerment.

García's Cuban borderland is defined by its multiple perspectives. Her Cubanness is defined by its multiple, and at times, contradictory perspectives. In this way, Cuban identity is

not reduced to one defining factor. García informs her readers that there is no single archetype for what it means to be Cuban or Cuban-American. Rather, Cuban identity is comprised of the individual's personal subject position, specifically regarding the Revolution. The polarizing sentiments about the Revolution are a defining quality of the Cuban and Cuban-American borderland. For example, someone who is pro-Revolution is just as Cuban as someone who is anti-Revolution. A defining characteristic is precisely the inability to define these characteristics.

Both texts highlight the necessity to revisit and return, literally and figuratively. García and Rubiera Castillo center women while emphasizing the importance of their characters' healing their relationships with their mothers and the need to rupture the colonial-era imposed exclusionary practices. In doing so, they repair the relationships with their descendants (on and off the island), starting a new "ricorso" of empowerment. Similarly, if the women are embodiments of their homeland, then returning is not only essential, but also suggests that healing experiences are rooted in returning and revisiting the past. Truth is likewise complex and dependent on the subject who is relating an event—in this way, the truth is relative. Truth, like history, is expressed according to someone's current situation, experience, and perspective. Therefore, it is important to have history documented by more than the traditional historian. Reyita evidences the necessity to revisit, remember, and retell these herstories to create healthier cycles and prevent the repetition of oppression and exclusion.

Chapter 2

Deaquíydeallá: Mexicana and Chicana Life Stories

“I was compelled to face the fiction that is a part of all retelling, remembering. I began to think of the work I was doing as both fiction and autobiography. . . I was not as concerned with the accuracy of detail as I was with evoking in writing the state of mind, *the spirit* of a particular moment”
—bell hooks, “Writing Autobiography” pp. 157-8

The largest Spanish-speaking population in the world is made up of a combination of Mexicans in Mexico and Mexican descendants in the United States. When considered separately, they make up the first and second largest Spanish speaking populations in the world. In addition to the international border, Mexicans and the Mexican diaspora, also cross linguistic international borders between Mexico and the United States. In the United States, the mention of Mexico often conjures images of tequila, mariachi music, colorful cemeteries, and prehistoric empires. However, the mention of Mexicans produces polarizing stereotypes about people from the southern neighboring nation. Less positively depicted, Mexicans in the United States are often portrayed as simultaneously indolent and employment thieves. The portrayals of Mexican women and of Latinas of Mexican heritage, are similarly contradictory, but the added layer of gender violence and oppression from dominant American society and Latino men, positions Mexican women and Latina women in a cycle of recycled stereotypes, hostility, and a tradition of erasure. The importance of Mexicans and Mexican descendants extends beyond their collective linguistic strength; indeed, the relationship between the two nations and their peoples’ produces a significant cultural exchange felt on both sides of the border. Complications arise in navigating the authorial, emotional, cultural, ethnic, political, and racial differences created by the metaphorical and international border. These complications present a complex, fluid, but

codependent identity. Race and race relations are nuanced on each side of the Rio Grande. For both, life is heavily influenced by the two countries' physical proximity to each other and the geographical-political divide that separates the two. The complex nature of Mexican-American hybridity stems from the cultural inheritance of Mexican ancestors, contrasted by the stark privileges of US residency (and, citizenship) and the physical separation. Still, in both nations and cultures, Mexican and Latina women comprise the lower echelons of social, political, and economic factions of society. The largest group of the Latinx population has its own history of misogyny, gender, and racial genocide.

In Mexico, the United States, and Chicana societies, women are exploited and relegated to the margins, often erasing or misrepresenting their cultural and literary contributions. In an effort to address this exclusion, in this chapter I examine Laura Esquivel's *Like Water for Chocolate: A Novel in Monthly Instalments with Recipes, Romances, and Home Remedies* (1989) as an example of Mexicana and Latina self-writing. I focus on this text as representative of the author's larger communities, for her contributions to nation building within the Latinx community and more broadly in both nations. This text exposes the exploitation of women as the most voiceless and poorest victims of the church, government, men, and the elite class. Themes of love, family, food and the kitchen, religion, tradition, rebellion, race, class, *machismo*, and life on the border (figuratively and literally) are necessary inroads into the stories of women in different generations and stages of Mexican and US history.

Esquivel's novel raises these fundamental questions: How does one interpret a text that weaves a network of ambiguities and instabilities? Or rather, how does one interpret a novel whose nature interlaces historical events and creative writing to counter the practice of women's erasure? For a such hybrid text, it seems appropriate to use a hybrid reading through the lens of

transculturation that focus on liminality and displacement—the “in-between” and the “unhomely”—of Homi Bhabha and the borderlands of Gloria Anzaldúa. Observing with a critical double-vision, the “non-belonging” of the protagonists results in the creation of a transnational communal self-writing that is hybrid and complex. These texts take an often destructive or paralyzing experience—due to gender, culture/nationality and social position—and create a textual representation that is reflective of both Mexican women and Mexican-American women in the US.

To frame this reading, I propose the compatible application of Bhabha’s theory, since he parts from the post-modern and post-structuralist notion of difference. Bhabha focuses on the conception of cultural difference, but also depends on performative concepts of identity, echoing the performative gender scheme, according to Judith Butler. For Bhabha, “Terms of cultural engagement, whether antagonistic or affiliative, are produced performatively” (2). This interpretation depends on encounters and interactions between cultures and ways of knowing, on mediations between different ways of thinking, and it uses analogies and spatial figurations to map their theories. Bhabha uses the borderline’s liminal space, while Anzaldúa complicates this idea by creating the transboundary movement of the new mestiza consciousness.

Bhabha raises a question about subjectivity that comes from negotiation, but in his case, this is the product or the result of an intercultural exchange that takes place in an interstitial and border space. This intermediate space, the “in-between,” is theoretically situated “beyond” the binarisms established by the dominant culture. Bhabha insists on the importance of focusing on the moments and processes of the articulation of cultural differences. For him, these moments create a discursive space to negotiate intercultural identities: “These ‘in-between’ spaces provide the terrain for elaborating strategies of selfhood—singular or communal—that initiate new signs

of identity, and innovative sites of collaboration, and contestation, in the act of defining the idea of society itself” (1-2). Although he frames his theory within a spatial image, it also indicates that the notion of the border—such as Anzaldúa’s borderlands—can be metaphorical: “it is the moment of transit where space and time cross to produce complex figures of difference and identity, past and present, inside and outside, inclusion and exclusion” (1).

It is important to qualify the idea of “unbelonging,” as my starting point supposes a borderland of shared non-belonging that contains its own negation: “*deaquí y de allá*.” Unbelonging, according to Bhaba is a state of limited belonging, a hybridity that allows for both privilege and oppression to coexist. It is linked to the experience or sense of otherness and subalternity. Gayatri Spivak refines this notion, noting that this inferior position is defined by its difference from an elite class (80) and, at the same time, pointing out that the group called “subaltern” or “the (common) people” is “irretrievably heterogeneous” (79). In any case, this figure occupies the excluded and silenced side of the binaries of power (dominant-subaltern) and is demarcated in an adverse way: not belonging to the dominant group; possessing limited or no rights and authority. For an example one needs to look no further than Elena Poniatowska’s *Hasta no verte, Jesús mío* (1969). At first glance, Poniatowska has nothing to do with the conceptualization of the “other” or the “subaltern.” In fact, the author seems the opposite: White, European, high-class. She was born in France, the daughter of a Mexican mother (exiled during the Mexican Civil War) and a Polish father, and from a noble lineage: She inherited—but rejected—the title of Princess. At age ten, she emigrated to Mexico with her family to escape World War II. Her native language is French, and she was educated in France, in the United States, and in foreign institutes in Mexico (Castillo 317). However, Poniatowska insists on identifying herself as Mexican, and became a naturalized citizen of Mexico in 1969, the same

year that she published *Hasta no verte Jesús mío*. According to Ana Castillo, “Poniatowska can be said to have inherited displacement. . . Her parents had to recreate themselves as French out of their own exiled displacements . . . [When] Poniatowska consciously chooses a Mexican identity, she turns her back on her parents’ analogous but opposite choice of a Eurocentric identity” (317).

It is interesting to note, the literary world has chosen to accept Poniatowska’s self-identification as Mexican and refers to her as such. Despite her privileged origins—or rather, because of her privilege—traits of otherness can be read in the life and work of Poniatowska. As Spivak proposes in “Can the Subaltern Speak?,” the privilege of the (postcolonial) intellectual is, paradoxically, his/her loss (82). Said “loss” is rather the absence of something never possessed and impossible to obtain (such as an ethnicity); it produces another type of exclusion and subalternity. The inherent distancing (social, economic, racial) of the intellectual produces a lack of understanding of the other’s position. Therefore, the particular knowledge of the other is unattainable and unknowable to the privileged subject. As Bhabha asserts, “It is not the colonialist Self or the colonized Other, but the disturbing distance in-between that constituting the figure of colonial otherness” (45). Apart from carrying a sense of alterity in reverse, the distance and exclusion of the privileged subject can produce an identification with the studied “other”: “the subaltern represents the dominant subject to itself, and thus unsettles that subject, in the form of a negation or displacement” (Beverley 26). Poniatowska is aware of the “loss” that her privilege represents, and she explicitly recognizes it, in her reflections on the writing process. The author points out that the driving force of her writing is a sense of displacement: “I write in order to belong” (“A Question Mark” 82). Why, then, is Poniatowska Mexican, but Chicanas are not? Part of Poniatowska’s alterity, not unlike Chicana writers, is her attempt to compensate and express through writing, the fundamental mismatch between her origins and her desire to

belong—culturally and linguistically—to her “adoptive” country. The Chicana authors’ otherness is their own multi-level privilege (educational, cultural, social), and even while drawing from this source of creativity, their writings fulfill a recuperative and compensatory function.

According to Bhabha, the process of identity creation is related to the notion of identity; for him, identity is not something pre-established or passively acquired, but rather transformatively produced: “the question of identification is never the affirmation of a pre-given identity, never a self-fulfilling prophecy—it is always the production of an image of identity and the transformation of the subject in assuming that image” (45). Furthermore, moving between different identities opens the possibility of cultural hybridity that entertains difference without hierarchy (Bhabha 4). It turns out that, for Chicanas, their privileged socio-geographic position—although it constitutes another facet of their “loss” according to Spivak’s notion—facilitates the cultural exchange that produces their own hybrid identity.

For Bhabha, the mere act of existing “is to be called into being in relation to an otherness, its look or locus. It is a demand that reaches outward to an external object. . . the very place of identification, caught in the tension of demand and desire, is a space of splitting” (44).

Mexicanas and Chicanas, create texts—interweaving themselves with their protagonists—that occupy, the space of the subaltern. However, these writers do not limit the definition of the subaltern, but rather, open a space where “otherness” grants membership. This crisis of identity and the occupation of the borderlands, originally limited to Mexicans and Mexican-Americans who lived along the US-Mexico border, are further complicated by Anzaldúa’s introspection and eradication of borderlands as an external geographical space. Instead, Anzaldúa demonstrates that the borderlands exist within and not on the ground.

Borders are set up to define the places that are safe and unsafe, to distinguish us from them. A border is a dividing line, a narrow strip along a steep edge. A borderland is a vague and undetermined place created by the emotional residue of an unnatural boundary. It is in a constant state of transition. The prohibited and forbidden are its inhabitants. (3)

For Anzaldúa, the borderlands function as a space from which Mexicana and Chicana women can write—through themselves. Indeed, Esquivel expresses both fragmentation and diffusion. By occupying the subordinate space, these authors go beyond Bhabha’s concept of intercultural negotiations; the authors indicate a negotiating process that relates to the creation of Bhabha’s hybrid identity, resulting in an expansion and update of Anzaldúa’s borderland.

Anzaldúa’s *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza* explores themes of identity, femininity, spirituality, heritage, and sexuality. The text opens with the chapter titled “The Homeland, Aztlán. El otro México.” Geographically, the mythological ancestral homeland of the Aztecs—Aztlán—would have extended from the US Pacific Northwest down through northern and central Mexico. In this way, the Chicano movement’s embrace of Aztlán was a dismissal of US state designations, contempt for the US-Mexico border, and embrace of ethnicity that was based on a shared mythological history, ancestry, culture, tradition, and religion (embracing prehistoric religions and deities). Anzaldúa’s “commitment to women and to ancient indigenous culture led to her creation of a new mestiza awareness, identity, and people” (Quintana 127). Her primary message of empowerment for both Chicanas and women in general, was groundbreaking for its re-centering of Mexican mythology, social justice, and sexuality. The new mestiza responded to Anzaldúa’s experiences of displacement as a feminist lesbian within the Mexican and Mexican-American community. Ultimately, *Borderlands* functioned as an ideal—albeit

somewhat exclusive—discursive area that expanded the “American” way of thinking. According to Frances Negrón-Muntaner, “In time, the Texas-born and California-rooted Gloria E. Anzaldúa (1942-2004) may be regarded as a key *American* writer of our late twentieth century. In the interim, she is a foundational figure for the fields, markets, and affects known as Latina/o—studies, literature, theory, and metaphysics” (my emphasis, 272). To this end, we must keep in mind the socio-historic, geographic, and political context from which she wrote. At the time, Anzaldúa’s acceptance of her sexuality and her challenges to traditional gender norms (both by dominant and Mexican/Mexican-American standards) was groundbreaking and provocative. However, to declare her sexuality a choice—as Anzaldúa claims it was for her—is dismissive of the vast majority of people for whom it is a birthright or inherent, and latent with colonial-era, Catholic, and conservative rhetoric that posits one can choose to not be gay or choose to correct that choice.

Anzaldúa welcomed an embrace of multi-culturalism, plurality, and the right to self-identify. In a 1994 interview with Debbie Blake and Carmen Abrego, Anzaldúa states the following:

I began to think, “Yes, I’m a chicana but that’s not all I am. Yes, I’m a woman but that’s not all I am. Yes, I’m a dyke but that doesn’t define all of me. Yes, I come from working class origins, but I’m no longer working class. Yes, I come from a mestizaje, but which parts of that mestizaje get privileged? Only the Spanish, not the Indian or black.” I started to think in terms of mestiza consciousness. What happens to people like me who are in between all of these different categories? What does that do to one’s concept of nationalism, of race, ethnicity, and even gender? I was trying to articulate and create a theory of a Borderlands existence. . . . I had to, for myself, figure out some other term

that would describe a more porous nationalism, opened up to other categories of identity.
(Keating 215)

Indeed, hesitancy to critique Anzaldúa is understandable as she is often considered one of the founding mothers of Latinx critical theory.^{xxxiii} Still, to hold Anzaldúa's text immune from criticism promulgates the dichotomous thinking she critiqued, institutes the framework she fought to dismantle, and silences voices to which she answered directly. Moreover, not to criticize Anzaldúa based on her ethnicity, gender, and/or sexuality dismisses the decision Chicanas made when they chose to criticize the movement's *machismo* in order to create a more intersectional and inclusive social justice movement. Imposing Anzaldúa's 1970s notion of the new mestiza onto contemporary Latinas, proves limiting, even harmful, and an obvious misreading of Anzaldúa results when the Chicana movement separates itself from the Latinx movement.

Esquivel's *Terra Nullius*

To survive the Borderlands
you must live *sin fronteras*
be a crossroads.
-Gloria Anzaldúa

Born in Mexico City in 1950, Laura Esquivel is one of Mexico's most renowned contemporary writers. Prior to the literary success of *Like Water for Chocolate*, Esquivel was a teacher, a playwright for children, and wrote for television and film. Since publishing her first novel, Esquivel has continued publishing *La ley del amor* (1995), *Tan veloz como el deseo* (2001), *Malinche* (2005), and the second part of *Like Water for Chocolate*, titled *Tita's Diary* (2016). She has also written short stories, essays, and non-fiction. Esquivel adapted *Like Water for Chocolate* into a screenplay that her then-husband, and director, Alfonso Arau, turned into

the successful film by the same name. Since 2008, Esquivel has worked as a politician and in 2012 was elected as a representative to the Mexican government.

Published first in Spanish in 1989, *Like Water for Chocolate* surpassed Gabriel García Márquez's *El general en su laberinto* (1989) in sales that same year. In 1992—when the English version first appeared in the United States—the novel was met with an unprecedented sales record and by early 1993 it appeared in the *Los Angeles Times* and *New York Times* bestseller lists. The magical realist novel revolves around Tita de la Garza, the youngest of Mama Elena's three daughters and her forbidden love for Pedro. As the youngest, tradition dictates she must never marry to serve as her mother's caretaker. Tita embraces the kitchen and reimagines food and the kitchen as indispensable, not as a lesser craft tasked to women because of their condition as second-class citizens. Rather, Esquivel toys with tradition and gender. Indeed, this novel should not be read as an inversion of gender roles; instead, what *Like Water for Chocolate* inverts is the narrative and the importance surrounding the *machista* mentality towards work considered the domain of women. In essence, Esquivel demonstrates the value and the importance of the unpaid work that women (historically) perform in the household. The short novel touches on themes of family, tradition, love, gender, race, and mental health.

Critics such as Nicolás Balutet and Olga Chesnokova credit Esquivel's novel with opening the door to other, more established, Latin American authors in the United States (215). However, despite the novel's widespread success, it was not well received by literary critics:

The novel like the movie, was not free of negative criticism. Guillermo Fadanelli called it “a fiction born out of luke-warm imagination” (1990, p. 4) and Carmen Galindo (1990, p. 16), that the novel has nothing exceptional. Numerous critics suggested a writing and style that was banal and denounced the “dozens of adjectives that were used as

scaffoldings that held up dead phrases” (Fadanelli, 1990, p. 4), the language “plagued of common and simpleton phrases, weak colloquialism that are there more due to a lack of capacity to reach something, than out of will” (Fadanelli, 1990, p.4), “a plain world, observed from an angle—unjustifiably favorable towards the protagonist—in which only the black and white is present, without any nuance” (Marquet, 1991, p. 59), “plain characters/personalities, taken from fairy tales” (Gil Bonmatí, 1993, p. VII). In summary, as written by Antonio Marquet: “if you were to judge from a literary perspective, the novel’s defects are very evident [...]: it’s simplistic, Manichean” (1991, p. 59). Additionally, Laura Esquivel would not have the talent of the great writers of magical realism (my translation).^{xxxiii}

Outside of intellectual circles, the novel was similarly scrutinized. Rita Kempley wrote for the *Washington Post* that Esquivel’s text was an “overly rich fable” that “aims to portray the onset of Mexican feminism in 1910, but it’s really just another hearth-set Cinderella story, one that connects cooking to sorcery and servitude.” I find that these interpretations lack depth and perpetuate a practice of dismissing women’s work as superficial light literature.

Until recently, Esquivel’s novel was not considered canonical; instead *Like Water for Chocolate* was often positioned in a subcategory of literature—due, in large part, to its authorial and genre classifications (read: a foreign woman from south of the border and a romance novel). Joanne Saltz states *Like Water for Chocolate* “transforms the kitchen from an invisible, non-productive domestic sphere into an aesthetically and ethically productive sphere” (31). Saltz further argues that the novel proposes “a discourse centering on feminine experience, and therefore a devalued, ignored, or silenced discourse in traditional literature” that “contests novels of the canon set during the Mexican Revolution that center on male experience” (31). Therefore,

I find that its categorization as a literary subgenre does not hinder the novel; rather in a strategic manner, this brings an understudied genre to enlighten an understudied group, in a way in which the content mirrors the context. From a second-class and thrice-oppressed position, Esquivel continues to destabilize traditional notions of feminism and literature to pierce through dominant national discourses. In *The Cambridge History of Latin American Women's Literature*, Beatriz González-Stephan and Carolyn Fornoff declare “epitomizing the trend toward strategically tailored profitability, the commercial and critical success of ... Esquivel’s *Like Water for Chocolate* (1989) resulted not just in the canonization and mainstream recognition of these texts, but in their solidification as models of promotable ‘women’s literature’” (490). However, Esquivel’s novel does not subscribe to a preservation and propagation of dominant cultural norms. Esquivel’s text created through:

The use of recipes, melodrama, and popular genres for women readers, such as romance novels, enables Esquivel to create a feminine world in which history takes a back seat. Because the feminine world and its discourse are excluded from the discourse of the Mexican Revolution, Esquivel creates a feminine world that parodies the masculine, historical master narrative. (Olivera-Williams 288)

Since critical scrutiny supports canonical texts—and, historically speaking, the canon excludes women and people of color—it is not surprising to find polarizing literary criticism. Indeed, perhaps the mixed reviews are due to Esquivel’s presentation and centering of women, while relegating history to the margins. Kristine Ibsen finds that critical reaction to *Like Water for Chocolate* “has often tended to dismiss the work as, at best, a poor imitation of the male canon” (133). One such example is George McMurray’s critique. McMurray declares the episodes of magical realism “never would have been written without the precedent of *Cien años de soledad*”

(1035-6). McMurray, like many other scholars, assumes that magical realism is a male literary invention and not that male authors have documented the fusion of the ethereal into the quotidian. Since racism cannot stand in isolation from *machismo*, McMurray fails to credit the magical realism in Gabriel Garcia Marquez's *Cien años de soledad* to Alejo Carpentier's *El reino de este mundo*. The apparent subtle oversight serves to highlight the anti-Blackness that is latent to the Latin American patriarchy and is present in Esquivel's writing.

Like Water for Chocolate is the intergenerational story of Mexican society as told by women. Esquivel's presentation of Mexico highlights the importance of women's storytelling and preservation of culture. The novel opens with the grandniece of Tita de la Garza—the protagonist—recounting her great-aunt's life story, her family and, consequently, unspooling an untold herstory. In other words, *Like Water for Chocolate* tells the story of Mexico by centering women and consigning male characters to flat, supporting roles. Mama Elena explains, "I've never needed a man for anything; all by myself, I've done all right with my ranch and my daughters. Men aren't that important in this life, Father." However, Mama Elena's mentality does not eradicate the patriarchy; she transforms into it. Mama Elena demonstrates the complexities of embodying a corrupted feminism.

As an exemplary borderland novel, *Like Water for Chocolate* is set along the US-Mexico border. Most of the novel occurs during the Mexican Revolution (approximately 1910-1934, arguably). In a nod to oral tradition, the novel begins in the future, as told in the first-person narrative of the protagonist's great-grand niece, spans the late 1800s up through the mid 1900s, and informs the reader of several prominent events. Giving birth to many quintessential Mexican—and Latin American—heroes such as Pancho Villa, Emiliano Zapata, and the lesser known, "adelitas," the uprising resulted in the end of a dictatorship and founding of a

constitutional state. Similarly, the storyline parodies the dominant historical narratives that have promoted women's exclusion. Esquivel touches on events that have not made it into dominant historical narratives. One such example is the history of enslaved people in the United States running away to Mexico and Mexico's practice of granting them freedom and protecting them against extradition. However, Esquivel highlights the anti-Black sentiment that has prevailed in Mexico (and Latin America). My insistence is anything but trivial as this little-known historical fact pushes the limits of readers' knowledge and encourages them to question why Mexico would take such a stance.

The deceptively insignificant detail is indicative of a transnational sentiment expressed in Latin American and Latinx women's narratives. As marginalized subjects within Mexican society, women are often tasked with ending the traditions of violence and exclusion established, enforced, and maintained by men. Esquivel's parody is a way in which she strategically maneuvers within and redefines the pillars of male culture. Esquivel positions women in major roles: protagonist and antagonist. To this end, the comparisons to other works of magical realism seem superficial, at best. Indeed, Esquivel's focus is on individual experiences, rather than "emphasizing issues of sexual domination and violence which the Americas were founded, Esquivel 'feminizes' her novel through the exaggeration of traits traditionally associated with women" (Ibsen 135).

The de la Garza women present family as a harsh condition of birth. As the head of the household, Mama Elena enforces a cruel and antiquated tradition that consigns women to solitude and servitude. This tyrannical figure serves as the antithesis to female liberation and acts as "a follower in the web of hegemonic, counter-revolutionary forces, of pre-revolutionary repression and authoritarianism" (Saltz 32). Mama Elena's apparent success—financially and

autocratically—is due to her embodiment of the patriarchy and consequent oppression of women. Speaking of the customary practices, she says the following: “You don’t have an opinion, and that’s all I want to hear about it. For generations, not a single person in my family has ever questioned this tradition, and no daughter of mine is going to be the one to start” (8). As a repressive agent, the matriarch not only perpetuates authoritarian, but also promotes silencing of women. Enforcing silencing and blind obedience, leads to the family’s demise. As a representative of Mexican dictatorships and the patriarchy, Mama Elena evokes a cautionary tale: the inversion and perpetuation of machismo leads to destruction; these systems of oppression must be eradicated. Moments of pride are often accompanied by the suppression of her youngest daughter. For instance, she orders her daughters call her “Mami” as she feels the alternatives are disrespectful. However, “the only one who resisted, the only one who said the word without the proper deference was Tita, which had earned her plenty of slaps.... Mama Elena took comfort in the hope that she had finally managed to subdue her youngest daughter.” The relationship between Mama Elena and Tita becomes one of resistance and revolution. Tita is empowered through her embrace of a habitually powerless function.

Mamá Elena rejects Pedro’s permission to marry Tita and, instead, offers her eldest daughter’s hand in marriage. Pedro accepts marriage to Rosaura to remain close to Tita. Rosaura inherits her mother’s repression and is destined to repeat the cycle of abuse that her younger sister experiences. The reader learns that Rosaura and Mama Elena are united in their roles as repressive cultural agents against Tita, Gertrudis, and Nacha who disrupt the tradition of violence against women. Upon learning that she is not allowed to marry Pedro and that he will instead marry her oldest sister, Tita is evidently upset. Mama Elena responds by further punishing her youngest daughter and enforcing her own authority: “I won’t stand for disobedience ... nor am I

going to allow you to ruin your sister's wedding, with your acting like a victim. You're in charge of all the preparations starting now, and don't ever let me catch you with a single tear or even a long face, do you hear?" To this, Tita finds a conventional manner, within the restraints of women's work, to release her suffering and rebel while obeying her mother, thus protecting herself from further punishment.

After being forced to cook for Pedro and Rosaura's wedding, and forbidden from showing any emotion, Tita cries into the batter, infusing the cake with her sadness. The emotions transmuted proved so potent, the entire wedding party was struck with an ailment of the heart and a purging illness. Despite acting as the architect of these events, Mama Elena is rendered helpless, "Mama Elena, who hadn't shed a single tear over her husband's death, was sobbing silently." Tita manages to make her mother feel the suffering Mama Eleana has imposed, effectively using the tools that were meant to repress her, as weapons of empowerment. Although Tita is relegated to the kitchen, the narrative proposes that she is empowered and not weakened by this limitation. Tita becomes an indispensable character, for who can survive without food? Tony Spanos contends that cooking and the kitchen are reclaimed "as a very serious domestic sphere which is the most sacred place in the house" (30). He further states that "reclaim[ing] the kitchen as a place or space of artistic and creative power and not just a place of mere confinement and oppression" permits literature to assert women-authored works as spaces of "artistic and creative power" (32). The kitchen, like "women's work," has been incorrectly portrayed as insignificant. Authors like Esquivel begin to correct that mistake. The authorial monopoly, previously held by men, has failed to capture many spaces and experiences of others. As such, literature and history are not faithful rendition of (or mirror) society.

In *Like Water for Chocolate*, the kitchen is essential, not a tradition. Traditions, unlike food, are not a necessity; instead, tradition represents abuse and violence. Cooking is also an artform as it serves Tita's need for expression. Thus, cooking is the protagonist's artistic métier. Just as Tita transferred her sadness onto her sister's wedding cake, so, too, does Tita's passion for Pedro come alive in her food. In the third chapter, titled "March. *Quail in Rose Petal Sauce*" Tita prepares a meal that produces an aphrodisiac effect: "it was as if a strange alchemical process had dissolved her entire being in the rose petal sauce, in the tender flesh of the quails, in the wine, in every one of the meal's aromas. That was the way she entered Pedro's body, hot, voluptuous, perfumed, totally sensuous" (38). Tita not only expresses her desire for Pedro, the entire family feels those effects. What is more, cooking becomes a way in which Tita penetrates Pedro. Tita has used the kitchen to demonstrate the fragility of gender roles and norms. In other words, to use a "disreputable" practice—acknowledging that lust is a proscribed topic—to enlighten the taboo that is the creation of gender norms, is a way to mirror the context.

Esquivel highlights the *machismo* that is inherent to Mexican society and culture, both through male characters and the tyrannical Mama Elena. Pedro and Rosaura have a baby, but the new mother is not able to feed her son—it is not surprising that as the representative of the patriarchy, Rosaura cannot breastfeed. At hearing her nephew cry in hunger, Tita produces breast milk to ease the baby's hunger pains. Considering Tita a threat to her sister's marriage, Mama Elena encourages Rosaura and Pedro to leave. When Rosaura and Pedro depart, the baby stops eating and dies. Upon hearing of her nephew's death, Tita suffers a mental breakdown losing all inhibitions and speaks her truth:

"Here's what I do with your orders! I'm sick of them! I'm sick of obeying you!" Mama Elena went to her, picked up a wooden spoon, and smashed her across the face with it.

“You did it, you killed Roberto!” screamed Tita, beside herself, and she ran from the room, wiping the blood that dripped from her nose. (72)

This episode provides the first instance of outward rebellion from Tita, as well as a powerful instance of magical realism. Mama Elena torments Tita to a literal breaking point—physically and mentally—punishing her youngest daughter and confining her to a dove cove. In doing so, Esquivel transcends the physical manifestations of the Revolution and delves into the effects on the psyche. Tita’s collapse requires professional medical attention. John, a doctor from the United States, who falls in love with Tita, takes her under his care, leading to a complicated love triangle between Tita, Dr. John, and Pedro. In the United States, Tita lives with John and his grandmother, Morning Light, a Kikapu tribe *curandera*. Dr. John can nurse Tita back to health because of the knowledge his Kikapu grandmother imparted to him. As such, Esquivel locates maternal healing abilities in the native women on both sides of the border.

Criticized as *literatura light*, as an insensitive portrayal of women of color, one that plays dangerously close to the negative stereotypes, the text presents nonwhite women of color as those who oppose the patriarchy and break cycles of oppression. Tita, Gertrudis, Nacha, Chenchu, and Morning Light stand on one side (rebels), opposing the conventional and more powerful Mama Elena and Rosaura (the *Federales*). In sustaining this metaphor and considering Mama Elena represents the patriarchy upheld by the Mexican government, it does not come as a surprise that Tita—like the Mexican population—rebelled against the autocracy. Contrary to the criticism, Esquivel provides a powerful commentary on the political climate.

The women who (figuratively) stand with Tita against her tyrannical mother, are native and *mestiza* women. Esquivel’s definition of *mestiza* is in line with Anzaldúa’s “new mestiza consciousness” that privileges the “Indian or Black,” instead of solely the Spanish. Esquivel

presents an inclusive and porous nationality that is not constrained by man-made borders. Indeed, Chenchá, one of Tita's only friends, a native woman who has little to no schooling and is similarly mistreated by Mama Elena, arrives at Dr. John's home with oxtail soup. "With the first sip, Nacha appeared there at her side, stroking her hair as she ate, as she had done when she was little and was sick, kissing her forehead over and over." Although Esquivel can be criticized for perpetuating stereotypes of indigenous women as uneducated, it is interesting to note Chenchá is who demonstrates the fragility of the U.S.-Mexico border, as a socio-geographic construct, by easily travelling across its reach Tita. In other words, Esquivel employs one of the most marginalized members of Mexican society to demonstrate the irrelevance of the international man-made border.

Esquivel suggests food is not only nourishment, but also a gateway to the ethereal. Through the mysticism of food, Tita arrives at what today popular science calls the "proust effect."^{xxxiv} Unsurprisingly, and akin to third-world feminists, Tita accesses this knowledge through lived experiences of oppression. This assumingly inconsequential realization demonstrates that these concepts have long existed in spaces deemed insignificant, (read: women's spaces) like the kitchen. Not having the terminology that now exists should not translate to an absence of such sentiments and beliefs. Challenging the anti-indigenous sentiment in Mexico, Esquivel centers native women as healers and indispensable characters. It is Chenchá who makes a magical soup and Nacha who returns to assist Tita in her recovery. Through physical distance from her mother, nourishment from Dr. John (learned through his Native grandmother), and the support Chenchá brings, Tita assumes autonomy. Esquivel also challenges Mexico's anti-indigenous customs by contrasting Mama Elena's repressive practices with

indigenous women's—on both sides of the U.S.-Mexico border—through Nacha and Morning Light.

Esquivel also contests Mexican racism (anti-Blackness) and the *machismo* culture inherent to Mexican society, through Gertrudis. Tita discovers Mama Elena suffered from her own forbidden love affair and that that daughter Gertrudis is the byproduct of that relationship. Because of the nature of the illicit relationship, the reader is presented with information about the underground railroad that headed south into Mexico.

Jose was the love of her life. She hadn't been allowed to marry him because he had Negro blood in his veins. A colony of Negroes, fleeing from the Civil War in the United States, from the risk they ran of being lynched, had come to settle near the village. Young Jose Trevino was the product of an illicit love affair between the elder Jose Trevino and a beautiful Negress. When Mama Elena's parents discovered the love that existed between their daughter and this mulatto, they were horrified and forced her into an immediate marriage with Juan De la Garza, Tita's father. (99)

In this passage, Esquivel provides insight into Mexico-U.S. relations. In 1829, Mexico abolished slavery while Texas still belonged to Mexico. The white slave-holding immigrants fought for independence in the Texas Revolution, making slavery legal once again in 1836. Unlike northern U.S. states, Mexico declined to sign a fugitive slave treaty, refusing to return enslaved people to the United States and declaring enslaved people free once in Mexico. Accordingly, Mexico served as a fugitive haven from slavery, one that was more accessible than the northern states and offered real protection from a return to enslavement. In a parallel fashion, the reader learns of Mama Elena's personal history where she was on the receiving end of her mother's oppression. The restriction to her daughter marrying a "mulatto" is suggestive of a larger social

issue in Mexico that suggests racism is fundamental to tradition. Mama Elena continued her relationship with Jose Trevino after her arranged marriage to Juan de la Garza and decided to run away with him, but her plan was discovered, and Jose Trevino murdered. Jose Trevino's death further suggests that any break from tradition will lead to erasure; hence, liberation arrives through death.

Esquivel presents cycles of abuse that have long masqueraded as tradition. Much like occurred during the Mexican Revolution, the oppressed become oppressors unless these cycles are disrupted. Mama Elena's mother not only controlled her daughter, she also controlled the personal lives of all in the household, as evidenced by her sending away Nacha's fiancé. It is therefore not surprising to find Rosaura and Tita's relationship becomes truly strained, not due to Pedro and Tita's love affair, but because of Tita's determination to have the tradition of servitude end with her. However, after Rosaura gives birth to a daughter, she must have a hysterectomy. As such, the baby is Rosaura's youngest and daughter. As tradition dictates, Rosaura has sentenced her newborn baby to a life of servitude. Although Tita is not exempt from finding liberation through death, she succeeds in ending the oppressive custom for young girls. Likening liberation to death, Esquivel suggests that Mexican women need to "liberate" themselves from abuse, especially when the abuse is disguised as culture and tradition. In other words, Esquivel ties women's liberation to the death of patriarchal practices. Making an exception for Gertrudis—who achieves freedom and breaks with cycles of violence through running away—Esquivel suggests women of color, women who are often mistreated, and misrepresented by society, can be the most powerful change-makers.

Although Esquivel's portrayals of Gertrudis, as a hypersexual woman with an inherent proclivity towards good rhythm, proves problematic, I would caution against a conclusion that

settles on Esquivel simply perpetuating racialized stereotypes. The reductionist analysis dismisses the ways in which *Like Water for Chocolate* parodies this customary practice.

Meredith Stambaugh finds that

The novel's historical context and setting are essential for understanding characters like Gertrudis—Tita's oldest sister—whose participation in the revolution makes her liberation possible. Craske observes that Gertrudis ... turns gender roles on their head and lives her life exactly as she sees fit. (189)

Like Water for Chocolate demands a deeper analysis of Gertrudis's hypersexuality that is not due to her African ancestry, but rather, due to becoming the vessel for Tita and Pedro's love. "With that meal it seemed they had discovered a new system of communication, in which Tita was the transmitter, Pedro the receiver, and poor Gertrudis the medium, the conducting body through which the singular sexual message was passed" (38). Indeed, as the "medium" for Pedro and Tita's repressed love and lust, Gertrudis becomes overwhelmed by passion, runs away and into the arms of a revolutionary soldier but leaves him because he could not extinguish the fire inside of her. Gertrudis chooses to work in a brothel and later becomes a general of the Mexican Revolution, a wife, and mother. At first, Mama Elena became bedridden upon learning of Gertrudis' departure; however, she was under the impression that her eldest daughter had been kidnapped—shedding light on a common war-time practice. Upon learning that her daughter was working in a brothel, the (*ma*)*machista* matriarch forbids the mention of her oldest daughter, pretending she is dead.

In Gertrudis's choosing to work as a prostitute, the text further serves to destigmatize sex-work and the controlled depictions of women as either virginal or sexual deviants. In this way, Gertrudis's character toys with the limitations of women's representation. Perhaps,

Gertrudis is not an oversexualized “mulatta,” rather emblematic of bravery and liberation. Upon emancipation—achieved through physically running away from her family and sexual liberation—Gertrudis achieves unfathomable success. Gertrudis takes agency over her life, choosing to embody all the traditional gender roles (except for cooking), and becoming one of the most celebrated and respected generals. Esquivel deconstructs the myth of the fallen woman and converts Gertrudis into a national hero. This is telling of a deeper history within Mexico’s *machismo*, racism, and stance against the United States. As a platform for social change, the Mexican Revolution provides a sensible backdrop for a text that destabilizes customary expectations. Certainly, Mama Elena tries to erase Gertrudis (the only Black character that survives), only to lose all power because of Gertrudis’ revolutionary efforts. On the one hand Gertrudis represents the oppressed and misrepresented, while Mama Elena, on the other, personifies the patriarchy and Mexican government. Therefore, Mama Elena’s efforts to erase Gertrudis are thwarted by the Revolution of “los de abajo.”^{xxxv} The irony of Gertrudis rising through the ranks to become a general is not lost on the reader. The practice of women’s erasure—particularly of women of color—and its demise at Gertrudis’s hand, further indicates Esquivel’s commentary on the political climate.

Women were active fighters in the revolution, as opposed to the historically reductionist practice of assigning women to culinary and sexual services. Indeed, one of Mexico’s most celebrated symbols of virility and liberation is an Afro-*mestiza* who “was a *general* in the revolutionary army. The commission had been earned by sheer hard work, she fought like mad on the field of battle.” Gertrudis becomes a woman adored and respected by Mexican society—defying tradition. As a truth bearer, she presents Tita with an option that allays that combats her internalized guilt and assists her in breaking the cycles of repression. Much like Esquivel, who

dismisses history as the all-important and exclusive authority and presents life in Mexico from the often-overlooked perspective of women, Gertrudis similarly offers Tita an alternative reality:

The truth! The truth! Look, Tita, the simple truth is that the truth does not exist; it all depends on a person's point of view. For example, in your case, the truth could be that Rosaura married Pedro, showing no loyalty, not caring a damn that you really loved him, that's the truth, isn't it? ...

Pedro and you have both made the mistake of trying to keep the truth a secret, but it will come out in time. Look, Mama is dead, and it's God's own truth that she wouldn't listen to reason, but Rosaura is different, she knows the truth perfectly well and has to understand; what's more, I think that deep down she has always understood. You have no choice but to stand up for the truth, right now. (136)

Gertrudis understands that silence only empowers those who benefit from the secrecy—usually the oppressor—and disempowers those whose authority is restricted—usually the oppressed. Therefore, Gertrudis does not invert power dynamics, she eradicates them. Gertrudis' visit catalyzes Tita's own self-liberation and the youngest de la Garza consummates her love with Pedro. After sleeping with Pedro for the first time—an act demonstrative of Tita's freedom—Tita stands up to her mother, albeit post-mortem, who appears to punish her for her indiscretions. It is important to acknowledge Tita chooses death; Tita has granted herself the freedom to make a choice, further cementing the idea that death leads to liberation and countering the idea that it is a weakness.

Conclusions

Como agua para chocolate problematizes the role of history, race, and women. Esquivel demonstrates that Anzaldúa's borderlands are indeed a state of living "sin fronteras." Anzaldúa explains that to survive the borderlands, one must live without borders and exist as a crossroads, defining the borderlands as "a vague and undetermined place created by the emotional residue of an unnatural boundary. It is in a constant state of transition. The prohibited and forbidden are its inhabitants" (25). Both authors do away with the physical boundaries that serve to segregate; they turn the borderlands inward and speak through themselves about their experiences to include traits of being from here and from there: *de aquí y de allá*. In this way, borderlands are not reduced to the physical crossing in and out of the United States, but rather about dismissing the construction of borders.

Rather than reading *Como agua para chocolate* as a continuation of the male canon or a poor imitation of such, the text speaks for itself. Contrary to popular criticism, Esquivel makes a powerful commentary on the Mexican Revolution. Women experienced the war as active participants in a variety of roles. However, Esquivel focuses on the impacts of the war, and does not edit her commentary to dismiss women's experiences or further political agendas. She addresses women's equality and their erasure, giving the Mexican Revolution a secondary role. In a way, Esquivel inverts the hierarchy of gender roles and demonstrates that tradition, war, and history are nonessentials whereas the kitchen is foundational.

Esquivel demonstrates the fragility of nationhood and the consequences of dismissing women's experiences and relegating them to the kitchen—as if it were a proscribed place and not a necessity. "Esquivel 'feminizes' her novel by presenting a community of women sustained through an activity—the preparation of food—that transcends social barriers of class, race, and generation" (Ibsen 112). Ironically, it is through the kitchen that cycles of violence are dismissed

and community is built. Unlike Bhabha who perpetuates exclusion, solitude, and intercultural negotiations, Anzaldúa and Esquivel express disintegration and dissemination. For example, Anzaldúa honors her indigenous and Catholic (read: European) heritage, and she speaks of honoring Yemaya—representing her African roots—and extends her identity transnationally. Similarly, Esquivel highlights the diversity of women such as Mama Elena, Chenchá, and Gertrudis, and addresses anti-Blackness within Mexican culture. The concept of the “other” does not exist, there is no “other” to contrast and compare with, instead, there is room for diversity.

Esquivel further complicates the ideas of the borderlands, not as a survival strategy but as a tool for success. Esquivel and Anzaldúa ridicule the European forefathers (in literature, history, tradition, etcetera) and become cultural agents that do not entertain colonial era practices of exclusion, *machismo*, and racism.

Chapter 3

Mayra Santos-Febres' and Yolanda Arroyo Pizarro's Nonconformist Approaches to Healing Transnational and Generational Trauma

The Combahee River Collective in the United States has long promoted a process of liberation for Black women because “if Black women were free, it would mean that everyone else would have to be free since our freedom would necessitate the destruction of all the systems of oppression” (67). Mayra Santos-Febres' *Fe en disfraz* (2009) and Yolanda Arroyo Pizarro's *las Negras* (2012), reveal that the Combahee River Collective's statement is still relevant and that a national sense of community and an all-inclusive desire for liberation can only be brought about by the most marginalized subjects. In Latin America and in the United States—as in many parts of the world—that voice belongs to women of color, specifically to Black women. In this chapter, I study *Fe en Disfraz* and *las Negras*, as examples of self-writing. These works transform conventional understandings of self-writing—not to be labeled as a sub-category or foreign literature category—and combine a bicultural, diasporic, transnational lived experience and creative expression, personal and collective memory, and private and public history. Furthermore, these Afro-Puerto Rican and Latinx authored texts, expand upon the ideas of self-writing to include their multiple communities. This is not meant to be reductive of the works written by Afro-Puerto Rican and Latinx authors, but rather, acknowledging the impossibility of fully removing the “self” from writing, these authors present it as a “communal self.” I focus on the decolonization process from the perspective of the most marginalized Puerto Rican subjects and the society that they present—not as a counter discourse or to fill in the blanks of what society is, but as literary reflections of lived experiences that have been historically excluded or

imagined. Specifically, I consider how Santos-Febres and Arroyo Pizarro address memory, religion, spirituality, and history. These authors' experiences cross literary boundaries that reflect their status as subjects who straddle multiple metaphoric, political, historical, and social borders. These texts present an insightful depiction of the complexities of identity politics. Women of color use their voice for "other" oppressed subjects—even speaking to oppressions that are not their own and, especially, for those who are more oppressed. That is, Santos-Febres and Arroyo Pizarro look at "others" and find a connection to a hemispheric experience—a Black woman's experience. These are didactic texts in that they shed light on communities that are not known to the dominant culture nor are they recognized within the subdominant Latin community.

Mayra Santos-Febres' *Fe en Disfraz*

Fe en disfraz es muchas cosas, pero, también es una novela acerca de la memoria, de la herida que es recordar. Está montada sobre documentos falsos, falsificados, reescritos con retazos de declaraciones de esclavos que recogí de múltiples fuentes primarias y secundarias; que recombíné, traduje o que, francamente, inventé. (Nota de la autora, *Fe en disfraz*)^{xxxvi}

At the 2018 "Festival de la Palabra" in San Juan, Puerto Rico, *The Afro-Hispanic Review* presented a monographic issue about Afro-Puerto Rican women. One of the coeditors of the monographic issue is the award-winning Afro-Puerto Rican author Santos-Febres. During the panel presentation, Santos-Febres says the following:

Y se da por sobreentendido que la raza existe por si sola como un fenómeno natural y no como una construcción social, ideológica, espiritual, y económica, que crea esta cosa extraña que se llama que se ha llamado el negro, el nigger, y que ahora se llama el afrodescendiente. Que va cambiando, verdad, de nombre en la medida en que se dan luchas por las palabras realmente por como se llama la gente, como asumen una identidad.^{xxxvii}

Race, and thereby racism, is not a natural phenomenon. The construction of these ideologies

corresponds to the desires of society's dominant group to remain in power. As such, the dominant group (historically white men), molds social norms whose functions preserve their homogenization.

At last I found a name, because it is not African American. Whatever you want to call it, it is this (points to the *Afro-Hispanic Review*). **This border between being Black, and being Latina, and being Puerto Rican, and being diasporic in all aspects.** In the aspect of race, in the aspect of being Puerto Rican—because we live with more Puerto Ricans outside than inside—, in the aspect of being a woman—**we have an identity that is transnational, too. So, here there are three transnationalities.** (my emphasis, my translation) ^{xxxviii}

Santos-Febres' assertion of her identity is powerful, she implies a relationship and sense of nationality with Latinx and Afro-Latinx women—crossing national borders. Santos-Febres' speaks to the importance of self-identifying from her position as a thrice oppressed/marginalized subject and highlights the multiple points of contact amongst all three oppressive points. In the way that Santos-Febres' underscores the shared "otherization," she points to the responsibilities that come with this knowledge. Both Puerto Rican women present their identity as a hemispheric and Black experience rather than one confined to the borders of the Caribbean island. Indeed, Santos-Febres' main character is an Afro-Venezuelan woman living in the United States who travels throughout Latin America and through time; however, the narrator is a white Puerto Rican man who serves as a critique of Puerto Rican nationality and identity.

Santos-Febres' writing trajectory is an example of the services women of color continue to provide by redefining concepts that are social constructs and advocating for social injustices

(despite not being personally afflicted by all of them). Perhaps due to a sense of empathy, women—especially Black women—continue to maintain and create possibilities for people who are relationally “othered.”

Fe en Disfraz takes us back in time to slavery in Latin America, specifically the experience of enslaved women in Brazil, Costa Rica, Venezuela, and Colombia, their struggles, their pain, and their pleasures. Through archival research, firsthand testimonies, and authorial creative liberties (“francamente, inventé”), Santos-Febres filters history through the lens of a Black woman whose story is transnational. Santos-Febres delves into a collective diasporic memory, her archival research is a form of testimonial recuperation where she has taken some creative liberties. Therefore, Santos-Febres’ use of archival documents—including explorations of the first-person narration, and its many manifestations—merits a deeper analysis. *Fe en Disfraz* imagines a reconciliation with a past to heal transgenerational traumas: slavery and colonialism. Indeed, if trauma and fear can be inherited, then it should be possible that other non-tangibles—such as memory—can also be hereditary. The short novel also presents the strength of desire and its negotiations with the power of others. Lastly, it is important to examine how the novel considers the erotization of Black bodies or participates in its portrayal. *Fe en disfraz* serves as an example of self-writing for Santos-Febres, Afro-Puerto Rican women, Afro-Latinx women, and Black women transnationally.

The preface of *Fe en disfraz* ends with the white heterosexual, Puerto Rican narrator musing: “El tiempo se ha detenido. Mi historia quedará como testimonio, por si acaso no regreso de esta Vispera de Todos los Santos” (14).^{xxxix} The satire of having a representative from the dominant culture fear being erased, is not lost on the reader; still, the short novel is neither an autobiography nor a *testimonio*. Instead, the novel functions as a form of self-writing for both the

author and the female descendants of enslaved people in the western hemisphere. Some of the autobiographical elements in *Fe en disfraz* can be seen in the novel's protagonist, "No abundan las mujeres como Fe en esta disciplina; mujeres preparadas en Florencia, en México; ... No son muchas las estrellas académicas con sus preparacion y que, como Fe, sean, a su vez, mujeres negras" (16-17).^{x1} This description of Fe is akin to a description of Santos-Febres who holds several intermediary positions, as an Afro-Puerto Rican academic and writer, she straddles several insider/outsider spaces that inform her text and create an awareness of women's needs, while maintaining the integrity of those dichotomies. *Fe en disfraz* reflects the added layer of Puerto Rico's unique sense of in-betweenness due to its status as a modern-day colony.

Fe en disfraz explores the interpersonal relationships fabricated from colonial dynamics that define existing racial, gender, and sexual hierarchies. In *Fe en disfraz*, the painful past is recycled to denounce both the process of eroticization of domination (by white men) and submission (of women of African descent) and the re-enactment of such dynamics in postcolonial societies. The novel disconnects from the restrictive and traditional view of sex in its embrace of sadomasochism (S&M) specifically in its inversion of power dynamics within S&M. In so doing, the author reverses the traditional gender roles ascribed to the sexual practice. She takes an untraditional and eschewed practice, to abjure and ridicule the societal practice of assigning such gender norms. In other words, to use a "disreputable" sexual practice—acknowledging that sex is in itself a proscribed topic—to illuminate on the taboo that is the creation of gender norms is a way to mirror the context.

Santos-Febres points at the possibility of subversions of traditional power dynamics in interracial relationships—albeit not unproblematically. The erotic short novel recounts the sexual exploitation of enslaved women in Brazil, Costa Rica, Venezuela, and Colombia. In a non-linear

manner, events from the past and the present intersect—serving as a reminder that time and space in Latin America are not always perceived in a linear way. Santos-Febres incorporates references to other cultural contexts in Latin America and the United States. Martín Tirado, the narrator and one of the protagonists, works under Fe Verdejo, a museologist, researcher, and the organizer of an exhibition on manumitted enslaved people. Fe’s work in the archives serves as another autobiographical trait as Santos-Febres’ research for this novel necessitated archival research from where she created the stories of the enslaved women. The discovery of historical documents that reveal brutalities suffered by enslaved women serve as a conductor to the past. While Martín reads each of the stories of the enslaved women, he becomes excited by their testimonies, almost all characterized by physical and sexual abuse—these violations are highlighted in autobiographical and testimonial self-writings of enslaved women such as Harriet Jacobs *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* (1861).

Perhaps strategically, and as a parody of the idea that literature reflects reality, *Fe en disfraz*’s narrator is a white Puerto Rican male historian. In a conversation with Fe, Martín asks the following:

—¿A quiénes se habrían parecido esas mujeres?

—¿No es obvio, Martín? Se parecían a mí.

Me quedé mirando a Fe, en silencio. Curiosamente, nunca antes me había detenido a pensar que sus esclavas se le parecieran. Que ella, presente y ante mí, tuviera la misma tez, el mismo cuerpo que una esclava agredida hace más de doscientos años. Que el objeto de su estudio estuviera tan cerca de su piel. ^{xli}

That Martín is an ignorant white Puerto Rican man who does not see the connection with a Black Hispanic woman serves to demonstrate why Santos-Febres’ concept of identity is a hemispheric,

transnational, and communal experience amongst women of color regardless of their country of origin. The narrator satirizes the idea of a nationality that is restricted by colonial era geographical limitations. For Martín, archival preservation and historicity is his career; for Fe, there is an added layer to her work that makes her career choice personal. Although it appears that Martín can appreciate and study the horrors of slavery, he lacks a consciousness of racial discrimination in society and other forms of oppression and injustice. Martín is unable to see the enslaved women as people and continues the tradition of dehumanizing and objectifying them, and their descendants. Conversely, Fe is conscious of her resemblance to the enslaved women. Fe identifies with these women—in a way that is not limited to a set time or space—and she reflects on the privilege of having been born in the future. Santos-Febres captures a trite experience for white people on one end, and women of color and non-heteronormative people on the other. Martín subjects Fe to a pedagogical position, where she has to compartmentalize her trauma (personal and collective), in order to serve as a catalyst for a white America's social consciousness. Fe, like many women of color and non-heteronormative people, must perform her hardship to her subordinate colleague, in order for him to develop a social and ethical consciousness. This highlights another unjust commonality in the transnational post-colonial experience; in other words, minorities must display their hardship as part of white America's decolonization process. As an experience that touches the lives of marginalized communities, that simple exchange between Martín and Fe reflects a common experience for people of color and those who live outside of dominant cultural standards and serves as an example of a communal self-writing or testimony. Martín's arousal over the enslaved women's testimonies and his indolence and obliviousness to Fe's personal investment, is a symptom of the disease of colonization as it has manifested for white-cis men. Martín's work presents an endemic remnant

of colonization for white people—a shallow and emotional idealization of the past that fails to acknowledge the current socio-political issues and lasting effects of slavery, especially with regards to the exotization and erotization of Black female bodies and their pain.

At first glance, the novel suggests Martín's attraction to Fe is a racist-patriarchal-power-fantasy involving dynamics of domination and submission as sources of eroticism. Specifically, the racial characterization of the protagonists—white man and *mulata* woman—introduces a parallelism informed by the stories of the manumitted enslaved people and the life of Fe Verdejo. However, the treatment of slavery and the representation of enslaved women is articulated through an effort to question, reorder, and parody official history. Fe embodies the enslaved people's past and serves to unify different mechanisms by which to explore memories—nurturing from traditions associated with memory and oral narratives. In its representation of slavery, *Fe en disfraz* transcends the examination of the past's painful episodes and transfers them to the present, exploring their documentation, exhibiting them, and reinterpreting them. For Santos-Febres' text, the liberating act does not occur in the colonial space due to abolition, but rather, it occurs in the present, because of restructured power relations (racial and gender).

From the present and based on “otherization,” Fe (re)creates a rite around a cultural trauma that is informed by her research and by memories. From this moment on, the narration moves between history, a performative recovery of a collective trauma, and the disarticulation of power dynamics that have transpired over the centuries. The discursive element that unites the two main axes of the plot, the stories of the enslaved people (past) and the relationship between Fe and Martín (present), is a mysterious costume from the eighteenth century. During a research trip to Brazil, Fe visits the “*Recogimiento de las Macaúbas*” convent and meets with an elderly *mulata* nun who is the daughter and granddaughter of nuns—“Aun así nació ella, y nació su

madre. Nació toda su casta. Todas monjas y putas” (Santos-Febres 24).^{xlii} This nun was the first in her family who kept vows, motivated as she explained, more by shame than by *fe* (Faith)—and because she straddled the ethereal and spiritual world—she was done seeing people dressed as something they were not (24). The elderly nun directs Fe to the convent’s archives, and there Fe finds the dress. To Fe’s surprise, the nuns are happy to dispense with the dress under one condition, that Fe never return the dress.

Fe literally puts on the costume and makes it a place of memory. The protagonist cannot avoid falling into the temptation of reproducing—in her own flesh—the pain and sexual condition that has inhabited that dress for centuries. In this way, Fe’s body is a place of memory and by inflicting pain onto herself—using her skin and the dress as a conduit to a past where pain was inflicted on Black women—Fe recreates physical suffering, but also creates an opportunity to heal. This is evident in the sexual encounters between Fe and Martín as they occur between October 31 and November 1, dates that coincide with celebrations of Halloween, All Souls Day, and Day of the Dead—emphasizing the importance of spirituality. As part of the ritual, Fe puts on the antique dress in the presence of her lover. An important element of the ceremony is the makeup of the outfit—a leather harness and rods that physically harm Fe.

Con una mano, Fe apretó las correas del arnés contra su carne. Frunció el ceño. Su piel se arrugó contra las bandas, mudando de color, enrojeciéndose.... Fe apretó aún más el arnés y echó un poco la cabeza hacía atrás, mordiéndose los labios. Las varillas se hundieron en su carne.... Fe dio un paso y el arnés bailó contra la carne expuesta, hiriéndola aun mas. Entonces, mi jefa procedió a vestirse con el traje amarillo de seda. No necesitó mi ayuda para atarse el pasacintas, para terminar de abotonarse el antebrazo. Se cubrió entera. Acto seguido, se puso a gatas. Empezó a lamerme los pies, luego, las

pantorrillas, las rodillas, los muslos, las entrepiernas. Yo, preso del rito, no hacía más que jadear, sabiendo que, con cada caricia, la piel de Fe recibía un mordisco del arnés, que levantaba en una nueva herida. En aquella sala vacía y con aquel extraño traje puesto, Fe Verdejo pagaba en sangre el placer de darme placer. No pude contenerme. Me vacié en su boca, como una ofrenda. (Santos-Febres 57-58)^{xliii}

The tight contraption inflicts scratches that bleed on Fe's thighs and between her legs. Wounds Martín licks zealously after the sexual act. While these gestures become an element of a high erotic charge for both, one of the major contributions is their disarticulation of power dynamics and their ability to dramatically channel violence. That is, to rewrite and relive historical trauma fueled by centuries of physical and sexual abuse. Pain is presented as a direct consequence of the search for sexual pleasure, but also as the representation and appropriation of the suffering of Fe's ancestors. At first glance, this is a problematic fantasy of submission, but upon a closer inspection, it serves as a renegotiation of power in their sexual relationship as Fe, singlehandedly, tightens the harness straps against her own flesh.

The sadomasochism and eroticism of the ritual posits another example of an unconventional betrayal of gender roles. The DSM-5 explains sadomasochism as a paraphilia and addresses masochism and sadism as maladies. Masochism disorder refers to those who experience sexual arousal in response to pain, humiliation, bondage, or torture, whereas sadists experience sexual arousal by inflicting pain. According to Harry Oosterhuis, the 19th century German psychiatrist Krafft-Ebbing's "claim that sadomasochism formed the foundation of the sexual relationship of man and woman because it readily invited associations with overpowering, rape, murder for lust and even cannibalism" ("Sexual Modernity in the Works of Richard von Krafft-Ebing and Albert Moll"). It is not surprising to find that sadism—derivation of sexual

pleasure from causing pain or humiliation onto others—was assigned as the masculine tendency in comparison to masochism—derivation of experiencing sexual pleasure from pain or humiliation—assigned as the feminine quality and thereby perpetuating stereotypical gender norms. Martín realizes the inversion of traditional sadomasochistic power dynamics and comments: “Sentí miedo y vergüenza. Había sido yo el penetrado, el desnudo. Yo el venido. Los ojos de Fe, su silencio después de que me contara del traje, me lo hicieron saber” (59).^{xliv}

Only Fe oversees dosing and sharpening her own pain. In this sexual game, Martín does not play the role of a dominant master, but functions as an element of a ritual orchestrated by Fe as she plays with and inverts the dynamics of power, gender, and race. Each description of such encounters indicates that Fe decides and controls how the sexual roles are assigned. The relationship between Fe and Martín destabilizes the racial hierarchies inherited from the colonial period, both because Fe is a Black woman and Martín’s boss. In this sense, the reader confronts redistribution of power determined by race, sex, and class—factors that condition the traditional assignment of gender and racial roles. Despite this, the inversion of power dynamics remains problematic. Historically, the workforce has been composed by men, but expanded later to include female subordinates. Santos-Febres’ reversal of the roles does not end the cycle of abuse, it merely reverses who the abuser and abused are—perhaps offering a sense of poetic justice, but not a way in which this dynamic is destroyed. Fe and Martín’s relationship presents an uneven power dynamic because they are not lateral colleagues, she is his superior. As such, Fe’s actions do not exist in a vacuum; she faces risks in being a Hispanic Black woman who is sleeping with her subordinate. Fe stands to lose more than Martín, in terms of her healing (transgenerational trauma) as it is not common to see women of color in positions of power. Still, perhaps much

more significant is the allegorical reappropriation, from an erotic pretense, of the physical abuse suffered by the enslaved people.

Considering slavery from the perspective of an Afro-descendant writer can be questioned, eroticizing the colonial trauma, and strengthening the stereotype of Black and *mulato* women is certainly conflicting. Still, the exclusion of these women's stories remains the real problem. Of the novel's twenty-four chapters, four travel back in time into the judicial records and testimonies of enslaved women: Chapter III is titled "Declaratoria ante el gobernador Alonso de Pires,/ Aldea de Tejuco/ Archivo Histórico de Minas/ Gerais Caso: Diamantina. Condición: esclava/ 1785; Chapter V is titled "Registro Histórico del Valle de Matina, Costa Rica/ Papeles del gobernador Diego de la Haya/ Caso: María y Petrona. Condición: esclavas/ 1719; and Chapter VIII is titled "Papeles de la Villa de Mompox, Cartagena de Indias,/ Archivo Histórico de la Nueva Granada y del gobernador Francisco del Valle/ Caso: Ana María. Condición: esclava/ 1743."^{xlv} The stories are taken from official archives of religious institutions and municipal records of cities throughout Latin America—Venezuela, Brazil, Costa Rica, and Colombia. Each of the documents classifies women according to their racial origin and status as enslaved or manumitted. Perhaps strategically, Santos-Febres does not disclose what parts are translated, combined, or flat out invented. Therefore, Santos-Febres positions the reader in an active and participatory role of questioning which stories are true? How much of these stories are true? What are the lasting effects of those stories? And how does the reader participate in maintaining those dynamics? Santos-Febres has also positioned the introspective reader in the role of participant in colonial-era internalized racism, sexism, and other socio-cultural norms.

Chapter III tells the story of Diamantina from the historical records of Minas Gerais, Brazil. In 1785 Diamantina presents a declaration to the governor for herself and her five

children. The document indicates this is Diamantina's second official denouncement of her mistress, doña Antonia de la Granda y Balbín. Previously, Diamantina petitioned the governor for protection against her mistress for physical abuse. Doña Antonia's testimony reflects her prejudice against Black women as erotic and shamefully promiscuous and the bigotry of white women in promulgating such stereotypes. However, the purpose of Diamantina's second declaration is not necessarily to seek protection from her mistress's abuses, but rather to inform the courts of Tomás de Angueira's death and to petition the courts to fulfill his will. Angueira's will declared Diamantina's children as his heirs—strongly suggesting Diamantina's children were Angueira's. According to Patricia Valladares-Ruiz, the history of this enslaved woman summons some of the greatest fears of colonial society: miscegenation, the undermining of racial purity, the usufruct of white fortunes by Afro-descendants, and the ensuing social ascent of the latter (608). In conversation with Valladares-Ruiz, I would add that the fears of white colonial women served to demonstrate the precariousness of male dominance that was necessary for maintaining the colonial racial social structure. In essence, white women's fears were essential to the colonial racial social norms. Contrary to popular belief, white women played an active role in maintaining and perpetuating the stereotypes of Black women that have persisted. These maintained that white women needed to believe and criminalize enslaved women such as Diamantina, as someone who exploited her hypersexuality to seduce her master and take over his fortune. This was a more plausible mentality than the reality that both women shared oppressive points of contact; with the destruction of this belief system, it would remain impossible for the dominant culture to consider itself a victim of Blackness and would require the destruction of their fear.

Two chapters later, Martín discovers an archive that reads: “Nacida en 1731 ó 1735, no se conoce la fecha exacta. Hija de María da Costa, negra esclava, y Caetano de Sá, portugués [...], esclava del médico del Arraial de Tejuco, don Manuel de Pires, quien la tomó como amante siendo ella apenas una niña de once años” (41).^{xlvi} Xica da Silva was from Arraial do Tijuco in Minas Gerais—nowadays the city is called Diamantina—the daughter of a Portuguese man, Antônio Caetano de Sá, and María da Costa, an enslaved woman (see Júnia Ferreria Furtado’s *Chica da Silva: A Brazilian Slave of the Eighteenth Century*). Xica da Silva was born into slavery, but ascended socially and financially. Xica da Silva’s first-born son was able to receive a Portuguese title (Ferreira Furtado 52). However, Xica da Silva’s daughters were sent to the convent of Macaúbas, the same convent where Fe finds the elderly nun who leads Fe to the dress (59). The logic follows that the dress Fe uses for her rituals originally belonged to Xica da Silva.

Diamantina’s description mirrors aspects of Xica da Silva’s life. The historic Xica da Silva and Santos-Febres’ characters were both from Minas Gerais, both born into slavery, both had children with their owners, and both inherited fortunes. Valladares-Ruiz reminds, “en la capitania de Minas Gerais, durante el siglo XVIII—periodo en el que transcurren las vidas de Xica y Diamantina—abundaron las manumisiones vinculadas a los concubinatos entre amos blancos y esclavas.” Although Diamantina’s story contains several biographical references to Xica da Silva, in *Fe en disfraz*, Diamantina’s condition remains that of an enslaved person. The power dynamics in place do not allow for a consensual relationship between a slave owner and an enslaved person. Therefore, perhaps deliberately, the reader is not informed of the ruling in Diamantina’s case, but can hope for an outcome like Xica da Silva’s. Diamantina actively participates, and according to her mistress, enjoys her meetings with Angueira; however, other

manumitted women report sexual abuse, rape, and violence from their white masters. In other words, the experiences of Black women and their approaches to survival, were diverse.

The oldest entry relates the case of a seventeenth century woman, “Chapter XII Libro de Consulta del Colegio Jesuita San Francisco Javier de Mérida, Venezuela. Caso: mulata Pascuala. Condición: esclava. 1645.” Pascuala was sent from Mérida to the prison of Castillo de la Barra in Maracaibo, in Venezuela accused of bewitching the teenage son of a landowner. Therefore, to prevent other men from becoming victims, “por sus artes de yerbería y los efluvios embrujadores de su cuerpo, el Santo Oficio aconseja precaución en el trato diario con la mulata Pascuala. Los oficiales del castillo de Barra quedan advertidos de guardar precavida distancia” (Santos-Febres 63).^{xlvii} Pascuala’s story feeds the myth of the demonic, hypersexual, *mulata* who hexes white men. Prior to her affair with the landowner’s son, Pascuala was known for her healing abilities and knowledge of plants, and she was sought out by creole high society (61). However, the criminalization of her practice occurred because Pascuala was romantically linked to a wealthy white man. This case is indicative of the historically preserved and socially created notion of a person’s place in society and the consequences of what happens when someone strays. Pascuala’s “crime” is rooted in a racist and sexist ideology that makes it inconceivable for women, especially Black women, to be equal to white men. This colonial malady is both an enigmatic and an interdependent relationship that relegates Black women to the margins of society where they are cast as inferior to white men and women.

There are three exception to the format of the chapters—titled solely by a roman numeral or a roman numeral followed by the names of the enslaved or manumitted women, and their status. Because it is Martín’s job to document the cases of the enslaved or manumitted women, every chapter is a journal-like entry that narrates the story of his and Fe’s relationship; between

each of their encounters, Martín interlinks the denouncements of the enslaved women. Santos-Febres' choice in narration style is reminiscent of hupomnemata: individual notebooks and journals of the ancient Greeks. The hupomnemata:

Do not constitute a “narrative of oneself” . . . The intent is not to pursue the unspeakable, nor to reveal the hidden, nor to say the unsaid, **but on the contrary to capture the already said, to collect what one has managed to hear or read, and for a purpose that is nothing less than the shaping of the self.** (my emphasis, Foucault *Ethics* 210-11)

Furthermore, Foucault argues the hupomnemata contributes to the formation of the self in three ways: “the limiting effects of the coupling of reading with writing; the regular practice of the disparate that determines choices, and the appropriation which that practices brings about” (Foucault 211). The “appropriation” Foucault references explains that the act of writing turns the author into a subjective rendition and does not serve as a faithful rendition of others, but rather of the writer's identity. Following Foucault's logic, Santos-Febres parodies the idea that a male-white history can truly reflect society; instead, it reflects the author and the dominant culture's identity. Martín's entries demonstrate the flawed process of documenting history. The three entries that differ are Chapter “XVIII Ciudad de Maracaibo Fe Verdejo Circa 1985,” Chapter “XX Isla de Puerto Rico Aldea de Río Piedras Circa 1984,” and the last chapter “XXIV Chicago, Illinois Encuentro con Fe Verdejo.” Chapter XVIII is titled: “Ciudad de Maracaibo/ Fe Verdejo/ Circa 1985.”

The title of Chapter XVIII, naming Fe Verdejo, is formatted the same way as the enslaved women's records. Martín does not list Fe's status but has kept notes about her as if she were an enslaved or manumitted woman for the exhibition she is organizing and not the director and Martín's supervisor. This detail should not be overlooked because it shows just how subtly,

but intricately, male-colonialist-white-supremacy has survived. It is safe to infer Martín views Fe as an enslaved woman—racialized, and perhaps worse than outright objectifying Fe, he has likened her to her voiceless ancestors and symbolically recorded or transferred her to the unknown areas of history as if Fe similarly did not have a voice. Martín's entry on Fe is a dangerous practice in that it confines contemporary Black women to a particular place in society—linking them to a one-dimensional and stereotypical vision of an enslaved woman. This practice reduces Black women's experiences and identities to the pigeonholes that colonial white men created, allows for continued practice of such categorization, removing their right to self-identify; furthermore, it reflects lack of self-awareness and of privilege. Returning to Foucault, Martín's classification of Fe, in the same manner as his classification of the enslaved women, provides insight into him, and thereby, a reflection of the dominant culture's identity and its perception of Black women.

Santos-Febres describes true historical events in a way that is accessible to contemporary readers, therefore, the tension between historical authenticity and fiction is secondary to the didactic function of the novel. Because Santos-Febres does not inform readers which stories are, or how much of each story is historically accurate, and because Santos-Febres subliminally denounces the lasting effects of colonialism, she places responsibility on the reader to detect the cycles of violence, the instances where there is resistance, and to explore their own unconscious biases. Not unlike the enslaved women's stories, and reminiscent of the elderly Brazilian nun, the chapter eighteen entry tells the story of Fe's difficult childhood and a traumatic and violent rape scene that responds to the need to break with colonial-era cycles of race, gender, and violence:

Pero no me esperaba la fuerza con que me agarró por debajo el traje, me desgarró la ropa

interior, me metió los dedos por dentro hasta ponerme de cuclillas. Tampoco me esperaba la manera como me mantuvo sujeta contra el suelo, mientras me metía su miembro duro entre las piernas. El muchacho comenzó a mordirme, a arañarme, a abrirme con empujones. Forcejeé un poco, pero lo peor de todo fue cómo mi cuerpo respondió a cada empujón y a cada manoplazo. Respondió con sangre y con ardor. Respondió con un temblor intenso que salió, inesperado, de mi vagina. Latí completa, en carne viva, debajo del traje. Aquella fue la única vez que grité, mientras Aníbal Andrés estuvo regocijándose en mi carne. Tengo que admitir que me gustó aquella derrota. Aquella sumisión dolorosa, aquel dejarme hacer. (90)^{xlvi}

Fe's rape is difficult to read, not so much for the violence surrounding it, but because of the confusion surrounding how Fe processes her own trauma. It is unclear if Fe feels a sense of betrayal from her body, or a sense of gratitude for finding pleasure in her trauma and taking control of when she physically responds ("That was the only time I screamed"). Taking an unpopular and controversial stance on rape and sexual violence, Fe's rape scene demonstrates the way in which women are diverse—in their trauma processing and sexual desires. Sexual violence against women of color is an epidemic. The scene highlights the points of contact among Black women during the colonial era and in the present.

Chapter XVIII is told in the first person by Fe as indicated by her use of "I" and in this case, representative of a collective point of view and experience—the reader learns of a tradition in Fe's family of women who have had to leave the convent after becoming pregnant with their daughters. The subtler implication, one that Santos-Febres also plays with, is the tradition of secrecy. At age fourteen, Fe's grandmother receives a phone call from the convent to immediately remove her daughter because she is pregnant. No one knows who the father is and it

does not seem to matter (87). Thus, women are the keepers of memory, trauma, secrets, and history. Santos-Febres relegating the “father’s” identity and stories to the margin is another way in which the author ridicules the tradition of a singular male authorial and historian perspective. Furthermore, the resemblance to the Brazilian nun’s life indicates that the practice of sending young women to convents is a transnational remnant of the colonial era that has produced a population of women harmed and castigated by society. The most impactful similarity between Fe and the Brazilian nun lies in their social consciousness and deliberate desire to break with the societal and predetermined fate ascribed to them.

Chapter XVIII not only offers the story of Fe’s traumatic childhood, but also suggests Fe as the personified history of centuries of social rejection and forced isolation. In this chapter, the reader learns that Fe’s grandmother sent her to a religious boarding school where Fe is the only poor and Black girl. The twice disadvantaged Fe takes refuge in the convent and realizes the power in rituals, “me daba miedo tocar los hábitos, pero no podía dejar de hacerlo. Lo que nunca me atreví fue a probarme uno. Sabía que aquello hubiera sido mi perdición” (88).^{xlix} Ironically, donning the nun’s habit would have caused Fe’s perdition, whereas putting on Xica’s dress—a literal embodiment of the legendary colonial sex symbol—provides a road to healing. To take advantage of and control women, Black women’s sexuality was construed in opposition to the attributes of purity and chastity associated with white women. Contrastingly, white women were assigned the role of guardians of societal moral and religious values, thereby, making Black and white women “natural” enemies. Becoming a nun was a way to position women in a different type of subversive role, one that created a sense of protection from those who would otherwise violate them; and it endorsed women to be active participants in maintaining the status quo of purity. Specifically, the convent gave the illusion of a refuge for Black women, a means to

circumvent their stereotypic roles as mistresses. Internalized notions of sacrifice and silence were important in maintaining the cycle of violence. Having learned of the importance of rituals, Fe refuses to follow those of the convent since this would mean a continuation of silence, obedience, and chastity—ways in which women gave up their autonomy and endorsed this system. Therefore, Fe’s creation of a ritual that is like her own sexual violence, and like those of the enslaved women, provides a way for her to take control and deviate from her “preordained” social role, albeit problematically.

The perils that enslaved women confronted—sexual assault, violence, exclusion, and second class citizenship—can be found in Fe’s childhood. Dedicating a chapter to Fe’s adolescence, akin to the presentation of the enslaved women’s chapters, demonstrates a continuity in the treatment of Afro-Puerto Rican women that stems from the colonial era. The chapter explains Fe’s need to explore the past, her relationship to the enslaved women’s history, and the intricacies between sexuality, violence, and healing. Vallardes-Ruiz argues Fe’s adolescence influences her adult relationships stating that Fe’s description of her first sexual experience signals a search for pleasure through submission. Conversely, Farahnaz Mohammed explains:

A little known fact is that being sexually assaulted puts you at a much higher risk of being assaulted again in the future, as does childhood sexual abuse. . . . Women who were sexually abused as children have learned silence. . . . Some theorize that it [*revictimization*] is a way of attempting to master anxiety or trauma. Some suggest that traumatization may cause some to revert to familiar patterns, despite whatever pain it may cause. And some suggest that women who have been assaulted early learn to associate sex with pain and trauma. . . . (my emphasis, “The Repetition Compulsion: Why

Rape Victims Are More Likely to be Assaulted”).

Contrary to Vallardes-Ruiz, and in agreement with Mohammed, Fe’s childhood experiences have led to her creation of a ritual where Fe is able to master that trauma. Though an unorthodox approach to healing, that is not a reason to discount it as such; in fact, it should be incredible to assume that healing tools and approaches can come from the practices of abusers who benefit from the continuation of their pain.

The history of Puerto Rico, like the history of many former Spanish colonies, omits the atrocities committed by the historians and others charged with documenting history. However, the only chapter that is set in Puerto Rico recounts the life of the historian narrator. Titled “XX Isla de Puerto Rico Aldea de Río Piedras Circa 1984,” centers on the life of Martín Tirado. The title of the chapter deviates from the format in that it excludes the name of the subject. This apparently inconsequential detail disrupts the formatting of the novel and appears as another inversion or parody of official history in that it excludes the name of the protagonist—this time, suggesting a form of anti-self-silence. Coincidentally, Martín recalls an event that takes place on October thirty-first “*Víspera de Todos los Santos*,” when he partakes in the Halloween tradition of dressing up to don a disguise or a costume. Not unlike Fe, Martín also embodies a historical persona from the colonial era, the infamous “don Juan”: “*Siglo XVI. La vestimenta recreaba exactamente la época del don Juan Tenorio, de don Giovanni, del Casanova renacentista. Entonces, me coloqué un antifaz*” (96).¹ That night, Martín states he does not want to step out of character and approaches a woman dressed in eighteenth century garments. Seemingly chivalrous, Martín kisses her hand and when he introduces himself as “Don Juan Tenorio” the woman calls him “*El gran conquistador*.” They dance, share a kiss, and after inviting her for another drink, they retire to his dorm room:

Pasé la noche entera encajado entre las carnes de aquella pobre muchacha, dándole empujones, como un poseso. Ella, tan borracha como yo, no hacía más que gritar; no sé si de placer, no sé si de dolor. No tuve tiempo para preguntarle. Al día siguiente, mi cama amaneció vacía, con una mancha de sangre adornando las sábanas. Pensé que era la mancha de mi virginidad perdida o, quizás, la de ella.

No quise indagar más. (97)^{li}

Martín does not know if the unnamed woman screams out of pleasure or out of pain, but states he did not have time to ask her. The reality is, Martín does not care to ask her because it could preempt the climax of his pleasure. Martín—symbolic for colonial white European men and contemporary white Latin American men—is not interested in whether he is inflicting pain or if he is a rapist. What is more, Martín’s commentary regarding the stain of blood is absurd. It could not signal the loss of his virginity; it could, however, represent her loss of virginity, menstrual blood, or sexual violence that draws blood. It is important to note the differences in the use of silence. From an abused woman, silence is a way to perpetuate self-harm and protect the abuser; conversely, when the oppressor remains silent, it is to protect himself and to prolong the harm done to the abused.

The spirituality suggested by the date, the ritual costuming, and the facility with which Martín assumes the more historically accurate role of “conquistador,” demonstrate the differences in colonial era strategies and tools (such as silence) when presented by white men in contrast to Black women. Indeed, *Fe en disfraz*’s most faithful reflection of society is in the metaphorical recreation of the colonial era, when Don Juan Tenorio—Martín Tirado—violently rapes a nameless woman, without the fear of facing consequences. The gender, sexual, and racial makeup of the narrator and his violence against women are ways for Santos-Febres to provide a

more accurate depiction of the history in the Americas, the remnants of colonialism in Puerto Rico, and the sexism and violence that has persisted.

Breaking with the silence and departing from ideas of self-sacrifice and purity are keys to healing; for Fe to create her own set of norms—including enjoying consensual sexual violence—serves to author and take ownership of her life. Norms that deviate from the dominant cultural norms should not be dismissed as “unhealthy” or ineffective. Providing the history of anonymous characters and lives that have either been distorted in or omitted from history, is a ritual that counters with the template for presenting non-white subjects and interrupts the cycles of colonial era violence. It is not surprising that the story of Fe contains autobiographical traits of Santos-Febres’ life as well as the stories of contemporary Afro-Puerto Rican women and Black women across the Americas.

Yolanda Arroyo Pizarro’s *las Negras*

All the eggs a woman will ever carry form in her ovaries while she is a four-month-old fetus in the womb of her mother. This means our cellular life as an egg begins in the womb of our grandmother. Each of us spent five months in our grandmother’s womb, and she in turn formed in the womb of her grandmother.

-Layne Redmond

We may have all come on different ships, but we’re in the same boat now.

-Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.

In a separate presentation at the “Festival de la Palabra,” another award-winning Afro-Puerto Rican author—Arroyo Pizarro—spoke about her writing process and her teaching practices, entering dialogue with Santos-Febres’ expansion of self-writing. Arroyo Pizarro explained that in the creative writing courses she teaches, she takes students to work with enslaved people’s documents, perform archival research, and assist in its conservation—preservation of the documents as well as a creation of histories and thereby of voices. Arroyo

Pizarro then spoke about the influence of African-based religions and how she continues to incorporate spiritual practices in her classroom. As such, the author asks students to embody and channel the people they come across in the archives; Arroyo Pizarro mentioned how the spirits of the enslaved people prevented her students from sleeping until they finished writing. Perhaps the most powerful speaking point came when Arroyo Pizarro shared the emotional, intense, and personal experience of how one of her students found the documents of her enslaved great-grandparents from the end of the nineteenth century. In this way, and not unlike *Fe en disfraz*, the personal archival work in *las Negras* serves to expand upon the definition and as a form transnational self-writing. *las Negras* is not merely a fictionalized account or a retelling of a colonial and distant past, but rather the text serves to push the boundaries of self-writing as it combines diasporic, personal, and collective memory with private and public history. Lastly, Arroyo Pizarro encourages her students to publish their stories, thereby documenting and giving voice to a historically voiceless people.

Arroyo Pizarro's *las Negras*, tells four^{lii} stories where the protagonists are Black enslaved women—some of which predate their arrival to the western Hemisphere. In writing stories with Black enslaved female protagonists, Arroyo Pizarro reclaims the past, creates a history, and presents a perspective that historical documents and historians have left out. Through a subversion of stereotypes, Arroyo Pizarro redefines the stereotypical representations of the Black woman as more than a poor, submissive, maid and slave, or sexual object. The title *las Negras*, with a lowercase “l” and a capital “N,” foreshadows the content of the text. That is, before opening the book, the reader is warned that even the grammar is **secondary to the protagonists**: “las Negras.” In a straightforward manner, Arroyo Pizarro transmits the multilayered emotions specific to enslaved women's experiences—a previously omitted or silenced narrative.^{liii} The

directness of the narratives, coupled with the profoundness of an unsophisticated narration style, speaks against the male dominance over language. A superficial reading presumes Arroyo Pizarro's language is inelegant, but a deeper analysis reveals that employing simple language is a strategy that demonstrates the fragility of male-dominated discourse and how its loquacious and abrupt syntax impedes and obscures the otherness of women, specifically of Afro-Latinx women. *las Negras* is about how historians have left Blackness/Afro-Latinx/Afro-Hispanic people outside of language and thereby outside of memory.

Arroyo Pizarro recounts the pain, suffering, and rawness of women who were abducted from their homeland, transported, and enslaved in the Americas. From this perspective, a transnational (intra)history raises to the surface. Arroyo Pizarro proffers a strong suggestion: Blackness—in all its manifestations across the Americas—can be traced back to the original African foremothers' journeys and experiences. Arroyo Pizarro's feminist and queer transparency centers oppressed women and traces their history; as such, *las Negras* becomes a genuine referent for telling the withheld, even unknown stories—which can only be articulated by female speakers. In this sense, it not only offers a new anthropology of Latinx Black women, but responds to a desire to overcome the phallographic dominance of slave culture and narratives.

The first of the three stories narrate the violent kidnapping and transfer of a group of African women to the Caribbean. Through a series of flashbacks, the third-person narrator recounts the story of Wanwe and a group of African women. An omniscient narrator, albeit one with a subjective approach, provides the sense of an unbiased reliability and further pushes the limits of self-writing as a genre. To present the colonial-era narration from a literary perspective that implies truthfulness and recounts the story and perspective of women who have been silenced, functions as a counter discourse to the standard white-European historicity. Wanwe's

narration of life in Africa opposes the violent patriarchy of the European colonizers—specifically on the African continent but foreshadows what the reader knows is a continuation of that violence on the American continent. Towards the end of the section, the narrator informs the reader of the women’s collective questioning: “Los miedos de todas ellas, hermanas, se reducen a esto: ¿Quién diseñará nuestro posible retorno? ¿Quién nos abrazará en el Àtúnwa si hemos sufrido tanto? ¿Cuándo volveremos a ser libres para el ureoré?” (32).^{liv} In searching for the answers, analogous to Santos-Febres, Arroyo Pizarro underscores rituals, matriarchal societies and the roles of memory, spirituality and religion, a physical and literary trajectory that parallel one another, an expansion of transnational Black women’s experiences, cultural, and historical references.

Wanwe’s story opens with the lines “El primer recuerdo pudiera ser el barco” (Arroyo Pizarro 1).^{lv} Arroyo Pizarro’s word choice in using “recuerdo,” rather than “memoria,” for example, should not be taken lightly. The *Real Academia Española* provides four definitions for the word:

1. **Memory** that is created or a notice that is given of something past or already spoken about;
2. Thing that is given in **testimony** in good faith.
3. Object that is **conserved to remember** a person, a circumstance, an event, etcetera; and,
4. **Memories** (greeting in **writing or through a third party**). (my translation, my emphasis

<https://dle.rae.es/?id=VX0u9vz>)

The insistence on the specific word choice is anything but trivial as it allows for an expansion of self-writing. The word “recuerdo” reflects the author’s message: Giving voice to Afro-Latinx/Afro-Hispanic women, those previously omitted, silenced, or misrepresented by heteronormative and patriarchal white men, creates a new reality and more comprehensive

history. Moreover, (re)creating history allows for an understanding of the present through the past, provides a sense of agency over the origin story, and promotes a cross-cultural or transnational awareness. Although the opening statement refers to the “original/first” memory, the narrator proceeds to interlace the women’s present journey—to the slave ship and on it—with Wanwe’s life prior to the abduction. Therefore, the first memory could not have been the boat. This declaration, followed by its negation, serves as a discursive strategy that signals to the ways in which Black history, in the Americas, is often reduced to commencing with slavery. Arroyo Pizarro indicates the role of “remembering” or trying to find that first memory, can be attributed to finding the original mother or *madre patria*. That is, the act of searching and finding that first *recuerdo* is a type of testimony, one that serves to remember—and thereby preserve—people. The importance of this testimony told by a third person narrator, expands upon the conventional ideas of self-writing. Arroyo Pizarro traces *latinidad* transnationally to Africa. This “tracing” demonstrates the instability of a nationhood that is based on geographic borders. In essence, nationality is a neonatal accident. Starting with a multi-ethnic group of original “mothers” speaks to a diversity that remains present in the diaspora; the idea of these women as the original mothers serves as a resistance to the discourse that reduces Africa as a homogenous state and to the erasure of Blackness within Latinx, Hispanic, and Latin America.

While travelling to the larger ship, the narrator describes a woman who is from a different lineage than Wanwe, who speaks a different language, and as someone who silently and astutely unties herself before diving into the ocean. Two men jump in after her and violently return her to the canoe, they capture her and beat her into submission; once back on the canoe, they tie her by the neck and proceed to torture her. The men wait for her to stop crying to start again by tearing her septum nose ring, “Es poco lo que comprende Wanwe o las demás mujeres que miran, pero

entienden perceptivamente que se trata de un acto de control” (2).^{lvi} Although, admittedly, the women do not comprehend much of what occurs around them and to them, two things are clear. First, the women understand that the men’s torture is a psychologically manipulating fear tactic rooted in control. Second, and in contrast to the colonizer’s goal to control and scare the women, a sense of solidarity arises—despite not knowing each other, not speaking the same language, nor coming from the same ethnic groups—, their cry for their sister-in-bondage reverberates like as an act of defiance. In this way, the women’s sisterhood can be considered an act of resistance. The women’s cries do not suffice to end the men’s sadism and they pull the rope around her neck so tightly that she loses consciousness. For the second time, the men do not achieve their desired outcome and are oblivious to their failure. Wanwe expresses that the woman has either fainted or “her spirit has gone to meet with the powerful dancers at the doors of the underworld” (my translation, 4). Contrary to the anticipated outcome of placing the women in bondage, the men fail to realize that Wanwe’s desire to do something for her sister and a frustration for not being able to, is indicative of an emotional and spiritual “bond” that serves as a tool against their colonization. In other words, the hard(ship)—quite literally—promotes a sense of unity through a shared trauma and dependence on each other for survival.

Due to Wanwe’s state of captivity, making a choice and choosing sisterhood, is an act of resistance. However, Wanwe’s sense of sisterhood should not be reduced to merely a counter-discourse or defiance to the colonizers, doing so continues to promote the idea that the origin story starts with slavery and negates the culture and ethnic diversity of these foremothers. Wanwe’s sense of self is not limited to her as an individual but extends to the women around her because of her origins in a matriarchal society. As they are walking, the woman directly in front of Wanwe is sick, and the rest of the women attempt to keep her in movement. It is implied the

sick woman does not survive the journey, and Wanwe's desire and desperation to leave a mark for her—to prevent her erasure—comes with the realization that from that moment on, she will never have the freedom to make a choice again. It is further suggested that the loss of freedom is also the loss of a matriarchal society. More than an act of defiance, choosing sisterhood is a way in which Wanwe preserves and honors her cultural practices.

Arroyo Pizarro weaves the narrative between pleasant memories of Wanwe's childhood—a culturally pedagogic function for the reader—with the jarring present. Returning to the woman who is tortured, immediately following the scene where the men hold her unconscious body by the neck, “Wanwe cierra los ojos y recuerda el aroma de las viejas, de su madre, de las hermanas, de las muchachas en el rito del *ureoré*. **Cualquier cosa que le haga olvidar**, en este preciso momento, que la mujer de los aretes arrancados apenas respira” (my emphasis, 6).^{lvii} To counter the traumatic scene, Wanwe closes her eyes to recall joyful memories of the women from home. The next time the narrator mentions what the first memory could have been, the reader learns about the ritual *ureoré*, a rite for girls who have been raised together as sisters. In essence, the girls sleep tightly pressed to each other and joined by the shoulders. The game is for girls only and is forbidden to the boys. In direct opposition to the colonial context Wanwe is enslaved to, in Wanwe's culture, the girl chooses who she will marry, with her mother's guidance. The young men who know how to swim, hunt, and play the drums, are the ones who receive recommendations (12). The pleasant memory is transient, and the narrator again wonders about the first memory, this time, relating it to the day of the kidnapping. Returning to Wanwe's present, the narrator's discourse is dissonantly darker. In recounting her capture, Wanwe describes the proceedings as a “maldición,” literally a damnation or curse. She is caught by the ankle and loses sight of her siblings and her whistling mother. Wanwe continues

to hear the whistling, even after she loses sight of, but does not stop looking for her mother. The whistling serves as the alarm system that alerts her to danger; it is finally drowned out by the certainty that they have to flee (23). In this section, the *ureoré* is mentioned for the last time and in relation to their current situation aboard the slave ship. The women are laid down next to each other in the bilge of the ship. Unlike her childhood game, these men enter their space and literally brand them with the initials of “quienes de seguro pasarán a ser los nuevos dueños” (30).^{lviii}

There are instances when Wanwe can see herself in the women around her, however, when she looks down at herself it is, “como si fuera la primera vez que nota que de su cuerpo brotan extremidades indefensas, pero lo cierto es que lleva horas observándose. Se siente extraña, como salida de su propio cuerpo” (7).^{lix} At first, it seems Arroyo Pizarro’s declaration that Wanwe does not recognize herself in the state of bondage is powerful; notwithstanding, upon a closer inspection, the quote could also reference a possible out-of-body experience and a type of disassociation as a survival strategy. Reminiscent of Jacques Lacan’s “mirror stage,” Wanwe experiences a type of autoscopy where she sees the creation of her new subjectivity, a fragmented body, and a tension between who she is, the self she has lost, and what she sees. Lacan’s mirror stage speaks of the ego because of a misunderstanding, a false recognition, and the stage where self-alienation occurs. Indeed, Wanwe feels strange, as if she is observing herself for the first time, from a disintegrated and outside perspective.

Arroyo Pizarro’s writing centers a right to self-ownership by contesting dominant authorial narratives and delegitimizing the histories and discourses of colonialism. Wanwe recognizes herself in the eyes of the other women, “hace contacto visual con ella, *ojos míos con ojos suyos*, justo antes de verla hundirse. El océano se la traga” (34).^{lx} This reflection further

suggests that the protagonist sees herself as the other; in this way, Wanwe has access to the way in which she is viewed and “othered.” Wanwe’s reconciliation with her alternative fate (had she tried to escape), produces a bond between the women—they are one and the same. When Wanwe shares a likeness to the other women, this signals their shared status in captivity because Wanwe can see her potential fate reflected back to her. Indeed, Wanwe and the other women have spent time admiring the *cimarrona*’s fight and wondering who she could be “Wanwe y las otras observan las escena intentando identificarla” (32). Arroyo Pizarro questions if the woman: “¿Será de las cazadoras amarillas del norte, de las costureras azules del sur? ¿Acaso las bailarinas rojas del oeste? ¿Cuántos hijos tendrá? ¿Cuántas veces habrá jugado? ¿Habrá usado máscaras en las guerras contra los imperios o en las reyertas de aldea?” Questioning where she could be from, and in giving examples, provides means for Arroyo Pizarro to sneak in cultural information about the various ethnicities and the cultural diversity present in Africa and I so doing writing directly against the historical dominant narrative. Contrastingly, when historians have written about enslaved women (en route and otherwise), they continue to perpetuate the reductionist colonial era image of African women as a homogenous group, dismissive of the diverse backgrounds, cultures, and ethnicities. Wanwe is forced to watch as the woman who tried to escape, “es levantada por los pies como una guerrera de alabastro que parece inmortalizarse, su cuerpo ya ha sido partido a la mitad por los mordiscos de varios tiburones” (34).^{lxi} The logic follows that from the perspective of the slavers (colonizers), this is a strategy to achieve control where the goal is to dehumanize and make her an example that discourages escape attempts and promotes submission. However, Wanwe’s response—the insight from the perspective that has been excluded—expresses admiration for the woman and in doing so, demonstrates the counter-productiveness of this tactic.

Later, when Wanwe describes her lack of self-recognition, this coincides with a sense of abandonment:

Los seres ancestrales no las liberan. No hacen acto de presencia a pesar de haber sido convocados con todas las fuerzas. Tampoco asoman las nuevas deidades que adoran los chamanes de sus captores.... No hacen acto de presencia Orún, Olódùmarè, Bàbá, Ìyá ni las diosas que aún están en la Tierra, ni los verbos conjugados desde el cielo, ni los sabios del mar, ni las esencias ancestrales de culto. Olórun desaparece. Oníbodè desaparece. Ìbí, Ìyé, Àti, Ikú desaparecen. No se vislumbra el espíritu de los rituales de río, ni el paso por la compuerta del Portero, ni la pintura de rojo para la danza. No más nacimiento, vida y muerte. (31)^{lxii}

Interestingly, when Wanwe feels foreign to herself, she speaks of feeling abandoned by spiritual and religious practices; this observation is telling of her communal and cultural sense of self. It is reasonable to lose faith and consider enslavement the ultimate abandonment by the ethereal. Not only does Wanwe feel abandoned by the ancestral beings, she hints at having appealed to the Catholic god who likewise does not appear. Her mention of the orishas and sacred deities Orún, Olódùmaré, Bàbá, Ìyá, Olórun, Oníbodè, Ìbí, Ìyé, Àti, Ikú, implies Wanwe is from Yorubaland or present-day Nigeria, Togo, or Benin. The mention of the “spirit of the river rituals” seems to be a reference to Oshun, similarly the “red paint for dancing” can be read as a reference to Changó. In a different space and later—during the diaspora—the Orishas become syncretized with Catholic saints. However, because concepts of time and space do not function linearly in pre-colonial and non-western societies, along with Wanwe’s commentary regarding the “Portero” gate, with the capitalization of the “P” and suggestive of a proper noun, perhaps the “Portero” is a reference to “San Pedro” or, in English, Saint Peter who is syncretized with

Oggun.

Yoruba spiritual and cultural practices remain grounded in oral traditions, to which secrecy is key as it is to Yoruba religious practices in the diaspora. The slave trade transported Yoruba people throughout Latin America, many of whom carried and preserved these practices. In the Spanish speaking Caribbean, Yoruba-based religious practices are manifest today as Santeria, in Haiti and parts of the United States (like New Orleans) as Voodoo, in Trinidad and Tobago as Trinidad Orisha, and in South America as Candomblé and Umbanda. Despite the narrator's declaration that the recently enslaved women are sisters, it is important to not reduce such diversity and their sisterhood to the confines of trauma-bond and toxicity. "The fears of all of them, sisters, can be reduced to this: Who would design our possible return? Who will hug us in the Àtúnwa if we have suffered so much? (*my translation*, 32). The women's fears provide an insight into their spiritual and religious based sisterhood. Àtúnwa^{lxiii} is the Yoruba spiritual belief that death is not the end; it is the transfer of life, introducing a form of reincarnation that must occur within the same family. The women's fears are spiritual, transcending time—a preoccupation with the family they are severed from, but also, with uncertainty as to how they could possibly return when they are now divided selves between Africa and the Americas. Such preoccupations extend past their current bondage. Their fears, as individuals who are a part of a communal identity, that are not limited to Western notions of "individuality," transcending time and creating a divided self—leaving parts of themselves in Africa and split selves in the diaspora. The logic follows that if they are fragmented, their bondage extends to their spirits becoming an eternal sentence. To worry about themselves is to worry about their families in Africa and their families in the diaspora, justifying fear of an eternal incomplete state; anxiety over a legacy of incompleteness. The ripple effects of their divided selves reach beyond the

family they are born into because these imply never fully returning and thereby never being whole again. To not have children, or to kill them, might be a way to break that cycle in that there would be no undivided spirit, thereby a return to Africa.

Arroyo Pizarro's use of "Àtúnwa" corresponds to the Portuguese spelling and is suggestive of the slaver's nationality. Often, the focus of Latin America is on Spain as a colonial and imperial power; however, Portugal likewise played a key role in colonizing the Americas and in the transatlantic slave trade. In addition to the implicit history lesson, this serves as Arroyo Pizarro's extension of a transnational solidarity that includes Brazil and embodies the foremothers' notion of sisterhood. One that is not limited by contemporary geographic borders or by chance (birth) but credits the bonds of sisterhood that the women establish in honor of their spirituality. Resistance to colonial era impositions of identity and limited ideas of *Latinidad* combat sexism, racism, and colorism. The unique choice of spelling is indicative of Arroyo Pizarro's commitment to a transnational sense of identity or a *panlatinidad*. The collective Latinx transnational identity originally forged by trauma, spirituality, and a shared longing to return, results in a sense of self that can be traced back through spirituality to the African foremothers. In essence, a transnational diasporic Latinx identity promotes inclusivity. As such, Arroyo Pizarro's concept of nationality and identity transcends contemporary borders. Analogously, today, the Latinx identity mirrors Arroyo Pizarro's communal self in that it transcends country of origin to find points of contact amongst those living in the Latin American diaspora in the United States. One that can be traced through Latin America back to the African enslaved women.

The unifying thread that weaves the seemingly unrelated stories together is the chronology of slavery. In the second story of *las Negras*, titled "Matronas," Arroyo Pizarro

moves from the capture of the women, to their transatlantic trip, to their enslavement. Although all four stories have different settings and new characters, Arroyo Pizarro continues composing fundamental discourses that return to origin stories and provide another perspective on history. Nieves Lopez calls this approach a type of *viaje a la semilla*,^{lxiv} and cites Mercedes López-Baralt's technique as "a deeply decolonizing gesture, converting our authors in reverse anthropologists who disdain exotic otherness to see themselves in their own cultural and historical context" (my translation, 55). Indeed, Ndizi, the protagonist, becomes an active historical agent who defies colonial era stereotypes of Black women. Three themes dominate Ndizi's story: first, the power of language as a strategy to escape and to explore cultural and ethnic diversity in the colonial Caribbean; second, rebellion, anti-slavery, and patriarchy; and thirdly, reconfiguration of the "mammy" figure and the stereotype of Black women as submissive homemakers.

Raymond Williams notes, "A definition of language is always, implicitly or explicitly, a definition of human beings in the world" (21). Similarly, according to Kathryn Wortham (84) and Stanton Woolard (4), linguistic anthropologists have long argued that cultural values and social practices are inseparable from language. Language does not only reside in an individual's mind, but rather meaning is activated, contextualized, *assigned*, made sense of, reproduced (read: performed) and contested in real-life social interactions. In 1956 Peter Boyd-Bowman published "The Regional Origins of the Earliest Spanish Colonists of America" where he explains, the earliest form of American Spanish—between 1493 and 1519—was concentrated in the Antilles, and the original American Spanish must have developed then and there. Consequently, it was from the Antillean islands, that the rest of the Americas was (linguistically) conquered:

Cuba was conquered by colonists from Santo Domingo and was in those days seldom mentioned as a separate destination. However, the conquerors of Mexico were recruited almost entirely from Cuba . . . (1158)

Therefore, early American Spanish was a consecutive dialect of Antillean Spanish, as “the Spanish settlers were first adapting their speech to a common environment and beginning to level out their dialectal differences in response to a *new social consciousness*” (*my emphasis*, 1155). In an oversimplified manner, it could be argued that all American Spanish stems from the Caribbean. The logic follows that the “matronas” and wet-nurses’—Black and indigenous women—were the original bearers of language and therefore of culture in the Americas. A maternal linguistic *re-conquista* by the very people deemed the most conquerable.

Unlike the first story, “Matronas” is a first-person narration of the life of Ndizi, an imprisoned, enslaved, and resistant *bozal*.^{lxv} Ndizi’s language skills facilitate her insubordinate acts. However, these acts are eventually discovered, and she is imprisoned and sentenced to death. Told from her cell and after her execution, the reader learns of Ndizi’s unique use of language skills as an escape tactic—mentally and physically—to genuinely connect with people, and as a pedagogical tool. After Ndizi first meets Petro, an abolitionist monk and perhaps her only friend, Ndizi makes several linguistic observations about the monk’s attempt to communicate with her as he recites “dialectos zonificados, intentando suertes: kimbundu, mandigo, bantú, francés, holandés, creoles derivados de éstos” (46).^{lxvi} She decides two things, first, “debo recordar no contarle jamás todo lo que sé, lo que he visto, lo que he sentido” and second, to respond “en la lengua de los yoruba” (46). It is not outwardly stated that Ndizi is a Yoruba woman as she does not use the possessive pronouns when speaking of the Yoruba language; however, her choice to respond to the monk in the “language of the Yoruba,” indicates

the importance of the Yoruba people and culture as both she and the monk are familiar with the language. Through their shared linguistic abilities, demonstrative of joint efforts to have learned languages to communicate with other people, the two form a bond.

Watching Petro leave her jail cell, prompts Ndizi's reflection: "Cuando pienso en libertad siempre pienso en todas las palabras de todos los lenguajes que conozco, en donde esta expresión quiere decir algo" (46). Something similar happens when she recalls the words "laziness" or "rest"; Ndizi does not remember or recognize their meaning anymore. Reminiscent of Ferdinand de Saussure's theories of language, Roland Barthes' study of semiotics, and Stuart Hall's theory of language operation within power; albeit centuries before these theorists, and without the articulation of literary criticism and philosophy, Arroyo Pizarro demonstrates that women like Ndizi have long put into practice theories that are now used to analyze and critique literature and society. Ndizi emphasizes the intricate relationship between culture and language. In her current situation, she is not free, and so words have lost their meaning. Indeed, language is not made to express the thoughts and words of the oppressed. Ndizi must recall words in other languages for them to have meaning. That is, for her, words are tied to freedom, space, and context, from which she is removed. Ndizi mentions her purging process, her escape from jail. That process includes reciting and remembering: "Cuando entro en el pánico de lo que he olvidado, inicio un recuento mental: pedirle a mi madre que me abrace, gritar por comida, convocar a las hermanas, bromear con los infantes. Esas frases las recuerdo perfectamente en mi idioma" (42).^{lxvii}

Language's relationship to memory, functions as a survival strategy and a tool for Ndizi to escape her present. Recalling words, phrases, and their meanings in her "mother" tongue allows Ndizi to overcome her fear of forgetting and permits Ndizi a return to a time and a place where she is free from her current situation.

The second time Petro visits Ndizi, he carries a series of papers that Ndizi mistakenly assumes is the Bible. Although those papers are not the holy text of Catholicism, Ndizi's intuition is not completely incorrect as he has written phrases in Yoruba—the sacred language of Orisha worship and many Afro-Caribbean religions.^{lxviii} Petro's attempt to communicate with the twice enslaved woman—chattel slavery and prison—in her language is a humanizing technique, it demonstrates that Petro considers Ndizi a person. In this moment, Ndizi realizes Petro is different from the oppressive institutions he represents—as a white male clergyman. The linguistic approach creates an opening for a sincere connection, and Ndizi chooses not to be silent anymore. The logic follows that silence is a weapon of the oppressor, it serves to protect those that benefit from enslaved women's silences. In sharing her truths, Ndizi takes agency over her life and has found a sense of liberation and freedom through speech. When Petro asks about her age, she responds:

le digo que según el conteo de las tribus del norte, tengo treintitantos años. Pero aclaro, en imperfecto español, que fui apresada por el imperio de los negros de la costa y vendida a los blancos hace más de quince. Hecha cocinera, obrera de la caña y comadrona hace más de diez. (49)

In Ndizi's broken-Spanish reply, several details emerge that serve to enlighten women's daily experiences within chattel slavery. For example, Ndizi measures her age as a "thirtysomething years old" and does so according to how northern tribes manage time. It is implied that there are different ways to measure time—different to western notions of time—the suggestion is that age is not necessarily counted and that time functions differently for Ndizi. Ndizi's choice of words "according to the tribes of the north" suggests an affiliation to those tribes and signals to the importance of the northern tribes' culture. And, having been captured by "los negros" of the

coast and sold into slavery to “los blancos” further informs readers that the slave trade was a business that included the participation of African men’s collaboration with white men. It is lastly implied that Ndizi lived close to the coast. In this passage, Arroyo Pizarro provides a nuanced insight into the life and trajectory of an enslaved *bozal* teenager of approximately fifteen years old. That is, originally, Ndizi labored in the kitchen and in the sugar fields, prior to becoming a midwife. Ndizi has mastered work that is traditionally ascribed to women, and later that which is traditionally ascribed as men’s labor. Her midpoint lands on midwifery.

It is interesting to note, when Petro speaks to Ndizi in “lengua cristiana” in regard to the kitchen and cooking, Ndizi does not respond in her broken Spanish, but rather, refutes in “lengua esclava.” It is not explicitly stated that the “lengua esclava” is Yoruba nor that she has continued speaking in Yoruba. However, the distinction is important because Ndizi now refers to Petro’s Spanish as “lengua cristiana”; when the conversation becomes about the kitchen, an intimate space exclusive to women. Rather than continue to respond with her “imperfect Spanish,” Ndizi continues the conversation in “lengua esclava.” “Lengua cristiana” corresponds to Spanish in contrast to “lengua esclava,” which corresponds to Yoruba. Arroyo Pizarro’s simplistic narration style and use of language again serves as a pedagogical tool to provide insight into enslaved people’s culture—the author makes a strong suggestion: The Yoruba were the dominant ethnic group amongst the enslaved people. The surviving religious and spiritual practices of contemporary Afro-Puerto Rican, along with Afro-Latinx and Afro-Latin American, support the assertion.

Perhaps as a way to write against the homogenization of “Africa” and to honor the diversity of the African diaspora, Arroyo Pizarro employs ambivalence in relation to Ndizi’s ethnic background. While still honoring the influence and importance of the Yorba people in

Puerto Rico and throughout Latin America, and recognizing the impossibility of tracing ancestry to specific African nations, the author takes an anti-essentialist approach to ethnicity within slavery in order to write against an essentialist African diaspora experience. In this way, Arroyo Pizarro recognizes and respects the diversity that reflects the contemporary Afro-Latinx identities and affiliations with Yoruba spirituality and practices. Ndizi speaks of an early escape attempt with “un grupo de mandingos” and speaks of assisting the newly arrived men:

Los dirigí a robar alimentos y continué a su lado por voluntad propia, a pesar de que al quinto día los hombres se amancebaron conmigo sin yo consentirlo. No soy de la casta de los mandingos, pero cierto tipo de lealtad me hizo no dejarles y fungí como traductora ya que varios no entendían el idioma de los amos. Aunque no soy ladina lo entiendo a la perfección. Lo entiendo pero lo guardo como secreto. (43-44)

The only clear statement about Ndizi’s ethnic origins is when she declares she is not of the Mandingo caste, a distinction she never makes in regard to the Yoruba—which reinforces its importance as the ethnic majority, or suggests her ethnicity. Notwithstanding her ethnicity, for an enslaved woman, the ability to make a choice within a system that only offers oppression, lies in the type of oppression she chooses. Raped by *bozal* men seems a lesser evil than raped, sold, and traded by the enslavers. When Ndizi speaks of a certain loyalty not to leave the Mandingo, she is exerting power over herself and making one of the only choices she has—to stay. She not only stays, but she is also the reason for their survival. Although due to brute force, the men physically overpower Ndizi, they are powerless without her. Perhaps their shared status as *bozales* leads to what Ndizi calls a certain type of loyalty towards them; however, she maintains her language skills a secret. That is, Ndizi’s loyalty towards the Mandingo people manifests in helping them survive, but she distrusts the men. In dialogue with bell hooks’ “Black women

Shaping Feminist Theory,” Arroyo Pizarro highlights that men of color occupy positions of both oppressed and oppressor. It could appear to be an essentialist strategy for Ndizi to have joined and stayed with the men, but in reality, it is a concession of her power to join them, an act of solidarity, to align herself with the Mandingo runaways. Without her, the men would not have survived.

While imprisoned, Ndizi is raped by a prison guard. Ndizi waits until he is disoriented and tired after his ejaculation to physically attack him. After overpowering the guard, Ndizi does not simply escape, she takes his keys, goes to each cell, and “Liberé ladinos, cimarrones y nativos. Y a las comadronas que vienen luchando conmigo” (61).^{lxix} Ndizi does not simply free herself as her own liberation necessitates the freedom of others in bondage. Reminiscent of Audre Lorde’s “I am not free while any woman is unfree, even when her shackles are very different from my own,” Ndizi’s sense of self is communal (132-3).

During a separate escape attempt, Ndizi once more speaks of remembrance, this time “con los yorubas” (51). Again, Ndizi does not use the possessive pronoun that would include her amongst the Yoruba people, instead she says “los yorubas” and infers an otherness or separateness from them. Rather than continue to try to run away, Ndizi begins to work within the system of slavery to dismantle it from the inside. In this instance, Ndizi enters directly into conversation with Audre Lorde’s comments at “The Personal and the Political Panel” presentation in 1979:

those of us who stand outside the circle of this society's definition of acceptable women; those of us who have been forged in the crucibles of difference—those of us who are poor, who are lesbians, who are Black, who are older—know that survival is not an academic skill. It is learning how to take our differences and make them strengths. For

the master's tools will never dismantle the master's house. They may allow us temporarily to beat him at his own game, but they will never enable us to bring about genuine change. And this fact is only threatening to those women who still define the master's house as their only source of support. (112)

Despite this, Ndizi has certainly found a way to use the master's tools to bring about genuine change. That is, although all her escape attempts included the liberation of her peers, she is no longer working towards escape, but rather, towards the destruction of slavery as an economic institution.

Enslaved people often considered rebellion. Guillermo A. Baralt states “los esclavos de Puerto Rico expresan colectivamente su repudio al sistema de esclavitud mediante dos formas: la confrontación directa contra el sistema y las fugas” (155).^{lxx} Baralt fails to mention a third way in which the enslaved people rebelled and fought against slavery: Through death—including suicide and infanticide. Ndizi becomes a master of death. One of the most unorthodox ways to claim power over their own body, and to thereby dismantle the institution of slavery, was freedom through death, self-inflicted or otherwise. In an irrevocable manner, death removed ownership from the slave owners. Without enslaved people, there could be no slave owners and thus, no slavery. Dying is a form of rebellion and a return to freedom. Ndizi explains to the monk, “concluimos que lo mejor es morir, antes que humillarnos al opresor y hablamos de algunos hermanos nuestros, expertos en la práctica del suicidio compasivo, que ya lo han logrado y que han dejado instrucciones como legado” (51).^{lxxi} Suicide was not only considered a mortal sin, but also a crime, and socially considered a sign of a weak character. My intention is not to delve into suicide and mental illness, but rather to highlight the way in which Arroyo Pizarro

recasts this unorthodox and proscribed form of rebellion, not as weakness but rather as a tool of abolition.

The seventh commandment “Thou shall not kill” serves as the foundation for Catholicism’s condemnation of suicide. Saint Augustine’s *City of God* and later Saint Thomas Aquinas’s *Summa theologica*, argue homicide, suicide, and infanticide are violations of the Mosaic commandment that forbids killing. Indeed, St. Augustine declares suicide is never justified, not even “to escape from temporal difficulties” or to evade rape (quoted in Minois 27). Not only did the church scholars affect theological doctrine, but they also heavily influenced the European legal system. Considered a crime against God—except for war and capital punishment—Alfonso X of Castile follows the theologian’s line of reasoning in his *Siete partidas* where he gives a categorization of despair that leads to suicide and murder. By the Council of Trent, the prohibition of suicide had evolved to be “the work of powers of evil, identified in pagan times as evil spirits and in the Christian age as the devil” (Minois 36). Zeb Tortorici explains these beliefs about suicide were transferred to the American colonies. It should be said, the demonization of suicide in the Americas during the colonial era was intertwined with and driven by the Church’s economic interests. That is, the Church’s stance on suicide was not purely a theological argument as it protected slave owners and enriched the Catholic church. Therefore, Arroyo Pizarro writes against a centuries-old, institutionally crafted and imposed system of beliefs about death and suicide. Nidizi does not simply disregard the Church’s condemnation of suicide, the *bozal* woman inverts the beliefs about suicide and murder as a means to pay tribute to those whose suicides served as a legacy and an example of freedom, agency, and resistance.

Regarding the legacy of compassionate suicide, Arroyo Pizarro again provides a culturally pedagogical experience for her readers. In giving examples of the ways in which to successfully reproduce their legacy, the author delivers examples of the ethnic diversity of the enslaved people's population. First, there is the case of Undraá a "pescadora amarilla" forced to "cohabitate" with all the white men aboard the *nao*. Due to her background, Undraá had expert knowledge of the ocean, so she decided to wait for the high tide near the shark's nets, and then dove in. Undraá's suicide enters direct conversation and opposition to St. Augustine's doctrine. The enslaved woman's first action of defiance lies in not embracing the church's doctrine with regard to suicide as heretical or morally offensive; the second, in carrying out the act "to escape from temporal difficulties" that continue to serve and protect the interests of the perpetrator. Next, Ndizi states that the Yorubas mention other brothers—again speaking of the ethnic group as if she were not a member of it. The Yoruba people speak of Bguiano, an expert "colmillero" (sharp fangs) from the Sahara, who belonged to a militant group of men that sharpened their teeth and killed jungle beasts when they fought. Bguiano became a member of a group of *bozales* and taught them his abilities. Those he taught, swore to Changó that with a single bite to the neck they could sever the most visible and palpable neck artery. In the case of Bguiano, the body—specifically the mouth—becomes a tool and a weapon for self-defense and resistance. Lastly, "Recordamos a Zeza" a man who knew the exact number of poisonous plants needed to kill a person (54). Paradoxically, in Zeza's example, Arroyo Pizarro's choice of wording is indicative of a deeper desire to document and thereby immortalize those who have been erased and written out of history. Ndizi's path to freedom was through death. The logic follows that if there are no slaves, there can be no slave owners; therefore, Ndizi's way to guarantee there is no more slavery, is to kill the enslaved.

In conversation with Fray Petro, Ndizi explains she would rather die than be used like an animal:

Os juro que quise morir, Fray Petro, a ser usada como animal. Os juro que luego quise matar a todos, padrecito. Nous allons reproduire une armée, kite a kwaze yon lame. Eso me propuse. *Eso nos propusimos las mujeres* y corrimos la voz en los toques de tambores. Hebu kuzaliana jeshi. Repetimos lo mismo en los festines de música wolof, tuareg, bakongos, malimbo y los egba. (*my emphasis*, 59)^{lxvii}

Ndizi's use of various languages speaks to the power of words and the diversity of colonial Latin America. Today, the Latinx identity often excludes descendants from non-Spanish speaking countries in Latin America; by using French, Haitian Creole, and Swahili, Arroyo Pizarro extends Ndizi's sense of self to include those from francophone nations and beyond the Yoruba ethnicity. Again, Arroyo Pizarro sneaks in a lesson on cultural diversity and the sense of commonality that can be traced back through time and across geographical boundaries—this commonality exceeds contemporary notions of identity and race relations, breaking with obsolete and limiting borders. A common (colonized) tongue is not the unifying element that comprises Latin America as a region; rather, the foundation is both historical and political. The exclusion of Haiti from Latinx identity is not linguistic; it is racist. The disconnect from Haiti's Caribbean neighbors—who share Indigenous, African, and European ancestry—is a direct result of Haiti's embrace of its African lineage. This embrace led to the 1791 revolt which threatened systems of slavery and European ideals for all the Americas. The contemporary exclusion of Haiti from the rubric of Latinx identity maintains the anti-Black sentiment and renders homage to racist punishment by the colonial forces (See William Luis' *Literary Bondage*). In opposition, Arroyo Pizarro offers a strong suggestion: Latinx identity can be traced to a maternal, resilient,

rebellious, and diasporic solidarity that is based on a collective African ancestry and a shared history. Therefore, Arroyo Pizarro's inclusion of Haiti is controversial because it conflicts and confronts the anti-Black sentiment that is deeply ingrained in contemporary Latinx communities.

Ndizi's confession that she would rather die than be used like an animal references another popular stereotype about women of color: The angry Latina or the angry Black woman. However, Ndizi's desire to "kill them all," extends beyond vengeance. Unlike her enslavers, Ndizi expresses a righteous anger since her desire for liberation necessitates the eradication of people and institutions that cause her oppression. Contrastingly, the slave owner's violence towards Brown and Black bodies, is based on preserving economic interests rooted in control—the base of all abusive relationships. The implicit argument suggests that anyone not outraged is either not paying attention or in collusion with the enslavers. In stating that the women repeated the same message at the wolof, tuareg, bakongos, malimbo and egbo music feasts, Arroyo Pizarro highlights the active role of women in the abolition of slavery and their relationship to music and religion.

As to enslaved woman's labor, Arroyo presents an alternative link amongst traditionally domestic roles which provides the foundation for Ndizi's resistance. Ndizi explains:

Los ahogo en el balde de recolectar placentas, padrecito. Presiono sus negras gargantitas con mis dedos y los sofoco. O les asfixio con sus cordones umbilicales, incluso maniobrando antes que salgan del vientre. La madre no se da cuenta, o lo prefiere, o lo ha pedido ... suplicando en lengua desconocida para el blanco. El acto, que puede ser muy sutil, pasa desapercibido por el velador de recién nacidos, que vigila procurando la sobrevivencia del futuro esclavo. Lo burlo. Lo burlamos. Si no puedo hacerlo durante el parto, más tarde les doy de comer frutos contaminados con sangre de mujeres con el

tétano de las cadenas. O recojo diarreas expulsadas con pujos de disentería y las mezclo en las comidas y purés. A veces coloco el mejunje sobre el pezón de mis tetas y los lacto. O deposito casabe sin humedecer cerca de sus amígdalas y obstruyo las narices. No soy la única.

Muchas me siguen. Hemos logrado un ejército. (my emphasis, 70)^{lxxiii}

Through the kitchen—and contradictory to the attempt to “domesticate” and dominate a young *bozal*—Ndizi creates an anti-slavery army. Arroyo Pizarro does not work within the constraints of a binary system; therefore, she does not simply invert the “mammy” stereotype. She dismisses it completely and presents an image that is almost unfathomable. Recognizing that, to an extent, people are products of their own environments, Arroyo Pizarro’s dismantling of the “mammy” figure and presentation of such a contradictory image, positions readers in a place where they have to partake in an introspective questioning of their own biases. In other words, the “mammy” typecast is so ingrained in the psyche of the western hemisphere that it is difficult to imagine that the submissive-maternal-Black-nanny/wet-nurse/house enslaved person to be capable of infanticide and murder. Ndizi’s stance on liberation through death challenges the Catholic church’s moral authority. In the only instance where Ndizi speaks in English, she states “*Let us breed an army*.... El problema de los que oprimen, Fray Petro, no es la opresión en sí, es la subestimación que hacen del oprimido” (59).^{lxxiv} Ndizi’s language skills and her self-perception—her double consciousness—allow an understanding and a navigation of the systems of oppression meant to keep her in chattel slavery. Ndizi took the master’s perceived powerlessness of the enslaved Black women to weaponize that underestimation.

The last two stories, “Saeta” and “Los amantados”—the latter added only as of the third edition in 2016—continue the journey from capture, to shipment, to enslavement, and finally, a

spiritual and poetic return. The original three stories of *las Negras* feature female protagonists. Like Santos-Febres, and conceivably in a manner that satirizes the concept of literature as a reflection of society.

The title of the third and final story in the original publication of *las Negras*, translates from Spanish to English as “arrow” or “dart.” “Saeta” tells the story of Tshanwe, an enslaved woman recently purchased by Georgino Pizarro—Arroyo Pizarro’s maternal last name. The implication of the shared last name between the author and the slave owner, implies an autobiographical reference—either personally and/or transnationally. In choosing the last name “Pizarro” the author subtly offers an undeniable fact: The diaspora also partly draws from slave owners. It is interesting to note the violence, the rape, the enslavement, and the evil, can be traced back to the father. Following the logic of epigenetics, if non-tangible things like trauma and healing can be genetically passed, then it stands that violent tendencies can also be inherited. Therefore, rejecting the paternal ancestry is not merely a type of self-loathing, but rather a just anger as it represents a hatred towards an unassimilated part of the self; indeed, this presents a way to reject that violence and a type of patricide. In this way, self-hate is a repudiation of the violence forced onto the original mothers, a form of continued resistance.

The story begins with Georgino Pizarro raping Tshanwe and Jwaabi, another enslaved woman he owns, and making them watch and wait their turn. Tshanwe is from Namaqua, modern day Namibia and South Africa—once again emphasizing the ethnic diversity of the enslaved people in the Americas. It is unknown where Jwaabi and the other enslaved people are from:

Tampoco reconocía los códigos indígenas de aquellos que llamaban taínos y cuya lengua parecía ser tan necesaria para la cocción de alimentos. Había sido separada de sus

consanguíneos en su tierra natal y apenas había sobrevivido el viaje en nao. Mucho menos entendía el lenguaje nativo de Jwaabi, ni el de los demás sirvientes que se hacían cargo del mantenimiento de la hacienda puesto que casi todos venían de etnias diferentes dispersadas en el gran continente. (81-82)^{lxxv}

The diversity of the plantation includes the indigenous people of the Caribbean as well as other parts of Africa. The heterogeneity of the enslaved population was strategic; the lack of homogeneity created language barriers that obstructed communication and connection and required that the common tongue to be that of the oppressor engendering homogeneity that the oppressor could control. If there is no common tongue or cultural community amongst the oppressed, then it makes it difficult, if not impossible, to organize effectively. If the common tongue is what the oppressor speaks, then it makes secrecy inaccessible. Although Tshanwe and Jwaabi belong to different ethnic groups and do not speak the same language, the women still find ways to communicate through hand gestures and symbols.

The story then details the day Georgino Pizarro's son, Mr. Gregorio's dog dies. No one seems to know what happened to the dog and the phrase "nadie sabe como" is repeated throughout. Tshanwe finds the dead dog and discovers a "saeta" in his stomach and decides to keep it, albeit hidden, and considers it an amulet. The day of the count and countess's wedding anniversary, Tshanwe is again raped and chosen to carry the count's crossbow into the forest where he leaves her. After being raped, she picks up his crossbow, which she has to carry back, shoots an arrow up towards the trees, and whispered to herself "nadie sabe cómo." Later, Tshanwe is brutally beaten and attacked by Gregorio and his brother Trino. She hears them say things that she does not understand and tries to call on the protective spirits, "sin éxito." The boys torture her, stabbing her repeatedly, until she drops to her knees completely beaten. After

feeling abandoned by the spirit world, and in an act of defense, Tshanwe takes the arrow from her pocket and hits Trino with it, she connects with his “dedo corazón,” and upon hearing him cry the count arrives and proceeds to beat Tshanwe’s face and body; he beats the children, too, saying “‘Valen caro los esclavos,’ ‘es mi propiedad.’ ... ‘Muchachos insensatos,’ ‘vas a ver quien manda negra asquerosa’”(100).^{lxxvi} Perhaps the title “saeta” is as a reference to a violent phallic symbol—the count and tyrant. As an assertion of his power, the count has left Tshanwe in such a state that she is presumed dead. Two enslaved men who, like Jwaabi and Tshanwe, do not speak the same language, but are starting to understand Spanish, have orders to bury Tshanwe where they bury the dogs and other enslaved people, but due to heavy rains, they are unable to do so and place her body over wooden slats. However, Tshanwe’s body disappears, presumably claimed by the ancestors. The story ends with an arrow falling from the sky and striking Georgino in the face, an occurrence to which “nadie sabe como.”

Among others, literary critics Amarilis Hidalgo de Jesus and Luis Felipe Díaz place Tshanwe and Jwaabi in contrast to each other. One represents submission and the other represents rebellion. Holding the women as opposites results in oversimplification, a superficial reading of both characters, and a limiting binary of rebellion and submission results. Rather than consider of them in juxtaposition of each other—which perpetuates the limitations set in place by the slave owner—they should be read as a didactic survival experience. Jwaabi knows how to stay alive, in fact, when Tshanwe physically fights back, her life is at a greater risk.

It is important to keep the temporal context in mind as it is an injustice to superimpose contemporary knowledge onto the past. It would be a mistake to limit resistance to outward manifestations of rebellion—such as running away or physically assaulting the slave owners. In the aforementioned story, Arroyo Pizarro demonstrates that both forms of resistance lead to

extreme physical pain and danger to women. There are other ways to survive and fight back. Perhaps Jwaabi has learned that outward resistance leads to more physical violence against her. It is not a sign of weakness, but rather a form of survival, a type of resilience. Jwaabi does what is best for her survival within the constraints of slavery. Conceivably, Jwaabi resisted the rape in the past and was beaten; Arroyo Pizarro does not inform the reader of Jwaabi's past, nor does she provide information about potential resistance upon first arriving to Georgino Pizarro's plantation. Therefore, Jwaabi's "submission" is not necessarily an acceptance of her state and it would be presumptuous to assume as much.

The three stories present different types of resistance and a unique enslavement experience. One night, Tshanwe remembers her homeland, specifically the desert of Namib and allows herself to think of returning. Tshanwe expresses a desire to see her people grow old amongst the "sabios" and their magic. During this recollection, she touches the arrow and as she does, "Emitió un silbido, que se fundió entre la noche y el ruido de las ranas. Si alguien le contestara el silbido, si tan solo alguien lo hiciera..." (93-94).^{lxxvii} Tshanwe recalls the "cazadoras amarillas" as women who did not know fear and who were famous for using poisoned arrows. The whistle and the warrior women are a return to the first story and a foreshadowing of the end of the journey. The whistle is a return to Wanwe's story and her mother's whistling that alerts her to danger, a sound that is eventually drowned out by the need to get away from the enemy (23). The abandonment and the lack of answers that Wanwe, Ndizi, and Tshanwe confront are finally addressed by Tshanwe's desire to have someone respond to her "silbido." When Tshanwe caresses her arrow and yearns for "home," the "saeta" emits a whistle, or a call, and when she refuses to die, the narrator declares "silbidos que contestaban silbidos" (103).^{lxxviii} Indeed, in the same way that time and space function differently in Latin American

literature, (see for example, “lo real maravilloso”), so does prayer:

Las gotas le reaniman los párpados y un chamán invisible la hace despertar. Namaqua y sus mujeres guerreras la amparan. Desaparece el cuerpo.... Tres días más tarde, nadie se explica el encantamiento. Nadie comprende el embrujo. El amo y sus hombres arrojan primero sus propias flechas hacia la floresta, como tienen por costumbre. ... Algún acto de hechicería hace regresar a una de ellas, como un boomerang. La saeta disparada a través de la arboleda al final del llano emite un silbido. Los espíritus—es la única explicación—lo contestan. Logra incrustarse en la frente de don Georgino. Nadie sabe cómo. (105-107)^{lxxix}

Díaz interprets the whistle as a symbolic representation of the homeland and as the ancestors calling home their stolen women. For Díaz, it is only through death that Tshanwe can find freedom and a way back. However, Tshanwe’s body is never found. It could stand that after three days Tshawe recovered, went to the forest, and killed don Georgino. Logically, it would explain how both her body and the “ballesta” went missing. Perhaps it was a mixture of beginner’s luck, strong observation skills, natural ability, and answered prayers that made her shot so effective. Or, perhaps, Arroyo Pizarro is again challenging the Catholic church. If the Christian belief asserts that after three days of being dead, Jesus’s body ascended to heaven and that his mother, Mary, also ascended, why is it less plausible to believe the same of Thsanwe? The miraculous messages are indeed similar: Spiritual liberation also liberates the body.

Originally, Arroyo Pizarro ended the voyage with the return of the enslaved women back to Africa, the return of the ancestors, and of the gods. However, in the 2016 fourth edition of *las Negras*, Arroyo Pizarro adds a fourth story that takes place years after the first three, presumably in the nineteenth century, during slavery. With the last story, Arroyo Pizarro joins Santos-

Febres's literary tradition of mocking the idea that literature faithfully reflects society. Arroyo Pizarro mocks the contemporary leftist hyperconsciousness of political correctness—a recent trend that achieves an opposite effect and reads as an insincere afterthought. Oftentimes, intersectional stories are added to the periphery of a novel to update the texts and provide the impression of inclusivity, but these engender a superficial awareness regarding social and racial justice. Such additions appear to be editorial postscripts intended to avoid the risk of criticism. For Arroyo Pizarro—a queer-Afro-Puerto Rican female author—to add a fourth short story that centers cis-white men, but exposes them as incestuous predators, results in the ultimate inversion of stereotypes.

The fourth story focuses on Petra, an enslaved wet-nurse, and her relationship with her young master, Jonás Cartagena. Petra's role as a wet nurse does not end in Jonás's infancy. Petra is tasked with accompanying Jonás to school and sitting at the door of his classroom to ensure he is well nourished. As a child, Jonás takes an interest in the origin of enslaved people, particularly of his wet-nurse. Petra knows her ethnic background, and this is the only instance when Arroyo Pizarro provides a specific location in the Americas: Puerto Rico. "Petra ha nacido en San Juan Bautista y es descendiente mandinga por vía de su abuela materna, contado por ella misma en noches de nanas y corroborado cuando el propio señorito cuestiona el origen de los esclavos que le pertenecen" (139).^{lxxx} Naming Puerto Rico as Petra's birthplace directly critiques Puerto Rican society. Likewise, the strategic omission of location in the other stories implies an experience that is transnational. Here, Arroyo Pizarro points directly at Puerto Rico and participates in the literary tradition of writing rape and incest as metaphors for the depravity of colonialism. However, it would be a mistake to read Arroyo Pizarro's shortest story as merely symbolic; instead, "Los amamantados" should be read as the transformation of young suckling white boys

to adolescent slave owners, charting this dehumanizing process. Arroyo Pizarro presents the ways in which slavery changes and traces the problematic misogyny, or *machismo*, of contemporary Latinos—specifically, of white Latinos to their colonial era roots, a reverse chronology and a reversal of roles (authorial and authority). The dehumanization of Black women by white men, such as Santos-Febres' Martín, and Arroyo Pizarro's Jonás, is one of the legacies of slavery. Martín's sentiment, or lack thereof, can be traced back to his colonial era forefathers. In the present, Martín's inability to see enslaved women as people, to erotically objectify Black women and to dismiss their self-knowledge, is what Jonás does in the past.

At school, when Jonás asks his classmates about the origins of slaves, his language is sympathetic towards abolition. Jonás is informed of the way in which his classmate's father sees enslaved women: “‘Dice mi padre que las negras están aquí solo para montarlas. Se disfrutan mejor que las blancas.’ Jonás Cartagena reacciona sorprendido, y ya no es el mismo” (145).^{lxxxi} With this new information, Jonás alters his perception of enslaved women and the dynamics of his relationship with them. Petra changes from a maternal figure in his eyes, to a hypersexualized possession. It is important to note that prior to Jonás entering school he saw Petra as a person, as someone worthy of freedom; only when he hears the opinions of his classmates is he influenced by their reasoning and changes his outlook. Jonás's experience at school suggests Arroyo Pizarro extending her critique to the educational system.

The short story ends with the disturbing description of a teenage Jonás licking Petra's breastmilk and spreading her legs. As Petra weeps silently, the reader is privy to Jonás's thoughts during the rape: He has read about Petra's ancestors in the *Documento de Cartas de las Indias y Nuevas Colonias de 1793* and cannot wait to share that information with Petra. The detail about Jonás's research into Petra's life, is a commentary on the validity of the dominant culture's

ability to faithfully create and share stories of those they oppress. Implicitly, Arroyo Pizarro questions such representation of people of color and the accuracy of these stories as a literary creation. The author challenges the validity of the dominant group and their authority in sharing stories that are not their own. In Jonás's dismissal of Petra's own knowledge about herself and his desire to explain something about her to her, he presents a condescending attitude of superiority. Moreover, Jonás's nursing from Petra as he opens her legs renders an incestuous image. In a way, this scene could be read as a type of matricide: The murder of Petra as a wet-nurse, births Petra as a rape-victim and hypersexualized enslaved person. The reader witnesses the dehumanizing transformative process of Black women from the perspective and lived experience of the white men who degrade them. Therefore, Petra's degradation—via erotization—serves as an example of an incomplete and uniformed story that speaks to a need for marginalized voices to author and share their own stories. Arroyo Pizarro demonstrates that the continued omission of these voices, allows the narrative to remain incomplete. An incomplete narrative can only reflect an incomplete society.

Conclusions

The approach to slavery, from a contemporary perspective, raises the questions of not only the inversion of oppressive relations between enslaved people and masters, but also how these dynamics have been recycled and transgressed. It would break—or rewrite—the idea of racial tensions closely linked to sexual difference, a dichotomy that bolsters the supremacy of the white man. For Black female authors, writing these works presents a risk (to their careers and reputations) in order to appeal to the moral sense of those who benefit from their silence and in

pursuit of social justice. Nevertheless, authors like Santos-Febres and Arroyo Pizarro go through the traumatic experience of retelling and writing life stories to give voice to a historically silenced community.

Rather than perpetuate or fully dismantle stereotypes about Puerto Rico, women, and Black people, the authors permeate these matters with alternative knowledge. In the prologue to *Sirena Selena* (2000), Santos-Febres addresses the dilemma directly:

Opino que muchos de los escritores caribeños hacen una de dos cosas: tratan de irse por encima de ese estereotipo y niegan una realidad caribeña—escriben entonces novelas muy nostálgicas, que niegan la cuestión del deseo y del cuerpo y se alejan de tratar temas de raza, religión, cotidianidad caribeña—. Yo eso lo entiendo, porque se quieren salir del condena' o estereotipo que nos tiene encarcela'os. Mi respuesta es otra: tratar de incluir las cosas que se piensan como exóticas y develarlas como un tipo de conocimiento diferente: hay una risa, un gozo, una manera de pensar el deseo y experimentar el cuerpo de manera diferente que es tan valiosa como la de cualquiera. (viii)^{lxxxii}

Santos-Febres's texts can be characterized by the transgressive treatment of her characters that challenge the marginality to which they are condemned—due to social, racial, sexual, and gender status. However, these characters are not completely fictitious, thus informing the reader that there are more stories and there is more diversity to the stereotypical image of Black women. Hence, in educating the reader about historical figures that do not conform to the stereotypes (that stem from the colonial era) of Black women they achieve a didactic purpose. The authors give voice to Afro-Latinx women, demonstrate Black women's continued service to humanity despite a legacy of hostile treatment, and provide transnational bonds within the diaspora.

Santos-Febres and Arroyo Pizarro give voice to Black women in the Americas, they rediscover and rewrite the history of slavery, place Black women at the center of that narrative, and present those findings to Puerto Rico and to the world. The Afro-Puerto Rican authors provide an often-untold perspective of Black women who defy historical and literary stereotypes. They remind the world of Black women's roles in cultural preservation, of their resilience, their shared spirituality, and their history of resistance. Santos-Febres and Arroyo Pizarro fill a void in canon by creating the literary presence of those who are often "othered" and left out by mainstream literature—in both the dominant culture and within the subdominant Latinx community. These authors right the literary wrongs in a way that allows for a more accurate reflection of society. Indeed, *Fe en disfraz* and *las Negras* present experiences that cross more than literary barriers; they reflect a transnational experience for women of color. In dialogue with the Combahee River Collective, the authors expand the process of liberation for Black women across geographic and linguistic borders. In doing so, memory, spirituality, and history become communal experiences that challenge and expand upon the conventional understandings of self-writing.

Conclusion

Changing the Narrative Changes the Reality

In an essay titled “You Do Not Belong Here,” the award-winning and self-identifying Afro-Puerto Rican author Jaquira Díaz reflects on her position in multiple areas of society. Díaz originally published the personal essay on June 2017 in the *Kenyon Review*, and in it, she suggests that she remains at the outskirts and in an authorial, emotional, cultural, academic, ethnic, and racial borderlands. Díaz opens with a description of living in government housing projects in Puerto Rico—dangerous to outsiders, but at the same time, a place that truly embodies community and gives deeper meaning to family. While Díaz nostalgically revisits different places of her childhood neighborhood, a teenage boy approaches her:

“What are you doing here?” he asked./ “Just visiting,” I said. “I was born here” .../ “You do not belong here,” he said, then pedaled away, disappearing around the corner.../ You do not belong here./ Even though I was born here, even though I spent my childhood riding my bike in these same streets./ *You do not belong here.*/ Some of us have been hearing this our whole lives. (“You Do Not Belong Here”)

Díaz’s insider-outsider dichotomy evokes the borderlands Gloria Anzaldúa describes, providing a more contemporary actualization of Anzaldúa’s “mestiza”^{lxxxiii} consciousness. If we were to place Díaz in dialogue with Anzaldúa, we would find an updated language (a more expansive and inclusive “mestiza” consciousness that includes an “Afro-Latinx” consciousness, for example), an expansion of Anzaldúa’s ideas—one wherein her theories have become more inclusive and intersectional. And, lastly, we would find a society that has not achieved equality, equity, or justice. Living in the United States as a non-white Latinx queer woman for Anzaldúa

and Díaz means existing at the intersection of opposing identities. Racially, it means constantly asserting your presence, a persistent measurement of the “proximity to whiteness, always” answering to the question “What are you?” Similarly, non-binary and non-conforming gender identities, non-heteronormative sexualities, and/or belonging to a low socioeconomic status also lead to the same questioning of one’s identity and existence.

Díaz captures the perplexity of recognizing that it is both a privileged position to have an inherited or birthright US citizenship, and she takes responsibility for contributing to its problematization:

But even though this has been my experience, racial ambiguity is a privilege. Colorism is real and it lives in the US, in Puerto Rico, in Cuba, in the Dominican Republic, and all over Latin America. We need to keep having these conversations. Race is complicated, **especially when you consider that race and colorism in Puerto Rico are not exactly the same as in Mexico, Honduras, Peru.** You can’t simply lump us all together and pretend we’re one country and one race and call us “Latin America,” **because Latin America is made up of cultures and people with various histories of colonization, occupation, militarization, genocide, enslavement, displacement, and erasure.** (*my emphasis* “You Do Not Belong Here”)

When discussing the complexities of race, Díaz adds a nuanced perspective to an often-monolithic and reductive point-of-view. Her commentary on racism and colorism’s distinct manifestations is essential to my argument: Latinx identities have their origins in Latin America. While cautioning against a country and racial homogenization (“Latin America”) for Latinx people, Díaz uses the possessive plural “we.” Her use of a collective pronoun conveys a sense of empathy and complicity with the Latinx identity but does not negate the differences within Latin

American nations.

Díaz's Latinx identity expresses a sense of community and recognizes responsibility: "I regularly think of the ways in which we allow these systems to continue. Resistance, for me, means first acknowledging all the ways I have been complicit" ("You Do Not Belong Here"). Aiming for solidarity with other marginalized individuals, Díaz does not look to silence or privilege one voice over the other. Rather, acknowledging her position avoids ideological competitions that distract and hinder intersectionality and individuality. When Díaz speaks to the different treatment of Afro-Latinx authors, she illustrates limitations in the *Kenyon Review's* summer recommended reading list, "There are never Latinxs on these lists, and I can't recall a single time I saw an Afro-Latinx writer on one.... The list illustrates exactly how publishing works: almost every person is white. ... I'm not talking about diversity. I'm talking about access" ("You Do Not Belong Here"). Although I would caution against an oversimplification of diversity, Díaz's comment contains its own negation that stems from an awareness of her own subject-positionality.

In Sara Ahmed's *On Being Included: Racism and Diversity in Institutional Life*, the feminist critic agrees with Nirmal Puwar's argument that:

Diversity has come "overwhelmingly to mean the inclusion of people who look different." The very idea that diversity is about those who "look different" shows us how it can keep whiteness in place. If diversity becomes something that is added to organizations, like color, then it confirms the whiteness of what is already in place. (33)

Díaz's self-awareness highlights that her identity is not reduced to a superficial definition of diversity. Rather, as a self-identifying Afro-Puerto Rican woman who writes from the United States, Díaz captures the complexities of an ambiguous and fluid hierarchy that exists in

dominant culture as well as in the Latinx community. Furthermore, Díaz captures what could be called an “out of body experience” or a divided sense of self, because she is cognizant of how she is viewed, ignored, and how she views herself; moreover, Díaz expresses a need to be genuine in order to invalidate “the whiteness of what is already in place” (Ahmed 33).

When all three senses come into contact, Díaz expresses sentiments that are reminiscent of W.E.B. DuBois’s “double consciousness.” Often one of the only women of color in a room, she states, “In Ohio, I am invisible. In Ohio, I am hypervisible. Both of these statements are true. . . . For some of us, just existing in certain spaces, getting through the day, and surviving has been an act of resistance” (“You Do Not Belong Here”). In other words, the presence of an Afro-Latina in an inherently oppressive and exclusive space, is transformative and serves as an act of resistance as it disrupts the exclusivity of whiteness. Without expanding on the intricacies of the exclusionary daily occurrences—that take place in the dominant and subdominant communities she belongs to—Díaz articulates a quintessential trait of *Latinidad*: *de aquí y de allá*.^{lxxxiv} A purgatory-like in-betweenness that stems from existing in a country that is both Díaz’s and anti-Díaz; this provides a sense of interconnectedness amongst Latinx people from different Latin American countries, as well as an authorial expression of responsibility.

Díaz takes risk in voicing, defining, and shaping her own self-perception. In her essay, she stands in solidarity with other members of the Latinx community and, in doing so, she accents an intimate knowledge of the Latinx community, but breaks with the mold of the dominant culture’s homogenization of all that is Latinx. Díaz’s statement about the treatment of creative writing programs of Afro-Latinx people describes society’s treatment of Afro-Latinx and other non-white, non-heteronormative, and non-male authors. The recounted instances where Díaz is explicitly, or deductively, informed “You do not belong here” further speaks to

sentiments expressed in Latinx, as well as Latin American, texts. Díaz's work effectively highlights the Afro-Latinx contributions to Latinx identity, as well as their departures from and resistance to white writers. In other words, her writing does not “mold it into work that is palatable to white men, that fits the model of white, male writing” (“You Do Not Belong Here”). As Ahmed and Puwar demonstrate, it is a gross misreading of diversity to reduce it to a human color palate. To this end, I do not intend to define who is and who is not “Afro-Latinx;” still, it is a necessary distinction to express the differing interpretations of who is Black in individual Latin American nations as well as in the United States. In this way, we can shed light on the multiplicity of racism and colorism as it manifests for Afro-Latinx people without imposing a limited US perspective.

Historically, people of color are depicted and represented through the dominant-culture's eye. This results in a monolithic representation of what it means to be a person of color. It is interesting to note, however, when the author is a queer woman of color—such as Afro-Puerto Rican authors Yolanda Arroyo Pizarro and Díaz—she does not limit their critiques of society to their personalized marginalization, rather they use their platform to denounce oppression—even denouncing oppressive agents that do not harm them directly. Evocative of Maya Angelou's words, “I speak of the Black experience, but I am always talking about the human condition,” Díaz ends her essay thusly:

It's crucial for every single person, not just people of color, to interrogate their own complicity in enabling a system that keeps us out, engage in open conversations about white supremacy and privilege and power. It's time to listen, acknowledge the ways this privilege has made you safer, to recognize that as gatekeepers, it is our responsibility to

do more, to reach out, to say, “You belong here.” Is it safe there where you are? There are people standing outside, waiting. Open the door. (“You Do Not Belong Here”)

Perhaps a strategy of solidarity, perhaps Díaz’s self-perception, perhaps both, Díaz’s identification as a woman of color and specifically, as an Afro-Latina—more so than a Puerto Rican woman—centers race and gender in her discourse. Regardless of authorial intent, Díaz’s essay is a call to action from all and for all.

When women share their stories, literature more comprehensively captures reality. Texts from marginalized subjects—Latina Americana and Latinx people of color from Cuba, Mexico, and Puerto Rico—function as markers of identity whose works provides a more accurate reflection of society. Because these authors exist in the “borderlands,” they capture their multiple communities, not as an insider-outsider, but in a privileged position of belonging and thereby informing and educating on these cultures. If we collect information from the people who are at the bottom of the social, economic and political sectors, then those women reflect back a comprehensive and complex world. Therefore, Cuban and Cuban-American authors Daisy Rubiera Castillo’s *Reyita sencillamente* (1996), Cristina Garcia’s *Dreaming in Cuban* (1992), Mexican and Mexican-American authors Gloria Anzaldúa’s *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza* (1987) and Laura Esquivel’s *Como agua para chocolate* (1989), and the Puerto Rican Mayra Santos Febres’s *Fe en disfraz* (2009) and Yolanda Arroyo Pizarro’s *las Negras* (2012) inform the reader that their communities are not voiceless. They correct misrepresentations and counter the tradition of erasure and historical sidelining.

In reexamining and analyzing the sociopolitical and cultural contexts of Mexico, Puerto Rico, Cuba, and their relationship to the United States, it is not surprising to find that these authors document women’s roles in nation building and identity formation. These countries’

shared history of colonialism under Spanish rule, and then US expansionism, led to several commonalities. Mexico, Cuba, and Puerto Rico (as well as most of the Americas), express similar literary (mis)representations of society and concepts of nationality that promote *blanqueamiento*—or a practice of erasure of people of color. *Blanqueamiento* serves as a tool of destruction by promoting the heteronormative European white aesthetic. The white aesthetic then functions as a measuring device, the ideal, by which to compare (and contrast) all people. Within this practice, women have historically held the lowest positions. In this way, much of the previous literature failed as a model for nationhood and promoted that which they set out to dismantle. It was not until the advent of texts written by Latina American, Latinx authors, and other marginalized peoples, that a more comprehensive literary representation of the nation emerged.

These marginalized authors do away with the practice of writing a new nation that exists in comparison to European predecessors. They break with the practice of upholding antiquated and harmful social codes. In other words, these authors ascribe to a sense of self that is rooted in a decolonized custom of inclusivity. They function as cultural agents and new historians. Their sense of self extends to their communities, as diverse and unique as is humanity. Harmonies in the literature of these women express a sense of self that extends beyond the colonial-era borders. Turning the metaphorical borders inward allows for a sense of self, and a sense of community, built on principles of inclusivity rather than the traditional sense of nationality that is based on exclusion. Santos-Febres takes women's stories from across the Americas; she does not limit her storytelling to Puerto Rico. Gloria Anzaldúa honors the Virgin of Guadalupe and Yemayá, addressing anti-Blackness and extending her sense of self to diasporic subjects.

Their texts do away with obsolete limitations to create works of art that reflect their diverse borderlands. Still, the practice of classifying and comparing these authors' work to the Latin American and European cannon, proves a disservice since by nature a comparison implies an outcome that produces a hierarchy. The practice of comparing Latina Americana and Latinx works to their predecessors negates their story. What is more, the demanding practice implies these life stories exist only in relation to their predecessors and not as standalone stories. Comparing and contrasting positions these texts, and people, in a place of competition and preserves patriarchal hierarchies. Indeed, the reductionist practice assumes these works exist only in relationship to their antecedents and dismisses their contributions. Instead, these works flow as a literary continuation of Latin American and, by default, European practices.

García, Rubiera Castillo, Esquivel, Santos-Febres, and Arroyo Pizarro's literature does not merely exist in the limiting binary of upholding or dismantling colonial-era white supremacy. To continue to segregate these authors by country of origin dismisses their literary contributions and removes their right to self-identification. Because they show a transnational bond with other similarly marginalized subjects, the root of their *latinidad* is a shared history of trauma, survival, and now success. Furthermore, these authors expansion of self-writing to include their communal selves breaks with the previously established nation-building mold and dismisses the boundaries of self-writing (mirroring their content). These authors do not limit their sense of self to colonial-era nationalities and borders; instead, they honor their uniqueness while establishing common ground and serving as cultural agents in both spaces.

These authors revolutionize concepts of identity, much like nationality, from an outward performance to an internal space of existence where conflating and often times conflicting perspectives and identities co-exist. They collectively define the Latinx identity.

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ⁱ “Hispanic refers to those born, raised, and educated in a Spanish-speaking country who write in their national language. Latinos are those born, raised, and educated in the United States who feel more comfortable writing in English” (Luis, “Crisis in America: Identity and Latino U.S. Literature” 171). Working from William Luis’s definition, Latinx is the gender-neutral term, often used in lieu of Latino or Latina, that encompasses both culture and identity.

ⁱⁱ By “Latinidad” I am referring to the shared cultural identity of Latin American people and their descendants, in the United States. Juana Maria Rodriguez defines *latinidad* as “a particular geopolitical experience but it also contains within it the complexities and contradictions of immigration, (post)(neo)colonialism, race, color, legal status, class, nation, language and the politics of location” (10).

ⁱⁱⁱ Using Vanderbilt as an example.

^{iv} Only Emory offers the opportunity to create literature, such as a documenting a testimonial narrative; unlike graduate studies in English departments nationwide.

^v According to Antonio Flores’s “How the U.S. Hispanic Population is Changing” in the Pew Research Center: Hispanics of Mexican origin account for 63.3% (36 million) of the nation’s Hispanic population in 2015, by far the largest share of any origin group. Meanwhile, the share among non-Mexican origin groups (36.7% in 2015, up from 34.3% in 2008) has grown as migration from elsewhere in Latin America has increased. The population of Hispanics of Puerto Rican origin, the second-largest origin group, stands at 5.4 million in 2015 in the 50 states and the District of Columbia (an additional 3.4 million people live in Puerto Rico). Five other Hispanic origin groups have populations of more than 1 million – Salvadorans, Cubans, Dominicans, Guatemalans and Colombians – and each has also seen its population increase over the past decade.” Of the five other Hispanic origin groups, I choose to focus on Cubans and Cuban-Americans for two main reasons. First, their unique immigration story in comparison to other Latinx populations. Second, the power Cuban-Americans wield in US Politics and therefore nation-building in the United States—especially in Florida.

^{vi} Foundational Fictions, according to Doris Sommer are nineteenth-century fictions, functioning as national allegories, from Spanish America. These novels that engage in the nation-building process are produced by a male literate class that homogenize a heterogeneous society.

^{vii} Although Sommer’s work does include a study of Gertrudis Gómez de Avellaneda’s *Sab*.

^{viii} Martí writes “Nuestra América” because of the common elements these countries share.

^{ix} Narrated in the first person, and omniscient, *Lazarillo de tormes* (1554) is often considered the beginning of the picaresque and serves as one of the first examples of self-writing in the Spanish language. As a prototype of the picaresque, *Lazarillo* is an ironic realist novel that opposes idealist literature. The fictional autobiography is mediated by the implied author (this is seen in male writers whose books are narrated by fictional women—the prostitute gains a fictional space denied by society, although the author maintains superiority). It is further ironic that Lazaro, a man from a low social status, enters the literary domain and writes an autobiography with a rhetorical strategy that provides a defense for himself. The authority of Lazaro as the narrator is an illusion, because the implied author mediates the text into a parodic manifesto that ultimately incriminates Lazaro and allows society to crush him. In the beginning of *Lazarillo*, the text works as a deconstruction of idealism. Lazaro wants to show his triumph, but the implied author makes it appear that it is not a triumph and that he is still badly off in society. According to Professor Friedman, *Lazarillo* is a paradigm of the novel: it outlines realism (reflects social prohibitions, the importance of blood purity, genealogy, seeks another center that is not the typical hero, and criticizes society), includes Metafiction (addresses the reader), does not use idealized characters, and there is an element of multiperspectivism (in the double audience of the readers and Vuestra Merced as well as double narration in the explanation to Vuestra Merced and about the book). Lazaro is aware of the book he writes, as the prologue shows; the prologue of *Lazarillo* is then a metacommentary on the creation of books and the difficulties posed by

society.

^x For more information about the use of memory in Latin-America, see Luis's "Memory, Politics, and Writing *Biography of a Runaway Slave*."

^{xi} Molloy uses the term "Spanish America" to refer to the countries in Latin America that are Spanish speaking. In doing so, she restricts her analysis to the linguistic borders forced onto people during colonialism and reduces them to their former status as colonized subjects. Therefore, I do not use the term, except to refer to Molloy's use of it.

^{xii} For Molloy: "autobiography is as much a way of reading as it is a way of writing. . . . Whereas there are and have been a good many autobiographies written in Spanish America, they have not always been read autobiographically: filtered through the dominant discourse of the day, they have been hailed either as a history or as fiction, and rarely considered occupying a space of their own." ("The Autobiographical Narrative" 458).

And, "autobiography appears in Spanish America as a genre when it becomes a subject of reflection, that is, when questions arise about the validity of self-writing in general, about the forms the exercise should take in particular, and about the purposes it should accomplish. . . . That these questions should arise, furthermore, within the context of the more general debates over national identities and national culture—debates in which relations to Spanish, and more generally European, canonical authority are renegotiated—is also significant." ("The Autobiographical Narrative," 458-9).

^{xiii} Molloy is "especially interested in the peculiar awareness of self and culture brought about by ideological crisis... by the influence of the European Enlightenment and **by the independence from Spain**" (*At Face Value* 3).

^{xiv} Juan Francisco Manzano's *Autobiografía de un esclavo* details the autobiography of the only enslaved person to write (or speak) their autobiography during slavery; I consider his "testimonial" an oral text.

Typically, slave narratives were recounted orally; the enslaved person or former enslaved person presented their life in bondage to an editor who then read it back to the enslaved person for clarification (see John W. Blassingame's *Slave Testimony. Two Centuries of Letters, Speeches, Interviews, and Autobiographies* page xxii). However, Manzano was a writer—as well as a published poet—and so did not need a transcriber, rather, he himself provides his life story in a written manner that reads as an oral narrative.

^{xv} Subjectivity implies the following three criteria: 1. A person has to have a conscious experience [such as feelings]. 2. A person has to have agency [that is, they can wield power over someone/thing else] 3. A truth that is considered such only from this person's perspective [information, idea, situation, or some kind of physical thing]).

^{xvi} "Disidentification is meant to be a descriptive of the survival strategies the minority subject practices in order to negotiate a phobic majoritarian public sphere that continuously elides or punishes the existence of subjects who do not conform to the phantasm of normative citizenship" (4). Muñoz further elaborates that "disidentification is *not always* an adequate strategy of resistance or survival for all minority subjects. At times, resistance needs to be pronounced and direct; on other occasions, queers of color and other minority subjects need to follow a conformist path if they hope to survive a hostile public sphere. But, for some, disidentification is a survival strategy that works within and outside the dominant public sphere simultaneously." (6)

^{xvii} To illustrate the editing or silencing of enslaved women's accounts, please reference Harriet Ann Jacob's *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*.

^{xviii} I use Brooke Ackerly's notion of "Third World" women that stems from the Cold War from non-alliance and non-satellite states (leaders of Africa and Asia). A resistance to avoid developing in the way of the West that puts political equality over economic stability. Likewise, by not developing in the way of the Soviet bloc, which does the opposite. Originally, the idea was to find a third way of developing.

^{xix} The only Spanish American autobiography written during slavery, was authored in Cuba by Juan Francisco Manzano. For more information, see *Juan Francisco Manzano: Autobiografía del esclavo poeta y otros escritos. Edición, introducción y notas William Luis* (2007).

^{xx} "The prevalence of both consensual unions and miscegenation, along with the strong influence of the Catholic Church, led to major differences between how the English and Spanish regarded the rights of slaves, especially toward the end of the eighteenth century. Until then, all colonial powers had allowed masters to free their slaves. But after the Haitian revolution, the British, French, and Dutch started to restrict manumission, while the Portuguese and Spanish colonies promoted and codified the practice. As a result, only in the Portuguese and Spanish colonies did giant classes of free blacks develop, and with them the *mulato* group (in some countries they were called *pardos* or *morenos*) that so distinguished Latin America's rainbow racial spectrum from North America's stark black-white system of racial classification.... Racism obviously persisted in both groups of colonies, but in the Iberian ones it

assumed a muted form, its operation rendered more complex by the presence of a huge mixed-race population.” (Gonzalez 81)

^{xxi} Morua Law (1910), for example. For more information, see Louis A. Jr. Perez’s *Cuba Under the Platt Amendment, 1902-1934* pp. 151.

^{xxii} Examples of Donald Trump’s racism during his presidency and while campaigning, includes his commentary on Mexicans and immigrants from south of the US border: “When Mexico sends its people, they’re not sending their best.... They’re sending people that have lots of problems, and they’re bringing those problems with us. They’re bringing drugs. They’re bringing crime. They’re rapists.” In 2018, while meeting with lawmakers interested in protecting immigrants from developing nations with large Black populations, Trump asked, “Why are we having all these people from shithole countries come here? Why do we need more Haitians? Take them out.” Furthermore, Donald Trump has retweeted white supremacist symbols and refused to apologize. He has also encouraged violence against the Black Lives Matters (BLM) protests and refused to condemn anti-protestors who have killed peaceful protestors, but publicly condemns the BLM movement. However, Trump has a history of racism and prior to his presidency, Trump was sued for racial discrimination (for more information, see the Justice Department’s 1973 Lawsuit against Trump Management Company).

^{xxiii} Herstory is an alteration of “history”—originally the portmanteau of “his story”—that serves to critique the orthodox historiography that excludes a woman’s perspective. Herstory is then a way of highlighting women’s roles and perspectives.

^{xxiv} Santería is an African diaspora religion composed by syncretism of the Yoruba religion of West Africa (specifically, modern-day Nigeria), Catholicism, and Native American spiritism.

^{xxv} In Santería, the number 9 corresponds to Oya. Oya is a warrior orisha who guards the gates of the cemetery—a spiritual orisha, Oya ensures the boundaries between life and death are kept. The importance of religion, spirituality, and its symbolism can be read throughout the novel.

^{xxvi} These women create the pillars for a *panlatinidad*. That is, these women’s borderlands allow for a diversity of people, gender, race, ethnicity, country of origin, and religion. There is no one unifying element that defines all Latinx people. In other words, these women create spaces for diversity within the diversity to exist while encouraging solidarity. After all, is that not what cooking is?

^{xxvii} What is more, women were historically the last to become literate. Therefore, other measures to preserve history, such as oral narratives, challenge the western dichotomous historiography that is limited by a black-white, male-female, written-oral authorial and authority. In an effort to right this wrong, Latinx authors like García include a variety of perspectives; and, asserts the authors autobiographical presence in Pilar as the keeper of Cuban herstories.

^{xxviii} I use the word “centering” to refer to her approach to remove Black women from the margins and into the protagonist spotlight.

^{xxix} Regla de Ocha-Ifá is sometimes used interchangeably with Santería; however, Regla de Ocha-Ifá refers to the Orisha worship as it is still practiced in Africa without the syncretism with Catholic saints.

^{xxx} The term “gestora” is the feminization of “gestor” in Spanish and refers to the role of the person collecting, editing, and writing a testimony. Miguel Barnet says the following: “the gestor of the testimonial-novel collects the stories of his informants in voice and then transmits them in a decanted form” (my translation). By decanting, Barnet refers to the process of preserving elements of oral speech that allow for genuineness and removing those that interrupt the flow of the story.

^{xxxi} 1962 Missile Crisis

^{xxxii} Literary critics who support Anzaldúa’s role as key figure of Chicanx and Latinx critical theory include Frances Negrón-Muntaner, Lorraine López, Theresa A. Martinez, Melissa Castillo-Garsow, and Richard A. García.

^{xxxiii} A pesar del éxito público, tanto de la novela como de la película, no faltaron las críticas negativas sobre *Como agua para chocolate*. Guillermo Fadanelli opina que es “una ficción nacida de una tibia imaginación” (1990, p. 4) y Carmen Galindo (1990, p. 16), que la novela no tiene nada excepcional. Numerosos críticos evocan la banalidad de la escritura y el estilo, denunciando las “decenas de adjetivos que se utilizan a manera de andamios para sostener frases muertas” (Fadanelli, 1990, p. 4), el lenguaje “plagado de frases comunes y facilonas, débil coloquialismo que está allí más por incapacidad de realizar algo distinto que por mera voluntad” (Fadanelli, 1990, p. 4), “un mundo plano, observado desde un ángulo—injustificadamente favorable para la protagonista—en que sólo existe blanco y negro, sin matiz alguno” (Marquet, 1991, p. 59), “unos personajes planos, sacados de los cuentos de hadas” (Gil Bonmatí, 1993, p. VII). En resumen, bajo la pluma de Antonio Marquet: “si se le juzga desde un punto de vista literario, los defectos de la novela son muy evidentes [...]: es simplista, maniquea” (1991, p. 59). Por otra parte, Laura Esquivel no tendría el talento de los grandes escritores del realismo mágico. (216)

^{xxxiv} According to Cretien van Campen, “the Proust effect refers to the vivid reliving of events from the past through sensory stimuli.” For more information see *The Proust Effect: The Senses as Doorways to Lost Memories* (2014)

^{xxxv} *Los de abajo* (1915) is a novel by the Mexican author Mariano Azuela. The novel revolves around a group of people, “underdogs” or “los de abajo”—who take part in the Mexican Revolution—and the way in which the armed conflict has impacted their lives.

^{xxxvi} *Fe en disfraz* is a lot of things, but it is also a novel about memory, of the wound that is remembering. It is mounted on false, forged documents, rewritten with scraps of slave statements that I collected from multiple primary and secondary sources; that I recombined, translated, or, frankly, invented. (Author’s note, *Fe en disfraz*)

^{xxxvii} And it is understood that race exists by itself as a natural phenomenon and not as a social, ideological, spiritual, and economic construction that creates this strange thing that is called “Black,” the nigger... And who now is called afro-descendant. That it is changing/changes in name, is true, to the extent that there are struggles for words to name people and how they assume an identity (My translation).

^{xxxviii} Al fin encontré un nombre porque no es afro-américa americana. Como quiera que se llame, es esto (*señala a la revista*). **Esta colindancia entre ser negra y ser eh latina y ser puertorriqueña y ser diaspórica en todas las vertientes**. En la vertiente de la raza, en la vertiente de ser puertorriqueña—porque nosotros vivimos con más puertorriqueños afuera que adentro—, en la vertiente de ser mujer—que **nosotros tenemos una identidad que es transnacional también. Así que son tres transnacionalidades**. (my emphasis)

^{xxxix} Time has stopped. My history will remain as a testimony, in case I do not return from the eve of all Saint’s Day. (my translation).

^{xl} Women like Fe do not abound in this discipline; women whose formation/professional preparation takes place in Florence, in Mexico... There are not many academic stars with her preparation and, that like Fe, are, at the same time, Black women” (my translation, Santos-Febres 16-17).

^{xli} —Who would these women have looked like?

—Isn’t it obvious, Martín? They looked like me.

I stared at Faith silently. Interestingly, I had never stopped to think that her slaves looked like her. That she, present before me, had the same complexion, the same body as a slave under attack more than two hundred years ago. That the object of her study was so close to her skin.

^{xlii} “Even so, she was born, and her mother was born. Her entire caste was born. All of them nuns and whores.” (my translation, Santos-Febres 24).

^{xliiii} With one hand, Fe tightened the harness straps against her flesh. She frowned. Her skin crumpled against the bands, changing color, reddening... Fe tightened the harness harder and threw her head back a bit, biting her lips. The rods sank into her flesh... Fe took a step back and the harness danced against the exposed flesh, hurting her even more. Then, my boss proceeded to dress in the silk suit. She did not need my help to tie it, or to finish buttoning up the forearm. She covered herself completely. Then she got on her hands and knees and started to lick my feet, then my calves, my knees, my thighs, between my legs. I, a prisoner of the ritual, did nothing but gasp knowing that with each caress, Fe’s skin received a bite from the harness, raising a new wound. In that empty room and with that strange suit on, Fe Verdejo paid in blood the pleasure of giving me pleasure. I could not contain myself. I emptied myself in her mouth, like an offering. (my translation, Santos-Febres 57-58)

^{xliv} “I felt fear and shame. I had been the penetrated, the naked. I, the one who had come. Fe’s eyes, her silence after telling me about the suit, they let me know” (my translation, 59).

^{xlv} Chapter III: Declaration before the governor Alonso de Pires./ Village of Tejuco./ Historical Archive of Minas/ Gerais Case: Diamantina. Condition: Slave/ 1785. Chapter V: Historical Record of the Matina Valley, Costa Rica/ Governor’s Papers Diego de la Haya/ Case: María and Petrona. Condition: Slaves/ 1719. Chapter VIII: Papers of the Village of Mompo, Cartagena of Indias./ Historical Archive of New Granada and Governor Francisco del Calle/ Case: Ana María. Condition: Slave/ 1743. (my translation)

^{xlvi} “Born in 1731 or 1735, the exact date is unknown. Daughter of María da Costa, black slave, and Caetano de Sá, Portuguese [...], slave of the doctor of Arraial de Tejuco, don Manuel de Pires, who took her as a lover she being barely eleven years old (*My translation*, 41).”

^{xlvii} “Because of her herbalist craft and the haunting effluvioms of her body, the Inquisition advises caution in the daily dealings with the mulatta Pascuala. The officers of the castle of Barra have been warned to keep a safe distance” (*my translation*, 63).

^{xlviii} But I did not expect the strength with which he grabbed me from underneath my suit, shoved his fingers inside me until he forced me into a squat. Nor was I expecting the way he held me to the ground while he put his hard member between my legs. The guy started biting me, scratching me, open me with forceful shoves. I wrestled with him a bit, but worst of all was how my body responded to every push and every slap. It responded with blood and burning. It responded with an intense tremor that came out, unexpectedly from my vagina. I beat fully, my raw and

present body, underneath my outfit. That was the only time I screamed, while Aníbal Andrés was rejoicing in my flesh. I have to admit that I liked that defeat. That painful submission, that letting me be done to. (*my translation*, 90)

^{xlix} “I was afraid to touch the habits, but I could not stop doing so. What I never dared to do was try one on. I knew that would have been my perdition” (*my translation*, 88).

^l Century XVI. The vestment recreated the time of Don Juan Tenorio, of Don Giovanni, the renaissance Casanova perfectly. So, I put on a mask” (*my translation* 96).

^{li} I spent the entire night wedged between the flesh of that poor girl, shoving myself inside of her like a possessed man. She, as drunk as I, was just screaming; I don’t know if it was out of pleasure, I don’t know if it was out of pain. I didn’t have time to ask. The next day, my bed was empty with a blood stain that adorned the sheets. I thought it was the stain of my lost virginity or, perhaps, hers. I didn’t want to investigate.

^{lii} In the first three editions, *las Negras* tells three stories, in the fourth and most recent edition, a fourth story is added titled “Los amamantados.” As of December, 2019, the fourth story is not available in the electronic editions of the book.

^{liii} To illustrate the editing or silencing of enslaved women’s narratives, please reference Harriet Ann Jacob’s *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*.

^{liv} “The fears of all of them, sisters, can be reduced to this: Who would design our possible return? Who will hug us in the Àtúnwa if we have suffered so much? When will we be free for the ureoré?” (*my translation*, 32).

^{lv} The first memory could be the ship (*my translation*, Arroyo Pizarro 1).

^{lvi} Wanwe and the other women comprehend very little of what they see, but perceptively, they understand that it is about an act of control (*my translation*, 2).

^{lvii} Wanwe closes her eyes and remembers the aroma of the old women, of her mother, of her sisters, of the girl in the *ureoré* ritual. **Anything that makes her forget** that in this precise moment, the woman with the rings torn out is barely breathing.

^{lviii} Whom would surely be their new owners (*my translation*, 30).

^{lix} As if for the first time, she notices defenseless limbs sprouting from her body, but the truth is that she has been observing herself for hours. She feels foreign, as if exited from her own body (*my translation*, 7).

^{lx} “makes eye contact with her, *my eyes with her eyes*, just before seeing her sink. The ocean swallows her (*my translation* 34).

^{lxi} “is lifted by the feet like an alabaster warrior that seems to be immortalized, her body has already been halved by the bites of several sharks” (*my translation*).

^{lxii} The ancestral beings do not liberate them. They do not make an appearance despite having been summoned with all the strengths. Neither do the new deities that the shamans of their captors’ worship... Orún, Olódumaré, Bàbá, Ìyá do not appear and neither do the goddesses that are still on Earth, not even the prayers to the heavens, not the sages of the sea, nor the ancestral essences of the practice. Olórun disappears. Oníbodé disappears. Ìbí, Ìyé, Àti, Ikú disappear. There is no glimpse of the spirit of the river rituals, nor the passage through the gate of the Gatekeeper, nor the red paint for the dance. No more birth, life and death. (*my translation*, 31)

^{lxiii} For more information about Àtúnwa, see: <https://extra.globo.com/noticias/religiao-e-fe/pai-paulo-de-oxala/os-ancestrais-africanos-a-reencarnacao-22023084.html>

^{lxiv} However, Nieves López fails to mention Alejo Carpentier’s 1944 novel by the same name.

^{lxv} *Bozal* refers to “slaves born in Africa, who spoke European languages only with difficulty” (Lipski 851)

^{lxvi} Zoned dialects, trying their luck: Kimbundu, Mandingo, Bantu, French, Dutch, Creoles derived from these (*my translation*, 46).

^{lxvii} “When I panic about what I have forgotten, I start a mental recounting: I ask my mother to hug me, scream for food, I summon the sisters, joke with the infants. These phrases I remember perfectly in my language” (*my translation*, 42).

^{lxviii} Please reference Lydia Cabrera’s 1988 text *La lengua sagrada de los ñáñigos*.

^{lxix} I freed *ladinos*, maroons, and natives. And, the midwives who have been fighting with me (*my translation*, 61).

^{lxx} Puerto Rican slaves collectively express their repudiation of the system of slavery in two ways: Direct confrontation against the system and escape.

^{lxxi} We concluded it is better to die rather than humiliate ourselves to the oppressor and we spoke of some of our brothers, experts in the practice of compassionate suicide, since they have already achieved it and have left instructions as a legacy” (*my translation* 51).

^{lxxii} I swear I wanted to die, Fray Petro, to be used as an animal. I swear that later I wanted to kill them all, little father. Nous allons reproduire une armée, kite a kwaze yon lame. I made it my goal. That is what us women set out

to do and we spread the word through the beating of the drums. Hebu kuzaliana jeshi. We repeated the same at the music festivals of the Wolof, Tuareg, Bakongos, Malimbo, and the Egba.

^{lxxiii} I drown them in the buckets for collecting placentas, little father. I press their little black throats with my fingers and suffocate them. Or I asphyxiate them with their umbilical cords, even maneuvering before they leave the womb. The mother does not realize it, or she prefers it, or she has asked for it . . . pleading in a language unknown to the white man. The act, which can be very subtle, goes unnoticed by the watchman of newborns, who watches over for the survival of the future slave. I deceive him. We deceive him. If I can't do it during childbirth, I later feed them fruits contaminated with blood from women with tetanus from the chains. Or I pick up diarrhea infested with dysentery and mix it into their food and purees. Sometimes, I place the concoction on my nipples and I breastfeed them. Or I place casaba, prior to moistening, near their tonsil and I clog their nose. I'm not the only one. Many follow me. We have achieved an army. (my translation, 70)

^{lxxiv} The problem of those who oppress us, Fray Petro, is not the oppression itself, it is the underestimation that they make of the oppressed" (my translation, 59).

^{lxxv} Nor did she recognize the indigenous codices of those called Taínos and whose language seemed to be necessary for cooking. She had been separated from her consanguineous in her homeland and barely survived the trip via *nao*. She understood the language of Jwaabi much less, nor did she understand that of the other servants who were responsible for the maintenance of the farm since almost all came from different ethnic groups dispersed throughout the great continent. (my translation, 81-81).

^{lxxvi} "These slaves are expensive.' 'It is my property.' 'Senseless children' . . . 'You'll see who is boss, you disgusting black'" (my translation, 100).

^{lxxvii} Emitted a hiss, which melted into the night and the noise of the frogs. If someone answered the whistle, if only someone did (my translation).

^{lxxviii} "Whistles that answer whistles" (my translation).

^{lxxix} The droplets awaken her lids and an invisible shaman makes her wake up. Namaqua and its warrior women comfort her. The body disappears. . . . Three days later no one can explain the enchantment. No one understands the bewitchment. The slave owner and his men shoot their arrows towards the forest, as is customary. . . . Some act of sorcery makes one of them return, like a boomerang. The arrow shot across the forestry at the end of the llano emits a whistle. The spirits—it's the only explanation—answer. It manages to encrust itself in don Georgino's forehead. No one knows how. (my translation, 105-107).

^{lxxx} Petra was born in San Juan Bautista and is descendent of the Mandinga from her maternal grandmother, as recounted by herself during nighttime lullabies and corroborated when the little master himself questions the origins of the slaves that belong to him." (my translation, 139).

^{lxxxi} "My father says Black women are only here to be ridden. They are more enjoyable than the whites.' Jónas Cartagena reacts surprise, he is no longer the same" (my translation, 145).

^{lxxxii} I think that many of the Caribbean writers do one of two things: they try to rise above the stereotypes and deny a Caribbean reality—they write very nostalgic novels, which deny the question of desire and the body and move away from addressing issues of race, religion, Caribbean everyday life. I understand that, because they want to get out of the condemned stereotype that has us imprisoned. My answer is another: try to include things that are thought of as exotic and reveal them as a different kind of knowledge: there is a laugh, a joy, a way of thinking about desire and experiencing the body in a different way that is just as valuable.

^{lxxxiii} Returning to Anzaldúa's interview with Keating, "I started to think in terms of mestiza consciousness. What happens to people like me who are in between all of these different categories? What does that do to one's concept of nationalism, of race, ethnicity, and even gender? I was trying to articulate and create a theory of a Borderlands existence. . . . I had to, for myself, figure out some other term that would describe a more porous nationalism, opened up to other categories of identity" (215)

^{lxxxiv} Although the term "nideaquínideallá" is used in the "India María" in the 1988 film, I expand upon the Nuyorican poet, Tato Laviera's *Nideaquínideallá*.