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Inroads toward Contemporary Latina Literature: Poetry and Criticism

Adela Josefina Najarro

Western Michigan University

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INROADS TOWARD CONTEMPORARY LATINA LITERATURE:
POETRY AND CRITICISM

by

Adela Josefina Najarro

A Dissertation
Submitted to the
Faculty of The Graduate College
in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the
Degree of Doctor of Philosophy
Department of English

Western Michigan University
Kalamazoo, Michigan
August 2003
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

When I decided to write a dual dissertation, Professor Herb Scott and Dr. Allen Webb agreed to serve as co-directors. Herb would keep an eye on the poetry while Allen would check up on the scholarship. I have to thank you both for being willing to guide me through the process of writing a dissertation that combines poetry and criticism.

Herb’s editorial eye has pushed my poems into their final forms, and his belief and faith in my work has served as a touchstone where I could rest during moments of doubt. I am indebted to five years worth of close readings, and to his guidance as an editor. From our first workshop to the final stages of the dissertation, Herb has judiciously cared for my work. His editorial comments have enriched my understanding of the power of language where at times more can be said with less, so that when the unnecessary is cut, a poem comes alive within its own white space and language. Herb insisted that every word count in its multiple connotations, and that the very form of the poem, from line breaks to the overall structure, be tight and concise; all this while encouraging the development of my own particular poetic vision and voice. Herb, thank you for your support and encouragement, your insights into poetry, and your belief in me as a poet and scholar.

One weekday evening a few years back, Dr. Allen Webb walked into the classroom excited about the possibilities of mentoring doctoral students during the dissertation process. Little did he know that the notion of a dual dissertation was brewing in my mind as I was sitting there listening to him speak. Ever since our chat later that evening, I have worked with Allen on the dissertation’s critical volume. He
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has been a profound mentor and guide while I wrote about my *latinidad* and explored the possibilities of Latina literature. His wealth of knowledge concerning gender, ethnicity, race and literary studies has been fundamental to my own discoveries in these areas. Our discussions on the themes and issues of the literature, his extensive comments on each chapter, his own passion and dedication to teaching and scholarship, have empowered me to find my own voice as a Latina woman, poet and scholar, and for that I thank you from the bottom of my heart.

I would like to thank the other members of my dissertation committee, Dr. Robert Vann and Dr. Patricia Montilla. Thank you Rob, for pointing me in the direction of Pierre Bourdieu’s *Language & Symbolic Power*, which helped me understand the implications of Spanglish in United States culture. It was through you that I first realized my own linguistic domination and the power to break from its constraints. I am also grateful for the attention paid to Chapter two, and your editorial insights. Patricia, thank you for being a mentor, friend and guide as I completed this doctoral process, and for introducing me to various Latin American female poets, such as Alfonsina Storni and Gabriela Mistral.

My time here at Western Michigan University has been one of the most fruitful experiences of my life and I have to thank this very institution for giving me the opportunity to develop as a poet and scholar. A particular debt of thanks goes to Ms. Griselda Daniel, Director of Diversity Programs. When I first came to Western she coordinated a funding package consisting of a King/Chavez/Parks Future Faculty Fellowship and a Historically Underrepresented Groups Program Fellowship. Thanks
to this funding, I was able to immerse myself in creative writing and scholarship for five years. Griselda has always been willing to listen, and offered much needed support during the times I wrestled with my position as Latina woman in the academy. Griselda, thank you for everything. I also wish to thank Dr. Eileen Evans, Associate Vice President for Research, who helped in the development of grant proposals at the beginning of the dissertation process. Writing the proposals, with her guidance, enabled me to articulate the parameters of the dissertation. I am also indebted to Dr. Nancy Eimers and Dr. William Olsen for the careful attention paid to my poems. Both of you have played an integral part in my development as a poet, and I thank you. In the Spanish department, Dr. Antonio Isea’s scholarship and teaching have permanently influenced my own work. Antonio, thank you for always thinking of me as a colleague. I would also like to thank Dr. Arnie Johnston, English Department Chair, Dr. Gwen Tarbox, Director of Graduate Studies, Dr. Margaret Dupuis, Director of Undergraduate Programs, Michele McLaughlin and Rebecca Beech for their continual support and encouragement.

I have been fortunate to receive support outside of Western, and I would like to thank the Arts Council of Greater Kalamazoo for an Irving S. Gilmore Emerging Artist Grant that helped defray the cost of submitting my poetry manuscript for publication. In the summer of 2002, I had the opportunity to attend the Erasmus Institute Graduate Student Summer Seminar. I am grateful to all the people involved in the Faith and Fiction seminar where I first presented my chapter on Catholicism and Latina literature. I would like to especially thank Dr. Valerie Sayers, the seminar
Acknowledgments—continued

leader, and Dr. Alberto Pulido for their close readings of the chapter. Alberto also thank you for a sense of comunidad among us Latinos in the academy and for extending a welcoming hand. I also would like to thank Dr. Ellen McCracken for her close reading of the Catholicism chapter and for supporting my work in Latina literary scholarship.

My circle of poets and friends have all encouraged and challenged me on this well-worn path of poetry and scholarship. Thank you for the insights into my poems and the many conversations. Thanks to Lydia Melvin, Beth Martinelli, Kirsten Hemmy, Rachel Levine, Carrie McGath, Patricia Jabbeh Wesley, Jonathan Pugh and Cody Todd. A special note of thanks goes to Ralph Angel, who, from the first time I contacted him approximately nine years ago has always lent an ear and encouragement.

Finally, I would like to thank my entire family, but especially my mother. Gracias por todo, the love, the money, Nicaragua, Spanish and Spanglish. I am part of you and you are part of me. It has been your love that has taught me the ways of the world, how all is possible, how all rests en el cariño de la familia y en la fe del Espíritu Santo.

Adela Josefina Najarro
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The following dissertation, comprised of two volumes, one a collection of original poetry, the other an investigation into contemporary Latina literature, arose from a time when I was trying to find my place within American poetry as a Latina woman. I had moved from San Francisco to the Midwest in order to begin Western Michigan University’s doctoral program in English literature. Western was one of about thirty or so English doctoral programs that offered the option to write a creative dissertation. The reputation of Western’s creative writing department was extolled by all those from whom I asked advice, and I knew two members of the creative writing faculty, Nancy Eimers and Bill Olsen, through Vermont College where I had completed an MFA in poetry. These two people were generous, kind, and accomplished poets. I could envision myself working with Nancy and Bill for at least four years. Western was the place to go. My plan was to give up my job as a Spanish-bilingual elementary school teacher, move to Kalamazoo and become an indentured student. I figured the years of poverty would be worth the time to read and write, and hopefully, I could transition from elementary teaching to the university level. It was a simple plan: find the time to write surrounded by generous human beings, get immersed in literature, and then breathe.

The plan has worked out. Supported, encouraged and challenged by the faculty and graduate students at Western, I have read extensively and completed two volumes for this dissertation. What I didn’t know was that during this process I would come to see myself as a Latina writer. In San Francisco, I was my bilingual bicultural
self without thinking about it. At work, I spoke Spanish and English as necessary. My students, their parents, and many of the other teachers were also bilingual and bicultural. On the streetcar, in the grocery store, at the movies, at the mall, you could hear Spanish along with English, and numerous other languages. It was only when I moved to the Midwest, did I realize how central San Francisco's multi-ethnicity was to my sense of being. In order to maintain some sort of integrity in my writing and my personal sense of self, I had to find a way to write as a bilingual bicultural woman in the United States, but how? I began a search for Latino/a literature and scholarship.

I was looking for answers. How do I write about my grandmother's bedroom altar where my third grade picture was at the foot of San Martin de Porres? How do I include Spanish into my English poetry? Should I italicize? Should I translate? Should I include glossaries at the end of my poems? And as I began to feel more and more strongly that I should write about carne asada, about my tías and tíos and abuelitas, about the lure of Nicaragua that is always present in the memories and stories told by my family, I needed to see how other Latina women were doing this work of writing the bilingual bicultural experience in the United States. And also, I was worried. If I wrote about these things would I ever get published? What is the role of the Latina writer in relation to the American literary canon?

I was hoping to find answers in maybe one or two books, and then get on with writing my poetry. I found one book, Ellen McCracken's *The New Latina Narrative*, but that was the only text addressing Latinas writing in the United States from all nationalities. In order to find the answers to my questions, it was necessary to read across disciplines. I read history, theology, linguistics, along with literary criticism. I
read as many works of Latino/a poetry, fiction and non-fiction that time would allow. Reading was absolutely necessary, but I also had to put together all the ideas I encountered. Writing the critical volume of the dissertation became the vehicle by which I could develop the answers to my own questions.

In the process of writing, I came across other questions that I had not previously considered. Should I or should I not write in the style of academic discourse? Could or should the autobiographical be included in scholarly work? How does the very language we use create identity? There are no set answers to these questions; instead I found a conversation about the implications of language. Since I believe that the way we express ourselves in language, the very style, informs what we are trying to say, I have chosen to write from an autobiographical perspective and in a less formal academic style. In their introduction to *Women, Autobiography, Theory*, Smith and Watson note that through autobiography many women writers have broken the silence imposed upon our voices within the history of Western discourse, and that “autobiography has been employed by many women writers to write themselves into history” (5). I didn’t know my project was so large, when I first began writing. The autobiographical essays in this dissertation arose from the necessity to articulate my position as a writer, as a woman, and ultimately, as a Latina writer.

The dissertation begins with the poetry collection, followed by the critical volume. The poetry collection is divided into four untitled sections. The first three sections focus on my bilingual and bicultural identity, among other subjects, and in section IV appear poems written in “conversation” with Latin American authors.
Each chapter of the critical volume begins with an autobiographical narrative, which is then followed by a critical investigation into Latina literature. Even in the critical sections of each chapter, I try to use straightforward language as much as possible, and throw in a metaphor or two. I have chosen this style because it feels right, but there’s more at stake than that. The autobiographical essays could be classified as creative non-fiction, and by including creative writing along with scholarship, I hope to show that these two fields are not mutually exclusive, but inform one other. I also chose to include the autobiographical with the hope and desire to allow more people into the conversation surrounding Latina literature. By telling my own story in poetry and prose, I hope readers will make the connection to their stories, and thereby begin thinking about the wider implications Latina literature brings to literary studies.
CONVERSATION WITH RUBEN DARIO
Redlands, California

I'm coming to the conclusion that I'm simple, like my mother, my grandmother, father. All of them from Nicaragua where time goes back further. Here, wagons and rifles, the prairie plowed

into fields of soybeans and sunflowers. Sunken wood barns and tombstones rattle as a six-by-six tractor-trailer rumbles through exit 41a and on past peach cobbler, a shot of Jim Beam Whiskey, and the Stop'n'Go, 7-11,

Circle K, whatever name on that one corner, in that one place, where someone calls the intersection of a convenience store and a gas station their town, their home, their grass. Paint or aluminum siding. A kitchen and carpet. Photos of Aunt Edna and Uncle Charlie. That summer Chuck went for a ride on a Harley under redwoods and past cool stream shadows while Julie slept in a Ford stationwagon. Faded blue. Wood paneling peeling open to rust. The back flipped down for her, as little girl, to sleep and Ursa Major poured out sky.

*

In Nicaragua the colors are electric water in air. The weight of clouds on winged cockroaches and crocodiles in streams. La Virgen de Guadalupe. My cousin, Maria Guadalupe Sanchez, on a bike with Brenda through a suburb of Managua on the handlebars. The streets were Miguel. her brother, with a rifle shooting iguanas from a tree in a pickup or Jeep. The huge overbearing green of myriad plants inching their way past monkeys and chickens to a patio whitewashed
and cool. The distance away from grandmother. Actually
great-grandmother and her son, the witch doctor
who could stop malaria with powder or a gaze

into trembling hearts. The known ancient crossing
to psychology, biology, chemistry. The workings
of ourselves. A railroad blasted through mountain.

*

I want to dance under the _Verbenas_. I don’t know the word
or correct spelling. V or a B? Just a sound from a time
in Nicaragua. A truck lined with palm fronds. A parade
and a palladium. Dancing. At three in the morning,

it was still warm. _Verbenas._ An old colonial colonel’s name?
A street? A time to celebrate the harvest of bananas, yucca,
corn, beans? I don’t know. There was a monkey on a leash,
on the roof. The tiles curved from T a Teresa and T o Rafael
to me being pretty sitting at a table with my first rum and coke.
The loss of my virginity was to be a golden icon mined
from history where my grandfather was a child hidden
under a loose brown skirt and delivered to a convent. _Mi abuelita_

with her eight kids. My aunts and uncles. My mother with us.
In college with Philip, a boy standing naked looking out
a window, his butt prettier than mine, it was California.
There were palm trees. I was correctly 18. I had gone to visit

Planned Parenthood. The ladies behind a desk
asking questions. Taking notes. With a brown paper bag
I waited on grass, in the park, knowing already highway 80
cuts through Rock Springs, Wyoming, straight
to Newark, New Jersey on the Atlantic Coast.
My Mother’s High Heel Shoes


A patio deck.

Inside the cabana, at the counter, I order a hamburger.

In Nicaragua? Maybe it was a soda in a highball glass with a cherry. I do not have to ask for money. I am part of the black sand, fine silt, and seaside sparrow.

The sun drapes freckles across my mother’s shoulders. Ponoloya, a beach in Nicaragua. She is seventeen and pretty.

I lost the 8x10 glossy. Each eyelash curved. An ivory cheek. Joan Crawford lips.

I think I took it to school for a class project on family history and autobiography. In the second drawer of her dresser, a satin slip the size of a Mead college-ruled notebook.

How close can I get to the first bikini on Ponoloya? Saturday at three o’clock old movies re-run on KTTV, Channel 11. Clark Cable. Claudette Colbert. A shapely leg in a silk stocking extends for a ride to champagne and elegant parties.

Cummerbunds. Gold taffeta. Who does my mother kiss on a blanket as abuelita scolds her with a look that keeps hands in view?

My mother spots a picture in a Paris magazine or one de los Estados Unidos and asks the seamstress to make her just like it. Probably blue. It would have covered her belly button but exposed two inches of ribs below the bosom. Esther Williams
pulls back her hair and raises one arm before submersion.
On an overcast day we head toward Huntington Beach.

The piping tube of a seaweed frond stuck in a castle turret.
Half moon slivers. Crushed shells.
Pebbles in sand.
My father, my brother and I are added to a shoebox.
Primroses and Dead Fish

I have not yet found a gypsy grandmother
who forecasts a future excess where once a week
a cleaning lady comes in and evaporates
the hard water stains in the toilet and bathtub.

The meandering of the unforeseen
is at the grocery store, a $1.95 book
on palm reading. The unheroic deeds of numerous
dead have been analyzed, correlated,
to wrinkles in the palm, the closing, grasping,
over extension of fingers. Upon close inspection
the thick black outlines of hands, scored pen and ink,
will reveal how I have been feathering

my own destiny. Crosshatched grooves
woven together, longer, deeper into skin,

the heart and life conjoined, and I am a bounty
of pumpkins, primroses and dead fish.

A stinky stew molding in an iron skillet.
It’s not the future imprinted in the hand.

It’s the cigarettes twirled in an ashtray,
and the shots of vodka downed at a bar,
what’s been put to use or disuse, a pattern
that doesn’t hold close at four in the morning
as I wake up dark blue and alone. It’s when I’m
unsure and aware of my own insignificance
that the sky promises to be electric, that
one fallen leaf folds open its vanishing,
that I grant the world its myths and propose
that Apollo will hop into his chariot,
bring on the sun, and all will shine
brightly and glitter. And it does,
surprisingly so, hours later, when snow
melts on asphalt, when a pool gathers
in a gutter choked with leaves,
when quiet falls upon the gray peaked roof
across the street and settles into
the trunk of a tree split upward,
skeletal branches scratching nowhere.
nothing, here now, and it will be all right.
The Swarming Background

When the snow melted, my cigarette butt
was on the lawn. This was before Steve fell
on his knees with a smile and apology for being
47 minutes late, a mocha in hand, as if coffee
would take him somewhere besides Boston where
he met Janine. A side of toast, butter and marmalade.

A spoon rinsed clean in the sink. I climbed into bed,
bumped into a suitcase, and birds began ending
the long quiet during which snow made white
air around seven windows of an old house cut up
into four one-bedroom apartments. Yes, I do count
moments as they pass Sycamore Avenue and bricks
interlaced down a hill. In 1856 wagon wheels
careened through mud. The soil dried, cracked,
and goldenrod burst as a bungee cord broke
while a man fell on the edge of an airbag the size
of St. Louis. We need a beginning and end to quell
an angel in a church graveyard. Black marble
wings on a postcard from Iowa, where I refused to go sightseeing in a cemetery, but I saw a Jersey cow,
its long tongue on a salt lick. A woman needs water
after hands on a steering wheel and throwing change
at a toll booth. Mountains rise above a desert,
ocean, and highway. The 405 runs through
California where Cindy, Robin and I sat on grass
under a tree. We were ten. Nothing much happened.
The Problem of Knowledge

Have I doomed myself to seven years of bad luck?
For the next one hundred and twenty days

13 fronts my password to the internet and e-mail.
A pinch of salt into the devil's eye. My face

broken in a mirror. Superstition holds steady
thoughts that there is something working

sky, trees, ourselves. The first card-guessing
ESP experiments were conducted in psych labs

at Duke University, 1930, and Dr. J. B. Rhine
enticed the Minister Pearce to correctly

identify 25 Zener cards; the swirling blue
of an elliptical pattern etched on the back

of each circle, square, or star. Minister Pearce
pegged them all, twice, in a room with a glaring

light. One hundred dollars per card perceived
beyond the probability of chance as Oklahoma's
topsoil blew to the wind and astronomers
at the Lowell Observatory discovered Pluto.

A mathematician might propose that everything
can be explained as a function of numbers. It's plausible

that one day what makes me believe there's an angel
on my shoulder will turn out to be an equation

between symbols which correlate
sunspots, the earth's molten core and dreams

of the apocalypse. Last night McDonald's glass doors
opened to a smoky incendiary furnace and I ran

into a library. Stone lions growling
at the steps of language. The problem of knowledge
gives over to faith that I'm not alone
or hallucinating helicopter trees propelling pods
down through an overgrown lawn. Rochester Street,
Iowa. The sky turns green. Nathalie, Marit,
and Brandon dance on hardwood floors.
Red Ants, Black Ants

An ant crawling in through tattered books and files
hid under the shelf until I pinched it within
a thin white tissue. It didn’t have wings, but
it could have been a termite preparing to bore
into wallboard and chew its way down
the foundation. How strange

the way one ant on a wall next to a nail
comes forth unknown. A harbinger of why
I hate black ants and why Abuelita preserved
the red ones in mason jars. I have trouble
mixing the Wild West with Managua, Nicaragua
1908. Managua had to be green, but the poverty

and isolation of dry desert mesquite, beans
bubbling in an iron pot, fit stories
of hunger. Everyone. My grandmother stole
into the kitchen wearing a white
cotton frock embroidered with pineapples.
It could have been pale blue or yellow.

Definitely sleeveless in that humidity
and heat. Clear night skies are not frozen cold,
but a time when aunts, uncles, cousins and
grandmothers dream without sound.
Iguanas and monkeys. Huge cockroaches
with wings. In the night, a crescent moon would

have been enough for her to reach into a box lined
with wax paper. An iron box. A spicy hunk
of meat in her little scavenging hands
and the ants. The red ants biting her tongue.
Why do we love our families so much?
I had a hammer and nails. A piece of plywood.

I was determined to pound straight and true
under a Los Angeles sun and Abuelita’s tomatoes,
five pearly bushes six feet tall. Green in arid
desert heat. From the garden hose water
came out hot and splashed to dry dust. I sat
on clumps of grass, the board between my legs.
The nails wouldn't stay straight! They flopped over as the hammer hit the head. It was hot and I was sweaty, dirty and crying. Those damn nails! And the ants crawling on my sneakers, in my sock, up my leg! I'm sure she came out and wiped me off; had me blow my nose and gave me a piece of pie. It wasn't pie. It was torta. Out of a mix, but changed. An extra egg. Whole milk. Los Angeles. Managua. Verdant green mangroves and tile roofs.
My great-grandmother taught my mother to read using chalk
and a black slate in Le n where adobe brick
buildings are white-washed Spaniards

and history. We brought with us red and blue macaws, panthers,
and crocodiles. Tooling up and down
Dolores Street hills, my Papi rode

a bicycle delivering Lela’s snacatamales. Back and forth
from a clock tower at the end of Market Street,
a renovated 1919 streetcar,

transplanted from Milan, works tourist dollars. Advertisements
from the late sixties posted behind
True View Plexi-glass. I can’t read a word

of the European Italian glitz, deep blue of the Mediterranean
and a Coca-Cola, but there is a warm blanket
on a wooden bench and a leather

hand hook. Above a Cuban restaurant, where waiters serve
black bean hummus and chocolate croissants,
hangs the gay pride flag alongside

a Direct TV satellite dish. Gabby walks to school, Pok mon
cards in his pocket. Sanchez Street. I work
in the kitchen with my Lela. Mariposa Avenue,

Valencia Street, Camino Real, are added to masa. Homemade
tortillas puff into sweetness. I’m not
one third Irish, one half German

and two parts English with a little Cherokee thrown in,
but last night I couldn’t translate the word hinge
on every door that opens and closes

to clouds beyond four walls. An old lady, perhaps Cambodian,
Vietnamese, Korean, something of her own,
hurries off the 31 Stockton while
my Tia Teresa double parks in front of the *mercados* on 24th street
*para los quesos* and the *chiles* in the backroom. One
whiff and the world is not so small.
Myth is a Pig

I want to place blame on sex, gender.
Have everything line up
one way or the other. I was in college
when I switched channels, the lower knob
on the tube, before cable. I am old enough
to say I watched TV before cable,
but not before color. The picture was hazy.
There were clown fish and angel fish, stopped
up close, a coral reef. That’s when I first hit
on a schism dividing a red rock plain,
and now I want a simple solution. Calculate size,
measure the amount of testosterone in cells. The root
of violence is biological. Perhaps it comes
from the shape of the skull or the placement
of the eyes in relation to the brow.
If we are truly made in the image of gods
it should be easy to identify a pig, a horse
or a squirrel. But all myth is only a good story.
The sun could never
be your father and if you see angels
or hear God whisper in your ear,
you’re schizophrenic. It’s right there,
the cold hard facts. An imbalance of chemicals
in the brain. The universe expands,
only to collapse. My brother
won a bottle of champagne as a door prize.
A heliotrope looks toward the sun.
The squirrel is at it again.
Adjacent Objects and Their Inversion in Space

If only I could pull and stretch into perfection!
My lover, friend, amateur naturalist, upon reading Darwin’s *On the Origin of the Species*, plans a three week tour to the Galapagos. But nothing that specific or precise exists in the longings of my imagination. The struggle is with patience or compromise. Wait until the skin shines without sweat on a cloudy day or settle for a grilled cheese sandwich between moments of loneliness. Maybe it’s neither.

When I’m in my own company raindrops fall south through a damn good song on a CD. No need for redwoods or a marsh in Louisiana where ducks nest among cattails. Though, of course, it would be a terribly bad thing to lose that last square mile of old growth forest in Oregon or California. Maybe you’ve done it. Moved away from the self and boarded a too small boat with a video camera off the Eastern seaboard. Waves slosh against the sides of a tuna fish schooner capturing dolphins in a net. All this business of doing what is needed, what is right, that’s a flea in my shoe from cats, summer, and Elysian Court where bushes are pruned into hedges. I just want to have sex, but even that is too complicated and takes understanding that fingers on skin touch purple flowers slanted into soil from their very own pot. Nothing natural is left. Electricity lit up London, Tokyo and New York’s Broadway with incandescent bulbs in the 1880’s while Ferdinand P.A. Carr compressed liquid ammonia in a mechanical refrigerator and manufactured blocks of ice for the London Exhibition. This century of change and destruction doesn’t matter one bit
when a man shows up unexpected at the door.
But what to do if I won’t settle for being loved,

if happiness depends upon leaves that spring
into fullness one week in April? Now that’s a turn

from desire. This way and that,
upside down and sideways.
When I yelled into the house a simple question about how to spell a certain word, faster than I could predict, she came out to check what I was up to. Simply a letter, written in thick lead pencil, to my father, to forgive us for being the sinners we were. I'm sure I said too much.

"I'll make the bed. I'll wash the dishes. Why don't you marry my mother and come live with us?" The actual facts are not what matter, but our perception. The way we take things. The shame and guilt absorbed from those who love us. My mother's heart probably broke when she read that misspelled letter, and she told me to be quiet. Quiet little girl. Don't say a word. Don’t think a word. Don’t write these words. Silence is the golden rule when there are things other people shouldn’t know,

but there is so much beyond mathematics. Spirits live under rocks and there are birds that tell you everything. On Easter, my second uncle, between his shots of whiskey, recited poetry in the musty living room of my great aunts. The ladies in their shoes and stockings, the men in their button-down shirts, some with a tie, stood and listened to the rhapsode recite in Spanish, watch tears come to his eye. My father can mesmerize the backroom of a real estate agency with stories about Nicaragua or Reno. He planted a mango seed in the backyard of his aunt's steamy kitchen, and watched the seed grow into a tree that gave him the sweetest fruit in all Managua. I loved my father as I wrote Silence is the Golden Rule fifty times in the Continental Beauty Salon, my mother's shop, where I was talking and chattering and bothering her, though I was old enough to know better. I was at least ten and still my words had not settled into silence. I wanted to scream: I'm a bastard! I have a brother three months younger than me! I will never be President of the United States, no matter what! Instead, I stood on rocks of a nearby waterfall. The look of things inside. White butterflies. The cool shade of water and trees.
Brandy In a Crystal Goblet

My shoulder hurts for no apparent reason.
A stiffness starting toward the back, flowing over
and down the arm, to the wrist,
to the fingers, to the thumb, to the loss of feeling
and that shot of vodka after the ibuprofen
wore off. What am I doing here without my friends,
without their stories, without Christopher trying
to convince me the death penalty is wrong?
I sympathize with the desire to pull the switch. I’d still fear
the asshole, though he’d be strapped
in a chair behind steel walls, but just let me
loose, maybe then I wouldn’t have to close my windows
in the middle of a summer night. Death
is handed down, bodies bruised beyond recognition, and left
for children, mothers and family to forgive,
for the transgressions. I’m still kicking.

My mother hopes
one day I will walk into a church on a windy afternoon
and its cool stone walls will do the trick.
Gustavo understands. He offered to
drop a mixture of sugar and bleach
into the gas tank. He has friends
who have done things which I don’t
want to ask about, things, which are part of the go-around
and lead to tracing thin lines on skin with a razor blade
as part of the sexual warm-up. My mother
was right, time has a way to make everything fade,
I’m no longer me. Two years ago I was alone,
bunched over, memory hitting harder
than a punch in the stomach. My grandmother’s altar,
which she kept in her room, my third grade picture
at the feet of the saints, came to me as a way out.
I turned away from the solemnity of church bells
and incense, and fell into a poem
about family and friends that pull us away and toward
what this life is and what we should do
against the insurmountable passing of things collected,
ideas dismantled and feelings felt. 1:00 a.m. my time and no-one,
on either coast, is home. Why aren’t they
asleep in their beds, the book they’ve been reading
softly overturned
on silk striped sheets in a perfect world?
The Distance Between Stars


Active volcanoes and hot springs through mud. Why not here? Five miles from the Gull Road Tavern. A bar on a street that heads to the lake.


More than actual birds.

Everything is etched inside a Budweiser mirror on a wall in a bar. A nymph’s white lace, and she rides a crescent moon. The Saratoga. A beer-bar.

My grandmother’s business. A white line curling inside foam. Beer served up from a tap. Ralph, Joe, Craig? Laid off, or fired, and drinking.

one bar to the next. His foul teeth, yellow and black, and the spaces. The pock-marked face and snake-skin boots. I didn’t know about love, lust, or copulation, and his jokes were respectful. Only a slight sexual twinge for a 19 year old girl serving up the afternoon. It’s hard to believe innocence ever existed. But in those times it was there, without question. Even the drunks holding the line. Around a corner,

in Michigan, winter wind slaps my face. I have an aversion for cold

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bathtubs. My skin, my body, remembers Hostess fruit pies
and Ho-Ho’s. The fat kid eating Papawho wasn’t there. Chicken with noodles
in a sweet tomato sauce. Black licorice, then marriage vows. Constrained
by bed covers. I want to leave behind so much that was never
enough, the incomprehensible distance between stars.
*
A big cable car towel. Black embossed on blue. Lela is my grandmother.
She has sunflowers in her kitchen, on the placemats. Pinollio. A strange
cocoa-based grainy drink. Jugo de arroz. Water thickened by rice and strained
with sugar. I think that one is pink. I know it’s sweet. I took it.
The towel. The first morning after a warm shower with soap and a comb.
My mother brought a book from Nicaragua. The collected works
of Garcia Lorca. That was my first poem. The book. The pages in Spanish.
So many and so thin. I didn’t know what a caracol was. I know now.
Because Somebody Loved Them

When I wake to snoring in my ear,
dew is sticking to the inside of the tent
and sliding down onto my sleeping bag.
Last night we turned off the main highway
onto a road used to truck out
wheat and sunflowers
and pulled up a gravel driveway
past a wrought iron fence. In California

there is no space for cemeteries
between corn and soybeans, only parks
with marble angels and fountains.
Once, when my grandmother went to visit
her mother, a little lady from Nicaragua
who smoked a pipe and wore plastic shoes,
she left behind the scrap of paper
on which she had scribbled the plot number.
Mi abuelita couldn’t find the plaque
marking her mother’s ashes
and she was lost along
cement pathways, the fine green lawn.

This week we drove through North Dakota
where the grain and fields
fold into cemeteries. Tombstones
behind fences, in yards,
next to farmhouses, off two-lane highways
in the middle of nowhere. We had seen
boys jumping into a river off the steel gurneys
of a railway overpass and a little girl
lifted onto an ATV by her grandfather. They turned
onto a dirt road, followed by their dog. Bones

are sunken down, there under the ground,
in coats and dresses, still wearing
wedding rings and lace.
We walked and took a picture of pink sky
falling behind steel gray letters.
Someone had loved them
enough to come out here and lower them in,
with the other people
from around these parts,
and we
didn't know them at all.
Sunday Night Fox Hunt

A silver-plated razor, herbal shampoo, 
and that denim shirt with an embroidered pocket. 
I want him to come over and bring 
a beige Dakota garment bag and deluxe accessory tote, 
the necessary zipped and folded in, 
and we’d be ready 
for Venezuela where Warao’s weave Moriche palms 
and navigate _curiara_ through the Orinoco 
River Delta, the last frontier

we haven’t seen. But when rain scatters 
to the other side of Michigan, 
to Detroit and a rubber tire the size of a house, 
I will take note 
of words and their referents, 
how they entangle and loosen 
upon two chairs 
and a cat of the same color. My anger 
always turns to sadness. Tonight 
I will forge out fury. 
A flurry of bricks stuck in blue paint, 
the paint dribbling down a fractured 
eye. A confusion 
concerning grief since I’ve given up coffee 
and it takes twice as long to watch 
water boil in the Whistler, and for a green 
teabag to seep into sweetness.

Ashes to ashes, dust to dust, 
spontaneous human combustion, 
will be on Sunday Night Fox, and Jade, 
tooling around town on a Diamond 
Back Thrasher, knows 
the reason for bad reception. 
Not the thirty dollars a month for cable, 
which I can’t afford, but those 
words flashing on the screen, on location,

at the site. Utah’s red canyons. Moab 
and Dead Horse Point. 2000 feet 
above the Colorado River in the 1800’s
a herd of wild mustangs died behind
a fifty foot fence. Unwanted and thirsty.
So drink up, there we go much too quickly.
At the neck formation of sandstone,
rivulets and pools of water etch red rock shale.
Mockingbird

He bought me dinner and this impressed my mother.
She is a simple woman and I want to take in her hope
that a total stranger can be reasonable

while I sit outside for the first time in winter. The sky is clear
and red berries hang frozen to the tips
of bare branches. Cash for company is not what

my mother thinks. Something more of the sort
that the old ways hold men and women in a dance
where a violin is a fiddle

as we alaman holding hands round the circle.
Her thirty-two perfect teeth, miniature waist, and
the high arches of her feet whisked up

in an old country jig after his taking
a leather coverlet and folding in as payment,
a pen and signature. Is it easier

now that in an air-conditioned Safeway romaine
lettuce, butternut squash and tangerines rest
of a card, twenty dollars cash back, and I’ve taken
care of the old ways where a woman dependent

on kindness could see three statues, welded bronze facing east,
as the white flurries of a cotton petticoat
raised up high in a can-can kick. The joy

of a first kiss between her legs. That impossible moment
when he really does that. But is it
a whippoorwill or a mockingbird?

Small like a robin imitating songs along with
a squeaky gate and a barking dog.
Four times in succession. Day or night.
No payment necessary. Free-falling vertigo. A woman can shudder in disbelief as her body takes in a field below a ring of birch. Yellow cornstalk reeds.

Black thrushes drawing in through sky overhead.
Thursday Afternoon

For the first time the highway is white,
a bit of black coming through
crunched-out tire pathways.
Branches heavy with snow.
A tree bent over an icy river.
I just might fuck his best friend
in the bed of a pickup next to an old tire
that smells of oil and roads. Three leaves
dried and frozen with a bit of snow.
The shock value of indiscretions.
Fractal ice crackling through his bones.
But I’m trying to understand the quiet
white of a corn field. Plowed snow piled high.

*

The river isn’t frozen but slick
with cold, hardly moving at all.
A red house.
Not a footprint in snow.
Branches and space.
Gray sky. A pale humming sun.

John uses the same kind of tape. I didn’t
think of that until now. The roll of duct tape.
The cardboard core smashed slightly off center. Tacky
on the sides. A few frayed threads. My husband needed it.
The silver cloth. The handy-man’s friend.
The tape wound around my wrists
one night. All night. I still have tiny scars.
Half moons and white triangles.

I try to deceive myself all there is
under plains of white snow are harvested fields: corn, wheat,
soybean. Grain ground into bread. 33 cents a loaf. Food
for the hungry out of acres tilled
by hardworking God-fearing old-time folk.

*

That same zipping sound. John pulls loose
tape. Kneels down. Winds it around my calf,
around my ankle, sealing the plastic bag
so the snow doesn’t slip into my shoe
and freeze the warmth of my sock as we
cross-country ski on a cold afternoon. The tape
just so the plastic wouldn’t slip. What’s important
mulled over many times and changed
until I’ve gotten the essence of the fierce little girl,
hair pulled tight into pigtails. Pig ears
on each side of my head
shooting up and falling down.
Ping Pong

I say to him, "Let’s get drunk and have sex."
I’ve been sick for a week
and even my dreams have been filled with fits
of tension where I jump out of a two-story window
and run through a parking lot
to a chain link fence
which I can’t climb over. We’ve done this before
though I’ve never told him
that that time was the first time
I had ever made love
with someone I loved.
We were both broken and tired,
lying together on the couch. I wanted him
to love me. But instead
he said that he couldn’t
feel anything. I wondered what to do,
until his hand moved into my body
and we began giving something away.

We don’t have sex anymore; instead
I drive over to his house
and lie on his bed
while the down from his comforter
reminds me that I’m allergic
and that I still have a cold.
He’s torn up the carpet
and sanded the floor
and put up an old fashioned mirror, sideways,
because he likes it like that.
We play ping pong
in his living room. I played this game
in the garage
when we lived next door to my cousins.
There were bicycles and trees
across the street. An orchard. Long
shadows. Dry leaves. We would chase each other,
shooting off cap guns,
when things were right
and I didn’t know better.
My Mother, Sex, and Dating

Though she was sexy with her stockings and silk slips, she didn’t

think it was good. Seven years after leaving my father she wore a satin bra

under a gold and black knit sweater which I could see right through.

I pouted and exclaimed, "You can’t go out in that!"

My good mother now tells me I should hold off on sex, though

I’m divorced and in my thirties. After Elizabeth’s wedding reception at the Richland Pub, we all went back to her house in the woods

and I slept with a man who wanted only to hold me. My mother tells of dancing all night with a soldier or man in a tie. She must know how the heart gets lost once a palm is placed, open faced upon another palm, how the fingers curl under and how the neck pleads for a kiss and I think John knew this too. That’s why he confessed that he didn’t love me and why we didn’t do anything else. I thought it was understandable for my husband not to want me to wear make-up and to have all my clothes three sizes too big. My pants were held up.
by one of his old belts. I tucked
the extra leather through a loop, almost around
to the back. We both wanted for me
to be a good mother. She swears
she went home after breakfast at the diner,
offering a thank you and a fake phone
number and I have to believe my mother.
A Couple of Easy Lessons

I’m heading toward the Eiffel Tower with a broken heart at age six in a tutu, leotards, a crown on my head. Looking back over my shoulder, I am posed, smiling into the camera, walking down a boulevard in the mural my mother painted on living room walls. Green shag carpeting. Before disco and after swing, my mother wore fake eyelashes. Even then I had legs. Saucy legs. Slightly plump curving into my ass. A walking talking Miss Susie Doll with long brown hair and a smile. The story goes father fell in love at the hospital. Round peachfuzz head, tiny fingernails and lips that just wouldn’t quit. A little cutiepie! That’s what I am. A fine show on the Champs lys es. I pirouette to tinkling sounds. The same as now. Three notes plucked on a fiddle and I’m out the door chasing a harvest moon. Why don’t we take a drive down by the lake?

Tornadoes in Idaho. Floods in California. Texas is burning. Broadcast signals sent every ten seconds. I wanted to see if John would notice, so I chopped my hair into a short pixie cut. Bleached ends white, sticking straight up. A glass of wine. Red lipstick stain. Used to be ten cents for a cup of coffee with cream and sugar. How much for a kiss?
Blackbirds in a Pie

I always like to start by stating it
straight up. You see I know everything
is connected to the earth and sky bit by bit
up through the backbone of a spineless
jellyfish. Or a dog. Or a bird. Or
a tree. There is something about this all.
A cat sleeps right in the light of the window.
I don’t understand redtail squirrels
and sparrows. Golden sand in salty water.
No matter how I dream to forget it’s
right there. An island with two palm trees.
Obviously the woman I used to be was a fool
or an idiot. I don’t like her. She
couldn’t feel a thing sitting on a stool.
An impenetrable block of ice.
Smack her on the side of the head! Crack her
up! Should I have known what Jupiter looks like or Pluto?
There are nations in Africa whose names
I’ve never heard. How big is a moose?
What do wombats eat? Carrots, onions, Ritz
crackers with sardines. A soybean field turns
into blueberries. The sun doesn’t set.
We just back-flip over the horizon.
Can I take her hand? The me that was
trying so hard to stay in love with this
world where Rudolph is a caribou
and a nice warm pie has 21 blackbirds.
This place is a madhouse! One, two, three,
kaboom! A grandfather clock keeps ticking.
Weeds or flowers. Rot or just do something.
Turn consciousness into a lighthouse or a parking lot
and walk on sand where clams open.
They’re dead. Eaten up. All gone. But that’s just
it. The lake slips up past the sun and puts
it out. Nighttime. Storefront windows.
A beer in a bar with a shamrock.
A dollar for the March of Dimes.
Enough is Enuf

You see it's me I saw on a signpost in Michigan. El corazón es rojo y llora lagrimas. Luuuucky. The name of my cat. Black and white with a heart. La flor. El caracol.

La puerta estaba abierta. I looked upon the sun and wondered . . . Big bright yellow thing in the sky. Sol is sun. One word for something so big. The language in me.


I don't think like you. That means I don't know nothing. ¿Si? See? Which language? Yes? If I can catch the words will you give me a job as a singer in a band? A marching band on the Fourth of July. Red, white and blue are the colors that stand for Uncle Sam. But me rhymes with flea. La cucaracha ya no pudo caminar. He got stoned,

then subsequently squashed by a Texan's steel toe boot.
Dancing Around My Father

According to the clock I haven’t slept and it’s hot by the fountain where I break two silver black stone rings not wanting to know more or anything, just a tree silhouette and I’m back to where I began.

Another morning and I’m my father picking up a whore on the corner. No, he would have gone to where the girls serve drinks in red lace bras. A titty bar under an overpass. A street almost out of town. Rails stick out of circular tables for that private dance where a woman will kick one stiletto heel up, over and into broken glass, blue bobble earrings, a torn wrapper from a condom on a night table. It may or may not be light outside, but it’s over. Something is over. A ceiling fan circulates air.
White Zinfandel and Barbecue

All these days I’ve been babbling about a cardinal, red against green after snow, salt and a shovel, and also a pinion pine’s black branches as it rises and falls shackled to a rocky cliff.

This incessant talk about birds, leaves, snow, has something to do with beauty and swallowing it whole. I can always embarrass myself and then take it back.

What else is there to do? Go fishing? A red and white float bobbing. Perch, crappie or maybe a bass waits under a small wooden boat dock. In water murky and dark a hooked worm wiggles. It could be a birthday present wrapped in ribbon. The seams straight and neat. Tape only in the right places. Once I was told there is gold within darkness. We only get what we can take and it’s all a spiral staircase going up. When I was seven hopscotch was good, but even then I knew too much or too little about an old oak ensconced in grass. Is there more than believing what I can’t explain?

Sometimes a full moon turns out one laughing star on a leaf. One light on a street. In a window, a computer or TV flickers as who knows who waits for who knows what.
Cleaning House

And it is a lie, if I tell you that I am any different.
In my mother’s house, there are multiple uses

for strange glass jars and doll-sized iron kettles.
The universe is not organized and set,

but instead fluctuates in a chaotic dance
orchestrated by stashing into boxes

photos that are never to be labeled or sorted.
It is true she is not a very good housekeeper

and that cleaning up has always been impetuous
and without particular reason. A mystery

of not knowing why or when papers get lost
and keys misplaced, a nod to gnomes and gremlins,

half of the expected whole. The coldness of life
gone is what always happens. My mother’s
dead father was laid out on a table, in Honduras, neatly
tucked and folded into a light weight suit.

She reached out to one yellow calcified toe, a fleeting
touch. If only I could accept the falling away

of my own father, perhaps I would be granted white
blossoms and green fronds growing up and out

from moisture and soil, granted to me what
my mother saw and holds in her heart. It’s just

the way the world is, and not that Pops
doesn’t love me and therefore no-one else

will, but more so that life is chaotic,
one incomprehensible mess. We each try

to do the best we can: dust, cook,
love, undifferentiated, without grand
conclusions. We can only try to believe
that it all works together, that water in a pond
reflects an accurate image, right here, right now.
San Martin de Porres

I found my grandmother in a shoe box
and through a mirror. She is the center of a corn tortilla
layered with leftover chicken and Monterey jack cheese.
Us cousins, los primos, are folded under
a rosary and Abuelita Aminta's santos.
Nuestra familia at the feet of the saints
in her bedroom altar, when I was plump
as an Iowa corn fed chicken
in California, Pico Rivera, and my mother
exalted my meaty legs,
hers were thin to the bone.

With a new beginning
of breasts and voluptuous curves,
I spent four weeks in Nicaragua
for a quick look around at the homeland. A storm
came in and the sky
slid black. Overgrown trees, bushes,
an entire wall of green lining a paved asphalt highway,
reached up, electrified,
as though all was alive, in need
of water, of rain, in need of a storm,
la tormenta. A word

that holds within itself the tumultuous sky, how nature,
my nature, our nature
is the cause of suffering, and how an angry downpour
is always ready and willing to wipe us clean.
El clima es bárbaro.
The climate will kill you with its gentle murmurs
and violent caresses.

Nicaragua's heat and humidity. Moist air
alive in itself. I keep moving north and dream
of snow, quiet,
cool clear ice. I want it cold
and gray, snow angels fanned under three pine trees.
Place a finger on an ice cube and it melts back
to water, back to the essential,
back to the love of nuestra familia.
Before anger,

I sketched Abuelita Aminta
in a college-ruled notebook, and found
a Snicker's bar on a curio shelf. In my mouth
melted sugary sweet chocolate as I
ventured into her bedroom.
There Abuelita had propped my picture
up against San Martín de Porres, a Dominican
Brother found suspended in air
over a church floor, ecstatic in prayer for the lost,
for the homeless and the homebound.
Ode to My Mother’s Feet

The shadow of a birdcage drapes
across the arch of my right foot. My mother’s
strappy sling sandals. Strips of black patent leather
shine a little flamboyant, but always
my mother’s touch of sophistication made her
who she was, not a Mrs. Wilson or a Mrs. Brown
or Mrs. What’s-Her-Name who owned the house
next door and would stay in one place

a lifetime more than our ten months. We kept
moving while Mrs. Darcy conducted a lesson

in social studies and bell curves. It was fifth grade
and my full-flaring hips were the result of too many
nacho-flavored Doritos. I had been sung to sleep
with Lorca’s Poema del canto jondo: la guitarra, el grito,
y el silencio, but my shoes never quite fit, a narrow heel
sliding out of a Payless two-for-one special.

As I ran and tripped full court under a slam-dunk
basket, at least I was styling. It has always been about

my mother’s shoes. The ones that came out of an alley
near the Mediterranean where a door

is open to leather being cut, stapled and sewed,
finely tailored imported pairs. My mother’s talent

is to surround herself with literal beauty:
rollers, bobby pins, brushes and combs.

She has stood behind a chair and teased heads
into moments of perfection, brushed

the curl of youth onto frail crowns,
frosted white. Those ladies with skin soft
as over-ripe fruit had one more moment
of beauty in an oval mirror fastened
to the lime green wall of a salon; beauty earned
through time and care of babies on cotton cloth
slung over a shoulder and the tending of windows
down against a frost whipping through
two pines at the end of a driveway. My mother
re-shaped their finite layers of dust
into the beautiful, the calm,
into one more moment strewn over boxes
in the attic, coats, lanterns, old books
tied with string. It comes from her feet, the arches.
The pressure from above diverted to soil, dispersed
into the sound of a cricket scratching somewhere on a lawn.
Wedged blocks of stone from ancient aqueducts
converted the weight of water cascading into Rome
downward. The force of geometry and the strength
of points held in equilibrium are in my mother’s feet.
I remember the nails painted red and the arches
strapped in heels. She kept a pumice
stone in the shower. Her labor was to keep
the skin smooth,
brush off all that was dead, used up.
Homespun

I used to refuse half an hour lost
in a lecture hall, a movie theater,
or symphony. The murmur of words,
pictures, or notes streamed
an incessant hum of nothingness--
and I could not sit and manage
to look normal, a polite smile,
my hands folded neatly on my lap.
I had squandered steel gray clouds
at evening, the final touch of red
or crimson blue. Then sunrise and a sidewalk
in the Mission District, a white
crinoline dress in a shop window *para una muchachita*
and her first Holy communion.
Mine was so long ago. *Padre nuestro.*

*que est s en el cielo.* So much, and too much. A series
of solid oak doors, and I have counted
many windows, silhouettes laughing
through sheer curtains. Inside there
was something. Two stories up
a green Victorian, after the lights
had come on. If only I could have filtered through
the floorboards, appropriated
the down-filled comforter,
lathered up the soap on the bathroom sink,
and categorized the aspirin, throat lozenges,
nasal strips in the medicine cabinet.

At the corner of Market Street I was waiting
for the streetcar. There was a Safeway
and a twenty-four hour diner.
There were shoes, black boots and loafers.
   There were rings on fingers, the creases
   on a sleeve from an iron. We were all
waiting for the J Church that would go up a hill,
   around Dolores Park, and onto San Jose Avenue.
   Near the end of the line, my grandmother
would be watching Spanish novelas,
   the kitchen would have already been swept clean,
   and as my key fit into the lock,
I would find my Lela in her blue fleece robe.
   her hair done up in curlers.
   She would be on the phone with Tia Chepita
or Michelle or my Tia Sonia. Something
   would be happening and there would be
   plenty to talk about.
He Jumped on the Float and Kissed Miss Universe

I saw it twenty years ago. Men spilling out from a bar on Castro Street, hands clasped around hips.

Two pairs of Levi's 501's. I had a couple of hours before dinner with the aunts, great-aunts. Tia Chepita and my grandmother, Lela, always had dinner ready at five. Straight up two-stories, lace curtains through glass on a sloping street. My Tio Ernesto with a tripod and zoom lens waited in the Presidio to capture fog drifting open the Golden Gates. On Christmas Eve, he gave me a battery-operated yapping little dog with a red felt collar. It was past midnight and I was outside while my brother and cousins tossed the football. The same street where I fell off a bike two years later. Carmen Miranda smiled, a fruit basket on her head, my Tio Ernesto. His "El Rojo" played football in the grass, the backyard, in the dark, ladybugs and the cold damp settling in from above. I think we ate Kentucky Fried Chicken.

My Tio would take me with him to the corner store, and I thought it was awful that a shaggy mixed poodle peed on a tree rising out of cement. He explained it was their Daily Breeze, New York Times, San Francisco Examiner. Sniffing headlines and what's happening around town. Ten men in slick speedo briefs dive into a pool with a bouquet of flowers in a dream, now that my Tio is no longer here to read my poems. He must have understood how the threads of memory
and sunlight necessitate exposure on film
in a darkroom where fine haircuts

and precisely trimmed beards
escape so fast they are blurs of light.

The one lost may come back, but only after
we’ve packed up boxes, a broken chair, and home movies.

Nena, Qui-que, and Cito smile from their cribs.
In Memory of Siggy

What is afraid of rain bouncing on a tar-paper roof? This man in purple sweats, laid out in bed, under covers, skin smooth as the stainless steel railing that keeps him from falling, struggles to sleep. Every day at three o'clock, my mother folds him out and into a wheelchair. Once he parked a Chevy Nova off Redondo Beach. The moon over an oil tanker hoisting through water. What did this old crank say when Juanita gave him her sterling silver brooch? That it wasn’t her fault? Those words we need to begin forgiving when we cannot forgive ourselves. An old rubber tire gathers leaves and mosquitoes. In the backyard of my mother’s house are roses and plums. An apple tree. Every day she slides open vertical blinds and tunes the radio to Tommy Dorsey and his Big Band Orchestra or finds an old Doris Day movie on channel 11 for Siggy, Siegfried, this man afraid of letting go chocolate truffles and sheepskin slippers. She insists he know that he danced at the Alpine Village during Octoberfest. Schnitzel and beer. German potato salad. My mother’s legs cascading through the hem of her dress. He was clean, she said. He was clean after she changed the diaper and sheets. Powdered and shaved, he smelled of cologne as she rubbed him down with ice and the house turned to silver leaves and porcelain boxes.
The Absence Within

The simple sensation of a leaf
  torn in silver darkness lingers
in my pocket after walking past
a park near midnight.

It is necessary at times
to let the ridiculous take hold:

a flask of whiskey, brown leather
  sewn around stainless steel,
passed back and forth as though
  if I got drunk enough
the outline of a tree in the dark
  would begin to do a merengue
slide step in rapid 2/4 time.
  And again I try cursory pleasure
from my lips to George, with whom I should
  have nothing to do
for exactly the reason
  that it’s all in my own head
how to take in the body.
  a man’s body, inside me.

There is such willingness.

*

On cool sweet grass
  you can wait for a pop fly
and your own sensuality
  emerging from a new pair
of corduroy pants, the slick cotton
  backing a prepubescent thigh.
The sensation of cloth.
A new pair of socks.

Stone blocks
are erected to sky. Across the street,

the Catholic church.
I have known what goes beyond

the body, or perhaps not.
My mother’s sweet touch

as I lay in bed feverish under the covers.
*Cmo est mi chiquita?* Her hand

on my cheek. Love always outside
language.

*

I sit on a vinyl easy chair, sweat
sticking to bare skin and

it’s hot outside. The heat, the time,
the distance

from a shoreline and a restaurant.
A thirty minute drive southwest of Tijuana.

We were eating deep fried fish,
the heads still on.

My two brothers
named Salvador. One schizophrenic,

the other manic-depressive,
and they both carry our father

within their loping gait. Each
rides a mule, and through

the dust and heat one approaches
the edge of a corral. I can’t tell
which Salvador is getting closer.
Which one am I supposed to love?

Which one is retribution for the sins
of the father? There must be an explanation.

I have had courage to ask for stories,
but they don’t add up.

Three souvenir
sombreros. Tijuana,

and lavish flowers,
stitched in red and yellow yarn.

*

The sun restores a ’67 Chevy Impala
to aqua marine blue at a four-way

stop sign in San Francisco, 24th Street and Noe.
There is a bookstore, a liquor store,

una taqueria, pigeons swooping across
flowers in green buckets. Birds of Paradise,

Gardenias, Black-eyed Susans.
All is not quiet. Each of us

is one torn fingernail
off God’s right hand spit out

and tumbling along sidewalks.
I look down as I walk

in the street,
avoid casual glances,

the glances of strangers,
each with their own Pomeranian dog

ordered on-line from a breeder
in Texas, each with a designer
key chain or footstool, each
with a story or poem

about how difficult it is
to make some sense

out of a ballerina twirling in a music box,
a black and gray knitted afghan,

a beagle put down
for biting into a rabid rat.

We have more
than we know what to do with.

*

No matter that I’ve mixed
up facts. At the movies,

while mother watched William Holden
shirtless by a poolside,

my father reached past
under her skirt and lace

panties. The story fits genetics,
how it’s all in the blood, how

we manage to move in this world
by what we’re born with, the feverish

pulse which filters
through a swimming pool

to my breasts buoyant in water.
I am only twelve

and the sun burns brown
grass and skin. The words

to describe, to analyze,
to fabricate the fleeting versions
of what happened where and when,
are leaves broken and dried

on the front porch steps.
Over and over again.

There is a certain smell,
light through a blade of grass.

The absence within
a white picket fence. I am lost

in air.
A flower opens

purple,
fills the entire yard.
Near Traverse City, Michigan

Wind and waves hollow a hump of bear into a tureen filled with grass, thistle, and piping clover. A sand dune scooped and ladled out by storm beyond a view station placard and pale pine fencing. Standing above turquoise blue water, I think of my toes on a diving board and a somersault into a swimming pool in San Francisco.

The fact that my chubby little hands reached around thick thighs and dimpled knees for a quick twirl mid-air had been a true acrobatic feat. The fat girl was free from the bounds of gravity. That’s what I was: the fat girl displacing water onto cement and tile. My father’s wife noted the poor state of affairs I was forced to live in:

too many Hostess Fruit Pies and Twinkies. But I know how to wait for flowers undulating toward a light house where no one lives anymore. Near Traverse City,

fields roll through cables blasted into wood and tree limbs flare fire over the roofs of barns. There is a hottub, fill-line, and my impatience to sink into pulsating water with a man who loves my belly curving down to his mouth.
On Applying Pond’s Cold Cream

A dab in the palm after the shower, in front
of the mirror, seven strokes against the pull
of gravity. My mother, near forty. One afternoon
she was long and far away from the child alone
at the edge of a river. Right there above the buccinator
and masseter muscles is where we lose
the plump red herring cheek, but the rest
of the body is a magnet. The fake antique mirror
shows a madonna whose roundness surrounds
a bellybutton, hips, thighs. Let me lie in silk sheets
and smile over my shoulder! I remember my mother. No, I couldn’t.
I was only three and she was forever changing
from a green flowered pant suit and platform shoes
to a baby blue smock, Juana embroidered in red. Her name tag
matching her lipstick. Sometimes after the car door closed
she would come in to chat with her little girl on a cream
fringed bedspread, her legs up on the wall.
The spider veins would flow back from whence they came.

They came from me inside her body. Now outside.
A pip keeping time.
4:00 P.M. October

While I'm waiting for a signal light to change, 
a gray metal tone rattles on the other side of the street.  
A girl is bent over a bicycle.  
Bare legs in argyle socks.  
She walks toward double glass doors. Two trees.  
Birds swivel under a telephone wire.  
This is not important, but the birds were there.  
I heard their noise. It stopped. I heard the trees.
El Carino de la Familia

It is impossible, nor would I want to set loose again Elvis' hound dog upon my brother with his first girl,
as he awkwardly chatted on two cracked and dusty apartment steps. From the top of the stairwell,
over and over the same refrain of the one song Tio Ernesto or Tia Sonia had relinquished, a scratched vinyl 45 meant to keep company with my little teapot, short and stout. I was an obnoxious pest making fun of Salvador as he stepped into what we all step into, the absolute joy of someone else. That someone who randomly appears lyrically chirping at your shoulder. Siren songs, refrains of the momentary, the specifics randomly forgotten. Nevertheless we must continue to love, to love outside picture frames and family portraits. *El cariño de la familia* rests within two 8x10 glossies in my living room. The original prints brought over from Managua in *las maletas de mis abuelitas o tias*. On both sides, my parents pose along with their mothers and child-version aunts and uncles. Papi stands tall behind Lela's right shoulder, while my mother is at the end of the line. Six uncles, Tia Teresa, then Juanita. Four years old and already she edges out a white border, the eventual slide to the United States where Tio Ernesto will take pictures out on a roof and in a freshly painted warehouse that once was a sweat shop. Machines hum under an asbestos heating duct. Isabel, Margarita, or Louisa, sewing wedding veils and embroidering designer jeans. A fan in the window. My mother,
straight off a Pan Am flight, did not know how to sew, 
but she could stand in line with her hair held in black netting 
and slide hot cross buns into white boxes. The necessary 
done and over, on weekends, we kids would be outside, 
and then run in fresh with sweat, that sweet 
smell children acquire while cutting boxes into cars 
and boats in a backyard under an avocado tree. Tio Enrique 
would crackle his carne asada on a grill, the flame 
set too high, while Tia Maria Elena would serve 
her infamous rum cake. Then to sleep 
on a pull-out couch, the coffee table pushed aside, 
its glass-blown grapes and purple plums, holding firm 
the unknown, a peculiar slant of shade and shadow.
The This and That

I can plot Jupiter’s elliptical orbit on a brown paper bag using a protractor, ruler and pencil.

But what about the quiet white of a corn field in winter and the startling call of a laughing squirrel?

Sometimes withholding is a triumph. I’ve never seen a duende. Between languages, it’s hard to translate mystical images. Each has its own smudge under leaves, depends on a fresh water stream or mangrove delta. Wolf or jaguar. Bear or shark. Birds sift through maples, land on plots of grass. I’ve been looking for you, while waiting at a bus stop in front of a bagel shop.

Something other. I used to call it magic, then I called it love. Then I knew I’d never loved at all. Withheld.

Justly so. Empty toilet paper rolls were placed in my shoes and once I found the label of a shampoo bottle wet and sliding off the mirror. In my dreams, every man I know I introduce to my mother who laughs as the dining table distorts, breaks. Maple crumbs from pancakes. Maybe you too are wondering how to understand the overbearing green along a footpath to water where in stillness the curled horns of sand crustaceans maintain what’s inside? The same beach where Alfredo two summers ago fell down drunk and was no-longer the good son. But if you tell me all we’re worth is forty-nine cents of stuff easily gotten.
at the hardware store on shelves next to paint thinner, t-squares, wire, and picture frames.

I won't believe you.
Morning Desert Rainbow

If you happen to be in the right kind of airplane, one that doesn’t fly too high or too low with the sun at your back, then out the window between what is and what is possible, you might see one sixth of a circular pie. A 60 degree arc. A fragment. And that fragment may turn out to be a rainbow in the morning desert, a rainbow that rounds itself to a full circle, faint in its luminescence and adrift in sky. A cloudbow or a pilot’s bow. The rainbow we all know and have seen slides into mud, folds through dirt, rocks and magma. It’s impossible to see the entire whole, impossible to perceive the refraction, the reflection, the rays of light bouncing inside water droplets that continue, down three granite boulders and then up the backside of a hill. This morning the rainbow became a story told in line while waiting for a mocha. A rehashing of the biblical symbol, of God’s promise that he would never again wash us out; us, a nasty ingrown stain on fabric necessitating a bottle of bleach or a sign that all has been forgiven, the not being able to sleep, the drinking too many vodkas, forgiven the inability to stand still for one moment. Outside a rainbow. 180 degrees. This time poolside. The story of clouds wiping down the center arc. Thirty degrees
of color muted gray over a stone mountain.
And it is lost again, the pot of gold, the myth,

the attempt to play pinochle until the next time
water droplets form, until the next half

of the complete whole, until the next story
randomly chosen above zero.
A System of Interpretation

Hermeneutics is definitely not a word my grandmother would have used

as she guided my arm through the sleeve of a sweater, a pink cotton cardigan

with lavender rosebuds, that I never actually owned or put my arm through. So much

is creation, lies, misinterpretation, and so hermeneutics needs to be found in a dictionary,

any dictionary, even the dictionary I won as a prize for a poem in the local paper,

a poem about cemeteries growing like sunflowers in the backyards of farmhouses. I think

in my attempt to understand hermeneutics I've mixed exegesis with exodus by confusing my cousin Moises and an ideal promised land with a never-ending itch on my left heel. I'm still holding out

for an explanation, a system of interpretation balancing the various shades of green on a lawn

midsummer. I did win a dictionary as a prize for a poem about the Midwest and tractors,

tractors that mow hay fields into rolls of carpet behind wire mesh fences. But I can't contain

what perhaps doesn't exist or flies fast as a raven, a crow, a blackbird sitting on a telephone wire.

In my dictionary are many unfamiliar sounding words with Latinate roots. Most of these I can pronounce,

as long as breath slithers, as in maleficus, which has to do with evil or wickedness, two concepts
that guided me through divorce. The line was drawn, good and evil, right and wrong. I identified, attached a label, and controlled my own universe. Dictionaries provide explanations, divisions, lines and rationales for why one word choice is better than another. But if we pay attention, we might notice there's been a mistake. In the dictionary I won for a poem about the Midwest and rings on dead people's fingers, the M's are spliced in with the N's. It's a factory-second, and only by noticing can I properly stand on one foot with the aforementioned dictionary precariously balanced on top my head.
Frivolous Fancy

You give pizza pie love and I don’t know what to do. Three geese fly east in point formation. One star hovers above a rooftop. A maple end table is polished smooth. I’m not supposed to ask that you ring the doorbell with a bouquet of weeds bundled blue or simply call and profess your virulently infectious mortifying love. I might be left lounging with my legs up on the wall, contemplating my toenails freshly painted a frosted mocha pink, and which tattoo to engrave in the shallow hollow inside and to the left of my right knee. But I have dreams, ridiculous dreams filled with one man and then another. In each I’m in the throes of lust or actually he is simply nice and knows how to grab my ass while whispering you are the object of my enduring affliction. What an experience that would be, if you knew me, and you do, you know that I haven’t been that lucky, that I haven’t sauntered up to some guy in a bar, then tripped and smiled.
Throughout New York City

Emotional instability demands a new pair of shoes and a leopard print coat. All the men are beautiful glass houses. Desire struts down Fifth Avenue, past Gucci and Chanel, throwing blocks while shaking the rattle. I have been behaving badly chasing after a man in a blue wool coat who lisps in Spanish and smiles with a crooked eye. A late night phone rings and rings, while in the morning dreams morph a black crow's claws onto my left ankle, a scavenger picking pieces from the not dead yet. I should leave this city and practice patience. If only to sit outside and wait for the temperature to cool as light elongates through the shadows of a maple tree. Those damn near perfect leaves in cadence with the wind, as the wind goes round and round the earth's circumference. Vibrant. Volatile. Never ending. An unnamable interior ooze settles for a minute with my modern day gaucho on a New York subway, the F train or maybe the E, and then I am terrified, not of what might be or what should be, or the socially constructed this and that of how a woman should act concerning desire, but of electrified confusion that cracks open a thunder storm's loud boom while children kick and scream through nature's chaotic dance.

We find shelter under an aluminum awning over a five-story parking garage and by running down subway mid-summer sauna steps to another connection, another train. All holds still with permission to touch a knee, hip, shoulder, a slight seductive brushing
back and forth as we sit on pre-fabricated easy-to-clean subway seats. I could fall
into forgetting, but I cannot shut down
the box cutter blade steady
in that woman's hand, or ignore that we all clutch
bags slung crisscrossed over the shoulder, the possible
intrusion from the outside. an actuality. Our bodies,
moist and pliable wait for the one who seeks
to calm or release or turn-the-table on that same interior
ooze and find refuge, a palm in the dark. In the lilt
of so many bodies swaying with the continual rocking,
there is only more of ourselves. We rush to leave
tiles falling from turn-of-the-century walls, the steel
gurneys and iron pillars erect under the city above.
Ode to a Parrot

Dear bird you cannot replace
the Nightingale. Beauty rests still
in the city where creation rises
from a botanist’s soiled
thumb, where purple pansies float
in cement boxes, and honeysuckle,
or perhaps gardenia,
scent the sidewalk past powder blue
mums. I have kissed
a lipless mouth, and made love
with three serrated knives.
We are vulnerable to the swollen body.
In Fontana, California,
St. Joe’s, Michigan, among millions
crowded on New York streets,
we have too much and too little.
My Tio’s eyes open and his mouth
frozen wide on crisp hospital sheets.
The dying do not let go. Their melodious
song runs through a lavender sky
folded over a county road. Mistakes
accomplished, a hand held not
long enough. Love goes too quickly,
and nothing more may come. Birds
do not remember nor witness
our longing under a ball of helium gas,
through the millions of continuous miles
of empty expanse. Light fixtures
fall out from the walls, and dust
accumulates upon panes of broken
glass. And you dear bird, you too
were born for death, among toucans,
parakeets, and the sunken eye
of one crocodile in the murk of a river,
a river impossible to tame, where
parrots screech instead of sing.
And so we arrive at the same conclusion, that the way out is into other, not those other two girls we used to be, afraid and behind a closed bedroom door at three am.

It was dark, quiet, and we were beyond salvation, a crucifix stapled to white painted wallboard, of no use.

Now we never go far from knowing intimately how much there is in a leaf, brown before vanishing into snow and ice, knowing what remains still unforgotten.

We're a couple of smart cookies!

Just like Alfonsina Storni, la poeta from the gutter, her life and art opposite Argentina's elite thought machine, 1934 and a woman at that.

Alfonsina gruñó en voz de loba, a low guttural growl from a wolf mother, a single mother, different and therefore alone. One afternoon
she bought a pencil from an angle hawking
his wares on a corner and threw a cracked iron cannon
in her bag along with a Kleenex
and dried flowers.
It's now ours and you see
all has been written before.
You and I
can jump right in.
*
The body electric is a female body,
the pelvis cracked and open. We're standing
on a corner prophesying Homeric
verse, while fine tuning an ear
toward an angel, or a voice
from God. To speak of corridors
edging round to nowhere
is the ultimate triumph or the ultimate joke.
How do you drive a woman crazy? Stick her,
and then tell her to pee
in a corner, at the juncture of two perpendicular lines,
which don't exist in Borges' circular labyrinth,
his maze within a room, within
a simple circle, within a pure geometric form.
And again the before becomes
a tarnished beer stein, a chip
in a kitchen's Formica counter,
insignificant details
twice told over and then once more.
This may all be true.
I understand the difficulty,
how it is almost impossible to empathize
with a Puritan certain that a crow
on a fence is a direct messenger
from God, the big man,
who doles out justice more
than mercy and is therefore willing
to plague sinners with bowel
disorders or burn them asleep
in bed at night as one barn owl
blinks past the dark. The Puritans
deserve some credit for desire
to be more than flesh, sinew, bone
and muscle. And you need a soul
to imagine possibility,
the idea of God expanding
toward a leaf or a water droplet
on a spider web, how if you stand
in the middle of it all you become
Emerson’s transparent eyeball
able to see all, understand all, be all:
the groundhog, the cornfield, the black
and blue butterfly. A damn easy answer

would be nice once in a while, but that
American literature survey class
wasn’t going to allow me to label
them as losers and blame
all the world’s trouble, the manifestation
of the petty, the ordinary, the everyday
waking up to disappointment,
as the only option for thirty-five
impenetrable faces, each and all there,
as impossible to understand and as isolated
from me as from one another. Do we ever
transcend this body, these words, the desire
to imagine more than what can
possibly be? Nevertheless they chose
to raise their hands in affirmation. Of course
they have souls. Of course
they consider the meaning of their lives,
and at night in bed before falling asleep fall into the possibility of their needs, their wants, into the fact of what we do not have.
Playing Around César Vallejo

The day I was born
God conched his mighty roar
into Kruschev's ear.

Dandelion's bloomed yellow
and continued to fall
away, countless airborne,
and a very young boy
sat down to a bowl of chickens
scratching in the yard.

Few know the leopard print
pajamas I found on sale and that
I've withstood stars withered
into a faint echo, the pulpy mass
of a tomato
cut open, sliced and slivered.

The day I was born
God found his sense of humor
and whispered a dirty joke
into my grandmother's ear.

Oil heated in a pan,
kernels of rice crackling before
water and she forgot the brush
taken to my mother's legs, the welts
of anger when a bullfrog
let loose his mighty tongue.

Let's go to the Dragon River
and order moo shu pork rolled
with plum sauce. Did you wake
in love this morning? Never forget
a warm December and the cold
water deep in a lake,
August, September.

The day I was born
God was feeling much better.
What is the proper location
for a box of rusty nails
or those squirrels,
those damn squirrels again
sitting on a fence. Who knows
what you know and what is true.

I think the earth is in league
with red-tail sparrows, maple trees,
and even the stench of tar, wet and fluid;
all laughing as we sit
confused and mourning January's
overcast sky, the death of an oriole
frozen in ice.

And yes, César, light is inexhaustible
as well as shadow,
and it is the Mystery, the vast space
of what is unable to be said
that is kicking,
kicking us upside the head.
Sweet Moisture

My Abuelita Aminta could bite into an onion as though it were a crisp Macintosh apple and then core a green pepper, discard the seed filled center, slice, sauté and cook.

But it is my Tio Ernesto's yellow cake whose sweet moisture comes back Tuesday forty-three minutes after baking in an oven. With my Tio, the kitchen was the best of all possible worlds, and is

the only world where I can fold in his television set blaring a football game with a fat harvest moon bloated yellow and rising on the horizon.

And cheap glass bowls stacked over saucers, Lion-brand finest vegetables full-throated and loud, a chipped pilsner schooner, the last of a full set.

And it's just the way it is that the old ones die off one by one,

while I sit in a chair by a window looking out to the same tree branch as it buds, turns a leaf, falls bare.
Las Madres at the Museum of the Hispanic Society of America

Her glass eyes shine a liquefied gaze.

A statue of what has been before
preserved tall in the corner
of a corridor. A painted wooden mother

of Christ, Mater Dolorosa,

yearning for her son, languishing
at his suffering, while his heart

burns a light blue flame
calling us to flower and song.

A flower’s pale purple grace
remains to remind
that all is not lost, muted
among three gray stones. The stones

on a sidewalk. The flowers
fallen from a neighbor’s fence.

In the song of my mother’s kitchen,

I was spoon fed apricots and pureed
bananas in a high chair, then
the buzz of a bee or the warp of a wasp,

and the women ran
and their heels clicked

across a hardwood floor through the dust
of a warm afternoon.

The heart’s desire
will withstand the oncoming charge

of a bull driven mad
by the three banderilleros
twitching in its back.
When my great-grandmother

cracked open a dried tamarind pod,
flamenco dancers flashed

on a square, two white dresses
up in air, a dance mid-step

crushed onto a cobblestone street

by the sturdy heel
of a woman's black shoe.

In another painted panel
of Joaquín Sorolla y Bastida's
Provinces of Spain,

she parades side saddle,

an effortless ride atop a white stallion,

and off a wooden pole
worn smooth by numerous
nameless hands,

one satin ribbon,
a bundle of oranges,

a road awash in blue
gray shadows and dust.
Y yo tampoco me corro

after a poem by Cesárd Vallejo

On a Thursday, I will not die in Paris
or in Oshkosh, Wisconsin.
but instead Cesár I will read your poem
and wonder about black and white

pebbles at the bottom of a fishbowl,
how the antithesis of death is this life,
a life we understand too little of,
filled with Thursdays and more of the same,

those damn translucent purple flowers
at the end of a vine clamped shut as the moon
filters through fog. Y yo tampoco me corro.

I'll wait for autumn, the fire
spackled leaf and the chorus of our loneliness
below three stars. It is cold at night.
Conversation with Ruben Dario's "Eco y yo"

In the sadness of his childhood my father knew you Ruben, el gran poeta de Nicaragua.

In that little backward country, with his fifth grade education bought by sweaty dollars sent from los Estados Unidos, my grandmother laboring at the menial crap brown-skinned people do in this country, my father learned
to love art and how to weave a grand old narrative;

he believes that poetry is something special, something worthy, something his daughter is allowed to do,

though he would prefer I write song lyrics for the next break through Latin hit on the U.S. pop charts.

Señor Dario, though you're long dead and buried in the city of León where you were baptized and a stone lion weeps over your tomb, I call you back, my elitist fatman, to play poetry's muse draped in garlands and white chiffon.

*

Las obras suyas, your poetry, offers thick oaken doors on a Moorish palace, a unicorn, and a swan. And I attempt to follow your technique for rhyme, how you lay down streets paved gold, how through language we rise to a palatial state of mind.

But in following the rhyme, palace, I arrive at malice, phallus, fallacy
as if it's all a lie

that began with sex.

And it is sex, not the screwing and the sweat,
but when it's all over:
the towel, the glass
of water, perhaps the menthol cigarette.

How nothing is ever enough.

How it all can go

from you Rubén,
you, your mansion and your swans.

* 

Rubén, I believe in all that is beautiful,
but I could never be a dove.

All I know are pigeons on Market Street,
right outside Burger King,
two blocks up from City Hall.

Show me how to navigate sadness, sail through
every emotion and its opposite incarnation

spray-painted on cinderblock walls.

I haven't been able to avoid the dream

for all that is bright and cheerful. I can't
let go those three seconds

one summer day when the sun hit
the sea and there was nothing
more than clear blue.

And blue is the sky, and blue is time, and blue stands still
while we wait

because there is no other choice.
Your gypsy has packed up her tarot cards, star charts, and dice. She has thrown her bags into the back of a two-tone rusted pick-up and is heading on out of town.

* 

La patria, the homeland, the soil. We all do or we all have left.

In Managua, my father planted a mango seed in the backyard of his aunt's kitchen and it grew to bear fruit sweet and ripe,

but the aunt he never forgave for making him run to the grocers, to the pharmacy, an errand boy instead of a nephew, until he ran here to the States back to his mother, my grandmother, my Lela, after whom I am named.

Here the supermarkets are so big we should be ashamed of all our demands and desires. Each time I'm at Safeway, Hardings, D&W, I check out mangoes mostly green, mostly not ready yet.

And I can be nothing, but the mix of here and there, not one not the other. Not Nica.

Not gringa.

Mezcla. Mestizaje.

Los dos fit better than one alone.

* 

You, Rubén, left behind a tapestry sewn with gilded thread: your ornate
and elaborate poems that I found
in a Spanish language bookstore
off Valencia Street
in San Francisco where I am
the vowels, syllables, the names
of streets. *Los nombres de la calle* . . .

*mas me libró en toda parte*

*arte*

That's your line Ruben and your belief
that art metaphorically breaks
the binds that strap us into ourselves.

but more so the ability
to imagine,
the ability to conjure up hope
out of nowhere, nothing,
and face off despair.

Irises, orchids, tiger lilies dance
in air from where we have come
to where we must go.
The void
can be obscured by a rose or a pair
of glasses tinted blue.

So, let death take her sour bite.

Out of the delirium,
the sweat, the anxiety of every morning,
we weave a soft and tender sea,

the mermaids, the song,

the possibility,

and all begins again.
TWO PLACES AT ONCE: LATINA LIFE, LITERATURE AND THE AMERICAN WAY
CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

The Transnational History of my Latinidad

_Mis abuelitas_ did not know each other in Nicaragua. What they have in common are _platanos_, Managua, Leon, a distaste for humidity, a love of the seashore, and a desire for a better life. In the 1940’s, they both immigrated to the United States and left their children in the care of extended family. My mother, barely a teenager, stood on the shoulders of my Tio Ernesto before plunging into the tepid waters of the Pacific, while my father, still a boy, ran from here to there on the streets of Managua. My family’s story is one of strength, survival, of women leaving their culture, their language, their homeland; a story of the immigrant experience where one leaves all that is known and comfortable. Both _mis abuelitas_ grabbed the steel handrail off a Pan Am flight as the wind off San Francisco Bay toyed with their skirts, their hats, and their too many bags, _las maletas_, filled with visas, passports, and photos of the children they left behind.

I am a daughter within this family history, a child of immigration to the United States, one notch within this past century’s influx of immigrants from Latin American nations to the United States. Though the melting pot metaphor has been refused by Latinos of all nationalities, from the Tejanos, Chicanos and Hispanos in the Southwest since the annexation of Mexican territories after the treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo, to the Cubans and Central Americans in Florida, to the...
Dominicans in New York City's Washington Heights, when categorized by that infamous phrase "the melting pot" immigration is thought and expected to be a process of assimilation. I enjoy envisioning a fondue pot, where from sea to shining sea a variety of diverse cultures are thrown over a low flame and blend together to form a distinct new culture with its own flavors and texture, a unique American culture where the cheddar sharpens the muenster. Melting pot is such a common place term that there is even a cooking show on the Television Food Network by that name, where various chefs representing various ethnic cuisines re-introduce specialty dishes from all over the world to an American audience that has long lost great-grandma's recipe book. They have Caribbean-American chefs for Caribbean dishes, Mexican-American chefs for Mexican dishes, Italian-American chefs for Italian dishes, and so on and so forth. Instead of the Sunday roast chicken and mashed potatoes, we are encouraged to whip up some salted codfish, panini, or green chili salsa to go with a fine Pinot Grigio.

Though Latinos from all groups, Chicanos, Cubans, Dominicans, Puerto Ricans, Nicaraguans and so on, insist on maintaining their use of Spanish and other Latino traditions, such as, for example, cultural preferences in food, music, and religious practice, the idea of the melting pot still functions as a central cultural belief in the United States. Though we might wish it otherwise, the expectation that immigrants shed their traditional culture and join the mainstream still prevails. Assimilation is assumed to be a simply a matter of adopting the American lifestyle by adding a few flourishes to the English language, celebrating American holiday traditions, donning American clothing, and of course actualizing the American values of
individuality, hard-work, and a representative democracy. It is permissible, with the help of a cable network, to cook a recipe from a long ago past, but it is understood that eventually immigrants must speak English, own a home, a car, and like everybody else on Saturday zoom over to Home Depot for grass seed, a new faucet, and redwood planks to build the deck out back. It is also at times desirable to vote during Presidential elections. My family has assimilated to United States culture. But still I do not feel 100% American, in the common usage of the word, because I cannot trace my ancestry back to the icy shores of Western Europe. Of course many Latinos can claim a link to Spain, and in my case aunts and uncles have even hinted at France, but this genealogical tracing is ultimately only a daydream fueled by the necessity to find the European connection, so that we too can claim full membership in mainstream American culture.

When I look back to my family, my grandfathers are pictures in photo albums, since they both passed away and left the women to get done the job of raising the family. It was mis abuelitas who came here, to the United States, to the land of opportunity. The land of opportunity is actually how my entire family thinks of the United States, and our immigration experience has for the most part turned out as a fulfillment of this idea. We’ve done it. We own homes, there are numerous college graduates, there are marriages and grandchildren, and successful careers. Everything done. Often I have contemplated the initial move on the part of my grandmothers. Where did they get the idea to come to the States? How did they find the money for the tickets, and the courage to leave their sisters, cousins, mothers and aunts? Partially the move was facilitated by an established Nicaraguan community in San Francisco.
When they arrived, they knew someone would be waiting for them, that someone who had sponsored them, just as they would sponsor their children to come back to them.

Both grandmothers eventually saved enough to send for their children and bring them to the United States. The stories go that my father was saved from the negligent care of a not-so-loving aunt, while my mother took her older sister’s airplane ticket because my aunt was already in love with her future husband and the eventual father of my eight cousins. As adults, my parents met in San Francisco’s Nicaraguan community; they fell in love, did not marry, and had me and my brother out of wedlock. The details of this episode are the scandalous details of the family secret; the beautiful girl rebels against the tyrannical mother, and gets in trouble with the boy from the wrong side of the tracks. Even though I relate this story in the Midwestern symbolism of railroad tracks dividing the haves from the have-nots, and in San Francisco there are so many tracks that it is impossible to find the exact line of demarcation, my parents’ story can still be classified as this typical romantic tragedy: the good girl runs off with the bad boy and gets in trouble, the real trouble of the 1950’s and 60’s, an unplanned pregnancy. What is necessary about this story is that eventually my mother wises up, leaves my father and San Francisco’s Nicaraguan community by packing a Ford station wagon with all our belongings, and she drives to the Los Angeles suburbs. There we rent an apartment, sometimes it’s a house, and my mother opens a beauty salon. The American dream begins.

We do not own a house, and the car is a used Chevy Nova, but my mother is running her own small business, and I attend suburban schools. I am addicted to
television and watch reruns of old movies on channel 11, KTTV, and I learn about the
way things are from the TV series Bewitched, I Dream of Jeanie, and The Brady
Bunch. Eventually I relinquish my infatuation with magic and genies, but the ideal of
a suburban happy family haunts me to this day. It is through television that I learn
what is lacking in my Latina home environment. My mother works long hours and
arrives late. She is not there at three o’clock and there are no milk and cookies on a
white china saucer. My mother cooks dinner in the morning and leaves instructions
on how to warm it up. There is no father in a three-piece suit who goes off to the
office every morning at 8:30, and we make coffee with milk, instead of water.

In my child’s mind, I half attribute the difference between my family and
those on television to my mother’s single parent status, and the aching lack of my
father in our daily lives. This scenario is no different than that of other children
growing up in single-parent families during the sixties and seventies when divorce
became the latest craze, but I also throw into the equation the desire to be like
everybody else. And that means Marcia Brady. I want straight long flowing hair and
a tall thin body, but instead I have inherited my grandmother’s full figure, to put it
nicely. At family gatherings, I hear the accolade of “¡Ay, qué hermosa!” which in my
eyes translates to what a cute fat chick and I cannot reconcile my family’s concept of
feminine beauty with that seen on television. In my family’s eyes, I am beautiful, but
on the school playground I am the butt of endless teasing. Fortunately, the love I
receive from my mother, grandmother, aunts and uncles protects me, and somehow I
get along without undertaking drastic diets that would force my body into some
illusion devised by the media. But still I am different in the very way that I look.
For a teenager, physical appearance may seem of the utmost importance, especially in Southern California’s beach culture, and especially for an ethnic child. During the 70’s and early ’80’s, as I was putting on that first form fitting bathing suit, and placing a towel on the sands of Redondo Beach, the 1968 Civil Rights Act was reverberating through the nation. The ideal that every individual regardless of ethnicity and color could take advantage of all opportunities was now protected by law. Jefferson’s Declaration of Independence finally rang true for all citizens with the passage of the Civil Rights Act, and within the boundaries of the United States each individual was now theoretically considered free to go chasing after whichever colored balloon led to a fulfilled and happy life, irrespective of the hue of their skin. As a teenager, as a child, I heard these words, I could speak these words, but I knew that they were not reality. A colorblind society was only a notion, perhaps one that would someday be fulfilled, but nevertheless, even in our day and age, is still only a glittering ideal. The ideal of a colorblind society rests in our law books and our consciousness, but has yet to pass into the everyday workings of our lives.

I could now relate a poignant anecdote about confronting the color line in my daily life, preferably one that occurred in my pre-teen years and made an indelible impression on my developing sense of identity. But I can’t because I have no such anecdote. I am the "right" color. I am a fair-skinned Latina, una guera in the Mexican vernacular, or using the Nicaraguan label, una chele.

From the minute that I learned language, I learned I was una chele, a white girl, that I had inherited something special, something that would allow me to get along in the world a bit easier. When I thought of my future prospects, I thought that I
would make the perfect token at an Ivy League University or corporate board. I would wear the sleeveless black cocktail dress with pearls or navy blue suit, also with pearls, and I would help meet the quota by technically fitting the category of ethnic minority, but remain inoffensive and innocuous by looking white. I would go to college and get an important well-paying job. I would be innocuous. I would be inoffensive. I would be white.

As a child, I picked up the demands society makes for success or entrance into the mainstream. Even though the Civil Rights Act ensured a certain degree of equality under the law, extensive ethnic and racial discrimination remained a fact of adult life, and in my child’s mind I figured the best course was to take advantage of a random genetic feature, my skin color. Of course, I was a child, and of course my understanding of how the world worked was naive, undeveloped, and lacked objective data, but I was not hallucinating. I knew that I was "other," and that I had to figure out what was necessary in order to succeed in the future I saw looming quickly ahead. From the moment a Latino child hears his or her name anglicized in school, from the moment Maria changes to Mary or Enrique becomes Rick, this child realizes she is "other." As I imagined the future, I saw only a white future, an Anglo future, one where I could pass, one where I could get a piece of the pie as long as I wore the little black cocktail dress and hid who I truly was, and that is a person of color even though my skin is white.

My mother is also a fair-skinned Latina, and her accent is a cause of confusion. Regularly she is guessed at being German, or Hungarian, references to Zsa Zsa Gabor abound as the closest popular image that can be accorded to my mother’s
dress and physical appearance. My mother takes this as a compliment, not a problem.
The United States is her chosen land, the land of opportunity, and any factor in her
favor she accepts without question and puts to the best use. Her international flair has
led her to name one beauty shop, the Continental Hair Salon. I suppose that she is a
poet, in that this phrase, full of connotations, is meant to conjure a quaint European
atmosphere, cobblestone streets, baguettes, the slight tinge of perfume in the air. She
even commissioned, for the waiting room of her salon, a ceiling to floor mural of a
Parisian street with the Eiffel Tower offset in the background. If my mother’s
ethnicity is to be interpreted as something debonair and classic, something European,
then she’s played it for all it’s worth. My mother has assimilated the ultimate
American characteristic entrepreneurship.

But I am not my mother. My identity is rooted in California’s suburban track
homes and schools with freshly mowed softball fields. My mother’s identity was
formulated in Nicaragua. She was taught to be a good Catholic and a woman, and
from the stories she tells, a woman in Nicaragua could only identify as a good
Catholic wife and the mother of many children. By emigrating from Nicaragua as a
young woman, my mother formulated her own sense of identity, and she found it
necessary to break with the expectations Nicaraguan society placed upon her in the
1940’s. She came to the United States. She made her own way. She took advantage of
how large the United States is in its geography, and got lost in the suburbs to remake
who she was. My mother created her own identity because of the United States’
acceptance of difference, and its opportunities offered to women. Walt Whitman was
right in characterizing the United States as one huge contradiction.
My mother has lived the American dream, and so has my father, and so have most of my aunts, uncles, cousins and other extended family. So why am I about to complain? Why don't I just go out, buy the latest CD, and stop for a non-fat mocha without the whip cream? Because I still hope that the ideals of my childhood will be actualized. I want the United States to be what it says, not just get close but to do it. And then I have to think that childhood dreams are childish and not based in reality. What should the United States look like and feel like? What kind of a place do I want to call home, my country, my nation, mi patria?

I am a bicultural and bilingual person living in a society that still characterizes itself as a monolingual melting pot, and, to be truly American, I feel the pressure to abandon my family's heritage and eclipse the tremendous influence Latinos have had in our nation. I cannot do that. I cannot accept the development of American history as a pre-ordained movement of "Manifest Destiny" from the East Coast to the West. Latinos are in the names of our states, Florida, Nevada, California, Arizona, and in the names of our cities, St. Augustine, Los Angeles, San Francisco. The history and literature of the United States have been written by all kinds of people: white, black, Hispanic, Native American, Asian, men, women, and so on, etc. Diversity is a fact of our nation, not something we are working toward, but instead something that exists, has always existed, and needs celebration and serious study. Though the melting pot ideology has been challenged by Latinos in their daily lives, the arts and scholarship, this idea is still maintained in US culture, as evident, for example, in the debates over bilingual education and the passing of English-only legislation by 28 states. Diversity
is not that we are all the same, but that we all acknowledge, respect, and show interest in the differences that make up each individual.

As an immigrant, my mother came to this nation knowing that change would be the price for a better way of life. And it is in this country where she could own her own business as an unmarried mother of two children. It is in the suburbs where she could get lost, forget the past, and create a new persona. My mother imparted to me immigrant optimism that here in the States, with the proper education, I could be anything that I set my sights to. And, of course, she is and was right, but I need to twist the American dream in that I do not want to assimilate into sameness, but to acknowledge my difference. Though assimilation might be possible on the outside, it would entail forgetting or excluding a large part of my identity. Identity formation begins in the home and begins with language. My first language was Spanish. I had my ears pierced at two months old. I was baptized Catholic one month after my birth. I can never be Marcia Brady and that damn cocktail dress doesn’t seem to fit.

The Current State of Latina Literature

As an emerging writer I confided to a professor that I felt torn in half, as though I had one foot in the Nicaraguan culture of my mother, father, grandmother, great-grandmother who smoked a pipe as she rocked the afternoon to stillness, and the other foot in the suburbs of middle-class America with its neatly painted track homes and two-car garages. I confided that I felt incomplete in both cultures and a part of none, that I was eternally outside and never a part of preparing masa for the nacatamales and definitely not a part of the LSAT preparatory courses offered every
third Saturday afternoon. I didn't know how either system worked and so I perceived myself on the fringe, as an outsider looking in at two worlds that didn't seem to have much in common. That professor welcomed me to the Alienated Artists Club, the AAC, and passed out hearty congratulations for my pervasive feelings of discontinuity and fracture. I had the right stuff to be a poet! Perhaps the need to create a tightly woven picture of experience is why we turn to art, because reality, the everyday, feels so torn and fragmented.

In the fourth grade, I wrote my first poem, a limerick, and my first collection of poetry was compiled in Mr. Montellano's sixth grade class. The book was a hand-bound tour de force of needle and thread, contact paper and cardboard, and within the startling lines of the anagrams were my own colored pencil illustrations. Approximately twenty-five years later, I have gone through the entire United States educational system, and surprisingly the impetus has been a search for poetry, literature and art. The whole time I have been Latina, and most of the time I have lived within one of the most Hispanic states in the union, California, but rarely did I come across the Latina story in any version. In all areas I studied, political science, philosophy, history, even literature, the Latina presence within the United States has been incomprehensibly absent. Of course this is changing, but very slowly.

Studying literature at the graduate level for the past eight years, continuously I found that the voices of people of color were absent from suggested and required reading lists. Throughout my undergraduate career and an MFA, I was introduced to one Latino poet, Victor Hernández Cruz, and that number can be raised to two if we choose to label W.C. Williams as the Latino product of his Puerto Rican mother. I
was spoon fed the idea that great writing transcends cultural markers and expands into the universal, which is clearly free of refried pinto beans, rice and tortillas. This universal floats over the Western canon as one of Plato’s forms and it is the duty of all serious emerging writers to reach for the golden laurels through the appropriate and cultural transcending uses of language, diction and tone. (Irony can be thrown in for good measure.)

However, now with a doctorate in English literature almost in hand, I find that the universal can only be understood through particulars. I understand Keats’ obsession with the cycle of life and death precisely because of the pumpkin gourds, the poppies and full-grown lambs of "To Autumn." I understand Li-Young Lee’s relationship with his culture and father precisely because of the persimmons in the poem by the same name. And where would W.C. Williams be without that wheelbarrow and those ice cold plums? It is the details that cross intellectual, emotional, and cultural boundaries. It is through details that we communicate with one another and come to understand ourselves. Being Latina, my details incorporate red chili, a macho dad, and my grandmother’s votive candles. The universal comes by way of the specifics of everyday life as put forth by each author’s creative play with language.

The universal exists within the work of Sandra Cisneros, Judith Ortiz Cofer, Cristina Garcia, Julia Alvarez, Graciela Limon, and other Latina authors, but their details arise from a Latina perspective, one which leads the narratives and the lyrical lines of Latina poetry and prose to specific moments when the mix between two seemingly divergent cultures comes together, or seems to eternally remain apart. Even though the quest to combine two cultures is a pervasive theme in Latina poetry
and fiction, each individual author creates a singular vision of the process, and offers a unique version of the Latina presence by presenting a woven tapestry of their experience as *chicanas, puertorriquenas, cubanas, dominicanas, salvadoreñas* whatever word clashes up and against "American" to form identity, the song and anguish of Latinas in today’s culture.

The term Latino or Hispanic implies a cohesive united group, but in actuality the Latino community is comprised of many smaller groups, each with its own issues of importance and each with its own set of sub-groups. For the purposes of clarity, "Latino" can refer to men and women, the collective whole, while "Latina" refers specifically to the female sector of the population. However, from this point forward I will use "Latino/a" instead of "Latino," in order to counter the subjugation of the female within the term "Latino." Regardless of the choices I make in this dissertation, there is a debate over which term, Latino, Latino/a or Hispanic is apropos. Each term carries its own connotations, both positive and negative, the major issue being the acceptance or denunciation of Spanish colonialism. The word Hispanic carries a connotation of the Spanish conquest of much of the Americas, and denies indigenous people’s influence on modern day physiognomy and culture. Most of those living in the Southwestern United States, Mexico, the Caribbean, Central and South America are truly *mestizo*, in that they are a mix of indigenous, African, and European ancestry. Latino and Latino/a on the other hand, respect the idea of *mestizaje* and the independence and national sovereignty of Latin American nations. The Latino/a community within the United States is as diverse and complicated as is this debate over which label is most apropos.
Even though labels generalize to an extent that glosses over individuality, at times we need labels to understand specific difference, especially so within the various Latino/a communities within the U.S. The Latina authors chosen for this study were either born or raised and educated in the United States, and represent the diverse Latino/a groups found within this nation: Mexicans, Puerto Ricans, Cubans, and Dominicans. The central authors are Sandra Cisneros, Judith Ortiz Cofer, Cristina Garcia, Julia Alvarez, and Graciela Limn, and each has achieved literary prominence through major publishing houses and/or received national awards for her work. Cisneros is a Chicana writer supported by Random House. Judith Ortiz Cofer is Puerto Rican and regularly published by Norton and The University of Georgia Press, while Cristina Garcia’s novel Dreaming in Cuban, published through Ballantine Books, was chosen by Publishers Weekly as “One of the Best Books of the Year.” The Penguin Group publishes Julia Alvarez, a Dominican, and Graciela Limn’s In Search of Bernabe, published by Arte Público Press, received the American Book Award for 1994. Since this dissertation attempts to delineate the commonalities between Latina writers of various national origins, more authors and texts are included than those mentioned. All the texts under study have won national awards and/or are supported by prominent publishing houses. Through their publication credentials, these authors are recognized as representing the best that is being produced by Latina poets and writers currently in the United States, but of course "best" is a term of valuation and one in need of investigation. Latina literature is not only a search for identity and cultural roots; these texts also locate the Latina condition as it exists within the Anglo culture and society of the United States.
At the core of this experience is the navigation of duality, a duality of language, English and Spanish, and a duality of cultures, that of the United States and that of the specific Latin American nation relative to each writer's heritage. Chicana writers such as Sandra Cisneros, Ana Castillo, and Carmen Tafolla, each in her own unique style, re-create the Chicana presence in the United States. Each incorporates the history, personal experience and memories of Mexico with those of the States, and their work also presents the duality of language, so that Spanish and English appear simultaneously in their poetry and prose. The same situation arises for other Latina authors. The country of origin may differ, in that it may be Puerto Rico, the Dominican Republic, Cuba, or Nicaragua, but each author finds herself confronting United States culture and that of her familial history. Accordingly, I propose that since the Latina author confronts duality on a daily basis, this duality of culture and language presents itself within her poetry and fiction.

Though each author navigates the parameters of duality in her own style, a question exists as to whether or not a specific Latina literary aesthetic unifies the various sub-groups within Latina letters. What do *chicanas, puertorriquenas, cubanas, dominicanas* and those from other Latin American nations have in common and what are the sociological forces that influence these literary trends? I hypothesize that the baseline of Latina authors' commonality is the navigation of their dual cultural and linguistic status, and that even though the manner in which each author comes to terms with living in the United States while being a Latina woman is a unique story, there exist areas of similarity within the narratives.
Chapter II investigates the language issue. In Latina literature, the use of Spanish within predominantly English texts raises the idea of language as central to the distribution of power within a society. It is possible that the use of Spanglish, the incorporation of Spanish into English, indicates an intrinsic battleground between Hispanic culture and the dominant Anglo culture. In that the demand to write in English for an American audience is displaced by incorporating a language that the majority of readers may not understand: Spanish. Though Latina writers may be marketed as ethnic commodities by the publishing industry and their books placed on separate Hispanic shelves of the local Barnes and Noble, they are not only writing for a Latino/a audience: as any and all artists they aspire to capture a national audience, but in so doing they must navigate the extent to which they are willing to acquiesce to the demand for English and the extent that they are willing to be marginalized within national book store chains. Carmen Tafolla places poems written entirely in Spanish alongside those written entirely in English, both without translation into the other language. On the other extreme, Ortiz Cofer minimizes the use of Spanish within her texts, but addresses the duality of culture and language through her direct treatment of Puerto Rican subjects. The most common use when incorporating Spanish in a text is to follow MLA guidelines that designate foreign words through the use of italics, as I do throughout this dissertation. I will argue that when Spanglish appears in a text the writer is calling attention to her dual linguistic status, and insisting that this duality be acknowledged as part of her experience, but the degree to which Spanish appears in Latina texts varies by author.
In Chapter III, I analyze the reformulation of Catholic symbolism in Latina fiction. The dance between two cultures is further carried out in Latina texts through the use of Catholic referents. Julia Alvarez's *In the Time of the Butterflies*, Graciela Limón's *In Search of Bernabe*, and Ana Castillo's *So Far from God* all focus on the matriarchal lineage of the family as a source of strength which allows the protagonists to overcome, or at least come to terms with, the political turmoil in the background for all three novels, and in all three novels Catholicism, or a syncretic variation, is central to each of the novels' female protagonists. Alvarez's novel is located within the Trujillo dictatorship, Limón's timeframe is the civil war of 1980's El Salvador, while Castillo's novel recreates a Hispano population in New Mexico and depicts the results of the US annexation of Mexican territories after the Mexican War. All three novels point to United States involvement in international political situations, and all three pose various female characters as the emotional and actual center of resistance and resolution. I propose that through the use of Catholic referents, Latina writers show how spirituality affirms the Latina woman while empowering her to withstand oppressive political and cultural situations within the Latin American nations of their heritage, and within the Anglo dominant culture of the United States.

Latina literature and its relation to the American literary canon is the subject of Chapter four. Within the past thirty years, there has been an expansion of works written and published by Latina women from all nationalities. Now that there exists a body of work that can be categorized as "Latina literature," I propose that Latina literature should be viewed as part of the American literary canon, and as a primary force in the canon's reconfiguration. In Chapter IV, I highlight the voice of Latina
authors speaking about their development as writers and their desire to create the "best" literature possible. I hope to show that Latina authors function within the history of literary tradition, and that Latina literature expands literary tradition as put forth by T.S. Eliot, Harold Bloom and Jorge Luis Borges. Now that Latina literature has established a firm foundation, these texts raise the issue of literature’s cultural configurations. I also develop what I term "the crisis of exclusion" to analyze Latina literature. My articulation of this concept grows from the work of Carlos Alonso and his investigations into the role of the autochthonous in Latin American literature.

After the papers have been written and grades sent in, each semester folds into the next with the ritual of picking books off the floor, restocking the shelves, and clearing off tables for the upcoming flurry of new research tasks and endeavors. At the close of this past summer semester, instead of a picnic at the shoreline of some lake, I was in my apartment stacking books on the recliner and shoving the pages of no longer needed rough drafts into a Hefty garbage bag. I hit upon a beautiful idea: since for the past two years I've been collecting any and all poetry collections by Latino/a authors that I could find, along with enough novels to keep me more than busy, I should allocate separate shelves for my vast tome of Latino literature. I cleared off the photo albums, placed in the "to donate" pile various new age books on auras and Chinese medicine, and I was ready to fill one shelf with Latina poetry and prose, one shelf with Latino poetry and prose, and one more shelf for the various Latin American authors I had picked up along the way. The back wall to my reading table was reserved for those volumes I had in my possession from Waldo Library on Latino/a criticism and theory. My collection of Latina literature looked formidable.
stacked in haphazard piles on the floor, but I could barely fill one shelf when I got down to the task. Of course, with my graduate student budget, I do not own every volume of Latino/a poetry and prose currently in print, but aside from time and money, the reason my bookshelves are scant is that Latino/a literature and scholarship have only recently begun to make their presence known in the American literary scene.

In the late sixties and early seventies with La Raza movement in the Southwestern US, Chicano students began demanding Chicano studies courses and the development of ethnic studies departments. Latino literary scholarship began with this grassroots movement on the part of Chicano students approximately thirty years ago. It takes time to develop a scholarly conversation on a national level, and the area of Latino/a letters is relatively new. Gloria Anzaldúa's groundbreaking work *The Borderlands/La Frontera* was published in 1987, and numerous volumes on Chicano literature, such as Ramon Saldívar's *Chicano Narrative*, Jose E. Limón's *Mexican Ballads, Chicano Poems*, and Rafael Pérez-Torres' *Movements in Chicano Poetry*, all came out during the 1990's. The literary research focused on Chicano poetry and prose is further along than scholarly investigation into the work of other Hispanic groups writing in the United States today.

The volumes of criticism which expand Hispanic literary and ethnic studies to include Latino/as other than Chicano/as take cultural studies or comparative literature approaches, and include Gustavo Perez Firmat's essay collection *Do the Americas Have a Common Literature?* published in 1990, and Jose David Saldivar's *The Dialectics of Our America*, published in 1991. Ellen McCracken's *New Latina*
*Narrative* appeared in 1999, and is the only scholarly volume to specifically address the range of Latina women writers in the United States today, and so presents a scholarly analysis of the literature by Dominican-Americans, stateside Puerto Ricans, and Cuban-Americans along with that of Chicana authors.

Latina literature is the literature of the various Hispanic groups within the United States: *chicanas, puertorriquenas, cubanas, dominicanas*, and those from Central and South American nations. McCracken’s volume is the only single author text that addresses this definition of Latina literature. It is possible to find articles on individual writers from the various Latina groups, such as Cristina Garcia, Julia Alvarez, and Judith Ortiz Cofer, but at this point in time there is not a comprehensive scholarly work focusing on any one of these authors, nor is there a comprehensive scholarly monograph focused on the work of one Chicana author. Latina literary scholarship is available in article form, collections of articles, or volumes that provide historical and cultural background to Latina literature. Carmen Tafolla’s *Sonnets to Human Beings and Other Selected Works*, edited by Ernesto Padilla, is the first critical edition of a Chicano/a text that includes the author’s work along with critical essays. Tey Diana Rebolledo’s *Women Singing in the Snow* investigates the literary production of Chicana writers through a cultural analysis framework.

This study investigates the similarities and differences between the literary production of the various groups of Latina writers at work in the United States today. Saldivar’s *The Dialectics of Our America*, McCracken’s *New Latina Narrative*, and Anzaldúa’s *The Borderlands/La Frontera* have been influential in this dissertation. However, I have also reached out beyond literary and cultural studies to works in
theology, such as Jeanette Rodriguez's *Our Lady of Guadalupe*, and to works in linguistics, such as Ana Celia Zentella's *Growing Up Bilingual* and Pierre Bourdieu's *Language and Symbolic Power*. While writing a paper for a Shakespeare class, I came to understand that a research paper, a journal article, a dissertation or book are all viewed as in conversation with the literary scholarship that has come before. I find myself in a bit of a problem, in that Latina literary scholarship, the critical investigation into the literature written by Latina women across the various Hispanic groups within the States, is just beginning to develop. I can have a dialog with McCracken's work, but one book does not a conversation make. So the path I've chosen is to reach out to any area of scholarship that informs the central questions of the dissertation. I would like to continue by highlighting the major contributions Saldivar, McCracken and Anzaldúa have made to my scholarship.

Saldivar's work focuses on Chicano studies, and the authors mentioned are overwhelmingly male. Nevertheless, his idea of Chicano literature as part of a pan-American literature that includes the US literary production of Chicanos as part of Latin American literary traditions is helpful in locating Latina literature on a global scale. He views Latin American literature as combining aesthetic concerns with a desire to effect political change, where "the traditional intellectual's commitment to language and image . . . and commitment to politics and to revolution [are] equally absolute" (25). The creation of art combined with a desire for societal change is definitely a driving force within Latina letters.

 McCracken's *New Latina Narrative* presents many of the issues with which I am concerned, from religiosity in Latina literature to the marketing of Latina literary
production as an ethnic commodity that then serves to classify the work of Latina authors as that of the marginalized "other." McCracken is at the forefront of the scholarship to an emerging literature, and she views the production of Latina literature as undergoing a current boom: "A crucial sign of the vitality of this literary movement is that any study can only be partial and effectively unfinished: new novels continue to appear even as one attempts to close a critical intervention at a given moment" (201). As the works of Latina literature become more widely published, then the scholarly work in this area will also have to grow and address the changes in this area. Perhaps in the next ten years I will be able to fill more than one shelf with Latina poetry and prose.

Gloria Anzaldúa is a profound influence on Latina scholarship, and any article on any aspect of Latina literature usually includes at least one citation to Anzaldúa. Her seminal work *Borderlands/La Frontera* places the Chicana woman on a literal and figurative borderland, a creviced canyon between the United States and Mexico, a line straight down the middle of the body between two seemingly divergent cultures. Anzaldúa insists that this location of rupture is not one of victimization, but instead the locale from which a new consciousness emerges, that of the *mestiza* who "copes by developing a tolerance for contradictions, a tolerance for ambiguity . . . She learns to juggle cultures" (101). All Latina authors stand in a figurative borderland and juggle US Anglo culture with Latino/a culture. Anzaldúa's greatest contribution is to identify and name this central aspect of Latina experience. Her contribution is central to Latina scholarship.
On a final note, I would like to address the question of style. Saldivar and McCracken's texts are both written in the style of high academic discourse, while Anzaldua's text is a mixture of essay, poetry and memoir. I view the divergent styles of these texts as opposites of the spectrum, each with its own pitfalls. In regard to Saldivar and McCracken, the rigor of their style in effect limits their readership. Though these texts address issues of broad importance for United States society, they will mostly be read by academics. Though their style of writing reflects the quality of scholarship, the price paid is confinement to the arena of academic discourse. Anzaldua's style embodies Latina duality by combining Spanish and English, narration and analysis, the personal with the critical, and poetry and prose. Her style, reflective of Latina identity, runs the risk of being marginalized in academic discourse due to the very groundbreaking approach of the work. Concerning my own work, I hope to navigate between these styles of writing while raising issues that are of central importance to Latina literature and United States society in general, and in so doing create an accessible document for a wide range of readers.

During elementary school when Spring Break was still Easter Vacation, I would take a fifty-minute flight from LAX to San Francisco and spend time with my father, grandmother, and the paternal side of the extended family. Driving around with my father on his route of mandados, those errands he had to take care of from here to there on Mission Street, we passed by a bakery, Adelita's Pasteles. There I was in San Francisco, that city which is now one of the many locales in the States for Central American immigrants and refugees. I've been looking for myself ever since, and have found echoes within the literature of Latina writers in the United States. Our
stories are different. The country of origin, the reasons for immigration, the experience of growing up in this country all lead to various tales, trials and triumphs, but what we have in common is that feeling of standing on a figurative border where the past, the family, is over there, while the present, life in the States, is here, now. Navigating this figurative borderline, to use Gloria Anzaldúa’s metaphor, is the central concern within Latina letters.
CHAPTER II

SPANGLISH IN LATINA LITERATURE

The Multiplicity of Language, Thought and Experience

Throughout elementary school I wasn't in East LA or the San Joaquin Valley, instead I went to the suburban schools of Southern California where I was the only Latina child in the room. We had followed my uncles, on my mother's side, down south from San Francisco to the Los Angeles area. The plan was to begin anew, to leave my father, who was still married to his wife, and to leave behind the Nicaraguan community since my mother was tired of all the *chismosas*, the gossips and naysayers for whom pity was the most common attitude toward our incomplete family group. *Allí va la pobre Juanita con sus hijitos*. We would get lost in the suburbs, and my mother would open a beauty salon catering to elderly ladies with blue hair, while my brother and I would go to suburban schools, white schools, good schools. I spoke English, I read English, and I wrote in English.

I have no memories of being tongue-tied in Spanish. I could speak with my Spanish dominant grandmothers and with my aunts, uncles and cousins. I did not discriminate between the two languages, since they were both available when needed. *Hablaba con mis abuelitas*, and then with my cousins too. Whichever language fit the occasion was fine, and I spoke what I spoke when I needed to speak. Looking back, Spanglish, the back and forth switching of Spanish and English within a conversation, even within a single sentence, became the dominant language in the home and with
my extended family. Everyone simply talked a lot in whatever way they knew best. In
general, family members raised in Nicaragua remained Spanish dominant, while the
children became English dominant. However, correcting grammar in either language
was viewed as a highly obnoxious endeavor, and thankfully, there were no grammar
police on either side of the language line. Both languages, English and Spanish, were
equally valued. My mother kept the connection to Nicaragua by telling stories in
Spanish, the stories of her youth in Managua and Leon, as did my aunts, uncles and
those cousins who came to the States after the 1972 earthquake y la revolucion.
During my childhood, I was free to use the languages within me, naturally.

Often when thinking about language and its role in society, I think of the
Indian fable of the blind men and the elephant. In the fable, each blind man attempts
to describe the elephant by touching one body part; to the blind man holding the tail,
the elephant is like a rope; to the blind man touching the leg, the elephant is like a tree
trunk; to the one touching the side, the elephant is like a wall, and so on, etc. In regard
to the various aspects of language, which captures the essence of the elephant?
Taking a lesson from the fable, looking at only one aspect, such as speech acts, will
not present the entire whole. Instead, what is called for is an investigation into how
various aspects of language interrelate. Throughout this chapter, I approach the
investigation into language by applying Pierre Bourdieu’s theory of linguistic markets
and symbolic power to the Latina condition and consider how Spanglish functions in
the United States. In this autobiographical narrative introduction, the essence of the
elephant seems to hinge upon Bourdieu’s concept of the linguistic habitus and its
development within the individual, or, in other words, how personal experience creates the language we use.\footnote{1}

My family’s adaptation of language to include English with Spanish, and allow whatever speech came up to be spoken, relates to a general worldview arising out of hardship and the process of immigration. Moving from country to country, city to city, language to language fostered an acknowledgement that there was no one set way of doing things. Instead, flexibility was the only way to make it through since what might come next could not be contained or controlled, and in all likelihood would turn out to be unexpected. I can’t imagine that my family’s move to the States came with the expectation that they themselves, and their children, would end up speaking Spanglish, but we did, and the acceptance of Spanglish in my home became a way to acknowledge both Nicaragua and the States, and the fact that we were now part of two cultures with a variety of language strategies in our bodies, minds and souls. I was raised with an acceptance of linguistic varieties in the home, however this linguistic tolerance did not extend into mainstream Anglo society, and it wasn’t a matter of English only, since we spoke English well enough. The push toward English, which I felt most strongly in school, involved more than correct grammar, vocabulary and a way of speaking, it involved the process of writing. From the first time I came across the word "essay" through to my graduate work, academic writing demanded a particular way of thinking and understanding, different from the ways in which my family lived.

The first time I came across the word "essay" we were in Downey, California. After school I would go to my Abuelita Aminta and Tio Ernesto’s house on a tree-
lined suburban neighborhood and wait for my mother to pick me up after work. It was fifth grade, and Mrs. Darcy announced that there was a contest for the best essay. The specific topic did not matter to my young mind, since I simply wanted to win any contest that would pronounce that I was best at something, anything, including an essay, even though I had no idea what an essay was. The topic may have been on some patriotic theme or perhaps on how to preserve the environment or on the value of a good education, and I figured that my Tio Ernesto could explain the detailed nuances of an essay since he worked in an office as a bookkeeper. A simple explanation of just tell the story or write down what you think would have worked, but no one offered that bit of advice, not my Tio, not my mother, nor anyone else in my extended family. The essay passed unwritten and unexplained.

"Essay" became a mysterious word, a word understood by Mrs. Darcy and perhaps the other students in the class, a word that seemed understood by all except my family and myself. Was the incomprehensibility of this word due to a simple lack of translation? Or perhaps it was that no one in my family had ever written an essay since in Nicaragua they had very little formal schooling. If my mother and my uncles had never composed essays, then they had never undertaken the task of academic writing, the task of whisking the genie into the bottle so that the magic and volatility of thought is captured on a page of written prose. This might seem like an over-the-top metaphor for the writing process, but to myself, and if I can speak for the members of my family, writing was always a mystery. Why should thoughts be made manifest on the written page? It's not that my family was illiterate, but that their use of language did not find its expression through the composition of prose. My family
analyzed, interpreted and documented their experience and circumstance through the act of telling stories. Considering the elephant, storytelling at times is considered somewhere back toward the hindquarters, while the written word is at the pinnacle between the ears.

My family is composed of storytellers, not writers. Each and every one can tell a good tale that changes each time it’s told. In a written document, experience has been made static, set, and confined to one telling, and I don’t think my family was interested in fixating their stories. The fluidity of the verbal story sets it apart from the written page, and the members of my family all told stories of the this-and-that, along with what happened long ago, and yes, that one other thing, with the details, description and analysis altering each time to fit the circumstances of the telling. At the heart of my family’s mode of communication was an underlying perspective toward existence: that life was magical, a huge and grand adventure that did not need containment, where containment equated with futility since the day to day was not static, but in a constant state of change.

I found the push toward writing in school to go beyond the instruction of grammatical rules and toward teaching a way of thinking, a particular way to organize thought, which demands linear connections from one step in the argument to the next, and so on toward a final conclusion. Organization. Argumentation. Documentation. The history of Western thought. Through this process of writing, I was instructed in a particular way to think and experience the world from the minute I first stepped into a classroom, instructed in a way of thinking that clashed with my family’s acceptance of the multiplicity of language and the fluctuating nature of human experience.
Throughout my public school years, I was in "good" suburban schools, so therefore I wrote. I wrote in biology class. I wrote in English class. I wrote in history class. However, if I had heard the phrase "thesis statement," I don't remember when or where. Perhaps I was chatting in class at the time or perhaps my rebellious little heart had decided not to bother with something that seemed so alien and odd. Though I'm sure I wrote numerous "essays" throughout my public school years, the next time I remember the word "essay" was as part of the requirements for college entrance applications. Desperately desiring to get away from home, but at the same time afraid and inexperienced, the dorm life of Southern California's numerous small liberal arts colleges and universities seemed the perfect option. I would get away from home, loosen the familial ties, but stay within reach of my mother's love and support. The applications asked for an essay, this time a summary of my inconsequential life, including all my accomplishments, interests and future contributions to the university environment. I wrote the essay, but I didn't show it to anyone, not my mother or uncles, not a teacher at school. The structure of the essay was a winding snake of various paragraphs strung together with a poem sliced into the body of the epistle on the meaning of my life and future aspirations. The acceptance letters arrived in the mail. I would go to college, unaware of the changes about to occur.

An avid reader throughout childhood and as a young adult, I could write with a certain level of clarity and interest. My test scores were good, I had done well in high school college preparatory courses, and I even produced the required volume of text for my writing-intensive college freshman seminar. However, making it through the public school system, and even through my first freshman semester, had not
cemented in my repertoire the semantics of the essay, which came back to haunt me during my first university level English course, a class on the greats of world literature.

I was enthralled with Dostoevsky's *Crime and Punishment*, with the oak seminar table and chairs, and with the opportunity to discuss books and ideas, but then my papers came back with C's and D's. I was mortified. The traditional freshman slump is what some would call it, but that wasn’t the case. I had read the books, participated in class discussion, and understood what was going on. There had to be an explanation for the mystery of the grade, so I made my way to office hours and waited in the hall. I insisted to the professor that I was not a slacker, and that I had actually done my best with the assignment, so we went through the essay paragraph by paragraph. After reading aloud, he paraphrased what I had written, which to my surprise was not what I had intended. Then it hit: I didn’t know how to write. I did not qualify the epiphany toward only academic compositions. There was something flawed at the core of my capabilities.

If there are certain moments that permanently alter the path of one's life, then this literature course episode qualifies as one of my many. The pronouncement of my faulty writing abilities sent me in a direction where eventually writing became central to my personal and professional life. I am the first "writer" in the history of my family, except, perhaps, for Salvador Ruiz Morales, a great-grand uncle rumored to have been a poet in Nicaragua within the circles of Ruben Dario. As an undergraduate, I enrolled in every composition course the university offered, and signed up as an English major with a writing concentration. At various times, I made the Dean's
list. Good grades and awards. I was now an "effective writer," and I relished the victory of that accomplishment. However it came at a great price, one which I was not aware would affect the relationship with my mother.

In learning to write the college level essay, I began to master academic language, and how to think from a to b to c with all the supporting arguments. Some might say that this opened my mind to a clarity of thought, which then transferred to a clarity of writing. Others, like Bourdieu, might say I had become symbolically dominated by academia and its use of language, manipulated, in other words, to finally accept the superiority of academic discourse. I now felt myself to be a critical thinker and essayist. When I went home I carried with me a new found and sophomoric disrespect for my mother. I now demanded straight linear documentation of how the world worked. I wanted clear directions with street names and left and right turns designated correctly. When she spoke, I wanted her to use concrete place names. I wanted her to be direct, to get to the point, to be clear and concise, and then when she couldn't, I faulted her lack of understanding. For the first time I couldn't speak with my mother, and I became extremely frustrated during simple conversations.

Looking back, I am horribly embarrassed over those antagonistic conversations with my mother, yet now I can see that I was recapitulating the dominant society's expected use of language, an expectation which put down how my mother spoke and thought. I now view language as more than just a correct way of speaking. It is how we verbalize experience, and by labeling my mother's use of language as flawed, I also discounted her way of being in the world. La forma mas
The very style of this dissertation is meant to challenge those pervasive ideologies of academic writing that I encountered, which led me to shun my family’s use of language. There is a certain level of irony in that I have found the societal implications of language usage and the freedom to break with its constrictive paradigms by following through with a doctoral program in English literature.

Without the very institution that Bourdieu would demark as the location of my symbolic domination, I would have remained in that unknowing space accepting my own and my family’s use of language as irredeemably flawed.

But let me continue with the story, back to that point in time when I was a recent college graduate trying to figure out what to do next. Fortunately, the world is fluctuating, chaotic and beyond the control of a young Latina woman with an English degree. My family’s orientation to accept whatever came their way, be it Spanglish, be it a college graduate stuck on herself, be it new cities and cultures, was an orientation imprinted at the core of my identity, one that four years of college did not eradicate. Though I extolled the virtues of critical thought and adopted an educated manner of speech and writing, the chaos of reality came back upon graduation. Thank goodness.

My college experience had been the fulfillment of my mother’s immigrant optimism, in that her daughter was prepared to succeed in this new culture. I also had wanted to fit in and succeed, so I had grabbed the English language as taught in the university environment and a style of academic prose that demanded clear rationales, reasonable exposition, and a cool, calm, collected voice. Surprisingly, upon graduation this skill was not sufficient for an entry level job as an administrative assistant.
or, as a matter of fact, any position. With my English degree and scant resume, I queried any and all magazines in the Los Angeles area, and not one letter of interest returned. The college graduate was back home with nothing to do.

As I contemplated my circumstances and future prospects, I worked part-time in a pre-school, and then decided to inquire about the teaching shortage in the Los Angeles Unified School District. Within two weeks of walking into the District offices, I was placed as a fourth-grade bilingual teacher. The District was in the middle of its summer recruitment drive, and desperately in need of Spanish speakers. Only intending to ask for information, the fact that I spoke Spanish got my inexperienced self whisked into a language assessment room. Once my Spanish fluency was documented, I found myself with a contract and an emergency teaching credential for the upcoming school year. The unpredictable whirlwind of what may come and go picked me up and threw me into elementary education. Going with the flow, I enrolled in a teaching certification program at the local university, and began thirteen years of my first official career.

Perhaps my experience is similar to many college graduates returning home and attempting to find their place in the world, in that no matter how hard we might try to control and organize our lives, the unexpected waits around the corner. There is no denying that the skills I learned in college have served me well. I passed with ease the qualifying examinations required by the State of California teacher credentialing offices. However, it was my family’s orientation to accept and deal with whatever may come that developed my ability to adapt to new circumstances. Many times I cut out construction paper owls, and cleaned up a child’s bloody nose. I taught children to
read, to be kind and respect one another, but there was always something missing. Poetry brought me back to the academy, and it is from studying poetry that I have come to understand my dance with language.

I have always written poems from the time I was a little girl, and after thirteen years working as an elementary school teacher, the poems came alive once again. (Perhaps, the divorce was also intensive fuel for the fire.) I have always wondered why I was drawn to poetic forms. Now I think it is because poetry encourages non-linear thinking, the non-linear thinking characteristic of my family. In poetry, I found my voice because I was free from the constraints of the "right way" to do things. I could mix Spanish and English. I could go off on tangents. I could do whatever was needed to create the piece of art called a poem. However, I hesitated returning to the university environment and on to graduate school because I was sure that once again I would be forced into a constricted way of thinking.

A professor of mine, the same one that sent me on the quest for academic language, gently insisted that an MFA program might be a good idea after I sent him poem after poem, and a chapbook here and there. And away I went, first to the low-residency MFA program at Vermont College, and then to Western Michigan University for a doctorate. Back in the academy, the mill of rational thought. During my first semester as a doctoral candidate, I worked as a tutor for the writing center. Oh, irony of ironies. Maybe I would see a younger version of myself walking in the door. And I did walk in time after time. I was that student of color or someone from abroad, or any individual whose framework toward the world varied from the mainstream. I spoke in the language of playing the game, the game called academic
writing, which I was now certain was separate and distinct from the actualities of understanding and thought.

At times the academic essay is presented as the primary vehicle to showcase critical thought, but this is an attitude toward one particular style of writing, not an eternal truth. There are other ways to do things, other ways to organize prose and communicate knowledge. The very style of this dissertation attempts to show that possibility. As a tutor, I first validated each student’s diverse engagement with language, and since I empathized with the notion that it was a strange endeavor to write a streamlined essay beginning with a thesis statement and proceeding on straight through to the end. I provided some necessary clues for successful academic writing. My effectiveness as a tutor rested in my letting the cat out of the bag, the secret that academic writing is only one form of expression, a form of expression demanded in higher education, but only one of many possibilities for written prose. If the students desired to succeed in higher education in the United States, then they had a choice. They could make the conscious effort to adhere to the exigencies of academic writing, with the knowledge that this writing was a construction, one way to do things, not a judgment on their capabilities as an individual.

In my own work, I made that choice and accepted the demands of academic writing. Indeed, I wrote too many papers in a style that was not my own. By the time of this dissertation I had had enough. I have given up the idea that linear thinking, and therefore linear writing, is the pinnacle of thought. Instead, I have come to believe that language is a web where the autobiographical and the critical complement one another. I can never return solely to my family’s use of language or to the time before
I entered the university system. The changes are permanent. I am a writer working with the written aspect of language, working with the elephant's tail so to speak. Or is it its front quarters, hide or left tusk? As I write I am painfully aware of diverging from standard practice, and I wonder about clarity and reaching my audience. As I discuss in the following section with the help of Pierre Bourdieu, the idea of a "correct" language, a "correct" manner of speaking, and a "correct" manner of writing are social constructions that maintain a hierarchy of power. In this hierarchy, my family's worldview is belittled, unnecessarily so.

The Spanglish Debate

What do a mariposa and an elevator have in common?

They each go from flor to floor.

Alberto Pulido, a Chicano sociologist from Arizona State University, told me that Spanglish joke as we were chatting in the hallway during the Erasmus Institute 2002 Summer Seminar. Understanding the joke's humor necessitates knowledge of Spanish and English, along with an awareness of English spoken with a Spanish accent. The humor arises from the fact that the Spanish word for flower, flor, sounds the same as the English word "floor" when pronounced with a Spanish accent, and rests in the acknowledgement that when correlating English and Spanish, flor and "floor" are false cognates, a little joke to be gotten only when thinking in Spanglish.

Since the humorous correlation between a butterfly and an elevator falls apart when the joke is told only in one language, the joke exemplifies how Spanglish, the combination of Spanish and English, allows for the expression and reception of
One common criticism surrounding Spanglish usage is that this linguistic strategy is an aberration of both Spanish and English, primarily used by speakers who do not fully command either language. The joke falsifies this rationale by creating a linguistic act, the joke, which can only function successfully within a Spanglish framework. Though the correlation between a butterfly and an elevator may be viewed as minor and inconsequential, this pairing shows how Spanglish creates new ways of understanding and experience that are not available in monolingual frameworks.

For the purpose of this chapter, "Spanglish" and "code switching" are used interchangeably. Jeff MacSwan defines code switching as "a speech style in which fluent bilinguals move in and out of two (or conceivably more) languages" (Minimalist 37). Code switching can occur between any two languages, and the movement in and out of Spanish and English during speech or on the written page is commonly understood as Spanglish. Though Spanglish involves more than code switching, for example calques and borrowings, for the purpose of this chapter Spanglish refers to the back and forth switching between Spanish and English in speech and writing. There is a difference between spoken Spanglish and that which appears in literary texts. Ernst Rudin points out that a truly bilingual text would give equal weight to both languages, but that this rarely occurs. Instead texts employ bilingual techniques: One language is clearly primary and the other one (or the other ones) is (or are), equally clearly secondary. While bilingual literature proper is hard to find, literary bilingualism the use of secondary language elements in monolingual literature occurs frequently and in many forms (Tender 10).
In regards to literary code switching, John Lipski highlights three code switching categories:

Type I is the monolingual text, perhaps with a handful of L2 words thrown in for flavor. . . . Type II bilingual literature exhibits intersentential code switches, where entire lines of poetry or entire sentences of prose are produced in a single language, with switches occurring at phrase/sentence boundaries. . . . Type III bilingual literature exhibits intrasentential code switching . . . (Spanish-English 195).

The Latina texts under study in this chapter use English as the primary language with Spanish as the secondary language. The Spanish in these English dominant texts follow Lipski’s categories. At times within an English sentence a Spanish word may appear, or within an English sentence a Spanish phrase may appear, or within an English paragraph or stanza complete Spanish sentences may appear.

As evidenced by the numerous English-only propositions and statutes throughout the United States, such as in California (1986), Utah (2000), and Iowa (2002), the inclusion of Spanish into English is under assault. According to these statutes, the use of any language except English can be viewed as contradictory to US heritage, culture and identity. This concept of an English-only United States undermines Latino/a identity at a very fundamental level. Though not all Latino/as are fluent bilinguals, Spanish is an integral part of latinidad. In her introduction to Latina Self-Portraits, Bridget Kevane notes that Latina "writers are demanding that their readers acknowledge the Spanish [in Latina literature] and that they acknowledge that Spanish has become part of the American landscape" (15). Even though I have to amend Kevane to point out that Spanish has always been part of the American landscape, Kevane highlights the importance of the language issue for Latina writers.
Though all the authors under study code switch between Spanish and English at some point in their texts, the amount and the variety of the switches vary. To understand how Spanglish functions within Latina literature we need first to understand spoken Spanglish in the United States. At the same time we must recognize that the Spanish that appears in the English dominant texts of Latina writers is not identical to spoken Spanglish. I will first discuss the phenomenon of spoken Spanglish in the United States, and then follow through with how this linguistic practice appears in Latina literature.

Ed Morales’s *Living in Spanglish*, Ana Celia Zentella’s *Growing Up Bilingual* and Gloria Anzaldúa’s *Borderlands/La Frontera* investigate the Spanglish phenomenon through different avenues. Morales’s *Living in Spanglish* is a journalistic inquiry into Spanglish and its broader implications for US society. Zentella’s *Growing Up Bilingual* is a volume of academic scholarship that investigates Spanglish through a sociolinguistic framework. Anzaldúa’s *Borderlands/La Frontera* combines research with personal insight to present a multi-genre treatise on, among other subjects, Spanglish as central to Chicana identity. Though these three texts approach the phenomenon of Spanglish from different directions, they each validate Spanglish as a legitimate linguistic resource.

In *Living in Spanglish*, Morales presents a "Spanglish Manifesto" where he argues that the acceptance and celebration of Spanglish is critical to the acceptance and celebration of diversity. So often Latino/as are made to feel that they must choose to identify with either the Latin American nation of their heritage or with the United States. Instead of this polarization, Morales seeks to acknowledge the multiple
identities that comprise US Latino/a ethnicity, so that, for example, an individual does not have to identify as Cuban or as American, but can be both. For Morales, by "doing" Spanglish, an individual lives biculturally within the single sentence, and there is a simultaneous acknowledgement of Latin American and United States cultures. He views the phenomenon of Spanglish as extending from linguistic acts to an entire worldview:

Spanglish the movement, Spanglish the message, Spanglish the party happening next door right now is the active state of cultural mixing, the endless pursuit of resolving contradictions in politics and art, the upside-down overhaul of class structure, the carnival of multinational culture. (6)

For Morales, Spanglish as a way of thinking and being is a political act that serves to validate the multicultural, multinational, and multilingual lives of US Latino/as.

Despite his aspirations, Morales acknowledges that "to almost everyone, Spanglish is an ugly word. In its most literal sense, Spanglish refers to a bastardized language" (4) and that "Spanish speakers with a Latin American colonial mindset find it unsettling and distasteful that in the US's inner cities, Latinos are substituting English words liberally. English speakers flinch at anything that isn't in their native tongue" (5). The desire to maintain some perceived purity of Spanish or English may be a new incarnation of North, Central and South American nationalism, since national identity is so often tied with the way we speak: *Suenas como una cubana; Tu acento es como de una puertorriqueña*; You must be Australian; Do you speak Mexican? With the advent of global economic markets and mass communication technology, the world is shrinking and we are no longer culturally confined within the boundaries of the nation-state. Given that the internationalization of culture is
difficult to accept, the demand for Spanish or English "purity" can be viewed as a
regressive attempt to maintain cultural configurations and to stall any transition away
from traditionally conceived national cultures. Latino/as in the United States
exemplify what is to come: multiple languages, multiple cultures, and multiple
ethnicities.

In *Growing Up Bilingual*, Zentella observed the language patterns of a group
of Puerto Rican children in *El Barrio*, New York City's East Harlem, over an
eighteen-month period. She became part of *El Barrio* and was able to convince
parents to allow their children to walk around with knapsacks that held tape recorders.
Tape-recorded linguistic exchanges, along with first hand observations of the
community, comprise Zentella's data set. Her data indicate that Spanglish is not
primarily used as a result of the lack of competence in Spanish and English, but
instead occurs from competence with both language structures. She agrees with
Morales that Spanglish is a way of acknowledging two cultures simultaneously:

On the periphery of a prestigious English monolingual world and the
periphery of a stigmatized Spanish monolingual world, *el bloque*'s children
lived on the border of the "borderlands" alluded to by Anzaldúa, unwilling to
relinquish their foothold in either. Their code switching was a way of saying
that they belonged to both worlds, and should not be forced to give up one for
the other. . . . Every time they said something in one language when they
might just as easily have said it in the other, they were re-connecting with
people, occasions, settings, and power configurations from their history of
past interactions, and imprinting their own "act of identity" on that history.
(114)

Spanglish affirms the duality of Latino/a identity, and is more than a verbal
form of language. One does not speak Spanglish. instead you "do" Spanglish. You
take the American part and the Latin American part and combine the two into an
interwoven tapestry of language, experience, and history. By "doing" Spanglish the Latino/a individual exists in two places at once. The use of Spanglish is one signifier of a US Latino/a’s dual cultural identity, and perhaps is an indication of a transnational culture emerging as the artificially constructed political borders between nations erode.

Despite this scholarship, Spanglish is still viewed as a linguistic crutch by many US Spanish speaking Latino/as. Zentella notes this attitude in her work, and proposes that the concept of Spanglish as arising from a loss for words by Latino/a’s themselves may be a result of the embarrassment or frustration of not knowing the "right" word, which then "speakers tend to recall...heightening their awareness of 'crutching'" (99). However, Zentella’s data does not corroborate that crutching, or being at a loss for words, is the main impetus for Spanglish usage. In her study 25% of code switches could be classified as a "crutch" type strategy, while for 75% of the code switches the speakers knew how to say their switches in both languages (99). If we take into account that children were the focus of Zentella’s study, and that children are in the process of acquiring language where "crutching" would seem to occur more often, the fact that 75% of switches were done with knowledge of how to say the words in both languages points to the use of Spanglish as something other than a transition stage Spanish speakers pass through while acquiring English. For Zentella "code switching is, fundamentally, a conversational activity via which speakers negotiate meaning with each other, like salsa dancers responding smoothly to each other’s intricate steps and turns" (113).
In her study, Zentella presents a wide range of conversational strategies that lead to code switching. She notes that choosing one language over the other depends upon many factors, one of which is the social standing of the conversation participants. For example, a child often speaks to an adult in the adult’s dominant language out of respect. Other factors that can affect language choice are the desire to control the conversation and the desire to communicate clearly. When confusion arises in a conversation, instead of paraphrasing what has been misunderstood, a code switch can occur. Zentella writes that "in the heads of the speakers is the shared knowledge of how to manage conversations, how to achieve intentions in verbal interaction, and how to show respect for the social values of the community, the status of the interactants, and the symbolic value of the languages" (83). Zentella’s study is a meticulous linguistic analysis of one Spanglish speaking population, and her data adds to the growing literature documenting Spanglish as a flexible, context sensitive and effective language resource. She notes:

In an effort to counter the categorization of code switchers as linguistically and cognitively deficient, sociolinguists have responded by . . . quantifying speakers’ adherence to syntactic rules to prove that code switchers are not without language they are juggling two grammars. . . . almost all honor the complex rules of when and where to link the two grammars, and some speak of "Spanglish" proudly. (170)

Zentella’s findings convey her view that Spanglish is not an error-based aberration, a corruption of "correct" discourse, or a failure to master language competency; she notes that "the code switching of el bloque’s children proved they were not semi-or a-lingual hodge-podgers, but adept bilingual jugglers" (135).
When I first read Zentella's book two years ago, I was still under the impression that my own use of Spanglish was an indication of my Spanish language deficiencies. I too had been hoodwinked into thinking of Spanglish as an aberration and indicative of a faulty linguistic repertoire. I now see that Spanglish is one of my language resources. I agree with Gloria Anzaldúa when she writes, "ethnic identity is twin skin to linguistic identity I am my language. Until I can take pride in my language, I cannot take pride in myself" (Borderlands 81). It is also necessary to acknowledge that I have participated in the devaluation of the very way I speak, or the devaluation of the various language varieties that I embody. I now realize it is necessary to insist on the legitimacy of my own voice, its non-linearity, its English dominance, its bilingualism. I accept living within my own linguistic contradictions.

As a Latina writer, one who struggles with finding a voice within a dominant monolingual Anglo society, Anzaldúa's *Borderlands/La Frontera* calls out to me as the text of texts. In this work, Anzaldúa confidently rejects the imposition of a "correct" style, language, and thought, and instead presents a text that is truly Spanglish in the expanded sense of the term as put forth by Morales. Through her style and content, Anzaldúa challenges the marginalized status of Latino/a language, thought and experience.

In *Borderlands/La Frontera*, Anzaldúa locates the Chicana woman on a literal and figurative borderland, a creviced canyon between the United States and Mexico, a line straight down the middle of the body between two seemingly divergent cultures. The borderland extends from the actual Tex-Mex border at the Rio Grande to all spaces that are "physically present wherever two or more cultures edge each other,
where people of different races occupy the same territory, where under, lower, middle
and upper classes touch, where the space between two individuals shrinks with
intimacy" (Preface). On one level, the borderland metaphor describes a rupture within
Chicana consciousness that refuses closure, a rupture that tears women apart and
leaves them in the dust incapable of fitting in anywhere. However, Anzaldua insists
that this location of rupture is not one of victimization, but instead the locale from
which a new consciousness emerges, that of the mestiza who "copes by developing a
tolerance for contradictions, a tolerance for ambiguity" (101). For the mestiza,
Spanglish’s combination of two languages is not a contradiction, nor an aberration,
but instead an expression of Chicana identity since underneath the Spanglish
phenomenon is the individual whose daily existence is one of multiplicities, be that in
language, culture or identity. As Anzaldua writes, "so, if you really want to hurt me,
talk badly about my language" (81).

Along with Morales and Zentella, Anzaldua posits Spanglish as necessary for
the reality of Latino/a life in the United States. These authors argue for an acknowledg­
edgement of Spanglish as a legitimate linguistic resource that reflects, mirrors and
validates the Latino/a condition in North America. Though the works cited are from
various disciplines, and all function to establish Spanglish’s legitimacy, this idea has
not become an accepted social precept. Pierre Bourdieu’s *Language & Symbolic
Power* can help us better understand public attitudes towards Spanglish in the United
States.

Bourdieu’s *Language & Symbolic Power* presents a model of linguistic
exchanges and how they function. At the core of Bourdieu’s theory of linguistic
exchanges is the idea that speech acts reaffirm a hierarchy of power relations. He posits that in all societies there is a dominant "language," or set of linguistic practices, and those who possess the greatest authority also possess the greatest amount of "linguistic capital," in turn the basis for the efficacy of speech. Authority is not intrinsic to language itself, but arises outside of language within the hierarchical structures of society. For Bourdieu "authority comes to language from the outside, a fact concretely exemplified by the sceptron that, in Homer, is passed to the orator who is to speak. Language at most represents this authority, manifests and symbolizes it" (109). Societal power configurations are reflected and constructed through language use, and in the United States where English is the dominant language, authority manifests itself in how English is used and validated. As our culture continues to link English with US American identity, higher perceived competency in English begins to generate more legitimate linguistic capital, so that those who speak "correct" English have a greater ability to be heard or taken seriously.

Bourdieu uses an extended economic metaphor to describe the dynamics of language. He interprets linguistic utterances as commodities in a cultural market of symbolic power. He writes "linguistic exchanges are also relations of symbolic power in which the power relations between speakers or their respective groups are actualized" (37). The value of linguistic utterances depends upon the social standing of who is speaking, what is said, and the context of the discourse. An individual is capable of saying anything, the physical act of speaking, but the efficacy of language is determined by social constructions. For example, if I randomly utter, "I now
pronounce you husband and wife," this has no meaning, efficacy, or symbolic power, and is simply an empty vocalization because I am the wrong person, saying the wrong thing at the wrong time and place. If I were a Justice of the Peace at a court house and all in attendance accepted my authority, then the utterance would be legitimate because specific social and legal relationships between the respective individuals would be recognized and respected.

Applying Bourdieu’s theory to language usage in the United States, the linguistic dominance of English over Spanish and Spanglish is clearly related to an unequal power relationship between Anglo United States citizens and Latinos living within US borders. For Bourdieu the market of linguistic exchanges depends on acceptance of the power hierarchy by all parties involved, those who command the dominant language and those who are dominated by its very structures. In US linguistic markets, the perception of Spanglish as an aberration of Spanish and English reveals an underlying assumption that Spanish and English are superior language forms, and this assumption indicates an acceptance of the hierarchical structure of languages where in the United States English comes out on top. In the introduction to Language & Symbolic Power, John B. Thompson states that "symbolic power requires, as a condition of its success, that those subjected to it believe in the legitimacy of power and the legitimacy of those who wield it" (23). We all participate in the process whereby English is affirmed over and over as the legitimate language, the "correct" language, the "best" language. However, how many acknowledge the authority of English as a social construction rather than an absolute truth?
Though Latino/a scholarship and literature, including this dissertation, resist the legitimate authority of English by writing bilingually and by raising the issue of linguistic domination in the United States, Latino/as still receive the "message" that Spanglish indicates a faulty linguistic repertoire. We Latino/as will continue to marginalize ourselves until we stop internalizing the idea of Spanglish as a bastardized language, and instead celebrate that we hold the power of three language varieties: Spanish, English and Spanglish.

The works of Morales, Zentella, Anzaldua, and even this dissertation, hope to alter the structure of linguistic power concerning the valuation of Spanglish. In order to escape the artificial construction of English superiority, and its place as the dominant language, one recourse is to alter the hierarchy so that bilingual conversations are viewed as legitimate linguistic exchanges on a societal level as well as a local one. Morales's, Zentella's and Anzaldua's texts all function toward this goal by using the dominant language to break its own paradigms. Each in their own way argues for the legitimization of Spanglish, and therefore toward a reorganization of symbolic power in the linguistic market of the United States. Altering the market structure is by definition a difficult and slow process since this project involves altering the underlying assumptions of an entire culture, and since it implies that those who hold symbolic power share that power with the have-nots in the linguistic market. This might seem an overwhelming task; however, throughout United States history, power shifts have occurred and continue to occur with such movements as the drive for gender equality and universal civil rights. Perhaps now is the time to work at the fundamental level of language and break the paradigm of English dominance so
that various languages and language resources may be more equally valued. As a culture we must stop the subjugation of people through how they think, speak and write.

One of the most fascinating aspects of Latina literature is the manner in which individual authors follow dominant Anglo literary expectations, one of which is writing predominantly in English, while breaking these same expectations by including Spanish and Latina subjects within the texts. Though North American Latina authors overwhelmingly write in the dominant language of the United States, English, each author also contributes to an alteration of the linguistic market by portraying the vital realities and fundamental humanity of Latino/as. Latina texts introduce Latin American history, myths and legends to an Anglo United States audience, the texts recreate stateside Latino/a life, and also incorporate Spanish alongside English, all of which serve to legitimate Latino/as in the symbolic power structures of US society. Authors attain symbolic capital as their writing is legitimized through publication, and Latina writers, especially those published by major publishing houses, thus legitimize Latina cultural and linguistic concerns. As stated previously, the process is only beginning and these changes are slow and perhaps even marginal steps, but they are occurring.

Latina writers use Spanish in predominantly English texts for several reasons. My own experience as a poet reveals at least three reasons why Latinas may incorporate Spanish into their texts. The first is the desire to write in the language of the authors’ own sensibility; in other words, the desire to accurately put down the language in one’s head. For example, if I am thinking of my grandmother, who is a
dominant Spanish speaker, and I wish to create a poem concerning our experiences, then it is very probable that some of my memories would occur in Spanish, and therefore in the poem I would want to include Spanish in order to be faithful to this experience. Writers may incorporate Spanish into English dominant texts as a way to correspond to the languages with which they live and manage experience.

Moving away from the languages internal to the author, another viable strategy is the desire to capture the rhythm of speech of contemporary Latino/as. Writing dialect goes back to the Romantics and Wordsworth. We see it in the poetry of Robert Frost and in William Faulkner’s novels. Capturing the language of everyday people is not a new concept, and one which Latina writers may want to pursue when they write about Latina culture.

A third explanation for the inclusion of Spanish is a conscious act of renegotiating linguistic power structures. As Anzaldúa states, "until I can take pride in my language, I cannot take pride in myself" (Borderlands 81). The inclusion of Spanish in predominantly English texts affirms that Spanish, English and Spanglish are all legitimate language resources for Latino/as, and counteracts the demand for English-only. Latina authors are likely to be consciously aware of this process as they write.

Even if these rationales function for individual authors, the desire to write in Spanish or Spanglish is limited by the dominance of English in the publishing industry. Tey Diana Rebolledo in her analysis of Chicana literature, Women Singing in the Snow, writes that only "two contemporary Chicana authors . . . have written narrative texts in Spanish" (171). Those authors are Margarita Cota-Cardenas and
Erlinda Gonzales-Berry, and the texts of both authors where published by small private presses because, as Rebolledo states, "the authors were unable to publish them with larger Chicano presses because they were in Spanish" (171). Rebolledo affirms that the choice to write in Spanish is "an act of resistance, and one that leads to a separation from mainstream readers and makes it difficult for [writers] to have their work reviewed and published" and that writing in Spanish is "a political act and declaration of loyalties" (172). If the act of writing in Spanish leads to a narrow readership, and a lack of critical attention, then the price for this resistance to Anglo US culture is high. Latina writers can well justify the strategic decision to write English dominant texts.

Though most Latina writers create their literature predominantly in English, they also incorporate Spanish, and perhaps this is a mediated form of resistance, one that allows publication, and therefore the acquisition of economic as well as symbolic capital, and cultural power. The amount of Spanish in Latina texts varies from author to author and text to text. In fiction, entries range from large passages of Spanglish dialog and the inclusion of Spanish songs and poems, to individual Spanish sentences, phrases and words. In poetry, authors may include Spanish poems alongside English poems without translation. Individual poems may contain entire lines or stanzas in Spanish, and again, as in fiction, poems may include Spanish phrases and words.6

The Latina text affects the monolingual and bilingual reader in different ways. For the monolingual reader, except for poems written entirely in Spanish, the text’s overall meaning remains when the reader skips over Spanish entries. However, the connotations that Spanish entries contribute to textual layers of signification are lost.
The bilingual reader can read the text in its entirety and appreciate that the Spanish in a text is more than a reminder that the characters of the novel or speakers of the poem do live a life of Spanish and Spanglish. For the bilingual reader, the Spanish entries serve to validate the linguistic complexity of Latino/as in the United States.

I would now like to look at a range of Latina texts to analyze how Spanish and Latina themes appear in the literature. The texts under study have been chosen according to genre, equally split between fiction and poetry, and the authors chosen have either won national awards or been published by nationally prominent houses. Both in fiction and poetry, the texts range from minimal inclusion of Spanish, while recreating Latina subjects, to more intensive inclusions of Spanish within the texts. However, with all the texts, Spanish is highly mediated. In regards to fiction, I will begin with Julia Alvarez’s *In the Time of the Butterflies*, then proceed to Sheila Ortiz Taylor’s *Coachella*, and Norma Cantu’s *Can cula*. In regards to poetry, I will look at Judith Ortiz Cofer’s *Reaching for the Mainland*, Sandra Cisneros’ *Loose Woman*, and Carmen Tafolla’s *Sonnets to Human Beings*.

Set in the Dominican Republic during the Trujillo years, Julia Alvarez’s *In the Time of the Butterflies* recreates the lives of four sisters, the Butterflies or *las Mariposas*, who are actual Dominican heroines that contributed to the overthrow of the Trujillo dictatorship during the 1960’s. Alvarez fictionalizes the lives of these real world sisters to bring the events of the Trujillo years to a United States English reading audience, and therefore expand understanding of Dominican life and history in this country. In chapter three, I present a more detailed analysis of the novel’s themes. For the purpose of the present chapter, the amount and way that Spanish
appears in the text is of interest. The textual use of Spanish appears in the names of people and locations, exclamations, and the occasional phrase in the middle of a first person narrative or dialog passage.

The names of characters follow standard Spanish usage, where, for example, the parents of the family are referred to as "Mama" and "Papa" in conversation: "What of me, Papa?", "What do you say, Mama, about our Patria?", and "But Papa isn't really telling fortunes" (9). Various other names follow Spanish usage such as "Tia Flor" (36), "Tio Pepe" (37), "Sor Milagros" (14), "Sor Soccorro" and "Sor Asuncion" (21), as well as the names of cities and institutions, which are also not translated to English, so that "Ojo de Agua" (30) is not translated to "The Water's Eye," and the name of the girl's boarding school is 'Inmaculada Concepcion" (13), not the school of the "Immaculate Conception." When narration is from the point of view of one of the daughters, the names of characters continue to follow Spanish usage. In the opening section of the novel, Dede, the sole surviving sister, recalls a moment of family togetherness. The narration of the passage is from Dede's point of view. The parents are referred to as "Mama" and "Papa" in the following narrative passage:

Dede's memory is playing dolls with the past. She has sat them down that clear, cool night before the future begins, Mama and Papa and their four pretty girls, no one added, no one taken away. Papa calls on Mama to help him out with his fortune-telling. (9)

For the monolingual English reader the use of Spanish terms highlights the Spanish location of the novel, and since the monolingual reader can figure out via cognates and context clues the signification of these types of terms, the text maintains
its fluidity. For the bilingual reader these terms are signifiers of inclusion, in that the text speaks to bilingual bicultural experience. This mother and father are not the Mom and Pops of Springfield, Illinois, but the Mama and Papa of the Latino/a family. Spanish names of cities and institutions also validate Latino/a experience, in that they refuse erasure by maintaining their Spanish identifications. The novel also includes exclamational Spanish phrases such as "Exactamente!" (4), "Ay, Dios santo!" (53), "Ay, Mami!" (157) and "Viva la Mariposa!" (238). Again for the monolingual reader, as with the names of characters and locations, the meaning of these exclamations can be contextually understood, and for the bilingual reader they open the text to broader interpretations.

At times, Spanish phrases occur in the middle of a sentence of first person narration or dialog. Since the characters are presumably Spanish speakers due to the novel’s Dominican setting, and bilingualism is not a theme in the text, one might not expect Dominican characters to mix Spanish and English, however they do at certain points in the novel. At these places in the text, Alvarez breaks through and demonstrates the necessity of Spanish to convey meaning. These instances locate the novel in the Dominican Republic, and indicate that even though the novel is set in a Spanish speaking country, it is a US American Latina novel utilizing the expressive power of Spanglish. Let us consider a few examples.

In the following sentence narrated by Minerva, "guardia" could be replaced by "a member of the national guard": "At a checkpoint, a guardia finally convinced Jaimito that we were going the wrong way" (93). Perhaps the choice to retain "guardia" is that in Spanish this term carries a connotation of fear and dread, which
the English "national guard" does not. This type of rationale is a Spanglish rationale for language usage, in that a code switch occurs to enhance meaning and signifi-
cation. The character Minerva is not bilingual, and not a Spanglish speaker, therefore this bit of Spanglish in the text is Alvarez, the author, breaking through the lines of her own discourse. This happens throughout the novel, even in dialog.

Toward the final scene of the novel when the sisters are driving to visit their husbands in a distant prison, they pick up a soldier and give him a ride. As they chat to pass the time of the drive, the soldier states: "You ask more questions than mi 
mujer when I get home" (291). "Mi mujer" could translate to "my old lady" and stay within the diction appropriate for a soldier down on his luck trying to make his way home, however the English phrase is not used. Again there are subtle differences between "mi mujer" and "my old lady," in that "mi mujer" is a more gentle, kind and loving way to refer to one's wife. When Alvarez chooses the Spanish phrase, she again uses a Spanglish rationale, that of choosing the words which best fit the situation. Though a literary reason for this use of Spanish in the text can be to maintain the Spanish speaking Dominican setting of the novel, such usage between the lines of the discourse also indicates Alvarez's US Latina linguistic repertoire: Spanish, English and Spanglish. Though the novel is English dominant and readily understood by a monolingual reader, the bilingual reader gains an added layer of meaning through interpreting the multiple connotations of the Spanish entries.

In Sheila Ortiz Taylor's Coachella, Spanglish is used to show the language and thought of a Chicano character. With Cresencio Ram rez, Ortiz Taylor presents one character's Spanglish interior monolog as he works in the garden:
Yesterday, ese hombre, her husband, this Mr. Townsend, had come outside in his pajamas to say that if he, Cresencio, dug all his holes at once, entonces, if he put peat moss in all of them, and having done all this, then he put all the plants in, all at once, that he would save time. Gringo time otra vez. Like time could be put in a bank. Dep sito. Like you could take it out when you needed some. (3-4)

In accordance with Morales', Zentella's and Anzaldúa's depiction of Spanglish as a viable linguistic resource for US Latino/as, Ortiz Taylor gives voice to this phenomenon in her portrayal of Cresencio Ram rez. Ortiz Taylor does not italicize the Spanish within the text, which indicates that the character is not speaking two languages, but one: Spanglish. Though the majority of the novel is written in English and centered on English dominant speakers, the text reads differently for the monolingual and bilingual reader. When Ortiz Taylor incorporates Spanglish in her text, it is located in one character’s thought process, and though the monolingual English reader can skip over the Spanish entries, doing so entails losing the contextual richness these phrases add to the novel.

By skipping over the Spanish phrases, the reader can still make out that Cresencio is irritated by his employer’s insistence on efficiency and time management. What is lost, however, is the sarcasm of Cresencio’s voice. The first Spanish entry, "ese hombre," is more than the literal English translation of "that man." "Ese hombre" carries the connotation of a man who is too big for his britches, that the husband is a know-it-all who interferes with the day-to-day pleasures of living by offering unwanted advice. In the second paragraph by skipping over the sentence "Gringo time otra vez," the monolingual reader can infer Cresencio’s distaste with time management through the following sentence, "Like time could be put in the
bank. However, the Spanglish sentence is a pure expression of total exasperation not only with the husband, but also with the United States value system toward work where efficiency defines the quality of a job well done. For Cresencio, efficiency is not the only way to value the quality of one’s work; instead there is also the pleasure of immersing oneself in the task, and since Cresencio is a gardener, respecting the earth as a living being is also vitally important.

Finally, Norma Cantu’s *Canicula*, a fictionalized memoir written through a first person narrator, does code switch throughout the text. At times the switches are eased by a translation, such as "Tres Mujeres. Vecinas. Comadres. Three Women. Neighbors" (35) and "Dahlia se carcajea, loud gulps of laughter . . ." (106). As with Ortiz Taylor’s use of Spanglish, the monolingual reader can understand these passages by skipping the Spanish and reading the English, however in doing so the reader will lose a layer of signification. In the first example, "Comadres" is not translated, and therefore the monolingual reader does not get the connotation that these three women and neighbors are as close to one another as sisters would be. Though "carcajea" does translate to "loud gulps of laughter," the Spanish word, in its sound and connotations, epitomizes the process of laughing so hard that one is bent over in "loud gulps of laughter."

Cantu does not offer English translations for every Spanish entry. When a translation is not presented, the monolingual reader can gain a general meaning of Spanish entries through the passage’s context or by consulting a bilingual dictionary. For example, in the following passage "huesario" and "terreno" are not provided English translations: "Mami had reassured me, no, only those who don’t own their
own terreno are disinterred, their bones thrown into the huesario; she and Tia Nicha had paid for Buelito's terreno, so I had nothing to fear" (71). "Huesario" can be understood through the context as somewhere where human bones are deposited, and when the context of a cemetery and paying are applied to "terreno," then it becomes possible to understand the term as a burial plot. For a bilingual reader, understanding the Spanish in this passage adds a layer to the characterization of this little girl and her family. "Terreno" is more than a burial plot in that it is also the term for land, as in land ownership. Though the first order of interpretation is that the little girl is worried that her grandfather might be disinterred, it also carries the connotation that without the connection to one's "land" the individual is lost, and in combination with "huesario," that one is lost among a scattering of dried-out withering bones.

Of the three texts reviewed, Cantu takes the highest level of risk in her Spanglish usage in its frequency and lack of translations. As with Ortiz Taylor, Cantu does not italicize Spanish words and phrases, and the text is another example of how Spanglish is an effective language resource for Latino/as. This text, winner of the Premio Aztlan, is English dominant, and can be understood by monolingual English readers, more so by those of course who are willing to take a few extra minutes consulting a dictionary or pondering context. For the bilingual reader, the full connotations of the text are available. The memoir is an example of the rich multiplicities of meaning that are created when a literary text "does" Spanglish.

Judith Ortiz Cofer's poetry collection, *Reaching for the Mainland*, is organized from childhood to adulthood, with a chronological correspondence from life on the island to life on the mainland. Like Ortiz Taylor and Cantu, the use of
Spanish in the collection is not italicized. Spanish appears as names and as the occasional word or short phrase. In the first section where the poems are located in Puerto Rico, Spanish usage applies to names such as "Don Andres" and "Don Gonzalo" (11.9), or Spanish words that are making their way into English, such as "pueblo" and "siesta" (15.29-30). When Ortiz Cofer uses Spanish words that are not readily understood by English readers, she often offers a translation. In the poem "The Gusano of Puerto Rico," "gusano" is translated in the first word of the first line to "Earthworm" (17.1). Other examples of translation occur in the poem "In Yucatan" where a phrase of Spanish dialog is translated on the same line: " 'Estodo, Senora,' she says. It is all" (46.12).

As with the works of fiction previously discussed, the overall meaning remains available to a monolingual reader; however by skipping over the Spanish entries the reader loses the connotations these words and phrases add to the poems. For the bilingual Latino/a reader, again Spanish creates a sense of inclusion in that the poems are speaking about "us" Latino/as. There are also levels of meaning that are only available to the bilingual reader. For example the line quoted from "In Yucatan" completes the poem’s first section where the speaker meditates on the profound beauty of ancient Mayan monuments and culture as she visits Mexico. She sees Mayan strength and beauty reflected in "... the woman who makes my bed" (46.5). This woman is "... like a priest over the sacrificial altar ..." (46.6). In the final line, the Spanish phrase spoken by the woman and the English translation interact with each other to create an intricate level of signification. The woman speaks the standard phrase of her position as a hotel employee: "Es todo, Senora" (46.5). This phrase
reflects her position as a maid in a hotel serving the "American" guest; however, since
the stanza has already correlated this woman with the grace and beauty of Mayan
culture, the translation "That is all" (46.5) reverses her position in that the "all" is not
only that the woman has made the bed and fulfilled her obligation as a hotel
employee, but that she is "all" of Mexican Mayan culture and history through her
very presence.

Though the collection does not extensively use Spanish and is English
dominant, this text also works to validate Latino/a experience in the United States.
This text embodies its title, *Reaching for the Mainland*, by presenting what is lost and
gained when one leaves Puerto Rico to live in the mainland United States. The
collection is divided into three sections: "The Birthplace," "The Crossing," and "The
Habit of Movement." The poems in the first section are all located in Puerto Rico, the
poems of the middle section center on family life in the United States during child-
hood and adolescence, while the poems in the final section are from an adult point of
view. The strategic decision to write predominantly in English invites the mono-
lingual English reader to enter Puerto Rican experience and share in what Ortiz Cofer
names as "The Habit of Movement," the back and forth navigation that all Latino/as
experience as part of their dual identity.

In the final poem of the collection, "Lesson One: I Would Sing," translation
becomes the poem’s very subject, and the poem’s organization captures Latino/a
duality by switching from English to Spanish at each line break. The first line begins
"In Spanish, 'cantaria' means I would sing" (60.1), and then the poem’s following
lines alternate between a line in Spanish and a line of English translation: "'Cantar a
bajo de la luna,' I would sing under the moon" (60.2-3). In the final poem of the
collection, Ortiz Cofer sings in both languages, Spanish and English, and presents a
poetic argument that celebrates the duality of Puerto Rican life. The only untranslated
passage that cannot be understood through context clues occurs in the second to the
last line of the poem: "'Cantaria, amaria, viviria,' / Please repeat after me" (60.15-6).
We should all repeat after Ortiz Cofer, and sing, love and live in whichever language
best fits.

Sandra Cisneros' *Loose Woman* overwhelmingly emphasizes her identity as a
Chicana woman and her connection to both her Mexican and US heritage, and the
collection incorporates Spanish words, phrases and one Spanish poem not translated
into English. Cisneros' collection is her second volume of poetry, and it follows her
two collections of prose, *House on Mango Street*, and *Woman Hollering Creek*.
Within the collection, Spanish appears in phrases or in single words, except for
"Amorcito Corazon," the one Spanish poem. Cisneros varies in her use of translation
and in the establishment of context clues surrounding Spanish entries. At times,
Spanish lines are translated or can be understood through context clues, while at other
times they are not. A few examples are in order.

In the poem "*El Alacran Guero*" the Spanish title is translated in the first
stanza where it is made clear that an "alacran guero" is a "white scorpion": "Of all
the scorpions that exist,/ the white one is the deadliest" (45.3-4). This translation
serves not only to guide the English monolingual reader, but is necessary for the
poem's subject of how "whiteness" infiltrates Latina consciousness to sting or bring
annihilation of the self. By translating "guero" to "white," instead of blond or fair-
skinned, Cisneros' English translation interacts with the Spanish to emphasize the poem's subject. On a literal level the poem depicts the danger of the scorpion's bite, but it is also a Latina's meditation on the dangers involved in the positive valuation of "whiteness" and the lure of Anglo culture. For Latinas, the "white scorpion" asphyxiates, brings grief and death. Spanish and English work together to mediate the poem's subject matter, and as with Ortiz Cofer's "In Yucatan," the interaction between Spanish and English extends beyond literal translations.

While partial translation and some context clues are available in "El Alacran Guero," in other poems Cisneros incorporates Spanish without these structural guides. In the poem "Tu Que Sabes de Amor," the title is not translated even though it's repeated in the text of the poem, and context cues do not offer sufficient information for understanding the line's meaning:

You come from the twin Laredos.
Where the world was twice-named and nopalitos flower like a ripe ranchera.
Ay, corazon, t que sabes de amor?

No wonder your heart is filled with mil peso notes and jacaranda. (73.10-15)

Though it is possible that "your heart" provides a translational clue for "corazon," it is not enough to get the literal meaning of the poem's title and refrain. The poem meditates on the possibilities of love, and the title and refrain, though directly working within the poem, also invite the reader to contemplate the issue along with the speaker; unless a bilingual dictionary is consulted, this invitation is lost to the monolingual English reader. With the exception of italicizing Spanish entries, Cisneros' use of Spanish is similar to Cantu's usage, in that at times translations are

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provided, while at others they are not. Even though English is dominant throughout the text, the collection strategically incorporates Spanish to invoke Latina cultural concerns.

Carmen Tafolla’s poetry collection, *Sonnets to Human Beings*, includes one poem written entirely in Spanish, without translation, twelve poems with a high mixture of English and Spanish, and eighteen poems written entirely in English. Though the text is English dominant, Tafolla writes in all three language varieties: Spanish, English and Spanglish. Along with Spanish words, phrases and lines, Tafolla also merges Spanish and English within the sentence, reflecting spoken Spanglish sentence construction. In "Right in One Language," code switches heighten the poem’s argument that Spanglish is a vital linguistic resource for the poet, and the poem celebrates Spanglish's beauty and linguistic power. In the poem, the United States insistence to write in one language only, be that Spanish or English, is contrasted by the poet’s insistence that Spanglish is the way to go. The poem’s speaker refuses to reduce her experience into only one language:

I see biling e-beautiful
   explosions
   two worlds collide
   two tongues dance
   inside the cheek
   together (21.20-25)

After presenting the necessity for Spanglish, that the two languages simultaneously exist in order to accurately embody Latina duality, the poem proceeds to code switch with vehemence within the single sentence:

Por aqui, poquito and a dash alla tambien
salsa chacha disco polka
Rock that Texan cumbia
in a molcajete mezcla! (21.26-29)

I seriously doubt how much a bilingual dictionary would help the monolingual reader take in these lines, since the significance of this passage rests in the sound of the Spanish/English mixture. The lines maintain their fluidity through a shared assonance and consonance between the Spanish and English words of each line. The "a" vowel sound of "aqu" is heard in the English "and" and "dash." In the following line, the "s" consonant sound of "salsa" is repeated in "disco," and the hard "ch" sound of "chacha" reverberates in the hard "c" and "k" of "disco polka." Similar links exist between the sound of Spanish and English words of the next two lines. The joy, humor, and rhythm of the passage exists through the artful combination of English and Spanish, which would be lost by writing monolingually. This poem is a prime example of Spanglish’s linguistic power, and Tafolla takes her knowledge of Spanish and English to create a unique form of literary expression. As with Cantu, Tafolla’s literature exemplifies the possibilities of language when one "does" Spanglish.

As a final note in this survey of Spanish in contemporary Latina literature, I would like to return to Julia Alvarez. In the reprint of her first poetry collection, *Homecoming: New and Selected Poems*, Alvarez closes the new edition with an afterword where the author reflects upon the creation of her first volume of poetry, and herself as an emerging writer struggling with voice. In this personal narrative, Alvarez contemplates her position as a Latina writer and the fact that her first volume of poetry is almost completely devoid of Spanish: "I did not address my experience as a Dominican-American woman. Indeed, that earlier voice did not even feel
permission to do so, as if to call attention to my foreignness would make my readers question my right to write in English" (119). Here Alvarez articulates the fear all emerging Latina writers must confront, that she will be found out and labeled as deficient due to her bilingual and bicultural existence. Though the authors under study have all taken up writing bilingually in their literature, doing so requires courage. Each Latina writer who decides to write in the voice and language of her experience must also face the risk of marginalization, of not being published and reviewed critically. Kevane notes:

Latina literature has returned to the canon a truly bilingual American literature. . . . The ultimate consequences of the linguistic uniqueness remain to be seen. The bilingual literature may be accepted as part of the canon, or it may contribute to the unfortunate perception that Latina literature is not mainstream literature. (Self 15)

Latina authors are aware of the fact that the United States views itself as a monolingual English dominant society, and that by writing the Latina subject and through the use of Spanish their work may not be given the readership and critical attention it deserves. I first began this study hoping to figure out the "correct" way to incorporate Spanish into my English dominant texts. Now I see that there is no "correct" way; instead, the inclusion of Spanish is mediated by the author and what she views as important to her work.

Latina writing dances between perceived pressures for English-only and the joyful, strategic and powerful incorporation of Spanish into the texts as a literary resource. What remains constant among all these writers is that their texts are English dominant, however the incorporation of Spanish brings the richness of Spanglish to American literature. The manner in which Spanish and English are combined varies
within Latina texts. Some Latina writers italicize Spanish, while others do not. Some Latina authors offer translations, while others do not. Even the same author within the same text may vary in this aspect. For the monolingual English reader, at times Spanish entries can be understood because they are cognates or loanwords, but at other times a bilingual dictionary may be necessary. The same situation arises with the incorporation of context clues, in that at times the context may allow the monolingual reader access to the Spanish entries, while at other times not. Each Latina writer chooses how to use Spanish in her work, and as has been shown, Spanish entries add powerful layers of signification to the text. It is the bilingual reader who can fully access these complexities.

On a final note, one significant area of contention surrounding Spanish inclusion into English dominant texts is the issue of whether or not to italicize. The use of italics designates Spanish as a "foreign language," and this is highly contradictory to Latino/a identity. Latinas live in a multiple space of language, where both Spanish and English function separately or combine into Spanglish. For US Latinas, Spanish is not a foreign language, but a central aspect of US Latino/a culture. By not italicizing, an author emphasizes that Spanglish is a valid and powerful linguistic resource that Latino/as utilize in the United States. Curiously, though italics designate Spanish as a "foreign language," they also help the bilingual reader to code switch. In the process of reading one gets into the rhythm of the text; if the text is predominantly written in English, then when the non-italicized Spanish word or phrase appears the reader may begin to read the Spanish word as English, necessitating backtracking. When texts begin to approximate spoken Spanglish, such
as Cantu’s *Canicula* and Tafolla’s poems, then the bilingual reader gets into the
Spanglish rhythm of the text and italics would not be useful, but instead would clutter
the fluidity of the written page. The decision of whether or not to italicize Spanish
depends upon the author, and what she views as necessary for her text. In my own
situation, I am aware of the fact that I am an English dominant writer and I italicize
Spanish in order to help the reader avoid backtracking and to maintain the text’s
fluidity.

Latina authors resist the structures of power within the United States by
including Spanish into their texts along with the presentation of Latina life and
experience. In doing so, these authors may elevate the symbolic power of Spanglish
and of Latinas in the eyes of publishers and the reading public. Latina literature is
currently undergoing an expansion of publication. Ellen McCracken in her critical
volume, *New Latina Narrative*, writes about what the future may hold for Latina
literature:

> As Latina writers continue to create works that spill out of the critical
categories that academic criticism proposes, we can expect a continued
aesthetic vibrancy and cultural leadership that will achieve its well-deserved
place in the American canon. (10)

Through the inclusion of Spanish into otherwise English language literature,
Latina writers break from the monolingual model of US culture, and show how the
multiplicity of language aesthetically expands US American literature. There need to
be further investigations as to how Spanish combines with English in order to create
levels of signification that are unavailable in monolingual frameworks. As more
Latina literature reaches publication and the mainstream market, critical
investigations will need to address the powerful combination of Spanish and English that Latina literature contributes to the American literary canon.
CHAPTER III

LATINA LITERATURE AND CATHOLICISM

One Pilgrim’s Progress

My journey back to the Catholic Church begins with divorce, my divorce and subsequent move to San Francisco and my father’s home where I found myself writing poems once again. In college, I had been a creative writing major and even published one good poem in the undergraduate college magazine, The Redlands Review, but as I hit my mid-twenties and confronted the forces of work and marriage, I slipped away from poetry, away from creatively re-imagining experience through words on a page. The real-world pull of a job, where I toiled at Normont Elementary School teaching four, five and six year-old native Spanish speakers to read and write in English, plus the demands to make a committed relationship work, took up every spare moment of thought and energy, and then it was ten years later.

I was still teaching elementary school, in San Francisco instead of LA, but I was free from the constraints of a bad marriage. Every morning I would go down to my father’s basement with the morning’s coffee to smoke a cigarette and scribble in a notebook. I can’t recall the exact moment when I picked a pen out of an old flower vase used to hold the numerous give-aways my father acquired from hardware companies, travel agencies, and the other local businesses he frequented in and around the Mission District. But all of a sudden, there I was bent over the washing
machine writing once again, and the quintessential morning ritual of coffee, a cigarette and a pen, established and filling every morning.

The amazing thing was that I couldn’t escape religious images and metaphors. I am one of the youngest in my extended family, and the rituals of attending Sunday Mass and Catholic school had gone by the wayside right after I reached second grade. Catholic school had become too expensive for my mother to afford, and on most Sundays she was busy trying to make ends meet at her beauty salon. I’m sure she was open seven days a week, or in my child’s mind that is how it seemed. Though I have always identified as Catholic, throughout my early teens and twenties it was more a label I attached without significance. I suppose I was afraid of organized religion, that the rules of what to do and what not to do would crush any sort of independence out of my soul. There were so many other things to do instead.

Like go to Europe. In my freshman year at the University of Redlands, I signed up for an interim semester abroad, a whirlwind tour of northern Europe beginning in Amsterdam, passing quickly through Belgium, Germany, Luxembourg, and finally crossing the English channel on our way to London, and then home. In a musty hotel room somewhere in Belgium, I confided to my roommate, a savvy upper-classman, a girl with the right mix of self-confidence and the right friends, that I did indeed believe in God, and in Christ’s sacrifice to absolve us of our sins. I’m sure I did not use those words, those words I know now from attending Mass and listening to Father Mike’s homilies, but that conversation, no matter the exact language, quieted the glimmer of faith that was growing in my heart. Perhaps my roommate used logical rational reasoning, perhaps she recounted the atrocities committed in the name
of religion, perhaps she convinced me that the church was a cushion for those unable
to deal with reality. At that moment it all went out the window to snow quietly falling
onto the dark street of a foreign city, but even so, as that glimmer of faith was
silenced, it was not extinguished. Years later, I found myself scribbling in a notebook,
transposing my handwriting onto a computer screen, and those poems kept referring
to the Saints, to the crucifixion, to the story of Adam and Eve. This was highly
disturbing. Why should Catholicism creep onto the page when the last time I had
attended Mass was years before during a cousin’s wedding? I was in the middle of
something I didn’t understand, so I went to the library to research these stories.

The stone walls and slick steps of the downtown San Francisco Public Library
held the musty smell of books filtered through air conditioning. The lights were bright
enough to read by, and so I settled onto a sturdy wooden chair with a pile of Bibles
stacked on a rectangular table. I read Genesis, paying close attention to the story of
Adam and Eve, which had recently been the obsession of numerous poems, and I was
outraged. The downfall of humanity, sin, our current separation from the unity of
God, was the result of Eve, the first woman. From Eve’s act of disobedience came the
subjugation of all women to their husbands, the discomfort and mess of the repro-
ductive monthly cycle, and the pain of childbirth. There had to be some mistake, so I
read the same story in as many versions of the Bible that I could find, but there
wasn’t. That was it: woman was the cause of human suffering, and patriarchy was the
solution. I concocted in my mind a group of men sitting around a table dreaming up
the Adam and Eve story in order to keep women cooking their meals, weaving their
clothes and having their babies. Even though the Bible is supposed to be the written
word of God, at that moment, I could only see the definitely human writers struggling with the cultural mores of their society.

Fortunately, the center of religion, our inherent spirituality, is more than words on a page. Instead of atheism, which would have been a justified response. I began to see the Bible as metaphor for us as we attempt to understand the reality within which we live, and that this reality was spiritual at its essence could not be eradicated from my sensibility. The amount of justified patriarchy within the pages of the Bible, and within the institution of the Catholic church, did not matter since our inherent spirituality was the foundation of this text and institution. Though I could not accept a literal reading of the Bible and adhere to orthodox Catholicism. by taking into account the indeterminacy of language, the fluctuating social constructions of culture, and our heroic, although ultimately impossible, attempts to understand God, I was able to concede that truth concerning the human condition existed somewhere within the stories of the Bible, Christianity, and Catholicism. That this truth was mysterious, fluctuating, and impossible to pin down due to its very nature, allowed something beyond anger, something more than pointing a finger of blame. God existed, despite our human frailty. Though of course it took a while to let this whole episode settle down.

On Mother's Day, or when I wanted to spend time with my mother or grandmother, I would tag along with one of them to Mass. There was no bitterness toward the institution, instead I sat and listened, happy to spend time with these women whom I love. Both of these women have found their spirituality through the Catholic church. They both speak of a certain peace and calm found early mornings
within a church's stone walls, and though they cannot articulate what it is, they know it's there, in the church, in the pews, in the stained glass windows. For the women in my family, Catholicism goes beyond ritual, beyond going to Mass, Purisimas, and Easter Sunday service, there is more, the true direction north, the essence of our being. I suppose when you're surrounded by faith and love, it can't help but slip into you. Of course, though eventually, I did drive down Lake Street and spot St. Joseph's stone walls muted against a gray sky, quietly inviting.

To write an autobiographical spiritual journey as an introduction to a critical analysis of Catholicism and Latina literature may seem a roundabout way to get to the heart of the business, but the religious themes present in Latina literature are the strands of Latina life, including this one Latina life and those of the women in my family. In Latina literature women tell their stories. Latina authors find Catholic images springing up into their poetry and prose, and have followed this path of culture, history and spirituality. Catholicism is a cultural fact of everyday life, and the rituals play an almost secular role. Part of the routine of living is attending Mass, lighting candles, and teaching children to pray the Our Father in Spanish before they fall asleep. As I did, Latina writers also confront Catholicism as a patriarchal institution. The Catholic church has had a key role in the development of female identity based upon the sin of Eve, and also the humility and docility of the Virgin Mary. Then too, there is the undying glimmer and actualization of faith within the matriarch of many Latina families, fictional and real. What is it in the Catholic church that empowers my mother and grandmother even as they live in a secular patriarchal society? What does my mother find as she sits on a church pew or kneels in prayer on
cool weekday mornings, the stained glass portraits of the Saints holding first morning light?

Four years after standing in my father's basement, I found myself in Michigan working toward a doctorate in English literature and creative writing. I was in the Midwest. I wanted to see the checkerboard farmlands etched across the center of the nation, the farm belt, the place everyone leaves to go to California. I found myself alone, away from my family, away from the cultural diversity of San Francisco. In Kalamazoo there are actual railroad tracks that divide the haves from the have-nots based on the color line. On the south side, the affluent white population lives in two-story Tudor or Victorian style homes, the streets are lined with huge maples, pines, and actual forests exist in backyards where the sighting of a deer, fox or a stray little bunny is not infrequent. On the north side of the tracks is the black neighborhood. The trees lining the streets are smaller, many of the homes need a new coat of paint, and in the middle of the neighborhood is a blood center where you can sell your plasma for a few bucks. I thought the saying "the wrong side of the tracks" was a cultural fabrication, not an instance of the actual layout of a city within the United States.

Sometimes you have to leave home to find out how things are. Here in Michigan, there is an unspoken, but real, disparity based upon the color line, and I was far away from the support and love of my family. For the first time, I began to feel culturally isolated and alone. In San Francisco, near Mission and Silver Avenue, Lucas' Produce is next door to the shop where I could go buy cigarettes cheap and marvel at the produce from the Philippines and the Buddhist altar in the middle of the
store. San Francisco's cultural diversity has arisen from families like mine: immigrant families that, from the shock of leaving the known world of the homeland, arrive a bit dazed and confused in major metropolitan cities, but with a sense of community, a sense of responsibility to more than the individual self. The extended family, which goes beyond grandparents to include fourth cousins twice removed, expands in my particular instance to los nicaraguenses in San Francisco, to Central Americans, to all Latino/as, to an acceptance of diversity.

That is not to say that immigrant communities in major cities all live in harmony and peace. The acceptance of "other," even when you're part of what mainstream United States society understands as "other," is always a daunting task. But the idea of community, which begins with the extended family, expands outward. The respect given to loco Tio Chico, is the respect given to the Asian markets where ducks hang by their necks displayed in all their seasoned glory, and though I may say that my Tio is loco, the harsh truth of the situation is mediated by love and respect. He is an ornery old man who is difficult to get along with, but still we try. He is invited to dinner, he is given Christmas presents even though they will always be the wrong color and never fit, and no matter how difficult this man is to live with, he is never forgotten. This understanding of what it means to be part of family transfers to what it means to be part of community. It may be difficult to understand the accent, the customs, the odd star shaped fruit in the produce aisle, but even the difference feels similar and therefore invites respect, or at the least tolerance. In Michigan, all I could see was a line straight down the middle between black and white.
Random acts of driving fall into the routine of a graduate student trying to find some relief from books and a computer screen. I was headed down a street I had never been on before, a simply haphazard occurrence, and there was a church on the corner. A stone church that fit my idea of what a church should look like, and I figured that it couldn’t hurt to check it out. As I pulled into the parking lot I saw that it was indeed a Catholic church, St. Joseph’s church in Kalamazoo. Standing at the arched doorway of the rectory surrounded by granite blocks, I rang the bell. Graciela opened the door, a Latina woman. She told me what it was all about, that Sister Mary Catherine offered classes on Catholicism for those returning to the Church, and handed me one of those yearbooks that Catholic churches compile as fundraisers; I was astounded. I had found a location in Kalamazoo where people of all races and cultures mixed and intermingled. The parishioners were Latino/a families, mixed racial couples, black families, along with the white majority. Here within this church, the actual population of Kalamazoo existed under one roof, and St. Joseph’s was the only Catholic church in the area to offer Mass in Spanish. I signed on, and registered my name as a parishioner in the Church, though I have yet to pose for the yearbook.

Attending weekly Mass, and through the classes with Sister Mary Catherine, I came to understand a Church changed from the Church of my early childhood. There were altar girls along with altar boys. Women participated in the Mass by reading from the scripture and dispensing the bread and wine of communion. There were blond little girls and boys holding the book for Father Mike’s prayers, along with Latino and black little girls and boys. On special holy days when an extra evening Mass was called for, it was a bilingual Mass without translation into English. Both
Spanish speakers and English speakers equally had to make do with giving their time to another language, and have faith that the parts of the liturgy they didn’t understand, they knew. In this church there was an equality of language and of expression, an actualization of us all being brothers and sisters. The Catholic church as a patriarchal institution was obviously changing within St. Joseph’s in Kalamazoo, and it was in an official place of worship where I found race and spirituality combined.

I have to go back to that savvy upperclassman somewhere in Belgium and her arguments against faith and religion. The reasoning logic tugging at my reluctance to fully participate in organized religion has always been the fear that religious institutions enable escapism, in that by focusing on an afterlife, by kneeling in prayer, by seeking personal salvation, forgiveness and absolution, we can remain entombed within ourselves and ignore the reality of the world. But in one small parish, in one small city, the message went beyond self to community, in that the church was not the building, or the institution, but the community of the faithful. On a personal level, I made the connection; what I understood as the community of my family, los nicaraguenses, los latinos, was bigger, in that it was the community of humankind in relation to God. Here was the truth that I knew in my heart, that we are all connected, that we have to take care of each other, and that this entailed breaking down the socially constructed barriers of race.

One Sunday after Mass, as I was waiting to speak with Father Mike about nothing in particular, I overheard a Latina woman ask if her daughter could be confirmed at St. Joseph’s. She had driven two to three hours from the Holland area in Central Michigan, and it was doubtful that she attended weekly services, or that she
had enrolled her daughter in afternoon or weekend religious classes, but there she was. The stress of the drive, the anxiety to do what was right by her daughter, the need to secure her daughter’s spiritual growth was all reflected in her face, in the tone of voice, in her body urgently in the shadows insisting to be heard. I don’t know what happened to this woman or if the girl was confirmed in the Diocese of Kalamazoo. But Father Mike spoke to them in Spanish, made them feel welcome, and all three calmly chatted on their way to the rectory offices, on their way to some solution that would be found. This story may seem insignificant, but I saw it as an actualization of Christianity’s call to help those in need, the marginalized, the excluded, this one woman and her daughter searching for acceptance in a society that overwhelmingly doesn’t speak their language.

My own personal journey from doubt to faith, my grappling with the cultural significance of the Church within Latina life, and with Church history as a patriarchal institution, is a journey many Latina authors also share and investigate in their poetry and prose. Most incorporate the secular connotations of Catholic life within the everyday happenings depicted in their literature, and some alter the patriarchy of faith into a new feminine consciousness. My journey of faith is belief in the unbelievable, that we are more than just right now, that reality goes beyond the logical explanations of post-enlightenment rationalism. Joy is more than the chemical interactions within the brain. Though I still think it’s a little silly, and I might even blush when stating it, I knew that St. Joseph’s church was going to be my new center, especially when I acknowledged the influence of St. Joseph in my life. My mother has found love and
joy in marriage to a man named Joseph. I was born in St. Joseph hospital in San Francisco. My middle name is Josefina. This all can’t be random coincidence.

The Renegotiation of Catholicism

It may be an old story, it may be a new story, it may be the story of all conquered people. The story of adaptation where in order to mediate the destruction of their way of life and a nebulous future, the indigenous cultures of Mexico, Central and South America wrapped themselves in a cloak of Catholicism. In 1531 near Tepeyac, Juan Diego, a christianized Aztec Indian of the Nahuatl people, was passing through the countryside on his way to Mass when the apparition of what we now refer to as la Virgen de Guadalupe appeared. Was this apparition actually the Virgin Mary? Was it Tonantzin, the primary Aztec goddess worshipped in the area? Was the entire Guadalupe story fabricated by Bishop Zumarraga in order to facilitate the conversion of Mexico’s indigenous population? Or was it Juan Diego himself fabricating a new myth so that Tonantzin would still speak from underneath the Virgin’s robes? What actually occurred is lost in time and history by all parties involved, but the outcome, a semblance of peace, the transition to a new world, appeared in the blue robes, sun, moon and stars of the Guadalupe apparition.⁸

The story of la Virgen de Guadalupe is an early example of many syncretic expressions of Catholicism where the beliefs of the indigenous maintain their expression and significance through their attachment to official Catholic iconography.⁹ As Jeanette Rodríguez has shown in her theological study, Our Lady of
Guadalupe: Faith and Empowerment among Mexican-American Women, Aztec

religious symbolism permeates the Guadalupe image:

Significant aspects of the image are the stars, the gold sun rays, the moon, and the angel. Each of them relates directly to some aspect of Aztec divinity. The stars refer to . . . the feminine aspect of Ometeotl. The rays of the sun express the presence of the sun god, Quetzalcoatl. The fact that Guadalupe is standing on the moon reminds the Nahuatl of the god of night, the moon god. (29-30)

The image of la Virgen de Guadalupe retained aspects of Aztec culture, though

changed to coincide with the then new political power base of Spain and the Catholic Church. However, mediation and compromise flow in two directions, and the official Catholic concept of the Virgin Mary was also transformed by the arrival of la Virgen de Guadalupe. No longer was she a Euro-centered white Madonna, but was now mestiza in feature and skin color, a brown Madonna pregnant with new life, the beginning of a new era, a symbol of the mestizaje which would take place between Spain and Mexico's indigenous people.

The Catholic history of Latin America, which then becomes the Catholic history of Latinas in the United States, is one of syncretism where the indigenous and the European do a soft shoe dance step around each other to the music of religion and culture, each altering the other. After Guadalupe, other various apparitions and sightings within Latin America fused indigenous religious practices with orthodox Catholicism. Usually these sightings did not involve an actual apparition of the Virgin Mary, as with the Guadalupe sighting, but instead centered on an icon of the Virgin which miraculously appeared or insisted on staying put in one location, such as Nicaragua's Our Lady of the Immaculate Conception of El Viejo and Costa Rica's Our Lady of the Angels. 10 What is fascinating about these revered icons of the Virgin
Mary is that they were usually found by the marginalized poor, and the icons themselves resembled the indigenous people of the region in facial features, body type and skin color. The miracles performed by these icons served to elevate the indigenous, the *mestizo*, and the marginalized in the emerging social structures of Latin American societies for two centuries after the conquest.

The syncretism inherent within the religious practice of Latin American nations continues here in the US, and finds expression in Latina literature’s depiction of spirituality. Though the negotiation is no longer between the Aztecs and colonial Spain, between Tonantzin and Guadalupe, between the strictly indigenous and the strictly orthodox, the tendency to alter Catholicism so that it fits the needs and composition of groups marginalized by the dominant power structures of society remains a constitutive force within Latina literature written in the United States. Beginning with the conquest and Guadalupe, Catholicism played a pivotal role in the formation of female identity in Latin America, and is still pivotal to this day for Latina women including those living in the United States. The saying that you can take the Catholic out of the church, but you can’t take the church out of the Catholic, applies on a larger scale to Latina women. In order to articulate a new position of strength and power for the Latina woman, Latina literature articulates a systematic critique of patriarchy and power relations found within the Catholic church. Two of the novels under study are set in Latin American nations, while the third is located in New Mexico, and regardless of whether the novels are set in or out of US borders, they each investigate the Catholic hold upon Latina consciousness. Julia Alvarez in *In The Time of the Butterflies*, Graciela Limon in *In Search of Bernaebe*, and Ana
Castillo in *So Far From God* all transform the patriarchy inherently found within the Catholic church, so that the Latina relationship with the Catholic church is expressed, heard, and validated. Once again, the marginalized, in this case Latina authors, begin to tip the scales of power through a reformulation of Catholicism.

The Latina authors under study in this chapter have all been born or raised in the United States, and though they present Latin American culture and perspectives in their work, the issues Latinas confront in their fiction are United States issues. When Alvarez writes about the Trujillo regime in the Dominican Republic, she presents the history of the Dominican Republic to a United States audience, and hopefully the reader’s political awareness will expand out from US borders. It is the same with Limon’s depiction of El Salvador’s civil war. Though Castillo’s work is located within the United States, she writes the story of New Mexican Hispanos and their history, a story mostly unknown within the nation. These writers are telling the tales that have been swept under the rug in United States culture, and part of the history which they articulate is that of the Latina woman and her Catholic identity. But what does it mean to have a Catholic Latina identity? The three authors under study investigate this issue from different angles: Alvarez grapples with the image of the Virgin Mary in Catholic female identity formation in the Dominican Republic, Limon looks at El Salvador through an allegory of Eve, while Castillo refutes all forms of patriarchy sanctified through religious practice.

Though it may be argued that these authors grapple with Catholicism and view its historical significance as crucial to the reformulation of a patriarchal society, I resist uniting their projects into a one sentence statement of common method or...
purpose. Three authors confront Catholicism, patriarchy, and female identity formation in three different ways. Isn't that reasonable? Isn't that what we each do in our own lives? Shouldn't literature, and the criticism of literature, have some connection with human experience? I'm not proposing a one-to-one exact correspondence between life and literature, literature and criticism, but instead the fact of our postmodern age where there are no longer exists one single answer, and where even the questions themselves are questionable. Without a grand narrative of how the world functions, what remains are the interrelationships, and in this instance, the interrelationship between three Latina writers and their dance with Catholicism.

*In the Time of Butterflies* tells the story of Rafael Leonidas Trujillo's thirty-one year rule in the Dominican Republic through the voice of the four Mirabal sisters, three of whom actively resisted the regime and where known as *las Mariposas*, the butterflies. Alvarez’s *Mariposas* are based upon actual national heroines who worked to topple the Trujillo dictatorship and lost their lives at the hands of the SIM, *el Servicio de Inteligencia Militar*, Trujillo’s military police. Alvarez’s novel is a fictionalized account of these sisters’ lives from childhood until the assassination of Minerva, Patria, and Mate on an isolated mountain road in the Dominican Republic. The narrative of Dede, the lone surviving sister, serves as an organizing exterior shell for the novel, which begins and ends in the present day with Dede recalling the past and meditating on the significance of the Trujillo years. The chapters are each told from the point of view of one particular sister, so that by the novel’s end each of the four sisters has narrated her version of events. In the recreation of Patria Mirabal’s
life and history Alvarez explores the intricate relationship of the feminine within the Church and the image of Mary.

Catholicism is central to the Mariposas, and, as young girls, the main characters leave the rural homestead and attend Inmaculada Concepcion, a Catholic boarding school. The name of the school, Inmaculada Concepcion, is highly appropriate for an institution that educates young women. The concept of the Immaculate Conception is frequently misunderstood as applying to Jesus’ conception. Actually the Immaculate Conception refers to Mary and her status as woman created without sin. Mary, from the moment of conception, exists in a state of grace. Born without sin, she negates the original sin of Eve’s disobedience, thus in Catholic theology no longer is woman the cause of human suffering, but instead she is the mother of salvation. The school utilizes this image as a guiding metaphor to educate the young women of the Dominican Republic. However, the image of the Virgin Mary, immaculately conceived or not, carries within her robes multiple connotations.

Most Latin American nations venerate a local version of the Virgin Mary and the presentation of Mary in Latina literature reflects the local variety surrounding her image. In Alvarez’s text the Virgin Mary is referred to as the Merciful Mother and as the Virgin of Altagracia, the two primary significations of the Virgin in Dominican culture, while Chicana texts refer to the Virgin Mary consistently through the image of la Virgen de Guadalupe. Though Catholicism cannot escape the fluctuations of religious practice that arise from different cultures, the common tenets of the faith are maintained through the liturgy of the Mass, and the sacraments of Baptism, Communion, Confirmation and Marriage. Even though each nation, or even each
parish, has its own way of doing things, central tenets of belief cross political and cultural boundaries. Veneration of the Virgin Mary is one such tenet. Though there are numerous sanctified images of Mary throughout Latin America, the central tenets associated with the Virgin Mother remain relatively similar.

Latina authors confront the image of Mary as they formulate what it means to be a Latina woman. Though the humility, docility and family orientation of the Virgin Mary provide a patriarchal model for female activity, Mary can also be viewed as a source of strength and independence. Tey Diana Rebolledo notes the importance and prevalence of la Virgen de Guadalupe in Chicana literature, and her analysis of Guadalupe’s extensive role in Mexican and Chicana culture is relevant to a broader analysis of the Virgin Mary for Latina Catholics. Rebolledo states that la Virgen de Guadalupe embodies “characteristics considered positive for women; unselfish giving, intercession between earth and spirit, and the ideal qualities of motherhood” (53). Alvarez’s depiction of the Dominican Merciful Mother also embodies these characteristics. The Mary iconography can be used to justify various outcomes, such as a deep societal respect for motherhood, but the image, as we have seen, can also justify patriarchal dominance. Since the relationship of Mary to God symbolizes the relationship of the feminine to the masculine, in the attempt to imitate Mary’s relationship with God, a woman may interpret the image as a call to abdicate to the will of her husband, the father of the family, and even to the will of her sons. The religious metaphors surrounding Mary can be used by women themselves to justify patriarchy.
However, if the Virgin Mary only held patriarchy within her folded hands and downcast eyes, she would not be venerated throughout Latin America. The Virgin Mary is also an image of strength, faith, and power for the Latina woman. Rebolledo notes:

Many women feel the Virgin has much more power than the "official" ascendancy given to her by the church. For one thing, she is seen as having a mother's hold over her son that it is not just through him that she derives her power, but that from the respect he has for her, she only has to look at him for him to obey her commands. In her images in Chicano culture, she stands alone without her son" (53).

The image of Mary stands within her own realm of power and strength, where she is strong and independent, her essence transforming the image of woman from the downfall of Eve, to the powerful mother of salvation and source of all that is good.

In her novel, Alvarez explores this intricate relationship of the feminine within the church and the image of Mary. Patria, one of the heroines of the novel, evolves from passivity to empowerment through her relationship with the Virgin. In order to determine whether or not Patria has a spiritual calling, the Mirabal sisters are allowed to leave the familial rural homestead and attend Inmaculada Concepcion. During her time at the school, Patria is fervent in her prayers and other religious duties, such as abstaining from the consumption of meat during Lent to the extent that she refuses a beef broth when she is sick. However, the onset of puberty challenges her. Patria, the burgeoning young woman, finds herself to be a truly physical creature, her hands "rambled over my growing body, they touched the plumping of my chest, the mound of my belly, and on down. I tried reining them in, but they broke loose, night after night" (47). Ironically, she meets her future husband on Holy Thursday when it is
customary to wash "the feet of the parishioners at the door of the church" (48).

Washing Pedro Gonzalez's feet turns Patria away from entering the religious life, and toward the other possibility for a good Catholic woman of the times, wife and mother.

Though the character Patria has only two choices, becoming a Sister or a wife, Alvarez creates a very complex picture of one woman working within the Catholic Church and developing her own unique identity. When Patria's first pregnancy ends in a stillbirth, she cannot reconcile the death of her child and she temporarily loses her faith. Eventually her loss serves as a catalyst for a strengthened sense of spirituality. Losing a child expands her consciousness, so that she becomes able to recognize the unmerited pain experienced by others in the Dominican at the hands of Trujillo. In an angry epiphany she asks, "How could our powerful Father allow us to suffer so?" (53). The "us" in her statement refers to her own suffering, but also to that of the Dominican people. At this crisis of faith, Patria can no longer believe in the tenets of Catholicism, though she remains "Patria Mirabal de Gonzalez . . . a model Catholic wife and mother" (54). In order to gain a richer understanding of her own spiritual calling, Patria must first live and realize doubt and confusion. After this epiphany of anger, Patria dons a cloak of conformity with the rituals and obligations of Catholicism, and though she is simply going through the motions of Catholicism, this period of doubt is part of her spiritual journey that eventually leads to a reconfirmation of faith.

Patria's return to faith occurs during a pilgrimage to Higuey, where "there had been sightings of the Virgencita. . . . a little girl had seen the Virgencita swinging on the bucket that was kept decoratively dangling above the now dry well where she had

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once appeared back in the 1600s" (55). It is the mother’s idea to take the Mirabal sisters on the pilgrimage since each in their own way needed "the Virgencita’s help" (55); Patria had lost her child, Minerva was intricately involved with subverting the Trujillo regime, while Dona Mirabal herself was suspicious that her husband was partaking in an extramarital affair. On this pilgrimage Patria’s understanding of the Church and the Virgin Mary evolves, and the image of Mary as mother also becomes Mary as caretaker of all who suffer, including Patria and the people of the Dominican Republic. As Patria proceeds slowly in line behind her mother and sisters to view the Virgin’s picture at the altar, she is hot and uncomfortable. However, when she gets to the head of the line and views the picture, Patria realizes that the Virgin is an integral part of family, and that the concept of family includes her own extended family, as well as all the people in the church. She turns around from the altar and views the "packed pews, hundreds of weary, upturned faces, and it was if I’d been facing the wrong way all my life. My faith stirred" (58). Patria’s faith returns when she realizes that her spiritual calling is broader than her role as wife and mother. In the footsteps of the Virgin she must also be a caretaker for all in the Dominican Republic.

Though Patria eventually fully joins Minerva’s resistance efforts against Trujillo, at first she makes only small concessions, such as allowing Minerva to hold meetings on a distant clearing on the farm. Patria insists that the group stay away from the main house, so that if the SIM ever comes knocking the Gonzalez homestead will have a plausible alibi that they are not involved with the organized efforts to overthrow Trujillo. However Patria’s relationship with the Virgin Mary changes once more, inspiring her full participation in the resistance efforts.
On the final day of a retreat near the mountain village of Constanza, as the group of wives and mothers ponders the Assumption of the Virgin Mary, the civil turmoil of the nation breaks the serenity of the convent: "Explosion after explosion ripped the air. The house shook to its very foundation" (161). The religious retreat is caught in the middle of an insurrection, and the women try to find shelter under tables and chairs. At this time Patria is pregnant with her third child, and, in her determination to protect her unborn son, she "scrambled to a little niche where a statue of the Virgencita was standing, and begging her pardon, I knocked her and her pedestal over" (161). The act of knocking the Virgin off her pedestal in order to protect her unborn child represents Patria's reformulation of what the Virgin Mary signifies in her role as mother. No longer can she passively accept what comes her way, and abdicate to the will of her husband who desires to remain distant from the resistance movement against Trujillo. By knocking the Virgin off her pedestal, Patria begins to understand that she must take aggressive action to protect those she loves. This call to action is further strengthened when the shelling stops and the group witnesses the SIM chase down four teen-age boys. Patria confronts the brutality of the Trujillo regime when she looks into one of the boy's eyes as he is shot in the back. Patria sees her own children in the countenance of that face. She witnesses "the wonder on his young face as the life drained out of him, and I thought, Oh my God, he's one of mine!" (62). When Patria returns to her family, she fully joins her sister's insurgent efforts, and offers herself, her family and her farm to aid the overthrow of the Trujillo regime.
The experience at Constanza completes Patria’s transformation from passivity to empowerment, but this change remains within her identification as a mother. Patria’s complete support of Minerva’s insurgent efforts comes from an expanded understanding of the image of the Virgin Mary as mother and caretaker, an understanding that demands concerted and planned actions that will protect all the children of the Dominican Republic, not only those of her immediate family. The Virgin Mary as the humble mother who gives up her son to better the world is transformed to a revolutionary mother who in order to save her son, and the sons of the Dominican Republic, must actively take up and fight against injustice here on earth.

Alvarez reformulates the Virgin Mary from passivity to strength. Her presentation of the Virgin highlights how the tenets of Catholicism are routinely altered to fit the circumstances of the faithful in religious practice. In this novel, Alvarez contends that viewing the Virgin Mary as a vessel of God’s will passively accepting all that comes her way, including a pregnancy out of marriage and the sacrifice of her son for the benefit of humankind, can no longer suffice as a model for women. The times demanded concerted and overt action on the part of all to rid themselves of an oppressive dictatorial regime, and a passive interpretation of the Virgin Mary was particularly insufficient during the Trujillo years in the Dominican Republic. In the novel, Minerva forgoes religious practice, but Patria makes the case that remaining within the Church is a possibility, but one that can only be actualized through a revision of Catholicism’s central tenets, in this case the signification surrounding Mary. Alvarez’s transformation of Mary from a symbol of passivity to one of strength can be understood as an alternative for all Catholics. Alvarez may
indeed be a feminist theologian in that she revises Catholic doctrine in her novel and presents the possibility of female empowerment within the Church.

However Patria’s story of faith goes beyond renegotiating Church doctrine, in that her story also serves to bring Latina religious practice to a United States audience. Patria’s characterization presents a Latina’s intricate relationship with Catholicism, and may serve to increase cross-cultural understanding. In the postscript to *In the Time of the Butterflies*, Alvarez acknowledges that the novel is intended for a United States audience:

> I would hope that through this fictionalized story I will bring acquaintance of these famous sisters to English-speaking readers. . . . I hope this book deepens North Americans’ understanding of the nightmare [Dominicans] endured and the heavy losses [Dominicans] suffered of which this story tells only a few. (324)

Alvarez’s intention is to bring Dominican culture and history to United States readers, and though the main story the novel tells is that of the Trujillo regime, the women and Catholic culture of the Dominican Republic are also presented. Through the novel’s detailed account of Dominican experience, life, and culture, Alvarez extends the mainstream perception of Latino/as in the United States, and, even though the novel is set outside of US borders, the book addresses a central United States issue, the invisibility of Latino/a history and culture.

Graciela Limon’s *In Search of Bernabe* also addresses the invisibility of Latino/a history and culture. Limon presents the history of El Salvador’s civil war, and through her fictional account she expands awareness within the United States of the numerous refugees from El Salvador. Limon is Chicana and was part of a Jesuit sponsored group that traveled to El Salvador with the purpose of investigating the
1989 assassination of Jesuit priests. This episode might, in fact, be the inspiration for the novel. *In Search of Bernabe* recreates 1980’s El Salvador by following the path of the Delcano family. Limn tells their story as a biblical allegory where Luz Delgado is portrayed as Eve and her sons represent Cain and Abel. In order to understand the violence within El Salvador, Limn returns to the foundation of Western culture, the biblical origin of sin as arising from Eve. The direct consequence of Eve’s disobedience to God, banishment from the Garden of Eden into the land of Nod, results in Eve’s two sons and the first act of human violence, that of Abel’s murder at the hands of his brother. Limon takes this foundational story and moves it to modern day El Salvador, and through a revision of these grand Christian archetypes Limon attempts to control and mediate the El Salvadorian experience.

Though the story is structured by biblical allegory, it is possible to read the novel as realistic fiction since Limon’s style renders the characters in everyday language and situations that reflect actual historical events. Under the banner of liberation theology, El Salvador was one of the first locations in Latin America where the Church began its political activism against regimes that infringe upon human rights. Liberation theology views the mission of Christianity as a battle against all forms of oppression, and in El Salvador this theological standpoint led to the Church’s official involvement with insurgent efforts. This level of political activism by the Church came with a high price, the assassination of Archbishop Romero and the 1989 massacre of Jesuit priests. Limon uses these two real world events to frame her fictionalized story; the novel’s first chapter takes place during the Archbishop’s funeral procession, while a reference to the massacre of Jesuit priests appears toward
the novel’s end. Limon’s incorporation of actual events involving the Catholic Church and her focus on the fictionalized Delcano family balances the novel’s controlling biblical allegory with realism, adding a necessary level of subtlety.

Just as Alvarez explores the significance of the Virgin Mary in the formation of Latina female identity, Limon revisits the story and image of Eve. The novel opens with a prologue where the story of original sin is reformulated, and Eve is recast as Luz Delgado, a mestiza, and grandchild of Don Lucio Delcano. Luz is truly mestiza in that she is a mix of her indigenous grandmother, her white upper class grandfather, Don Lucio, and her black mother. Luz is at the bottom of the social hierarchy and physically incorporates the three socially constructed concepts of race within Latin America. Within Luz’s mother lies the slave trade of Latin America, within her grandmother lies the rape and pillage of indigenous women, and in her grandfather lies patriarchy and imperialistic colonialism. Adam’s rib, in this instance, is the manifestation of colonialism and patriarchy.

Don Lucio’s background is described in the prologue, and his story is one of an impoverished white male from Spain who travels to the Americas for financial gain, and achieves wealth and power. He represents the history of male colonists, economic imperialism, and patriarchy, and it is this man who culminates the original sin at the novel’s opening. Don Lucio “nearing his seventieth birthday” (11) spots Luz, who at the time is thirteen or fourteen, and becomes obsessed with the girl. He consequently follows through on his desires by sexually consummating a union with his own granddaughter. Through the symbolism of the novel, it is not only Don Lucio who takes advantage of the girl, but the entire patriarchal system. In the novel’s
prologue, Limon alters Eve to be a *mestiza* ravaged and raped by patriarchal power. This is the origination of sin, and of the consequent barbarity of the El Salvadorian civil war.

The original sin of the novel directly results in the barbarity of the El Salvadorian civil war, in that the result of Luz's rape by her grandfather is Lucio, Colonel Delcano, the head of the El Salvadorian military who orchestrates the brutality and carnage during the 1980's. Though Colonel Delcano eventually takes on the role of Cain in the controlling biblical allegory of the novel, he is first described as Lucifer, the ultimate evil, reflected in his name "Lucio." The novel's subtle use of allegoric symbolism is further exemplified through Luz's name, which translates to light and in Spanish holds the connotation of giving birth. In Spanish, to give birth is to *dar luz*. Through the light of God the world was created, including good and evil, and through Luz good and evil are given light in El Salvador, her two sons Bemabe and Colonel Delcano. Colonel Delcano is described as an angel, and is known by that nickname: "More than any other Delcano, Lucio was distinguished by milk-white skin, blue eyes, and hair shaded so fairly it often appeared golden. It was because of his looks that others spoke of him as the Angel" (37), and angel he is, the fallen angel, Lucifer.

Bemabe, Luz's other son, who eventually takes on the role of Abel within the novel, is first described as a Christ figure. The novel recreates the massacre which took place during the funeral procession of Archbishop Romero in March of 1980. Limon's fictionalized recreation of this event places Bernabe, a seminary student, carrying the cross during the funeral procession. Bernabe represents Christ and his
burden of carrying the cross through the streets of Jerusalem on his way to the crucifixion, but in this rendition Bernabe carries his burden through the streets of San Salvador. Bernabe suffers as he walks in the street: "his hands, which clutched the cross tightly, were stiff and white around the knuckles and fingertips" (21). He even parallels a station of the cross, when at various moments he looks for his mother, and then "suddenly, he dropped the cross and fell on his knees"(23). Bernabe, like Christ, is aware of human suffering, and when he looks at the Salvadorian crowd, "he realized that these people around him were really fragmented: faces, eyes, cheeks, and arms. They were broken pieces . . ." (21). Bernabe’s journey to become an apostle of Christ and join the priesthood is interrupted by gunfire upon the procession and it turns into a chaotic massacre with all running for their lives. In the middle of this turmoil Bernabe is separated from his mother and joins a crowd heading out of the city toward the sanctuary of an FMLN base in the mountains, where he eventually joins the resistance forces.

As Bernabe joins the FMLN, the Cain and Abel analogy develops, in that the brothers are posited one against the other, with Colonel Delcano at the head of the El Salvadorian military and Bernab as a member of the insurgent efforts. As previously mentioned, the brothers also represent good and evil, and at this point in the novel Cain and Abel’s jealousy is developed as central to the brothers’ relationship. Though both sons are conceived out of wedlock, Colonel Delcano is conceived through rape and then learns neglect, abuse, and violence at the hands of the Delcano family who snatch him out of Luz’s arms when he is a baby. Bernabe is the child of the union between Luz and her employer. Though Bernabe is conceived out of wedlock, he
nevertheless is raised with the love of his mother. As in the Cain and Abel story, the two central characters are a good and a bad son, with the bad son driven by jealousy of his brother, in this case, the Colonel’s jealousy that Bernabe enjoyed his mother’s love while he did not. The Colonel maintains a detailed file on all aspects of Luz and Bernabe’s lives, and spends his adult life observing his mother’s love for Bernabe, a love he was denied. When Bernabe joins the FMLN, Colonel Delcano then has the justification that will allow him to complete the Cain and Abel allegory. In jealousy, under the guise of "military necessity," he murders his brother at the novel’s end.

Limon incorporates multiple Biblical allegories in the novel. At the core of the novel is the eternal question of how barbaric violence can occur. Limon contends that violence arises directly from sin, that of Don Lucio raping Luz and Luz’s sin of adultery with Bernabe’s father. These two personal acts give birth to El Salvador’s civil war, the opposing forces of Colonel Delcano and his brother, Bernabe. However, sin is only half of the story. In the Old Testament sin arises from Eve’s independence and disobedience to God, while in the New Testament Christ’s sacrifice is the redemption for all Christians from this original sin. The novel explores the concept of sin and the possibility of redemption. In Catholic theology repentance is necessary for redemption, and Limon uses the Catholic idea of repentance to structure the suffering of her characters. The theme of repentance begins in the prologue with Don Lucio’s death scene. As he suffers a major stroke or heart attack, Don Lucio thinks about death and "that he was going to die and that he had not yet received forgiveness for the sins and offenses he had willingly committed" (17). But Don Lucio acknowledges that he doesn’t repent a thing, and that forgiveness and redemption are out of the
question, so he dies unredeemed. Luz also refuses to repent her sin of adultery with Bernabe’s father during a confession. Luz admits, "I’ve never repented of what I did. If Bernabe’s father appeared here, right now, I would do everything with him all over again" (97).

It is only Bernabe who repents his decision to join the FMLN and begin a life of civil rebellion and violence. In the final scene of a military insurrection, Bernabe contemplates his actions since joining the FMLN while waiting to strike Colonel Delcano’s stronghold. As he undergoes a self-confession, he realizes that "he had persuaded himself that instead of peace, the gospel preached by Jesus was really one of murder and torture . . . he had falsely convinced himself that as a guerilla he could do more for his brothers and sisters than as a priest" (134). Even though he repents, he does not change his course of action and attacks Colonel Delcano’s stronghold where he is captured and executed by his own brother.

It would be plausible, taking into account the novel’s infusion of Biblical allegory, that redemption or salvation occurs for at least one of the individual characters, or perhaps for El Salvador as a nation. However, Limon cannot justify or explicate such violence and degradation of the human body and spirit as occurred in El Salvador during the 1980’s. Instead of offering salvation through the Catholic tenet of repentance, acts of contrition followed by redemption, each and every character suffers, dies, or continues in an unredeemed state at the novel’s end. It is as though the evil brought in the world by the rape of the mestiza and the structures of patriarchy cannot be overcome. In modernizing the Cain and Abel story and that of
Eve, Limon posits that the political violence of El Salvador is the direct result of violence against women in a patriarchal society.

In contrast with the Dominican and Salvadian settings of Alvarez’s and Limon’s novels, Ana Castillo’s *So Far From God* is set in the United States, specifically in Tome, New Mexico, an unincorporated village Castillo places somewhere in the vicinity of Albuquerque. Just as Alvarez and Limon undertake the ramifications of civil turmoil, Castillo takes up the cause of Hispanics in New Mexico, an area that through time and the fluctuations of political history has left the descendants of the original Spanish settlers marginalized, as they attempt to maintain their rural lifestyle against an increasingly consumer United States Anglo economy and culture.

Sofi, the matriarch of the novel, revitalizes Tome’s economy by establishing a sheep-grazing and wool-weaving cooperative, allowing the people of Tome to maintain their communal and agricultural way of life. Theresa Delgadillo states in her article, "Forms of Chicana Feminist Resistance: Hybrid Spirituality in Ana Castillo’s *So Far From God*" that the novel "asks us to see cultural resistance alongside political resistance, and to recognize women as agents of social change" (889). The change in the community is effected by Sofi, the matriarch of the family at the novel’s core, but also as Sofi states, "It’s not 'imagination' that I’ve always had, it’s faith! Faith has kept me going" (138). The economic empowerment which occurs in Tome is intricately tied to spirituality and religion. Delgadillo states that "the novel insists that the transformative effort of human life engaged in struggle also finds expression in the spiritual, metaphysical and religious life of the oppressed" (887). The political,
economic, and cultural turmoil the family undergoes is carried forward by a simultaneous journey of faith. The mother and the four daughters each offer particular examples of how Latina women might address their marginalized status in society, and they are each transformed through a spiritual journey.

Sofi and her four daughters practice what Delgadillo terms as "hybrid spirituality" where practitioners accept "multiple forms and systems of knowledge, including the intuitive, mythical, native, psychic. folkloric, spiritual, material, and rational, as well as traditional practices and ceremonies" (891). Sofi and her daughters view faith as a central tenet of their empowerment, a faith which does not depend on the rituals and obligations of any organized religious system, but is instead as necessary as water.

The novel points to the ineffectiveness of structured religion in its depiction of the Catholic church, Native American belief organizations, and the uniquely New Mexican group of the Penitentes. Castillo depicts all three of these groups as male oriented, and out of reach for Sofi and her daughters. Father Jerome, the main representative of the Catholic church in the novel, dismisses La Loca's, one of Sofi's four daughters, spiritual and mystical existence as insanity or that of a "person who was really not responsible for her mind" (221). Esperanza, another daughter, attempts to find her center of spirituality through the Native-American church by accompanying her boyfriend Ruben to the meetings, but all Ruben shows her is another version of patriarchy as he instructs the lowly Esperanza on "the do's and don'ts of his interpretation of lodge 'etiquette' and the role of women and the role of men and how they were not to be questioned" (36). Francisco el Penitente is a
santero, who "above all, loved Christ, his heavenly Lord" (100). Francisco, a Latino version of patriarchal Catholicism, commits the ultimate act of violence upon women by abducting and violating Caridad’s friend Esmeralda, and then later stalking the two women to the extent that they both leap over a cliff in order to escape his looming presence. Castillo maintains that the organization of faith and belief in the hands of male patriarchy is ineffectual for women, and instead argues that female empowerment must rely upon something new, a hybrid spirituality, where the different elements of various religious traditions simultaneously co-exist. This idea parallels the Chicana condition of mestizaje not Mexican, not Anglo, not a unified center but something distinct, flexible, and randomly formulated by each individual.

On my wall, next to my computer, is the yearly calendar, a gift to all parishioners from St. Joseph’s Church. Each month mystified photos of the oceanside, flowers and leaves are the backdrop to a few Catholic tenets to be kept in mind all month, and today is a holy day of obligation, the Assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary. In Alvarez’s novel, the Assumption was the topic during Patria’s retreat to Constanza: another coincidence, another random event, another minor example of how Catholicism permeates Latina experience. These three novels, each in their own way, present the story of interaction between Latina women and the Church. Are these texts works of justice and mercy, are they evangelizing, are they strengthening the faith? These questions are of a theological nature, and the answers are for each reader to decide. In the secular realm, the contribution these novels make is that they voice the silenced history of Latinas in the United States, a history that from the time of the conquest has been tied to the Catholic Church.
Latinas live in a dual status of language, culture and history, and to reflect this experience their writing frequently expands out from United States borders. Alvarez’s novel depicts the Trujillo dictatorship through the eyes of the Mirabal sisters, Limon recreates El Salvador during the 1980’s in an allegory of Eve, and even Castillo, whose novel is set in New Mexico, returns to pre-conquest Mexico in her depiction of la Llorona, the Weeping Woman. In the novel, Castillo postulates that la Llorona is a modern day version of three Aztec goddesses, Matlaciuatl, Cituapipiltin and Cihuacoatl (161). These texts function in what Gloria Anzaldua termed the "mestiza consciousness" in her seminal work Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza. For Anzaldua, the mestiza "learns to juggle cultures" (101). These authors juggle Latina and United States culture through the creation of new religious paradigms centered on Latina subjects, but written in English for a North American audience.

One of the unifying threads within this literature are the varied relationships Latinas maintain with the Catholic church: Alvarez reformulates the Virgin Mary, Limon recasts Eve as a mestiza ravaged by patriarchal power, and Castillo negates the ascendancy of all patriarchal religious practice. All three novels posit the institution of the Catholic church as a patriarchal superstructure in Latina consciousness, one which the protagonists in all three texts deconstruct and reconstruct as they move through each novel’s action. Finally, all three novels refuse agnosticism or the complete abandonment of spirituality and the Church. Each finds a new way of maintaining the spiritual within a Catholic framework, but not necessarily according to the traditions of church hierarchy.
I may or may not go to Church today and fulfill my holy obligation to the Virgin Mary, but perhaps by writing this text I have been evangelizing and proclaiming the good news. The good news is that God is not dead, but is alive and well stirring rice and beans in my grandmother’s kitchen, and in the creative kitchens of numerous Latina writers.
CHAPTER IV

LATINA LITERATURE AND THE AMERICAN LITERARY CANON

How I Came To Identify as a Latina Writer

As a little girl I always had my nose in a book. I remember my mother sending me off to bed and halfway through the corridor sliding down the wall to finish the last paragraph on the last page I would read that night. I read on the school bus. I read in the library. On the living room couch as I waited for my mother to come home, I read from the set of encyclopedias she had bought the year of my brother’s birth. Though I did not understand everything I read, I tried to read a bit of it all. Through fairy tales I began to envision Europe and its forests, the woodcutters, cottages, gray wolves, black bears, and the concept of snow. Through the biographies of Daniel Boone, Abraham Lincoln, and Laura Ingalls Wilder, I envisioned a United States frontier where pioneers constructed log cabins in Kentucky and learned to walk through forests with the stealth of Indians. I was fascinated with the solar system, rockets and walking on the moon. Eventually I hit upon the Harlequin Romances and Marx’s *Communist Manifesto*, of which I understood not a word. In books I found possibility: men, mostly men and boys, sometimes women or girls, who were brave and made it on through. I would be brave. I could make it on through.

I have made it through trying times. Now I write stories for others to read. Even though I compose poems, autobiographical essays and critical prose, I call them all stories, since the word "story" acknowledges the indeterminate status of language,
that writing is imaginative, constructed, only one version of many possibilities, and that even my one version on this page will change each time it's read. Though I can separate personal experience from the critical investigation of language, literature and the making of culture, I choose not to. In this introduction to Latina literature and the Western canon, I have a story to tell: a reconfiguration of how I came to identify as a Latina writer. The story ends with my current fascination with literary tradition and influence, and begins with a little girl riding along with her dad doing *mandados* during Easter break, when that much needed repose in the second half of the school year was still acknowledged by its religious signification.

Let's say it's 1971, Easter Vacation, and I am visiting my father in San Francisco. I’m in the passenger’s seat of his truck. Let’s say a blue Ford pick-up and, as mentioned earlier, I’m tagging along with my father on one of his many *mandados*, the errands here and there that he needs to accomplish, and that this time they are of no great significance and can be interrupted by the chatter of his little girl. Maybe we go to a hardware store, and I stare at the rows and boxes filled with progressively sized screws, bolts and nails. There are power tools. The store is crammed from ceiling to floor with everything needed to fix up this house or that apartment my father is currently renovating. He chats at the counter, while I stare at the back of the cash register. Then we get back into the truck and drive through the Mission District taking side streets to avoid the traffic of the main thoroughfares. At a stop sign, my father tells me to duck, to duck under the dashboard and hide. I feel his hand rest between my shoulders. Perhaps I am something special, a surprise kept under wraps and blue ribbons, but no, I am something to be hidden his illegitimate daughter. My
father has spotted his wife’s car at a stop sign or perhaps pulling out from a driveway, and he wants to avoid any problems, so he explains. She doesn’t know I’m in town, that he sent the money for the plane ticket, or that I’m sleeping in the rollaway bed next to my grandmother. He explains that it is necessary for me to disappear under the dash for only a moment, and for a moment I no longer exist, my presence erased.

I have known firsthand the power of setting aside that which is problematic, and how we can clean up a story into a more streamlined version. Denial, erasure, forgetting can be put to good use as we construct the stories of our lives, not only for the individual, but perhaps also for society as a whole. The personal and the cultural at times seem to work in the same fashion. There are stories that we remember and there are stories that we forget about American history, as well as our personal pasts. Usually the ones forgotten are alternative versions of what happened where, when and why. I have never spoken to my father about the dashboard incident, and perhaps I should. But I don’t want to hear it. I don’t want to listen to his denial, and then to his acquiescence that maybe something similar might have occurred, followed by that hoped for apology. This process would take too much work on my part, and at times that is how I feel when telling and retelling the story of Latina literature, culture and history. The Latina/o story has so often not been told within United States history. Forgotten or ignored are the effects of the Mexican war and the annexation of Mexican territories on Chicanos living in the States. Forgotten or ignored are the land-grabbing schemes after the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo and the consequent loss of Mexican land ownership. Forgotten or ignored are the effects of Manifest Destiny throughout Latin America. The stories are out there: at the university, on
public radio and television, in dissertations such as this one, but they’re not the
dominant versions, and not the ones that influenced 28 states to pass English-Only
legislation. Our history may be the story of what best fits at a certain point in time, a
convenient story, a story that allows those in power to continue in their roles of
obscuring the inconvenient, whether that be a father or the Anglo culture of the
United States.

At the end of this story, the personal, cultural and political intertwine, but for
now I’m still in the past reconstructing the events that led me to identify as a writer, a
Latina writer. During my childhood the big secret was that my brother and I were my
father’s second familia, the other ones, and this was not a good thing to be. However
living in the United States offered an option that could sanctify our existence: my
mother, brother and I would simply disguise ourselves as one of the many recently
divorced and single parent homes, and from there I learned the power of language.
Instead of stating that my parents weren’t married, I could state that they were not
together or that they lived apart or that they were separated. Separated was my
favorite way to describe the situation because I knew that whoever I was talking to
would assume "separated" as in the first stage to divorce, rather than a literal meaning
of the word. Perhaps this is where I first learned the power of words, about how
language can be manipulated to create an illusion, the illusion we sometimes call
poetry, the illusion we sometimes call art.

I always sensed that there was something up with my parents, though no one
ever spoke that one version of the story where the absence of wedding vows came
into play, until the sixth grade when my mother thought it was time or that I was
ready. Perhaps I had been making roundabout accusations, such as questioning her when she signed school notes with Mrs. Najarro. On a Saturday afternoon in the quiet of her bedroom, she told her version of the story, a story I knew, a story central to my understanding, but one that I really could not understand. All I felt was my mother's overwhelming pain, her bravery, her anguish, and as emotions took over the room words stopped. We held each other, a flood of love commingling with sadness. I now understood why the Mrs. Najarros and the separated terminology were necessary: that amount of pain had to be hidden, and some versions of the story cannot be told.

At times I think that is why as a society we wish to put aside the horrors of slavery, the second-class status of Mexicans in the Southwest, the genocide of Native Americans. These stories are just too painful to dwell on, and as a society it is simply easier to believe the Hollywood version of the Wild Wild West and David O. Selznick's version of the South in Gone with the Wind. Though we know these films are caricatures, they offer versions of the story that we can live with. My family took on the same approach, all of them, my father, my mother, both sides of the entire family were in collusion to forget, to ignore, to let the past be the past, and to stick with a version that would work in society. We were in the States after all, and here you could be whoever you wanted to be.

In this way my upbringing prepared me to become a writer. I understood the power of multiple connotations within a word, how truth or meaning is indeterminate, how one story can have multiple versions, versions we choose to accept or ignore depending on what we need in order to continue in this grand project of the United States and the eternal pursuit of happiness. But these are all conclusions after the fact,
what I have learned at the end of this story here presented in the middle of the telling. Though I had an intricate relationship with language from reading extensively as a child and from the manipulation of my birth story, ultimately when I began writing in earnest I wrote to prove that I existed, that I was something, that I was here. During my MFA, I wrote poems carving out who I was and how I had become, and still to this day some poems take on that necessity. There was a time when I actually thought that if I could get the words just right, then the reader would understand, not only the poem, but understand me, Adela Josefina Najarro. I was willing to work toward clarity. I was willing to open all the closet doors of hidden secrets. I would tell all, and in so doing rebel against my family’s collusion to tell the cleaned up version of the story. As an added benefit, perfect strangers would sympathize with my plight, worries, and the injustices placed upon my soul. A grand project for poetry, and ultimately a futile one.

My current interest in literary tradition and influence is the end of this story, and now in the middle is the beginning of how I began to change as a writer, how my understanding of the possibilities of poetry and of the written word began to alter. For my last MFA workshop, I finally put up for public inspection poems that I had been working on for nearly a year, poems that through their language I knew captured my tortured soul. I expected the readers in the class to understand, that through the language of the poems they could actually come to rest in my experience, literally know what I know. However that didn’t happen. In that towered room with many windows and the comfy chairs arranged in a circle, I listened to paraphrases of my heart, and I began to realize that there was something more at stake. I could rearrange
the words on the page in twenty million different ways, and no one would ever know what I know. Language could not capture my experience verbatim, and language does not reveal the "truth" of the situation. Barriers exist between the author, the text, and the reader. I did not behave very well at the end of this workshop. I accused the class of not being good readers. I left at break. I was stunned into silence.

However this silence was not a silence of erasure, but one of solitude, perhaps meditation, a down time to let personal experience and the possibilities of language find a new relationship. What was the purpose of poetry if not to cross the boundary of my own isolation? I did not arrive at an answer to this question immediately, and I wonder even now how much this internal desire to be heard and acknowledged drives my obsession to write. However from that moment on, I stopped trying to capture my own experience verbatim through words on a page. I often still write from an autobiographical perspective in my poems, and, of course, here, in this dissertation. I view the autobiographical not as concrete truth, but as another tool to construct a collage of language. The autobiographical can lend authenticity to a piece of writing. The autobiographical can pull on the heart strings of an absent reader. The autobiographical can be manipulated just as any other form of language.

But again, these are conclusions after the fact, conclusions arrived at the end of the story. My study of language and literature comes together with the personal, in that my experience as a child manipulating the language of my parents’ relationship equates to the process by which we create imaginative literature: threads of what happened where, when and why woven together to present one version of one of many possible stories. The story here of how I came to identify as a Latina writer
continues from my MFA to my doctoral studies at Western Michigan University where I ran across for the first time, or once again, Plato, Wordsworth, Keats, Saussure, Eliot, and dear Mr. Harold Bloom: all the voices through time discussing the do’s and don’ts of the possibility of literature, that transient entity that I was trying to create.

I read these authors not out of respect, or a desire to understand the history of poetics, but out of a need to find a new direction for my own writing. I let go, and stopped forcing words into meaning. Instead I began to play with language and allow memory, words, and images to collide together: the writer as orchestra leader. A little more trumpet of childhood, a muting flute of snow, a violin chorus of nouns. Amazingly, in letting go of the preordained idea for a poem and its purpose, my central concerns nonetheless emerged. Some might say that perhaps a muse had found me or that I had tapped into the subconscious, but I say I had found magic. Magic as the unexplained and that which cannot be explained. I learned to trust the power within the written word, and let it go at that.

In Eliot and Bloom I found the idea of influence and tradition, and that as a writer I was in conversation with writers who had come before. Though my original impetus for creating poems had been to escape the isolation of the self by attempting to create poetry that equated my personal experience, a trajectory that I eventually realized as impossible, the idea of literary tradition filled my basic need to conquer isolation. It was not only me writing in front of my computer, but I was writing in the company of Elizabeth Bishop, Sylvia Plath, Coleridge, Wordsworth and Whitman. Every time I read, I was in conversation with the author, and every time I wrote I was
talking back. The fact that most of the authors I read were dead and unable to join me at the local coffee house for a double espresso mocha was a bit of reality that I could live with.

However I did not take on straight with the idea of literary influence as proposed by Eliot and Bloom. For one, I'm female and throughout the history of Western letters women authors are not proportionately represented, and then as I began to identify as a Latina writer while in the midst of studying for my doctoral exams, I began to wonder where was my influence and where was my tradition? When I fell in love with the work of Blake, Wordsworth, Coleridge, and Keats while studying Romantic poetry, I daydreamed about 19th century Britain. I envisioned an emerging industrial London with smokestacks and chimney sweepers, and Blake’s little boy with soot on his face crying himself to sleep at night. I began to wonder where my family was at that time. They weren’t in London, that’s for sure, but in Nicaragua, in the tropics where there were no downy green hills and little lambs, much less a nightingale. Personally, I had no direct connection to Britain, and so I began to question my relation to the Romantic poets. How could a group so different from my own situation in terms of gender, ethnicity, and time influence my own work? Wasn’t there too much distance between the Romantic poets and myself? Perhaps all writers address similar questions, but as I was thinking over the problem I began to realize that influence upon one’s own work is not a conscious process, but arises through the cumulative effect of all that one has read. I had only read American and British authors, mostly men.
And so I began to consciously expand my reading to include women, Latino/a and Latin American writers. As a Latina writer I began to claim the legacy of two literary histories, that of the American/British canon and that of Latin American literary production. But more specifically, I began to search for Latino/a literature, not only Latin American literature, but writing by others who did not fit into the American British trajectory of history and culture who were writing in the United States. And now we’re back full circle to the original father Dashboard story of my erasure as a child. When looking for Latino/a literary influence, I once again came upon erasure, not the erasure of the individual, but of entire cultures and history.

My personal feeling of erasure expanded to an acknowledgement of the erasure of the history of Nicaragua, Mexico, Cuba, Puerto Rico, the rest of the Caribbean and Latin America in the United States. I found that the history of Nicaragua was inexorably tied to United States Manifest Destiny ideology, and that the history of my family’s personal stories was a microcosm of the economic and political interrelation between the United States and Central America. As I looked to my own poems, if I did not mention the details of my Nicaraguan bilingual self, not only was I contributing to my personal erasure, but to that of the entire Latino/a community in the United States. Ignoring my latinidad would entail letting go the details and stories that did not fit the conception of the United States as one nation under God with justice and liberty for all, and add to the creation myth of the United States as a land of opportunity open, free and culturally unrestricted. However at the same time I wasn’t about to lose sight of what I had come to understand about creating poetry as art. A poem can’t be written from an intention, a poem is not
created to educate, a poem can never capture the suffering of an entire group of people; a poem has to focus on its language, and at times this language does educate and does capture the injustices of the world. It’s a mysterious process, again a letting go, a bit of magic.

In the middle of my doctoral studies, I began to realize the importance of accepting my latinidad, of allowing my latinidad into my poetry and into this very dissertation, but the question of "how" still remained. I return to my original position as a writer during my MFA where I thought that through writing I could directly lead the reader into jumping into my experience. It feels the same if I start to write about Latino/a subjects beforehand. Through my own experience with poetry I’ve realized that a poem cannot arise from a preordained agenda, whether that be the desire to break the binds of my own isolation or the desire to voice the history of Nicaraguans in the United States.

Ultimately there is only the language in which we write, but language is always culturally charged, and poems cannot escape their cultural consciousness. It might be argued, for example, that a lyric poem about a dandelion would not be culturally charged, since it’s only a poem about a flowering weed. But whatever flower we choose to write about is a flower in our culture. The dandelion might capture a poet’s imagination because it is a central artifact of suburban United States life. Is there any detail that is not a detail expressing our current cultural configurations? As a writer there is a choice between which details I allow into my writing. If I begin a poem about my family, I could relate the details in an Anglo suburban discourse by replacing all the Tias and Tios with aunt and uncle, by
replacing Managua, Nicaragua, with Springfield, Illinois, and replacing carne asada with burgers on the barbecue, or I can choose not to. By allowing my latinidad into my poems, I allow myself to speak and break with the imposed silence upon women and Latinas. Latinas can and should write in the details and language of their experience, and in so doing perhaps expand what is conceived as American experience, but not from a preordained agenda, but from an interior necessity. Finding this interior necessity and how it manifests in words on a page is a subjective process, one that I have attempted to recreate in this essay.

In the following section, I discuss T.S. Eliot’s essay “Tradition and the Individual Talent” and how Eliot articulates a writer’s obligation to cultivate an historical sense, an historical sense which I interpret to include all history, the personal, the political, the cultural and the literary. Experience is what cultivates the creative imagination, the experience of a life lived, the experience of arguing with dead white men, the experience of being politically and culturally aware, the experience of everything that one can get her hands on. As a Latina writer I have found the necessity to move beyond US American intellectual borders by looking to Latina and Latin American authors for inspiration. I think I may have misread Harold Bloom: according to him the authors of the past will choose to play with my work, and if I’m lucky throw spitwads over my shoulder. But there is certainly one thing I can do, and that is expand my reading to include Latino/a and Latin American authors and allow the influence of the excluded in American letters to enter my work. I have seen Borges lurking around the corner, and Vallejo won’t stop crying in my bathroom. Right now, Alfonsina Storni is lighting a smoke on my living room couch.
The Crisis of Exclusion

When I realized that I had read mostly American and English literature after daydreaming about an emerging industrial London, I began searching for Latina authors, and I found them. Not only did I find the poetry and/or prose of Julia Alvarez, Judith Ortiz Cofer, Cristina Garcia, Carmen Tafolla and many others, I also found critical works such as Gloria Anzaldua’s *Borderlands* and Diana Tey Rebolledo’s *Women Singing in the Snow*. Through the imaginative and critical works of *chicanas, dominicanas, puertorriquenas,* and *cubanas* I found that my conflicted dual self was not something new or isolated, but part of the Latina experience in literature and United States culture. There is an underlying assumption throughout this dissertation that I view myself, my bilingual, bicultural Latina self, as part of the US American tapestry, and so I also view the endeavor of my own literary production, my poems and this very dissertation, as a part of North American discourse. The work of Latina writers who have come before has created a space within American literature for the articulation of *latinidad*, created a space where a Latina woman, such as myself, can voice her concerns and points of view as a Latina woman. This very dissertation would not have been possible without the pioneering work of Latina writers and scholars, such as those previously mentioned.

In the stories told by Julia Alvarez and Judith Ortiz Cofer concerning their development as writers, they did not find the work of Latina authors as models. My story differs in that I did find Latina literary models, at first those of Alvarez and Ortiz Cofer and then that of many other Latinas. This change in our stories has been
possible only because of the very work these writers themselves have contributed to American literature. In *Something to Declare* Alvarez tells of her development as a writer:

How I discovered a way into my bicultural, bilingual experience was paradoxically not through a Hispanic American writer, but an Asian American writer. Soon after it came out, I remember picking up *The Woman Warrior* by Maxine Hong Kingston. I gobbled up the book, and then went back to the first page and read it through again. She addressed the duality of her experience, the Babel of voices in her head, the confusions and pressures of being a Chinese American female. It could be done!

With her as my model, I set out to write about my own experience as a Dominican American woman. (168)

Judith Ortiz Cofer relates a similar story in that when she was searching for a literary model to emulate she also did not find a Latina author. Instead, she found Flannery O'Connor. She writes:

As a college student in the seventies' United States I had a... realization: I needed to write and I had no models of my own kind. In fact I remember only one woman's name coming up for serious discussion in my classes and that was Virginia Woolf. ... My day of revelation arrived years later when I came across a book of stories written by someone whose gender I couldn't decide by the name alone. Flannery. What kind of a person would have a name like that? After reading only one story "Revelation" I knew what kind of person, my kind.... Someday I was going to write poems and stories extolling these virtues of my people while exposing the Others for the oppressors they were. (Woman 95-6)

The commonality between my story and those of Alvarez and Ortiz Cofer is the need for the emerging writer to find literary models with which to identify. Alvarez found hers in Maxine Hong Kingston, and Ortiz Cofer with O'Connor, while I found them, Alvarez and Ortiz Cofer. That's the difference. When I started looking around there was an established group of Latina writers that I could reach out to for guidance and inspiration. The group of Latina writers currently publishing today

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encompasses several Latina sub-groups in the United States: dominicanas, puertorriquenas, cubanas, chicanas and others.

The establishment of Latina literature owes a great debt to the Chicana experience since it is this group that first began to voice the concerns of Latina women as a response to the male-oriented Chicano Renaissance. Diana Tey Rebolledo notes that the necessity for a separate Chicana literary space arose from "the gender objectification of Chicanas in such works as Armando's Rendon's The Chicano Manifesto (1972) [that] effectively removed or distanced the women from full-scale participation in the Chicano movement" (Snow 95). Chicana literature has established many Latina voices where before there was only silence. Historically, societal constructions at large and the publishing industry have not supported the production of women's literature, and more so that of Chicanas and other Latinas. Rebolledo writes of this situation concerning Chicanas and notes that

the problem for Chicanas was how to represent a discourse that had effectively been silenced for generations... Because theirs was a subjugated or subordinated discourse, excluded from both mainstream and minority discourse, they were trying to 'inscribe' themselves in a collective and historical process that had discounted and silenced them (96-7).

Perhaps the reason that Alvarez and Ortiz Cofer did not find Latina writers in their search for literary models was that at the time, the 1970's, the silencing of Chicanas and Latinas was still pervasive throughout our culture. Give or take a few years from a quarter of century later, at the time of my doctoral studies, the silence has been broken by the work of these authors and many others. Even though there are currently enough books in publication to warrant a category of "Latina literature," this in itself
is not enough and there is much work to be done. Latina literature has yet to receive the recognition it deserves.

The growing number of Latina authors and the publication of their literature indicates a changing societal configuration, one where women and women of color are no longer silenced, but instead have the opportunity to create literature reflecting their experience. In the introduction to *Latina Self-Portraits*, Juanita Heredia directly correlates the changes in United States culture with the increased production of Latina literature:

Through the Chicano, civil rights, Puerto Rican, and women's movements, Latinas made in-roads into American society. Because of the social activism and institutional reforms that were an outgrowth of these movements, Latinas gained access to an educational system that enabled them to develop careers as writers and academics. These social movements in the Northern Hemisphere transformed the demographics of Latino communities in the United States, particularly in the East, Midwest, and Southwest. If it were not for the social movements of the 1960's, it is doubtful whether U.S. Latina literature would exist today. (3)

I propose that a shift may be occurring in Latina literature away from establishing the right to have a voice, to getting that voice recognized and respected.

In her *Latina Self-Portraits* interview, Cristina Garcia speaks to the future of Latina literature and how this literature by its very existence is altering the parameters of "American" literature:

These fascinating stories, traditionally on the margin, are redefining American literature. Broadening, muscling in, and expanding on what is considered serious American literature. Before it was reglegated to the margins or to the sociology shelf, and now, after some time, the writing has just gotten too good to ignore. (74)

During the past thirty or so years, Latina writers have created a space for their literature, and now may be the time to place that literature where it belongs, as part of
the US American literary canon. With an established body of Latina literature, we can now shift from making the voice to having the voice included among the works of "canonical" American literature. Before I get started on the American literary canon and its relationship with Latina literature, I would like to quote Alvarez on the subject of ambition. So often I am amazed that it is not assumed that Latinas desire to create lasting works of literature. Alvarez eloquently speaks to this issue:

Certainly none of us serious writers of Latino origin want to be a mere flash in the literary pan. We want to write good books that touch and move all our readers, not just those of our own particular ethnic background. We want our work to become part of the great body of all that has been thought and felt and written by writers of different cultures, languages, experiences, classes, races. (Declare 169)

Writing the poetry and prose that may someday be considered as exemplary texts within the history of literary tradition, what Alvarez describes as that "great body of all that has been thought and felt and written," is one half of the equation; on the other side is the process of critical evaluation. I would now like to focus on the critical discourse addressing literary tradition and its influence on the writer as put forth by T.S. Eliot in "Tradition and the Individual Talent," Harold Bloom in The Western Canon and The Anxiety of Influence, and Jorge Luis Borges in "The Argentine Writer and Tradition." Before I begin discussing these great guardians of the canon, Eliot, Bloom and Borges, it is necessary to state that I have chosen these three authors due to their very prominence and critical reputations. Hopefully by showing that their discourse also pertains to Latina literature, I can show that Latina literature is not a "minority" literature, a literature off on the side and investigated as a cultural artifact of the "other," but is instead part and parcel of the history and
tradition of Western culture. In the essay "And May He be Bilingual," Judith Ortiz Cofer refers to her poetry and prose as "art," that literature is "the human search for meaning" and that if she is "served well by [her] craft and the transformation occurs, it [her poetry and prose] will also have meaning for others as art" (Woman 120-1).

Like Ortiz Cofer, Latina writers view their work as part of the history of imaginative literature, that process by which written language is transformed into "art." This process is what Eliot, Bloom and Borges discuss, and it is by belonging to this process that Latina writers create their literature as part of the American literary canon. But Latina writers do more than just belong to the literary canon. They are changing its very configuration.

A central idea that Latina literature offers US literary studies is the ability to live within duality and the acceptance of multiplicity. Latina literature does not abandon the idea of literature as "art," but expands the configuration so that a literary text can be aesthetically complex, thematically on the cutting edge, and reflect cultural concerns. All three in one bundle. Eliot, Bloom and Borges consider what it takes to create quality literature, literature that reaches the realm of universal excellence, and all focus on the development of a writer's worldview, understanding of the human condition, and the use of language. Ultimately the discourse on literary tradition and influence focuses on how to cultivate a magnanimous worldview and the aesthetics of language on the part of the writer. As I will hopefully show by the end of this essay, Eliot, Bloom and Borges speak to the timeless qualities of great literature, but more so their discourse centers on the development of the creative imagination. The process by which the creative imagination works and is cultivated pertains to

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Latina writers, as it does to all writers. I would like to begin with Eliot and hopefully show that his groundbreaking essay can be read as in accordance with the changes in the literary canon that Latina literature brings.

Eliot’s discourse on the writer’s relationship to literary tradition focuses on what he terms the "historical sense." For Eliot, tradition does not mimic the past, but is a "matter of much wider significance . . . It involves in the first place, a historical sense, which we may call nearly indispensable to anyone who would continue to be a poet beyond his twenty-fifth year" (761). Let me state the obvious that all the Latina writers in this study are beyond their twenty-fifth year and continue as poets and writers. I propose that the historical sense for Latina artists includes the development of aesthetics and style, and also includes the historical aspects of culture and United States politics. This configuration of the "historical sense" is not excluded in Eliot’s essay, and, as I will hopefully show, Eliot’s open-ended definition of the "historical sense," a reading perhaps that he would not have predicted, supports the embodiment of the cultural infused throughout Latina literature.

Though Eliot’s groundbreaking essay outlines what he views as every writer’s relation to literary history and tradition, he does not present literary history and tradition as a self-enclosed never changing entity. Granted that the essay focuses on aesthetics, Eliot also states that simply copying the accepted artistic literary successes of the past "should positively be discouraged" (761). For Eliot it seems that aesthetics involves more than the elements of craft, and that to be a traditional writer is not a simple matter of turning out Shakespearean sonnets. In his definition of the essential mark of the traditional writer, which is the writer that will create texts Alvarez
described as belonging to "the great body of all that has been thought and felt and written," Eliot proposes that the "historical sense, which is a sense of the timeless as well as the temporal and of the timeless and of the temporal together, is what makes a writer traditional" (761). Eliot specifies his understanding of the historical sense with two undefined terms: the timeless and the temporal. In order to write in the traditional sense, Eliot proposes that a writer be aware of the past and the present in all its vast complexities and configurations. The historical sense may be a sense of the ever changing uses of language and poetic forms, such as the changes in poetic diction through time, but it may also include new understandings of language and its relation to culture and power formation, such as those surrounding the use of Spanglish discussed in Chapter II.

When Eliot asks the writer to gain a sense of the tradition of literary history he states that what "is to be insisted upon is that the poet must develop or procure the consciousness of the past and that he should continue to develop this consciousness throughout his career" (762). In terms of the aesthetics of language, this involves an investigation into how language has been used in the past to create art, and, for example, may call for an in-depth analysis of how Shakespeare's sonnets utilize language to create their artistic power. However if we read this passage from a cultural studies and linguistics perspective, then developing a "consciousness of the past" could also rightly include the developments in language theory since Eliot's composition, where poetic language is viewed as more than its aesthetic qualities, but also entails the cultural, political, and power relations within society.
Eliot’s discourse on tradition and the writer ultimately proposes that the traditional writer expands from an isolated sense of self to a literary identity equating to the mind of his culture: "he must be aware that the mind of Europe the mind of his own country a mind which he learns in time to be much more important than his own private mind is a mind which changes, and that this change is a development which abandons nothing en route . . ." (762). Is this not the Latina mind? A mind that is aware of the history of United States imperialism, aware of the history of exclusion for people of color and women, and then logically and ethically must write to alter this history? Despite what conservative canon defenders might claim, a careful and close reading of Eliot, one of their supposed "forefathers" reveals something perhaps surprising. By reasoning that the individual need for tradition leads to achieving a cultural mindset that understands the changes of culture through time, Eliot opens the understanding of literary tradition to include new and evolving configurations of culture. When Latina writers include Latin American subjects and Latina details, this does not mean that they are working outside of United States literary tradition, in that this may be the capturing of the "mind of [her] own country" at this point in time.

Eliot’s "historical sense" fuels the creative imagination. It is precisely when a writer takes on all the nuances of the past and the present, the temporal and the timeless, which include aesthetics and the cultural, that a writer can expand out from the self and create literature that offers a new vision to the legacy of literary tradition. Latina writers, as all writers do, hope to create literary texts that stand the test of time by reflecting the temporal experience of their day and age, magically utilizing the tool of the trade, language, and by hopefully having all the various aspects of the
construction of imaginative literature come together in a text which we can label as "art." But they also bring to literary discourse perspectives that have not been previously articulated or heard, that of Latina experience. Literary tradition is not a static entity, but is in a constant state of change brought about by the imaginative literature put forth by each generation, and Latina writers may be the center of the new articulations of literary tradition.

Harold Bloom is one of our current literary critics who has attempted to delineate the qualities of great literature leading up to the current day. Through his own unique style of writing in *The Western Canon*, where he refers to the new directions in literary criticism, such as multiculturalism and feminism, as "The School of Resentment," Bloom clouds his discourse with a subjective bigotry. However, his concept of the "anxiety of influence" as related in his first critical work by the same title and retold in *The Western Canon*, is very insightful into the process of how the creative imagination functions and is of importance when considering how Latina literature reconfigures the literary canon. Bloom insists that literature be viewed as a collective whole that is constantly refigured by new writers as they re-write their canonical predecessors. As in the emerging writer stories previously presented, both Alvarez and Ortiz Cofer sought models to emulate as young writers; though they were looking for women with whom they could identify, this very search implies that the canonical Anglo male literature which they had read did not fit the bill, and that they were searching for ways to counter this influence. Though Bloom’s "anxiety of influence" may seem patriarchal and highly aggressive, Latina writers do re-write
their canonical predecessors by voicing the concerns and experience of Latina women, which have been so long silenced.

In order to discuss Bloom's critical work in relation to Latina writers I must note that there are two realms of discourse that Bloom addresses in his critical work. One is the private realm of writing and reading where the individual confronts literature as a private matter, "the aesthetic is, in my view, an individual rather than a societal concern" (Canon 16), while the other realm is the stage of critical judgment where texts are placed in relation to one another. Bloom admits that the stage of critical judgment, the formulation of a canon, is tied to the reigning strata of societal, political and economic power: "Those who resent all canons suffer from an elitist guilt founded upon the accurate enough realization that canons always do indirectly serve the social and political, and indeed the spiritual, concerns and aims of the wealthier classes of each generation of Western society" (Canon 31). For Bloom the inequity of society based on economic interests is a fact of life, something to understand, and accept. However, he misses the point that the construction of the canon is one location where the inequity of society is constantly challenged.

In *The Western Canon*, Bloom continuously refers to those he has labeled the School of Resentment: "Feminists, Afrocentrists, Marxists, Foucault-inspired New Historicists, or Deconstructors-- all of those I have described as members of the School of Resentment" (20). For Bloom the School of Resentment are those who have relinquished the aesthetic and instead focus on politically correct interpretations of the marginalized in order to turn the study of literature away from a study of art and into the study of cultural configurations. Bloom's own evident resentment toward
the School of Resentment rests in the notion that art is separate from cultural configurations, and that investigating literature through an aesthetic perspective excludes the political and the social. By dividing the critique of literature into aesthetics versus cultural perspectives, and validating aesthetical appreciations of literature over feminist, multiculturalist, New Historicist and other recent developments in literary criticism, Bloom creates an exclusionary dichotomy where a text voicing cultural concerns may be interpreted as automatically lacking aesthetical merit. Here lies the danger with Bloom's ranting about the School of Resentment it hides within its discourse the idea that to speak of culture is to turn away from the great questions of human experience that serve as the central domain of canonical literature. But are not the effects of cultural and political history upon the human "soul," so to speak, of universal interest and one of the eternal areas of inquiry into the human condition?

It is in the very arena of what are the eternal questions surrounding human experience that Latina literature alters the current configurations of the American literary canon. Latina literature does not refuse to consider the great questions of the past such as the confrontation of our mortality, the evolution of the self, the relationship between the individual and nature, these and many other themes exist within Latina literature, but along with these themes Latina literature asks the reader to contemplate the cultural configurations that ultimately shape Latina experience. By raising the issue of Latinas and culture, Latina literature points to how we are all wrapped in the social tapestry of our times. When considering our own mortality, we are also considering our cultural views toward death. The evolution of the self occurs
within our societal expectations of gender, class and economic status. The relationship between the individual and nature also depends upon culturally constructed attitudes towards the environment and the role of human beings on this blue green planet. Latina literature asks that we be aware of how these constructions affect our daily lives, whether we are Latina or not.

I would now like to turn toward the interior realm of the creative imagination as discussed by Bloom in *The Anxiety of Influence*. Bloom’s explication of the anxiety of influence rests on a description of how the private mind functions. I propose that a Latina woman could just as easily qualify as one of Bloom’s "strong poets," those writers who are "major figures with the persistence to wrestle with their strong precursors, even to the death" (Anxiety 5). Though the aggressive tendencies articulated in Bloom’s theories, as shown by his description of the writer as an individual willing to battle his precursor to the death, may be a bit over the top, at the same time it is insulting to state that women are not competitive and lack aggression. What I keep fighting with over and over is the tendency to place women in constricted boxes. A woman can be compassionate and aggressive, competitive and communal. It depends on the situation, place and time. In regards to the literary canon, women are competitive and aggressive in regards to owning their thoughts, creative expression and right to voice their concerns. Bloom outlines his anxiety of influence by stating that "poetic influence when it involves two strong, authentic poets, always proceeds by a misreading of the prior poet, an act of creative correction . . ." (30). The creative correction which Latina writers accomplish in their literature is to articulate the Latina experience that has been previously excluded.
Bloom’s anxiety of influence where one writer re-writes her predecessors is exactly what Latina writers do by voicing the perspectives of Latina women that have for so long been silenced, and this is an aggressive act, a competitive act, one where women, Latina women, challenge the configurations of the literary canon to include their voices. In rewriting the past canonical greats, Latina writers do not abandon the aesthetics of their predecessors, but alter these aesthetics to include Latina experience.

By looking at Eliot and Bloom’s critical work, I hope to have shown that the insights they articulate into how the writer functions within the history of literary tradition also apply to Latina writers. In so doing, the desire is to place Latina literature in the mainstream of literary thought and expression. In the discourse surrounding Eliot’s essay, I hope to have shown how Latina literature belongs to that discourse and expands the implications of Eliot’s thought, and the same with Bloom’s "anxiety of influence." There is one more essay I would like to discuss and that is Jorge Luis Borges’ "The Argentine Writer and Tradition." Of Latin American writers that reach into US American letters, Borges’ work and thought have been seriously considered. Beyond his highly regarded artistic reputation, the "Argentine" essay, though addressing Argentine writer’s attempt to create a national literature, raises literary issues that also relate to Latina literary production in the United States. Borges’ essay focuses on the Argentine attempt to create an authentic national literature by writing in a style infused with what he terms as "local color." If there is one stylistic commonality among Latina literature, then it would be that the poetry and prose of Latina writers does abound in what could be termed as Hispanic "local
color," and therefore Borges' argument surrounding the use of "local color" also relates to the Latina situation in the United States.

Borges' critique centers on the following proposition: "The idea that Argentine poetry must abound in Argentine differential traits and in Argentine local color seems to me to be a mistake" (422). Though Latina writers do not confine themselves solely to Hispanic characters, locations and themes, for example Julia Alvarez, Sandra Cisneros, and Carmen Tafolla all have poems that would not be classified as centered on specific Latina situations or language. Nevertheless, all of the texts under study in this dissertation do incorporate to varying degrees Latina "differential traits" and Hispanic "local color," as do my own poems and essays. What is at stake goes back to Alvarez's statement that "certainly none of us serious writers of Latino origin want to be a mere flash in the literary pan. We want to write good books that touch and move all our readers, not just those of our own particular ethnic background" (Declare 169). If a writer takes on the literary identity as a Latina writer and desires to incorporate Latina characters, situations and locales in her literature, does this very incorporation limit the scope of the literature as Borges thought it did for Argentine writers?

As I have hopefully shown while discussing Eliot and Bloom, the incorporation of Latina motifs is precisely the manner in which Latina writers reconfigure literary tradition by voicing what has been excluded. However it is still necessary to address the previous question, since it is through the very infusion of Latina motifs that Latina literature is categorized as a "minority" literature and the literature of the "other." Though Borges' "The Argentine Writer and Tradition" is one essay that specifically challenges the use of "local color," I would like to show that his argument
against the incorporation of "local color" is not one against the use of culturally
defined signifiers, but a more general critique about the writing process where writers
should not limit their creative endeavors to a prescribed agenda.

At the core of his argument, Borges puts forth that limiting the subject, style,
and language of a text to nationalistic origins artificially constrains the writer, and
therefore, extending the argument to Latina literature, limiting the subject, style and
language to cultural origins may also artificially constrain the writer. Borges argues
that use of "local color" as a signifier of cultural authenticity is an arbitrary
construction. and he proposes that "the idea that a literature must define itself by the
differential traits of the country that produced it is a relatively new one, and the idea
that writers must seek out subjects local to their countries is also new and arbitrary"
(423). Rereading this passage in relation to Latina literature, if Borges' note that
seeking out the differential traits and subjects local to one's nation is arbitrary, then a
parallel arises in that the endeavor to seek out the differential traits and subjects local
to one's culture may also be arbitrary. Borges proceeds to point out that many
canonical texts do not limit themselves to the settings and situations of the author's
home nation, and for example posits that Shakespeare is not any less British for
having set *Hamlet* in Denmark. It is not the setting or autochthonous details that make
a text reflective of its culture, but whether or not the writer can capture the spirit of
their times, what for Argentina Borges notes as the "reserve, wariness, and reticence
that are Argentine, significant of the difficulty we have in confiding, in being
intimate" (423).
I read Borges’ critique as an argument against formulaic writing, and in relation to Latina literature as a warning against a formula that requires Latina authenticity to rely upon the use of Latino/a subjects and themes. However, this critique or warning does not necessarily hinder a Latina writer from using Latina signifiers in her poetry and prose, but instead warns against limiting one’s field of creativity to artificially constructed boundaries, whether that boundary functions as a mandate to include or exclude local color. A writer should be at liberty to pursue whichever avenues are dictated by her creative imagination. Borges’ argument against designating a text as traditional solely on its incorporation of "local color," is an argument against limiting literary production to artificial constraints, in that if it is an artificial constraint to demand the authenticity of a literature through its autochthonous details, then it is also an artificial constraint to state that autochthonous details should not be used in literary production.

Throughout his essay, Borges attempts to claim Western literary tradition as the heritage of Argentine writers, so that Argentine literature is not viewed as separate and excluded from Western discourse, but is instead viewed as belonging to that tradition. He contends that "nationalists pretend to venerate the capacities of the Argentine mind but wish to humble that mind to a few local themes, as if we Argentines could only speak of neighborhoods and ranches and not of the universe" (424). We all inherit a literary tradition based upon the unlimited capacities of the creative imagination, one where an English writer can create an English text in a Danish setting, one where an Argentine writer can create an Argentine text in a French setting, and one where a Latina writer can create a Latina text in any setting.
Though Borges did follow the route of eliminating Argentine autochthonous details in his writing while aiming for the "universal," I do not read his essay as demanding that we all follow in his footsteps. Instead I see in Borges that to write a truly traditional piece of literature, traditional to one’s culture and literary tradition, the writer must relinquish preordained agendas. He asks "that we must not be afraid; we must believe that the universe is our birthright and try out every subject . . . I believe that if we lose ourselves in the voluntary dream called artistic creation, we will be Argentine and we will be, as well, good or adequate writers" (427). Borges emphasizes the unlimited realm of artistic creation, one where writers do not limit their production to preconceived notions of acceptability. As a Latina writer, I have confronted the expectation to write only Latina subjects, and also the expectation to abandon Latina subjects and write only toward the universal. Neither of these extremes is viable since ultimately losing oneself to "the voluntary dream called artistic creation" is a process without limits.

Earlier in this essay I proposed that it is by belonging to the process of Western tradition and literature that Latina literature should be viewed as part of the American literary canon, and more so that through its very inclusion Latina literature alters the canon’s configuration. Extending Eliot’s discourse in "Tradition and the Individual Talent," it may be that the Latina writers capture the mindset of their culture, United States culture, by writing the stories of Latino/as in the United States that have so long been absent and which are now refusing erasure. Bloom’s theory of the anxiety of influence applies to Latina writers in that they may be "misreading" their literary precursors as excluding the voices of women and Latinas and thereby
"rewriting" their precursors by articulating these missing voices. Borges’ call for the writer to give herself over to "the voluntary dream of artistic creation" is precisely how Cristina Garcia and Judith Ortiz describe their writing process.

In her *Latina Self-Portraits* interview, Garcia speaks about her writing process and that it centers upon the privacy of her office where she can read, contemplate and write. The description of her daily writing life sounds like one Latina writer’s description of Borges’ "voluntary dream of artistic creation:"

I spend a lot of time reading poetry in my office and seeing what catches, what phrase or what images begin to congeal and what the departure point for that day’s work will be. I read as broadly as possible, often around what I am writing at the time. I read a great deal of history, biography, memoirs, that sort of thing, not too many novels. But mostly what I read is poetry. On any given day I could be reading classical Chinese poetry in translation side by side with Adrienne Rich or Octavio Paz. And everything in between. (73)

In this description of how she prepares to write, Garcia describes a process that does not have set rules or prescribed agendas, instead she creates an environment in which the creative imagination can get going. Ortiz Cofer also posits that she writes away from agendas and her description of the writing process is highly metaphoric. It seems that when one gets down to the business of articulating exactly the space where written language becomes "art," that set rules and agendas fall by the wayside. Ortiz Cofer writes:

If these cuentos I create out of my memory and imbue with my perceptions add up to a universal message, then I consider myself to have accomplished much more than I allow myself to hope for when I sit down in front of that blank sheet of paper that calls to my restless spirit like a believer’s candle. No longer the idealistic young poet hoping to find big answers to big questions, I am content now to be the solitary traveler, the caminante: my main hope to find a pattern in the trees, the path less traveled by in the woods. (Woman 115)
Though both Garcia and Ortiz Cofer incorporate Latino/a settings, characters and details, these details naturally occur as part of their creative process and not from conscious desires or preordained agendas, and they both desire to create literature that may be considered exemplary texts within the American literary canon. These writers work within the process of literary tradition which means that they cultivate an "historical sense" and that they are vastly well read, and that they realize that in order to create literature as "art" it is necessary to break from any and all constraints upon the creative imagination. Julia Alvarez speaks for the Latina writer when she writes: "By writing powerfully about our Latino culture, we are forging a tradition and creating a literature that will widen and enrich the existing canon. So much depends upon our feeling that we have a right and responsibility to do this" (170).

At this point I would like to turn to the work of Carlos Alonso in regards to the autochthonous and Latin American literature. Alonso’s analysis as to why the autochthonous appears in Latin American literature may shed some light as to why the autochthonous appears in US Latina literature. Alonso proposes that "local color" in a text indicates a separation from the culture which the very infusion of "local color" attempts to recreate: "affirmations of cultural identity customarily explain their emergence as constituting a response to a perceived crisis, a disruption caused by a situation or event that threatens a loss of cultural organicity or integrity" (6). In order to affirm cultural identity, authors may incorporate culturally signified settings, characters and details into their texts. However, this need to affirm one’s culture can only be necessary when there is a perceived threat or loss to the integrity of that culture. For Latina texts, then the infusion of Latina themes, situations and
ethnographic portrayals may stem from a sense of loss or threat to Latina culture where the very infusion of Hispanic signifiers serves as a way to maintain and reaffirm Latino/a culture that is perceived as in danger of disintegration.

In regards to Latin American literature, Alonso proposes that the crisis from which the autochthonous arises, the crisis which autochthonous writing attempts to bridge, is "the impossibility of reconciling the rhetoric that gave legitimacy and authority to the emancipation movement with the historical development that ensued from that moment" (19). For Alonso, in Latin America there exists a crisis between the rhetorical ideals of emancipation and the then following reality of Latin American society, and it is from this crisis that autochthonous writing appears. Following the logic of Alonso, then the advent of local color within US Latina literature may also appear due to a perceived crisis, perhaps the inability for Latinas to experience in reality the full vision of the American dream. Latina writers may include the autochthonous in their texts as a response to what has been excluded from the Western canon and in this way "misread" to correct the past, but also by the very inclusion of the autochthonous Latina writers call attention to a cultural and political crisis.

The crisis of exclusion in United States society and the Western canon may lead many Latina writers to write their works from a position of "local color" and culture. I would like to look at Cristina Garcia’s Dreaming in Cuban and the poetry of Carmen Tafolla, two bodies of work that present Latino/as in their autochthonous glory within the United States while struggling with the failure of the American dream. Extending the ideas put forth by Eliot and Bloom, these two writers may be
reconfiguring the American literary canon in that they articulate the lives ofLatinas in this nation, and rewriting the canon to include what they see as excluded: the stories and lives of Latinas in the United States. But what these writers bring to the Western canon is larger than one voice or one story: they bring to the conversation of literary history the exclusion of Latinas in society and literature. These writers voice the crisis of exclusion.

Cristina García’s *Dreaming in Cuban* focuses on a Cuban matriarch, Celia, her daughters, Lourdes and Felicia, and Lourdes’ daughter, Pilar. This lineage of Cuban women tells one family’s personal story of Cuba, the Revolution and immigration to the United States. This complex novel interweaves US-Cuban political history with the inter-familial relationships between the novel’s female characters. The matriarch, Celia, supports Castro’s revolution and through her two daughters, Felicia and Lourdes, the novel presents two counter positions to Celia’s revolutionary zeal. Felicia represents non-politically inclined Cubans who remain in the nation after Castro’s coming to power and who struggle to maintain their personal lives within a radically changed economic, social and political climate. Lourdes represents Cubans who immigrate to the United States and are vehemently opposed to Castro and his regime, but also in Lourdes, García creates an immigrant character that enthusiastically takes up the ideals of the American dream as a solution to the political and personal turmoil of Cuba after the Revolution. It is in Pilar, Lourdes’s daughter, Celia’s granddaughter, and youngest female in this matriarchal line, that the crisis of the American dream for Latinas plays to fruition.
Mother-daughter relationships function as one of the novel’s structuring themes, and Pilar’s position as Lourdes’ daughter sets up the confrontation between these two women and their attitudes toward the United States. As previously noted, Lourdes views the United States with immigrant optimism and she feels that “immigration has redefined her, and she is grateful... She welcomes her adopted language, its possibilities for reinvention” (73). After arriving in Miami and driving north, away from Cuba’s heat and turmoil to the cold of New York city, Lourdes remakes herself in an American image. Lourdes takes on the American values of hard work and entrepreneurship by opening a string of bakeries, appropriately called The Yankee Doodle Bakeries. Lourdes embraces what she perceives as United States values, and assimilates to United States culture out of choice. Pilar, on the other hand, incapable of making such a decision since she immigrated to the United States as a child, finds herself uprooted into a culture she cannot claim as her own.

As a teenage punk rock visual artist, Pilar is the epitome of exclusion and disjuncture in the details of her very characterization. For Pilar, the United States does not feel like home, while Cuba is a rapidly fading memory. As she states her essential crisis: "Even though I’ve been living in Brooklyn all my life, it doesn’t feel like home to me. I’m not sure Cuba is, but I want to find out." (58). Pilar is displaced, angry and confused. Following the novel’s structure of mother-daughter relationships, Pilar continuously rebels against her mother’s immigrant optimism and interpretation of the American dream. Pilar finds fault with her mother’s choice of music, a Jim Nabor’s album celebrating the bicentennial, her mother’s sense of civic duty to join the auxiliary police force, and her mother’s over enthusiastic celebration of the Fourth
of July, in honor of which Lourdes creates "tricolor cupcakes and Uncle Sam marzipan" (136). Pilar views her mother's assimilation to United States culture as purely superficial and ultimately unsatisfying. As she describes her mother:

Mom makes food only people in Ohio eat, like Jell-O molds with miniature marshmallows or recipes she clips from *Family Circle*. And she barbecues anything she can get her hands on. Then we sit around behind the warehouse and stare at each other with nothing to say. Like this is it? We're living the American dream? (137)

The novel juxtaposes Lourdes' interpretation of the American dream against Pilar's dissatisfaction. For Pilar, her mother's interpretation of the American dream is a ridiculous caricature that does not fulfill Pilar's need to belong, and instead serves to further Pilar's sense of exclusion from American society.

Though Lourdes and her daughter are in constant conflict, they are also in a process of constant reconciliation. Lourdes attempts to bridge the gap between her daughter and herself by commissioning Pilar to paint a "big painting like the Mexicans do, but pro-American" (138) for the bicentennial opening of a second Yankee Doodle Bakery. They both agree on a depiction of the Statue of Liberty, and that Lourdes will not interfere while Pilar creates the work of art. Pilar's original intentions are to please her mother by painting Lady Liberty against a pretty blue background, but Pilar's inner conflicts rise into the final version of the painting. Her version of the Statue of Liberty has a safety pin through her nose, a crown of thorns, and a caption that reads: "I'M A MESS" (141). The painting functions as a symbolic response to Lourdes' take on the American dream, and expresses Pilar's continual state of crisis where she feels excluded from United States culture. At the painting's unveiling, the bakery customers attack Pilar's painting due to its unpatriotic nature,
which eventually leads to a knock-down blow-out fight where Lourdes protects the mural, symbolically protecting her daughter. At the end of this scene, Lourdes sides with Pilar, not in terms of ideology concerning the United States, but in terms of a mother's unconditional love for her daughter.

*Dreaming in Cuban* can be read as a reflection on the Latino/a immigrant dilemma, as in the previous discussion of the symbolism of the Statue of Liberty episode, but also the very lines of Pilar's discourse throughout the novel reveal the crisis of exclusion and of not belonging to United States culture. As the novel progresses, Pilar relates how she is losing touch with her Cuban side, and states that "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). Pilar captures the dilemma Cubans face in the United States: that of Cuban culture and history fading as rapidly as Pilar's memories of her grandmother the longer one stays in the United States. Returning to Alonso's insights to autochthonous writing, this text recreates Cuban life on the island and in the United States in order to stop the disintegration of Cuban culture in the United States. Halting the crisis through the creation of an autochthonous literary work results in a continual retelling of the very same crisis.

A letter Celia writes on the day of Pilar's birth serves as the final page of the novel. The letter predicts Pilar's future: "My granddaughter, Pilar Puentedel Pino, was born today. . . . She will remember everything" (245). Ultimately for Pilar, accepting the American dream ideology is not sufficient, but instead of resolving the crisis of exclusion, Pilar becomes the holder of familial memory, a teller of stories,
and the eventual writer of the same said novel which articulates over and over the crisis of Latina exclusion from the American dream. By ending the novel with a prediction of Pilar as the holder of familial memory, the novel returns to its beginning to tell and retell the story of the Latina crisis of exclusion.

Garcia’s text functions as a self-reflective never ending cycle of the failure of the American dream for Cubans and perhaps can be extended as reflecting this dilemma for other Latino/as. This text adds to the tradition of American letters the story of Latino/a exclusion and rewrites the American texts of the past through its depiction of Cuban culture and history. Carmen Tafolla’s poetry also rewrites American poetic discourse by articulating the details of Mexican-American culture and history, and also adds to American literature the Latina crisis of not fitting into the rhetoric of the American dream.

Carmen Tafolla’s poetry abounds in Chicana differential traits and the linguistic expression of Chicano/as in the US. Her poems are written in three language varieties: English, Spanish and Spanglish. Along with the infusion of Chicana settings and use of language, the subject of her poetry many times reflects the tension of Chicano/as in relation to achieving the American dream. In "To Mr. Gabacho 'Macho"'Tafolla articulates the exclusionary dilemma of Chicano/as:

No, this isn’t Middle America
or even upper lower
It’s barrio town we’re walkin’ through
And your watch is running slower.

There’s hunger here and anger too,
and insult and frustration. (90.25-31)
By stating that barrio town is not Middle America, Tafolla articulates the exclusion from United States culture that Chicano/as experience. Barrio town, though a neighborhood in an American city, is a separate entity, excluded from prosperity and relegated to poverty and frustration. In "At the Very Last Battle" the discourse of her poetry resonates within the poem’s images to reflect on the eternal Chicana dilemma of exclusion within the very country of her birth: "I turn the key and walk into the empty house,/ Alone like the rest of la raza,/ a stranger in my own home" (54.13-15).

Though the poem narrates the speaker’s journey home one afternoon, as she enters her own house, she enters her exclusion from mainstream society. The speaker of the poem is presented as a middle class educated individual, but, nevertheless, as a Chicana she is outside middle America and the American dream.

Both Garcia and Tafolla infuse "local color" throughout their texts as a way to highlight and celebrate Latina identity in the United States, and both reflect the crisis of exclusion for Latino/as in United States culture. Kevane notes that Latina writers "have been shaped largely by the fruitful interaction of the American, European, and Latin American literary traditions" (Self 13). Following through on Eliot’s "historical sense," Latina writers have moved beyond United States borders to develop an international sense of literary tradition, which they then bring to US American literature. Latina literature is a traditional literature, a US literature, one that is rewriting the texts of the past to include Latina voices and concerns. As part of literary tradition, Latina authors aggressively rewrite their canonical precursors and bring the crisis of exclusion to the American literary canon.
CHAPTER V

CONCLUSION

To End with a Beginning

I began this dissertation with the hope of finding some answers about how to write as a Latina poet. How should I incorporate Spanish into my English dominant poems? How do I speak of my grandmother’s altar and votive candles, and my mother’s faith that goes beyond a church’s stone walls? What does it entail to create literature that one day may be considered "art" as a woman, as a Latina woman, in this post-modern literary age? In a phone conversation to a very dear friend of mine, as I related the outline of my project, of my need to find a space of commonality among chicanas, puertorriquenas, cubanas and dominicanas, so that I too might write in the voice of a Latina woman, she questioned whether or not the entire category of Latina was simply a fabrication. Weren’t all Latinas actually separate members of the various nationalities that had immigrated to the United States, and therefore separate and distinct from one another? Being toward the end of this dissertation, I resoundly answered no! The commonality between the various Latina groups in the United States arises from our shared history of the Spanish conquest of the Americas where, until the Latin American independence wars of the 1800’s, for nearly three hundred and fifty years, what is now the Southwestern United States, Mexico, Central and South America, all shared in the painful process of change brought by los conquistadores and maintained through the Catholic church.
In her poem "La Malinche" Carmen Tafolla retells the story of Cortés' Aztec translator so that she is no longer personified as traitor, but instead viewed as the mother of a new beginning: "I saw a dream/ and I reached it./ Another world . . ./ La raza/ la raaaaaaa-zaaaaa . . ." (69.58-61). Tafolla locates la Malinche as the mother of "la raza," the combination of indigenous, black and European that is the mestizaje of today's Mexicanos but also of Latin Americans. Though the various indigenous groups brought about differences now seen in Latin American nations, such as the Aztec roots of Mexican culture, the Mayan influence in Guatemalan culture, the Incan aspects of Peruvian culture, all who are now considered Latin Americans formulated a new beginning after the conquest, one where survival demanded a mediation with colonial Spain and the Catholic church. Though Latin American history is a different history for each nation, it is also a shared history, one that Latinas writing in the United States also share and bring to their literature.

Latina literature moves the conception of "American literature" toward a Pan-American direction, where the defining moment of the Americas is located as the conquest of the New World. This is the baseline North, Central and South America share, and it is the stories after the conquest that make up our current political and societal tensions. We are all interrelated, and this one fact, too often ignored in the United States, Latina writers bring to the conversation, not only of literature, but of our current cultural configurations. Part of the "after the conquest story" is the development of the United States as a central political and economic power, which through its policy of "Manifest Destiny" and economic greed greatly affected the development of Latin America throughout much of the past two centuries. Though
the previous investigation in Chapter three focused on Catholicism within Julia
Alvarez’s *In the Time of the Butterflies*, Graciela Limon’s *In Search of Bernabe*, and
Ana Castillo’s *So Far From God*, these novels also showcase the effects of Manifest
Destiny ideology in Latin America and on Latina populations in the United States. *In
the Time of the Butterflies* profiles the Mirabal sisters’ personal efforts and sacrifice
that were necessary to rid the Dominican Republic of a United States sanctioned
dictator, Rafael Leonidas Trujillo. *In Search of Bernabe* presents the hardships and
tragedy of one El Salvadorian family struggling through the El Salvadorian civil war,
which led to the 1980’s immigration wave of El Salvadorians to the United States.
The historical backdrop for Castillo’s novel is the lasting legacy of second-class
citizenship of Mexican nationals caught in United States territories after the signing
of the treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo. These novels point to the interconnections
between United States foreign policy and the devastation within Latin America, and
that a cause of Latin American immigration to the United States is a direct result of
our interconnection, to put it nicely, or United States interference in the development
of these nations, to put it more bluntly.

In their literature many Latina writers recreate the experience of returning to
the homeland, *ese pais* with a stronghold on the imagination, that sends writers into a
search of history, of what happened when, where and why. I hope some day to return
to Nicaragua and find the convent my grandfather was supposedly born in, my great-
grandmother’s school for young ladies in Le n, my Tia Teresa’s house on the outskirts
of Managua that fell half apart during the 1972 earthquake, and the many other
locations of family stories. But of course there is even more to Nicaragua than my
personal connection; along with Cuba, Nicaragua is another nation that has stood up against United States imperialism and paid dearly for the right to self-determination and governance. I cannot tell whether I will write a novel, another collection of poems, or a non-fiction memoir since I've listened to the Latina writers under study and found that their relationship between the personal and the political informs, but does not dictate, how they create their literature as "art." There is no formula to Latina writing, instead as all writing, perhaps the "best" writing, each volume of Latina literature arises from personal necessity and a dedication to the aesthetical dimensions of the art. It is in the realm of literary criticism that the Pan-American dimension of Latina literature should be discussed, along with the aesthetic dimensions of the texts.

At the core of the Latina experience is the development of female identity within the patriarchal framework of the Catholic church. Beginning with the apparition of la Virgen de Guadalupe in 1531, Latina women have shaped Catholicism so that it empowers and supports them in a culture that to this day continues to keep women as wives, mothers, and caretakers. The Virgin Mary serves as a mediator, not only between those here on earth and the heavens above, but within the Latino/a family and culture. Veneration of la Virgen carries with it veneration of the mother and women in society. In Latina literature it is of utmost importance to identify and investigate how the images of the Virgin Mary and other feminine religious motifs, such as la curandera, support Latina women in patriarchal society. Religion in Latina texts is not simply an ethnographic matter of the specifics of one culture's religious worship, but is instead central to centuries of female empowerment.
through the renegotiation of religious practice in Latin America and the United States.

And again there is no one clear answer to this issue, but each Latina text takes up its
own discourse with this tradition. The manner in which religious devotion hinders or
supports women is at the core of religious signifiers in Latina texts.

I have written poems following through on the Latina connection to
spirituality and Catholicism during the process of this dissertation, but it is difficult to
put the critical eye to my own creative work. I know that the images of my grand-
mother’s altar and my mother’s faith have a hold on my consciousness, but I cannot
explicitly state that I wrote "San Martin de Porres" and "Las Madres at the Hispanic
Society of America" to empower the Latina woman. As I stated in Chapter IV, a
poem does not arise from an intention, but from an inner necessity. Though I have
come to honor the importance of spirituality for Latinas, I cannot set out to write a
poem based on a theory from the critical volume of the dissertation. However, the
work of this dissertation has become part of my understanding of Latina literature and
its relationship to Catholicism. I look at Chicana culture and the prevalence of
Guadalupe images with a bit of envy, in that Chicanas are still connected to cultural
aspects of la Virgen and continue to reformulate the image with each generation. I
wish I had a stronger connection to my family’s form of Catholicism. By the time I
was in second grade we were no longer attending Mass regularly, and I was in public
schools. My Abuelita Aminta, the one grandmother who maintained a bedroom altar
has passed away. I cannot go to her and ask the questions that I now have. This
passing of culture, this erasure that happens the longer one stays in the United States,
along with the very battle to maintain the culture and regain what is lost, functions as another central commonality within Latina literature.

The work of Julia Alvarez, Judith Ortiz Cofer, Cristina Garcia, Sandra Cisneros, Carmen Tafolla, and the work of other Latina writers, resounds over and over with the pull between two cultures, that of the dominant Anglo culture of the United States and that of the country of national heritage. How to create a stable identity as a bicultural bilingual woman is the topic of much Latina literature. And though there is never one stated answer that all agree to, the process of reconciling the irreconcilable is at the core of Latina literature. Anzaldúa proposes that this pull between two cultures creates a mestiza consciousness:

The new mestiza copes by developing a tolerance for contradictions, a tolerance for ambiguity. She learns to be an Indian in Mexican culture, to be Mexican from an Anglo point of view. She learns to juggle cultures. She has a plural personality, she operates in a pluralistic mode nothing is thrust out, the good the bad and the ugly, nothing rejected, nothing abandoned. Not only does she sustain contradictions, she turns the ambivalence into something else. (Borderlands 101)

Anzaldúa's mestiza consciousness permeates Latina literature. Latina identity as recreated in the literature emphasizes that the Latina woman does not have to choose between a US American identity and that of her familial heritage. Latina writers choose over and over not to make a choice, but to instead accept and value their bilingual bicultural selves with all the inherent conflicts and confusion. What arises from this perspective is a different way of being in the world, which does not demand clear-cut definitive answers, but instead acknowledges the vibrant reality of being two places at once.
At the center of the pull between two cultures is the pull between two languages, Spanish and English. I began my interest in this topic because I wanted to know the "right way" to include Spanish into my poems. After investigating the language issue in Chapter II, I now view the concept of a "right way" as reflecting how my own thinking about language has been formed as part of our cultural dynamics. So called "right ways" to speak and write are not verifiable concrete truths, but are instead cultural formulations that value certain linguistic performances over others, and throughout my experience as a Latina woman in United States society my use of Spanish, and especially my use of Spanglish, has been silenced. My desire to find the "right way" was a desire to validate my bilingual linguistic repertoire in a society that I perceived as continuously demanding English-only. I have given up the idea of a "right way," and now accept that at times my English is Spanish influenced and my Spanish is English influenced, and that's just the way it is. Even though I no longer feel the need to adjust my language into the "rules" of whatever discourse I encounter, it is impossible not to negotiate language as one writes and proceeds in our daily lives. I’ve been trying to allow the use of language that arises in my head to come out in my poems, in this dissertation, in the very way I speak, but this process is one of continuous negotiation between what I want to say, how I want to say it and society’s expectations.

In Latina literature the language issue is also at play, and functions as another avenue for critical investigation. Spanish in the English dominant texts of Latina writers arises from a desire to accurately portray personal experience, recreate the speech of contemporary Latina communities, and validate Latina cultural heritage.
The investigation of how and where Spanish appears in Latina texts is of paramount importance and relates to the overall societal conflicts between Latino/as and the dominant Anglo monolingual culture. Many Latina authors do not italicize Spanish as a way to promote Spanglish, the mixture of Spanish and English, as a legitimate linguistic strategy for Latino/as. On the other hand, though I agree that Spanglish is a legitimate linguistic strategy, one which I hope to allow myself to use more readily, I am English dominant and view italicizing Spanish not as an indication of a foreign language, but as a marker that aids the reader to code switch. Each Latina writer arrives at her own conception of how to use language, and these decisions are not haphazard, but indicate a negotiation between the author’s bilingual bicultural self and the dominant US monolingual society.

When I first started this dissertation project, I knew that combining the personal with the critical was outside the conventions of standard academic practice, but I also knew that I had to proceed in this direction in order to write in a voice that I could claim as my own. Smith and Watson note that the autobiographical functions as a cornerstone for women’s literature, and that "not only feminism but also literary and cultural theory have felt the impact of women’s autobiography as a previously unacknowledged mode of making visible formerly invisible subjects" (Women 5). I have told you one version of my path into latinidad, not as a way to proclaim my triumph as King or Queen of the mountain, but to show one journey of the many that are occurring right now throughout the United States by Latina women, writers or not. Storytelling is an opening, an invitation into the private world from where we all originate. Juanita Heredia, in the introduction to Latina Self-Portraits notes that "all
the writers we interviewed agree on one common technique that is shaping the form
of contemporary Latina literature: storytelling" (8). Telling the family story in
literature continues the oral tradition where the heritage and history of one generation
are passed on and preserved. But more so, storytelling is a communal form of
communication. The main idea of the story, the point, the moral is often left unsaid,
and so it is the listener, or the reader, who must discover the meaning of the tale. This
is not meant to obscure or to be mysterious, but arises out of respect for all
individuals as competent and intelligent human beings.


Delgadillo, Theresa. "Forms of Chicana Feminist Resistance: Hybrid Spirituality in


NOTES

1 John B. Thompson explains Bourdieu’s concept of the habitus as "a set of dispositions which incline agents to act and react in certain ways" (Bourdieu 12). Dispositions, acquired from early childhood, mold what an individual perceives as normal or acceptable behavior. Dispositions are not acquired through conscious effort, but are instead "inscribed in the most apparently insignificant aspects of the things, situations and practices of everyday life" (Bourdieu 51). The linguistic habitus, the set of dispositions an individual holds concerning language usage, is a sub-set of the habitus. Like the habitus, the linguistic habitus is learned subconsciously from early childhood and leads to an individual’s range of linguistic practices.

2 The Spanish used is the Spanish I hear in my head, and though this sentence is not "correct" Spanish I have been able to trace its English influence. It seems that it would be "correct" Spanish to say "la forma mas grande de respeto," or "la falta mas grande de respeto" both of which I may have heard as a child. In my Spanglish mind, however, "de respeto" sounds like the English "disrespect," and this calque sounds good to me in Spanish. But I also feel this is not the first time I have come across this phrase. It feels as though I’ve heard my mother say it when I was a teenager talking back to her.
The mixing of Spanish and English commonly understood as Spanglish may include code switches, along with calques and borrowings. A calque occurs when an expression is translated word for word in either direction resulting in a non-native like expression in the target language, for example translating "high school" to "escuela alta." The status of one word switches is debated among linguists today. When a word takes on the morphology of the target language then this word has been "borrowed" from the base language or "loaned" to the target language. Words that have altered their sound or spelling to coincide with the target language can be considered as belonging to that language and are not examples of code switching. However, classifying a single word as a borrowing or a code switch is difficult since a borrowing for one speaker may be a code switch for another. For example, if I state, "I’m going to have a burrito" the word "burrito" would be a borrowing if I pronounce the word in English, however it might considered a code switch if I softened the "b" and trilled the "rr."

Again, the Spanish used here is what I hear in my head, and may be English influenced.

Ibid.

Ernst Rudin in Tender Accents of Sound, his study of Spanish in the Chicano novel, notes that stylistic devices "range, in the case of Chicano texts, from code switching
passages to the use of Spanish words and loanwords and to the quotation of entire Mexican songs or poems, and from English phrases with a Spanish sentence structure to implicit and explicit comments on the often bilingual character of Chicano existence" (29). My analysis of Spanish within Latina texts is in accordance with Rudin's analysis.

1 I have kept Cisneros' use of Spanish. The title and refrain, "tú, que sabes de amor" does not accent "que" and this is perhaps meant to allow a double connotation of the phrase. Without an accent on "que" the phrase might translate to "you that knows of love?" while with the accent the phrase might translate to "you, what do you know of love?" Leaving off the accent allows for both interpretations simultaneously.

1 For a complete description and analysis of the Guadalupe apparition see Jeanette Rodriguez, Our Lady of Guadalupe: Faith and Empowerment Among Mexican-American Women, chapters 2 and 3.

1 See Ellen McCracken, New Latina Narrative: The Feminine Space of Postmodern Ethnicity, chapter 4. She presents an overview of syncretism as found in Latina religious practice and literature.

1 For a quick, but thorough, overture of Latin American Mary apparitions, see the Mary Resources Page at http://www.udayton.edu/mary/resources/english.html.
11 For an introduction to liberation theology see Penny Lernoux’s article "The Birth of Liberation Theology." Also of interest would be Carmen Marie Nanko’s "Justice Crosses the Border: The Preferential Option for the Poor in the United States."