

ABSTRACT

Title of Dissertation: THE U.S. LATINA BOOM: THE FORMATION OF A FEMINIST LITERARY MOVEMENT, 1984-2000

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The time period that spanned the late 1980s through the early 1990s saw an increase in production of U.S. Latina literature by women. Their production was so prolific it generated a Boom—a renaissance of Latina writing into the marketplace. This dissertation revisits what we may think of as a watershed moment in literary history and popular culture. I examine the impact of the Latina Boom on American literature writ large and on the U.S. publishing industry. Reading against arguments about the mere mainstreaming of ethnic voices, I contend that Latina Boom writers strategically used their respective positions to initiate progressive cultural change within and by way of the literary mainstream. Further, I argue that the Boom spans a wider timeframe than usually acknowledged, extending from 1984 to 2000. What's more, this extended Boom represents an ongoing a composite of multiple literary, social, and cultural movements that exceeds the bounds of the Boom as an ongoing process of revision, inspiration, and change.

When viewed as a collective, intentional effort within the mainstream rather than as individual accomplishment before the masses, the Latina Boom can be better

appreciated by scholars and readers for its impact on American publishing and literature. I argue that writers Sandra Cisneros, Cristina García, Julia Alvarez, Ana Castillo utilized the publishing market's interest in them to make visible and marketable a feminist literary movement. The biggest outcome of the Boom has been the expansion of the American canon and mainstream marketplace to include more diverse voices in American literature, most notably by a younger generation of writers who found their inspiration in their groundbreaking predecessors. I conclude with a discussion on the Latina Boom's beneficiaries, which includes authors Cristina Henríquez, Jennine Capó Crucet, Patricia Engel, and Kirsten Valdez Quade.

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THE FORMATION OF A FEMINIST LITERARY MOVEMENT, 1984-2000

by

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INTRODUCTION

The time period that spanned the late 1980s through the early 1990s saw an increase in production of U.S. Latina literature by women. This literature included now familiar writers such as Sandra Cisneros, Julia Alvarez, Ana Castillo, Helena María Viramontes, Judith Ortiz Cofer, and Denise Chávez. Their production was so prolific that it generated a Boom—a renaissance of Latina writing into the marketplace. Because of its flourishing into the market, the Boom is often framed as the entrance of Latino/a writers into the “mainstream” New York-based publishing world. This mainstreaming has been considered a crossover from small presses, such as Arte Público, into larger corporate publishing houses. Such crossovers granted Latino/a writers a wider reading audience through broad marketing campaigns. It propelled the careers of the aforementioned established writers into the mainstream, and it also ignited the writing careers of new voices, most prominently Cristina García, Achy Obejas, and Esmeralda Santiago. Notably, Latina women writers benefitted the most from the publishing market’s newfound interest in the U.S. Latino/a Boom writing and utilized this moment to make visible and marketable a feminist literary movement. By seizing upon this moment, they not only established a reputation for themselves but also collectively promoted a canon of U.S. literature written by Latina and Chicana women, merging the inclusion of diverse narratives with the demands of a marketplace hungry for new ethnic voices.

My project “The U.S. Latina Boom: The Formation of a Feminist Literary Movement, 1984-2000” revisits what we may think of as a watershed moment in literary history and popular culture. I examine the impact of the Latina Boom on American

literature writ large and on the U.S. publishing industry. Reading against arguments about the mere mainstreaming of ethnic voices, I contend that Latina Boom writers strategically used their respective positions to initiate progressive cultural change within and by way of the literary mainstream. Further, I argue that the Boom spans a wider timeframe than usually acknowledged, extending from 1984 to 2000. What's more, this extended Boom represents an ongoing a composite of multiple literary, social, and cultural movements that exceeds the bounds of the Boom as an ongoing process of revision, inspiration, and change. When viewed as a collective, intentional effort within the mainstream rather than as individual accomplishment before the masses, the Latina Boom can be better appreciated by scholars and readers for its impact on American publishing and literature. As we will see, the biggest outcome of the Boom has been the expansion of the American canon and mainstream marketplace to include more diverse voices in American literature, most notably by a younger generation of writers who found their inspiration in their groundbreaking predecessors.

To understand the context of the Latina Boom, we must revisit the decades that preceded it, beginning with the 1960s. In *Canons and Contexts*, Paul Lauter regards the social and political movements of the 1960s and early 1970s as transforming the U.S. literary canon. These movements included civil rights, women's rights, gay and lesbian rights, and the Young Lords and Chicano nationalist movements. Furthermore, the shifting population of students pressured universities to hire more diverse faculty members, including more women and minorities, and to add courses to the curriculum that centralized their experiences. Additionally, the entry of new faculty from historically marginalized groups into the academy precipitated the "canon wars," or the academic

debate over which writers merited study in the university literature classroom. These new voices in the university questioned the exclusion of minority, queer and women writers from the canon, and consequently, from college literature courses (Lauter 8-9). Lauter defines the literary canon as “a means by which culture validates social power” (23). However, Latinas and Chicanas did not yet possess the institutional or cultural power to solidify their own literary canon, nor did they possess a visible, accessible quantity of literary material to form one.

At this historical juncture, Latina and Chicana women were granted broader access to higher education due to affirmative action and Title IX initiatives. I argue that their university experiences provide them with the tools needed to train as writers and use their unique educational experiences to initiate their own literary movement. Many Latina and Chicana writers began writing in response to the literary void they witnessed in the classroom and in American society. By the 1990s, the U.S. Latina Boom provided a rich amount of accessible literary material for circulation in the university classroom, and cultural and literary scholars responded by developing new courses around this new canon. Before the Boom, courses concentrated exclusively on U.S. Latina writers were few, if not virtually nonexistent, in many colleges and universities. While many scholars focus on either Latino/a canon formation or the consumerism of Latina Boom literature, I assert that our contextualization of U.S. Latina literature must be expanded to include the unique historical moments after the 1960s that facilitated their opportunities to write and publish.

In this project, I contend that U.S. Latina Boom writers used the mainstream to ignite a new discourse on Latina women’s writing, in which they read and responded to

each other's work. As such, they adopted a strategy famously initiated by the Latin American Boom writers of the 1960s, a collective that included Carlos Fuentes, Gabriel García Márquez, Mario Vargas Llosa, Juan Rulfo, Julio Cortázar, and others (Parkinson Zamora qtd. in Cohn 6). The Latin American Boom gained equal recognition as a literary movement as well as an international marketing phenomenon, and it thrived from the piqued interest from U.S. publishers, translators, critics, and academics during the Cold War era (Cohn 2). Like their Latin American predecessors, U.S. Latina writers entered the global market after achieving successful sales, leading publishers to translate their work into multiple languages. In their important anthology *Latino Boom*, John Christie and José Gonzalez accredit the rise of U.S. Latino/a literature to Gabriel García Marquez's 1982 Nobel Prize, calling this era a "mini-boom" (xiv). While there are parallels between the reception of Latin American Boom writers and this "mini-boom" period of writers, Latino and Latina writers in the United States were not as widely received by the mainstream until the 1990s. For the purposes of my argument, I focus on how the Latina Boom movement stemmed from educational reform.

Beyond marketing strategies, there are other parallels between the Latin American Boom and the U.S. Latina feminist literary movement I discuss in this project. The Latin American Boom writers forged a collective literary identity to advance their cohesive ideologies—such as the liberation movements of the 1960s, support for the Cuban Revolution, and the celebration of Latin America's cultural autonomy—on the global stage (Cohn 6, 25). As Deborah Cohn writes, the Latin American "Boom authors felt that their goals formed part of a larger project, and so they strove to surmount the cultural nationalism of the recent past in order to forge a pan-Spanish American cultural identity

that would affirm commonalities shared by their nations rather than differences” (5). As I discuss in Chapter 3 of this project, Chicana writers extended their literary circles to other Latina writers, most notably Julia Alvarez, to offer them a new visibility and to expand the conversation on a U.S. Latina literary tradition. This movement consciously shifted away from nationalist affiliations to an inclusive U.S. Latina literary network that stressed their shared feminist politics, educational experiences, and cultural similarities. I do not suggest that the writers sought to erase differences in a multicultural celebration of sameness or assimilation. Rather, their work nuanced assumptions about their cultures by addressing shared histories of U.S. territorialization and intervention abroad, thus resisting easy interpretations of a monolithic Latina identity. By affirming each other’s narratives, the Latina Boom writers shifted their narratives from the margin to the center and challenged their audience’s indoctrinated beliefs about U.S. history. For these reasons, I liken this literary movement to the Latin American “Boom” of the 1960s.

Stylistically, the U.S. Latina writers I discuss in this project reinterpreted the literary conventions that emerged from the Latin American Boom, such as: the dictator novel, popularized by Vargas Llosa, American magical realism, innovated by García Márquez; and the incorporation of folklore, fantastical regional ghost stories, myth, and the privileging of narration by characters in poor or rural parts of the Americas, established by Rulfo. Furthermore, the Latin American Boom writers ruptured with the longstanding literary *bourgeoisie* to produce literature that spoke directly to the region’s burgeoning literate middle class at the time (Cohn 6). Additionally, the popularity Latin American Boom literature in the academy and in publishing challenged the New Critics, who asserted that the spheres of literature and politics should remain separate (Cohn 12).

While the Latin American Boom was largely male-dominated, the U.S. Latina Boom writers adopted these conventions and reoriented their readers toward a feminist interpretation of what would become distinct hemispheric American literary traditions. While Latina Boom adapted stylistically from Latin America Boom writers, their success is not a direct result from it. Furthermore, I argue that this U.S.-made boom results more from nationally based historical processes than as a result of an imported Latin American Boom.

The generation of Latina Boom writers has always perplexed scholars who attempt to sort out their relationship to the civil rights movements of the 1960s. However, the sudden success of Latina writers in the nineties did not happen in a historical and cultural vacuum. The feminist Latina Boom writers have been not only acknowledged but also separated from the political movements of the sixties. The late Juan Flores, for example, has said the Boom writers' success comes as a result from their thematic and personal distancing from low-income, inner-city life that marks the proliferation of early Latino writing, such as work by the Nuyorican poets and novelist Piri Thomas:

Broaching controversial themes of gender and sexuality, they offer up glimpses of middle-class Latino life in the metropolis, with all the travails and fits of nostalgia, but consistently from the vantage point of those who need not worry about being taken for Blacks or ghetto-dwellers. (Flores 176)

Far from the ghetto-ized narratives of marginalized minorities, the Boom writers thematized higher education and feminist politics in their work. Even Flores expressed his preference for radical “ghetto” literature by masculinist writers and street poets such

as Miguel Piñero and Pedro Pietri that echoes the nationalist sentiment of the 1960s. Flores implicitly critiqued the Boom writers' educational success and their upward mobility for failing to participate in the literature of the marginalized ethnic underclass.

I intervene in the privileging of underclass Latino/a and minority literatures as authentic cultural expression by considering the ways in which mainstreamed Latina writers produced within a context of upward mobility vis-à-vis higher education and social inclusion, the realized promise of the 1960s era. All of the writers Flores criticized—including Cristina García, Julia Alvarez, Judith Ortiz Cofer and Esmeralda Santiago—earned college degrees in the 1970s. Flores's critique failed to recognize that this very process of higher education in a civil rights, Title IX era gave the Boom writers the feminist tools they needed not only to write creatively, but also to critique patriarchal structures that suppressed women's voices in nationalist movements. Many of the Boom writers were responding to and criticizing the proliferation of the underclass macho texts that Flores admired even while participating in the promises of the dream of the middle class.

My project draws upon what Raphael Dalleo and Elena Machado Sáez have delineated as the post-Sixties Latino/a literary canon, or a new literary generation that appears around 1990. They argue that Latino/a literary scholars tend to either dismiss or celebrate literature appearing after the 1960s as apolitical and not engaging with the multifarious social causes of the decade, including anticolonial struggles. Dalleo and Sáez contend that Latino/a literature published after 1991 should be approached as the “interaction of cultural producers and market forces as a negotiation and not purely an exercise in appropriation and domination” (10). Dalleo and Sáez reframe post-Sixties

literature, or what I call the Latino/a Boom, in order to recuperate its connections to the political legacy of the civil rights era. I therefore expand upon their important critical work to address how Latina writers strategically use market forces to disseminate a collective feminist response to the preceding decades. My project differs from Dalleo and Sáez's concentration on Latino-Caribbean writers by considering how the *House on Mango Street*'s impacts the publishing careers of other Latina writers. However, my project moves beyond the discussion of civil rights to address how the concurrent social movements, as well as their aftermath, better frame a scholarly understanding of Latina Boom writers.

The attempt to connect Latina feminist writing to political struggles that had a tendency to undermine women's voices is not effective. Rather, it is helpful to address how Latina Boom writing is aligned with historical and cultural movements that allowed Latina writers in the U.S. to publish. In this project, I therefore address a historical gap that Latino/a literary scholars have yet to acknowledge and address: the transitional period within Latino/a letters in which cultural producers—made of affirmative action and equal opportunity programs, like Title IX—created a durable, visible U.S. Latina canon. Rather than label U.S. Latina literature as foreign, impoverished, or as exclusively as a result of immigration from Latin America—as some commentators have—I argue that Latina and Chicana writers emerged primarily from distinctive U.S. historical processes, including the benefits of entering the middle class. Their unique positioning of Chicana and Latina writers allowed them to benefit from advancements in higher education. Their cultural grounding as Latinas and their experiences in the academy came together—sometimes painfully—to inform their collective literary perspective and to

carve new outlets in American literature for narratives by U.S. Latina and Chicana women. The mainstream publishing market amplified the voices of U.S. Latina writers by publishing their work en masse after decades of struggling to be heard. Therefore, the mainstream publishing market became the means by which the U.S. Latina writer and the circulation of her work survived.

Embarking on an investigation of the Latina Boom not only requires attention to the way mainstream writers benefitted from Title IX and civil rights, but it also deserves a cross-cultural study of the disparate ethnic groups that constitute Latino/a identities. Any study on Latina Boom writers faces the challenge of a disciplinary divide between Chicano/a literary studies and Latina-Caribbean literary studies. Literary scholars often focus on one area or the other due to seemingly disparate geographic, historical, and cultural distinctions between Mexican-Americans on one hand and on Cuban-Americans, Dominican-Americans, or Puerto Ricans on the other. For example, the field of Chicano/a literary studies often focuses on the territorialization of former Mexican states into the U.S. Southwest after the Treaty of Guadalupe-Hidalgo was signed in 1848. Scholars of Chicano/a literature often address how writers discursively recreate the lost land of “Atzlán”, as well as its legends and history, through their work. Scholars focusing on Latino/a-Caribbean groups, including Puerto Rican or Nuyorican, Cuban, and Dominican writers, tend to thematize postcolonial discourses of migration or exile to places like New York or Miami. Furthermore, emphasis on these subgroups excludes attention to other articulations of *latinidad* in mainstream fiction, including writing by Colombian-American and Panamanian-American writers.

My project does the necessary work of bridging discourses on these various

subgroups across matters of class and geography and to unite our understanding of the Latina Boom writers' work through attention to the common U.S. historical processes that granted them access to higher education, and in turn, the publishing market. My intention is to move away from isolating each writer's success as an upwardly mobile individual phenomenon and explore instead how these writers collectively supported each other's work as readers even as they benefitted from the promises of the civil rights and Title IX era. I therefore depart from the notion that Latina writing of the 1990s reacted to and was shaped exclusively by the market. For example, I dispute the view offered in Ellen McCracken's *New Latina Narrative* and echoed in Ilan Stavans' recent *Norton Anthology of Latino Literature* that the genre of Latina literature that emerged in the 1990s is "market-driven." Rather, I explore the writers' formative influence on each other and on the Latina Boom as a collaborative literary feminist movement that took advantage of opportunities made available by mainstream publishing, while also defending and advancing the values of the movements that gave rise to the canon.

While the body of this project concentrates on the period commercial success for Latina Boom writers during the 1990s, the mainstream exposure of Latina women writers began in the early 1970s and slowly built momentum thereafter. In 1973, Nuyorican writer and visual artist Nicholasa Mohr published the illustrated bildungsroman *Nilda* with Harper and Row, followed by *El Bronx Remembered* (1975), *In Nueva York* (1977), and *Felita* (1979). In 1975, Mohr was awarded the *New York Times* "Outstanding Book of the Year Award" for the novel *El Bronx Remembered*, giving her both critical and commercial publicity at the national level (Kanellos 166). The New York literary establishment and a network of publishers, editors, agents, reviewers, academics, and a

college-educated readership, played (and continues to play) a central role in the commercial and critical reception of books like Mohr's (Ohmann 208). Mohr embraced the popular status of her writing, stating:

I liked the idea that my books could be part of popular culture in a way that my art could not be. As a writer, what I realized almost overnight was that anyone could read my books. Anyone could go to the library and read my books for nothing. In paperback people can buy them for relatively cheap prices. That made me happy. (Heredia 89)

Mohr was the first U.S. Latina woman writer to have her work published by the mainstream publishing market, disseminating Latina women's narratives to the masses and to the literary establishment almost simultaneously.

The importance of New York-based network of agents, publishers, and reviewers in circulating Latina literature to a wider audience cannot be underestimated. Mohr's writing—especially her writings from the 1970s—inspired writers like Sandra Cisneros and set an institutional precedent for the type of Latina literary production that would comprise the Boom during the 1990s (Heredia and Kevane 3). Mohr's prose writings, which spans the temporal setting from World War II, to her Bronx childhood in the 1950s and '60s, to the Vietnam War, correlates with the formation of a postmodern Latina literary tradition in the U.S. In an interview with Bridget Heredia, Mohr stated "I realized I had unconsciously done three books on my personal history because there was nothing about Latinos here and certainly nothing about Puerto Ricans. . . .It is as if I had to validate my existence as a Latina in the United States, my personal history" (90). Mohr's literary recollection of the past becomes a discursive practice of inserting Latina women's

narratives into a historical and cultural tradition that otherwise ignores them.

The mainstream publishing market provided the opportunity for the Latina woman writer's political and artistic participation in a way the nationalist movements of the sixties and seventies did not. Lisa Sánchez González has argued that Mohr's work is reflective of the civil rights movement's resistance narratives by "addressing its own conflicts and remedies in its own idiomatically rendered and generically improvised narratives during the postwar period" (132). She discerns Mohr's writing from the Boricua authors of the Latina Boom, such as Cofer and Santiago, by stating that Mohr's work responds to the "experiences of the Boricua community at large" as opposed to upwardly mobile, individualized narratives of the Boom (Sánchez González 158-59). Adopting Alice Walker's terminology, Sánchez González regards Mohr's work as exhibiting a "Boricua womanist" aesthetic as opposed to the white academic feminist sensibilities she considers Boom writers catering to. By comparing it to testimony by Young Lords's female leader Iris Morales, González posits Mohr's work as more authentically Latina and radical. However, this assertion evades the feminist intervention Morales and other women staged to be recognized as equals in the Young Lords Party, publicly rejecting the sexism they experienced in the party in their "Position Paper on Women."¹

I suggest that Mohr's work entered the mainstream at the height of coinciding feminist movements in 1973, and that feminism should not be viewed as a monolith. Rather, Latina women participated in feminist organizing that was particular to their respective communities, ethnic groups, and social class concerns, but their objectives were still in

¹ Morales and her female peers openly decried the oppression they experienced as Puerto Ricans, as women, as well as the sexism they experienced in their communities and in the Party. See MacLean 91-93.

line with the broader feminist movements at the time. For example, Puerto Rican feminists in New York protested the involuntary sterilization practices of poor women, especially Latinas, used widely for social control over minority populations (MacLean 26). While Sánchez Gonzalez criticizes Boom writers for capitalizing on themes of machismo, contemporary Latina writers have always contended with issues of gender oppression in their communities and in society at large. Mohr's novel is published six years after the much-lauded *Down These Mean Streets*, and her geographical proximity to New York publishers allowed her to enter the mainstream at a crucial time for Puerto Rican women living in New York. Mohr's novels were integral to the contemporary formation of a multivalent literary tradition that spoke out against the layers of oppression experienced by Latina women.

Writing by Latina and Chicana women flourished in the eighties despite, and many times in response to, a hostile social and political climate. Politicians of the Reagan Era sought to undo the civil-rights advances of the previous four decades by defunding social programs, co-opting the radicalism of the sixties, and empowering an Anglo-American national identity (Ortega and Sternbach 10). Reagan adopted Martin Luther King's rhetoric to support what he viewed as "color-blind" justice, subsequently rejecting affirmative action programs in the public sector. By catering to conservative white Southerners and blue-collar Northern whites, Reagan argued that affirmative action programs discriminated against whites, which he proposed King would have been against. By the late 1980s, women's rights groups protested the Reagan administration's nonenforcement of Title IX, which outlawed sex discrimination in schools and colleges (Wilentz 182, 185). Set against this antagonistic political backdrop, Latina and Chicana

writers used small, independent presses and literary journals, to continue the cultural production that had begun in the seventies. Their work often appeared in the feminist press Kitchen Table/Aunt Lute Press, as well as Arte Público, which is directed by Latino/a literary scholar and publishing pioneer Nicolas Kanellos.

The eighties were a powerful time for forming a collective presence of Latina and Chicana writing within the United States, despite the limited financial resources of these smaller presses. In 1981, the radical Chicana writers and scholars Gloria Anzaldúa and Cherrie Moraga edited and published *This Bridge Called My Back*, an anthology that solidified the presence of radical women writers of color, but it warranted collective feminist effort and financial backing to keep it in print. In the second edition of the anthology, the editors addressed the fact that *Bridge* went out of print two years after its publication. First published by the white feminist press Persephone in 1981, it was thereafter published in 1983 by Kitchen Table Press, an independent publisher run entirely by women of color. The anthology's transition from Persephone to Kitchen Table marked a crucial step for cultural production by and about minority women in the United States.

Anzaldúa and Moraga sought to resist discussions of the gender binary they found prevalent in white feminism and create a radical feminist discourse centered on relationships among women of color. They also explored themes of bias they experienced from white women in the broader feminist movement. The anthology tackled issues of prejudice from other minority groups and addressed sexism within their respective cultures. Collectively, the anthology articulated the differences among women writers of color while forging alliances across ethnic, race, class, and sexual identities. By

illustrating the connections among the women, the *Bridge* anthology set a precedent for using writing and publishing to create visibility for feminist writers of color in the U.S.

Adapting their language from the Third World political struggles of the 1960s and 1970s, the anthology's writers countered U.S. hegemony in the Americas, Africa, and Asia and promoted discursive solidarity with Third World feminists across the globe. The anthology sought to complicate U.S. Third World feminist politics by addressing how oppression stems from cultural heritage, sexuality, and class as well as gender. Anzaldúa and Moraga argued that writing by the U.S. Third World woman writer was the ultimate tool of preservation and revolution, especially in light of a political climate that threatened the advancements of women, people of color, and the anti-war movement.

Small presses were also instrumental in the promotion of work by women writers of color in the university classroom. As university educators, both Anzaldúa and Moraga were aware of how the anthology would be approached in college courses, citing literary scholars Barbara Smith and Norma Alarcón as the pioneers for contextualizing and promoting Third World women's writing (163). They asserted that "it is not enough to have our books published. We must also actively engage in establishing the criteria and the standards by which our work can be viewed" (Anzaldúa and Moraga 163). However, they were also aware of the tenuous thread between advancing the visibility of their work and the co-optation of it, especially by white feminists.

In "Speaking in Tongues: Letter to Third World Women," Anzaldúa discussed the paradox of writing as a university-educated woman of color. On the one hand, their education lent women of color the authority and the training to write and publish. On the other, Anzaldúa cautioned that clinging to one's "degrees, credentials, and published

books . . . are in danger of contributing to the invisibility of our sister-writers.” While it was necessary for women of color to have exposure, their adoption of academic language or formal literary training ran the risk of rendering other minority women’s writing as invaluable. The woman of color that catered to white feminists’ curiosity of them could be viewed as “La Vendida,” or the sell-out (Anzaldúa 167). Although the independent feminist presses that emerged in the 1980s provided for women writers of color to publish, it came with the risk of selling out:

For the Third World woman, who has, at best, one foot in the feminist literary world, the temptation is great to adopt the current feeling-fads and theory fads, the latest half truths in political thought, the half-digested new age psychological axioms that are preached by the white feminist establishment. Its followers are notorious for ‘adopting’ women of color as their ‘cause’ while still expecting us to adapt to *their* expectations and *their* language. (Anzaldúa 167)

As such, Anzaldúa exposed the double audience she addressed as a Chicana lesbian writer. Third World feminists still contended with having to compromise with white liberal feminists in order to be published, and the feminist presses still excluded them if they did not assimilate to their standards. Historically, these attitudes by feminist academics restricted the material about women of color in print, such as in journals, anthologies, and other feminist publications that circulated in academia. Thus, Anzaldúa’s role as an editor and writer privileged Third World women’s cultural production on their own terms.

While much of U.S Third World women’s writing and organizing occurred at a

grassroots level, it viewed the university classroom as an important site of radical intellectual transformation (Anzaldúa and Moraga introduction). Their intention to see the book used on course syllabi, in libraries, and in union meetings, illustrated a desire to merge intellectual thought and personal experience with the public sphere. Therefore, *Bridge* becomes crucial for its initial attempts to form canons by and about radical women of color, setting a precedent for scholars and writers to later emulate.

Despite their strong influence on the mainstream Latina writers, Moraga and Anzaldúa themselves were not explicitly included in this Boom. One of the reasons is that Moraga and Anzaldúa were both concerned with maintaining full authority over the work they produced, and they continued their relationships with independent feminist presses. Both were responsible for ushering in new waves of radical feminist theories, grounded in their intersectional identities as Chicana feminist lesbian writers. The mainstream publishing market tends to produce predominantly heteronormative narratives by Latina and Chicana women, although writers such as Ana Castillo and Achy Obejas have introduced queer narratives by and about Latina women into the mainstream. Another reason Moraga and Anzaldúa were not as easily introduced to the mainstream was their radical use of vernacular Spanish in their work, which often went untranslated or unexplained. In the 1990s, the use of Spanish in mainstream Latina literature was often italicized and translated for the reader, a publishing practice that is not as widely implemented in the new millennium. The “translation” of work by radical Chicana writers would undermine the very systems it wanted to resist, which included assimilation into a dominant, monolingual, heteropatriarchal culture.

The 1980s also marked the introduction of now-canonical Chicana writers, or

what was referred to as the “Chicana renaissance.” This was incited by the publication of Lorna Dee Cervantes’s poetry collection, *Emplumada*, published by the University of Pittsburgh Press in 1981. Three years later, Arte Público published the first edition of Sandra Cisneros’s *The House on Mango Street* (1984) and Ana Castillo’s *Women Are Not Roses* (1984), followed by Helena María Viramontes’s *The Moths and Other Stories* (1985), and Denise Chavez’s *The Last of the Menu Girls* (1986). In 1986, Bilingual Press/Editorial Bilingüe published Castillo’s epistolary novel, *The Mixquiahuala Letters*. In 1987, Gloria Anzaldúa published her groundbreaking work of experimental Chicana theory and poetry, *Borderlands/La Frontera with Aunt Lute*. Two years later, the University of Georgia Press published mainland Puerto Rican writer Judith Ortiz Cofer’s bildungsroman novel, *The Line of the Sun* (1989), which was nominated for the Pulitzer Prize that year (Heredia and Kevane 4). These works were the foundation for the Latina literary Boom of the 1990s, but the mainstream publishing world had been interested in minority women’s fiction since the 1970s.

The growing critical and commercial success of black women writers, such as Toni Morrison and Alice Walker, followed by Maxine Hong Kingston, Amy Tan and other Asian-American writers, and Native American writers Louise Erdrich and Leslie Marmon Silko, primed the New York publishers for writing by Latina and Chicana authors (Ortega and Sternbach 11). To better understand the U.S. Latina Boom, it is helpful to examine Toni Morrison’s impact on the publishing industry. As an editor at Random House in the 1960s and ‘70s, Toni Morrison played an instrumental role in identifying and publishing work by African-American women authors, including Angela Davis, Gayl Jones and Toni Cade Bambara (Als “Ghosts in the House”). Morrison used

her position at Random House to secure an editor and publish *The Bluest Eye*, which was published by Random House's imprint Knopf. Morrison had always been conscious of the popular market and attaining a readership. In 1977, she promoted an excerpt from *Song of Solomon* in the women's periodical *Redbook*, and she strategically chose the periodical to orient her work toward a broader readership that was feminist and literate at the time (Young 124).

The arrival of Morrison and her contemporaries initiated a second "Black Renaissance," one that focused on black women's literary success in the mainstream. As Henry Louis Gates Jr. has argued, Morrison's commercial success was dually important for the survival of black studies, which had become jeopardized in the mid-1970s (qtd. in Young 126). Therefore, the commercial exposure of such writers not only educated new readers on the experiences of women of color, but it provided the crucial popular and critical reception to sustain minority literary studies in the university. Although Morrison would leave her job as an editor in the early 1980s, she established new modes of marketing that would impact the Latina Boom of the 1990s. Furthermore, Morrison had a keen understanding of how to market high literature to the masses, including popular media, eventually forging a relationship with Oprah Winfrey in the 1990s.

In *Black Writers, White Publishers*, John Young argues that the re-edition of Morrison's novels for Oprah's Book Club allowed for financial and social accessibility, even after winning the Nobel Prize. He writes: "Morrison's efforts to construct herself as an author who participates equally in both high and popular cultures . . . develops from a tradition of exclusion out of which a commercial *and* canonical text appears a double dream deferred" (130). Additionally, Morrison's alliance with Oprah allowed for a

newfound market power that wasn't determined by publishers, but by Oprah herself, allowing Morrison to "redraw the lines among art, commodity, publisher, and reader" (Young 132). As Young notes, Morrison was not concerned with people consuming her books as she was with acquiring new *readers*, creating demand for her work and securing its continued circulation (132-33). In Chapter 1 of my project, I explore how Sandra Cisneros has similarly constructed her public identity, unapologetically participating in popular culture to expose the masses to literature by Latinas and to ensure the continued circulation of her work.

At the end of the eighties, literary critics found it difficult to explain why they were seeing a proliferation of Latina and Chicana writing and criticism, since they too were bearing witness to a movement in progress. In their 1989 essay "At the Threshold of the Unnamed," Eliana Ortega and Nancy Saporta Sternbach argued that historical processes cannot be detached from literary production, nor can formal education and upward mobility it creates be ignored as factors driving the expansion of Latina and Chicana writing and criticism (8-9). Ortega and Sternbach asserted that critics' emphasis on the writers' "identity," rather than on the historical and cultural production, dismisses the valuable contributions of Latina writers to changing the national literary landscape: "Such readings imply that the critic either doubts or questions the existence of a national or ethnic identity in said literature and, therefore, in its writers." They continue to argue that Latina writing is not so much a quest for identity, but rather for the formulation of a "paradigm of self-affirmation...a self-perception that stems from her rootedness in her heritage and in her historical circumstances." They further write that Latina literary discourse is not about a "search" for identity, but rather as a "search for the *expression* or

articulation of that identity” through the writing process (3). Writing by Latina women in the U.S. is not about a perpetual search for their place in a national landscape, but it is about boldly asserting their presence through the creation of diverse and dissenting voices in literature. Their writing effects democratic practices on the page, and in turn, in readers’ imaginations, in a nation in which it has yet to be successfully politically realized.

Despite the success of women writers during the 1990s, scholars tend to frame the Boom around Oscar Hijuelos’s 1991 Pulitzer Prize for *The Mambo Kings Play Songs of Love*. Hijuelos’s accolade provided U.S. Latino/a literary scholars the momentum to publish work on the burgeoning field of contemporary U.S. Latino/a literature. Therefore, the Boom provided a rich amount of material for literary and cultural studies scholars to explore in the classroom and in academic journals. Two widely-cited critical texts—Gustavo Pérez Firmat’s *Life on the Hyphen: the Cuban American Way* (1994) and Ilan Stavans’s *The Hispanic Condition* (1995)—declared Hijuelos’s novel as the catalyst of the Boom. Both of these works served as important foundational criticism in the field of U.S. Latino/a literary studies. While Stavans acknowledges Cisneros in *The Hispanic Condition*, he editorializes about her work, commenting that her style is “a bit slick to [his] taste” and always “ideologically charged” (74). Pérez Firmat’s work treats Latina Boom writers tangentially, briefly mentioning Cisneros and Cuban-American Cristina García as popular writers that succeed at reaching a broader readership before returning to an in-depth discussion on Hijuelos (144). As such, they privilege Hijuelos’s Pulitzer Prize accolade over the work that Latina women writers had done during the previous decade, dually as writers publishing in small presses and as university educators

developing the critical context for their own work. By valorizing Hijuelos as a pioneer and downplaying the success of Cisneros and García, they failed to fully acknowledge the origins of a literary movement in which Latina women's writing proliferated.

Finally, I'd argue that the U.S. Latina Boom writers capitalized on the ongoing debates on U.S. multiculturalism, which reached its peak in 1992. These debates were often characterized by paradoxes. On the one hand, multiculturalism rejected the black-white racial binary of the U.S. and asserted that there are five races: Caucasian, Black, Latino/Hispanic, Asian-American, and Native-American. On the other hand, it *avoided* discussions of race in favor of pluralism and "idealized equality" (Gordon and Newfield 2-3). Multiculturalism also rejected a Euro-centric common culture in the U.S., calling for the recognition of "non-Western" cultures, such as indigenous and pre-colonial African traditions. However, any challenge of white society and its implicit supremacy was viewed as threatening. In *Mapping Multiculturalism*, Avery Gordon and Christopher Newfield argued that capitalist democracy, or what is now referred to as "neoliberalism," went unchallenged by multiculturalism's emphasis on "cultural respect" (5). Moreover, any potential dialogue that sought to critically engage differences became coopted by the corporate workplace—such business models sought to emphasize workplace "tolerance," thus diluting the historical impact of affirmative action. As the U.S. shifted away from Cold War politics and toward increased intervention in the Middle East, the need for a unified culture to support the Gulf War efforts downplayed the differences that multiculturalism raised.

Set against the social backdrop of multiculturalism, the publishing market and American readership were eager to read about the experiences of Latina women in prose.

The writers often played up their own ethnic backgrounds when posing for photographic features in women's publications, such as *Cosmopolitan* and *Vanity Fair*. Like Morrison before them, they sought to use this multicultural moment to expose their work to a university-educated, literate, and likely middle-to-upper class woman reader/consumer—a new demographic undoubtedly formed by Title IX practices in the U.S. Cisneros in particular used her attractiveness and cultural identity—styling herself in traditional Mexican garb—to complement the releases of her work, for which she was unapologetic. In many ways, the Boom writers' images fulfilled an idealized construction of heteronormative Latina femininity in the U.S. reader/consumer's imagination. However, I argue that their work complicates such stereotypes of Latinas in the United States, often addressing such assumptions within their work to invert the reader's view of them. In the *New Latina Narrative*, McCracken suggests that the Latina author's success relied upon her ability to produce a “palatable multiculturalism” within a novelistic structure of agreed upon codes with her publisher, resulting in a commodified minority literature (6). While McCracken's tone is mostly critical, she does recognize their work was neither completely controlled nor entirely autonomous of the publishing market. Nonetheless, it is within this space that Latina writers establish what McCracken considers a “feminine space” from which sexual politics, or “ruptural feminism,” can emerge.

While it is true that the Boom writers' fiction was more profitable than their poetry collections, I disagree with commentators' common assertion that Latina Boom writers catered to a mostly white, liberal feminist reading audience. Like Morrison, the Boom writers were conscious of which conventions served the market, and it is not enough to imply that they “sold out.” Rather, they used the conventions of the publishing

market to transmit their assertion of feminism, which was always transnational in scope, to a general readership. Once they developed a reputation as prose writers, readers likely sought out their poetry, which tended to address frank discussions of sexuality, politics, and racial and ethnic oppression. Additionally, I argue that this new fiction was largely pedagogical and transformative for Latina and Spanish-speaking readers, who often were privy to code switching and cultural practices than the presumed monolingual, non-Latina reader. As such, they also participated in critical multicultural discourse, which not only denied a common Eurocentric culture, but also rejected the notion of English as sole language of the United States, a practice that had also been incorporated by contemporary Asian-American feminist writers. For the first time in publishing history, there was widespread accessibility to work by Latina women authors. This availability in turned fueled the demand for more writing by and about Latina women, thus igniting their cultural production in the mainstream and in the academy. My project thus explores the benefits of commercializing U.S. Latina literature without simply relegating these writers to the historically fraught terminology of the “sellout.”

Chapter Summaries

The following chapters trace the origins of the Latina Boom from the 1970s through the turn of the century. In chapter 1 (From MFA to the Mainstream), I discuss the importance of Sandra Cisneros’s documentation of her time at the Iowa Writers’ Workshop and how her experiences there compelled her to write *The House on Mango Street*. By examining Cisneros’s early career, I demonstrate how Cisneros was a crucial figure in launching the Latina Boom. Through a close reading of her earlier prose, *The House on Mango Street* and *Woman Hollering Creek*, I discuss how Cisneros set a

precedent for Latina women's narratives in the mainstream, through her original literary styles as well as through her marketing strategies.

In chapter 2 (Reading Beyond the Market), I examine how Cristina García directly benefitted from the early Boom with the publication of the novel *Dreaming in Cuban*. García's trajectory is different from that of Cisneros and Alvarez, but she became one of the most successful writers of the Boom period. My argument explores how the García interpolated the mainstream publishing market in order to redefine the American literary canon. My analysis looks at how García figures the American Dream into the novel and resists the mainstream, literary and cultural, as process of assimilation.

In chapter 3 (Every Revolution Needs a Chorus), I discuss how Julia Alvarez was an essential figure in diversifying Latina literature. I review how her strategic placement in a Chicana literary collective, "Las Girlfriends," led to her increased visibility as a Dominican American writer. Through a close reading of her novel *In the Name of Salomé*, I argue that Alvarez used her reputation to insert new narratives about Dominican women into American literature. I specifically use her 2000 novel to demarcate what I view as the transition between the Latina Boom and the new generation of Latino/a writers this period ushers in.

In my epilogue, I address how Ana Castillo returned to publishing with independent presses after twenty years of writing for the mainstream reader. I use her recent memoir *Black Dove* to revisit *So Far from God*, her canonical novel from the Latina Boom. I then offer my view of the writers who benefitted the most from the Boom, while highlighting younger authors whose artistic and publishing trajectory closely follow those of Cisneros, Castillo, García, and Alvarez.

CHAPTER ONE

From MFA to the Mainstream: The Beginning of a Movement in Sandra Cisneros's Early Prose

In August 1990, the *Los Angeles Times* published “Woman Hollering Creek,” the titular story of Sandra Cisneros’s prose collection. The story, which was published in the *Times*’ magazine supplement, came as Cisneros was transitioning from a small press into a broader U.S. reading public. The story focused on a Mexican woman, Cleófilas, who crosses the border twice, once to leave her overprotective, patriarchal family in Mexico, and the second time to leave her abusive husband in Texas. The story hardly made for light reading, but the *Times* promoted the piece as “Tales for a Summer Day.” Despite the mismatch, her agent’s strategic decision to market “Woman Hollering Creek” in the *Times* gave Cisneros a newfound visibility she hadn’t enjoyed with her previous publisher, Arte Público. Like her proto-Chicana literary foremothers in the earlier part of the century, Cisneros used print journalism to reach a larger reading audience. Cisneros’s exposure in the *Times* led to additional media exposure and over time helped to secure her place as a canonical author in U.S. literature. Cisneros would soon become the prototype her U.S. Latina contemporaries would emulate, rendering visible a literary movement that began in the mid-1970s.

A few weeks after “Woman Hollering Creek” made its debut, the *Times* published a letter from an offended Chicano reader who accused Cisneros of having a “superiority complex” toward “new immigrants” and shame of her language and culture. The reader, Miguel Sanchez Gracia from West Hollywood, argued that Chicanos are descendants of “peasants” who are not trained in the literary arts. He concluded by saying that these

same immigrants paid their taxes that in turn financed Cisneros's college education. Without explicitly saying so, Gracia criticized Cisneros for "selling out." The idea of "selling out," or being a *vendida*, was often attributed to women in the Chicano movement whose politics aligned with feminism or who desired upward mobility (Saldívar-Hull 83). By 1990, Cisneros had grown accustomed to criticism by male readers and writers discrediting her work. In an interview with Martha Satz, Cisneros expressed that many male reviewers were unhappy about her literary success:

I think the fact that I wandered into Texas with my awards rattling in my pocket threatened a lot of male poets...I can see that it really wasn't about me, but about someone else's unhappiness, which is what a lot of bad reviews are about (Satz 5-6).

It is telling that Gracia sought to undermine Cisneros's story publicly by filtering it through a masculinist Chicano-nationalist lens. By publishing "Woman Hollering Creek" in the *Times*, Cisneros and her agent Susan Bergholz were shifting away from a male-oriented narrative of Latino/a art and politics and towards a woman-centered one.

The national exposure that accompanied Cisneros's transition from *Arte Público* into the New York publishing market signified the public launch of a Latina feminist literary movement. However, Cisneros's journey to "mainstream" success could not have happened without her undergraduate education at Loyola University in Chicago and her career at the Iowa Writers' Workshop, where she began to write *The House on Mango Street* (1984), now a canonical work of American fiction. I include a discussion of Cisneros's two early works of fiction, *Mango Street* and *Woman Hollering Creek*, to address how her work discursively informs feminist theory, or what Sonia Saldívar-Hull

calls “feminism with a political consciousness” (103). I also examine how Cisneros’s educational experiences parallel those of her contemporaries, including Ana Castillo and Julia Alvarez, thus shifting from a narrative of upward mobility to recognizing her role in a feminist collective she coined “Las Girlfriends.” Cisneros explores the Latina writer and artist’s agency to keep their work in circulation, despite political, historical and financial attempts at erasure. In this chapter, I analyze Cisneros’s two story collections to trace her transition from the small press into the “mainstream,” which ignited an entire Latina feminist literary movement.

The most significant trait the Latina Boom writers share is that they were not only first generation college students within their own families, but they were overwhelmingly the first generation of women granted widespread access to higher education for the first time in U.S. history. Cisneros’s biography aligns with the transitional stage after 1965 that sought to implement affirmative action and equal opportunity programs, as well as the passage of Title IX. Cisneros earned her bachelor’s degree from Loyola University in Chicago in 1976 and then attended the renowned Iowa Writers’ Workshop, where she earned her MFA in 1978. In an interview with Martha Satz, Cisneros acknowledged that these shifts in higher education allowed her to become a writer: “I’m grateful to have had the opportunity to attend a university, unlike many young writers I’ve met in the barrio and in the communities who work in isolation. I was born at a time when there were government grants that allowed me to pursue higher education” (Satz 3). Cisneros’s access to higher education enabled her to develop a unique consciousness—she experienced social change firsthand while developing a narrative outlet for those writers whose work remained unrecognized.

Although the educational opportunities presented to Cisneros in the seventies opened doors for her, she often describes her experience at Iowa as isolating and antagonistic. In a 1988 interview with Pilar Rodriguez Aranda, Cisneros stated that *Mango Street* resulted from her newfound awareness of her gender, race and class while at the Iowa Writers Workshop:

The *House on Mango Street* started when I realized I didn't have a house. I was in this class, we were talking about memory and the imagination, about Gustave Bachelard's *Poetics of Space*. I remember sitting in the classroom, my face getting hot and I realized: "My god, I'm different! I'm different from everybody in this classroom" (Aranda 65).

While training formally in poetry, Cisneros began to write *Mango Street* in response to her difference from her colleagues at Iowa. Cisneros's reaction to her marginalized position in the classroom led to an experimental style of fiction: the vignettes of poetic prose that comprise *Mango Street*. Cisneros's unique aesthetic hybrid of poetry and prose can therefore be viewed as a reaction to her formal education.

In *The Program Era: Postwar Fiction and the Rise of Creative Writing*, Marc McGurl argues that the particular form of Cisneros's fiction results from the alienating environment at the Iowa Writer's Workshop, or what he calls "enabling disablement." McGurl regards her time at Iowa as giving access to the literary field that *Mango Street* paradoxically capitalizes on and critiques: "Cisneros's long journey to success in this field began when she learned to convert her disabling sense of otherness into a valuable, because relatively scarce, form of cultural capital" (336-37). McGurl labels Cisneros's unique position in Iowa, and later in the academy, as the "inside-outer" (338). As a result

of her training, Cisneros was given access to the university classroom which she would later transform as a writer and teacher. However, McGurl's definition of education refers exclusively to a writer's academic education, whereas Cisneros and her Chicana contemporaries also regard their rupture with patriarchal Mexican and Chicano culture as an essential part of their education.

Historically speaking, Cisneros and her contemporaries entered college during the height of "el movimiento" and the second-wave feminist movement. The male-led Chicano movement was always at odds with the feminist movement, and Chicana women who identified as feminists were considered traitors or sellouts, in contrast to those who identified with the men of "la raza" who were deemed "loyalists" (Roth 154-55). In *Life in Search of Readers*, Manuel Martín-Rodríguez contextualizes contemporary Chicana narrative within a historical framework from the 1930s through the 1970s Chicano movement. During this era, Chicana women were silenced in campus newsletters and magazines, serving as "invisible labor" while the male members were perceived as the leaders or public intellectuals (Martín-Rodríguez 69-70). The fact that Cisneros's time in Iowa has been so well documented is in itself a radical statement. Chicana women writers faced a dual historical and discursive silencing—first, within the university and second, by their peers within the movement. As more of them enrolled in college as a result of civil-rights advances, Chicanas also needed to learn how to develop a discursive awareness of gender, ethnicity or "raza," and class. This education, or "consciousness-raising," caused many Chicanas to align with other women of color during the Third World feminist movement of the 1980s.

Cisneros participated in a thriving Chicana literary presence in the eighties

despite, and many times in response to, the hostile social and political climate. The Reagan era sought to undo the advancements of the previous two decades by defunding social programs, co-opting the radicalism of the sixties, and empowering an Anglo-American national identity (Ortega and Sternbach 10). The rise of the independent ethnic and feminist press also occurs in the 1980s, including Aunt Lute and Third Woman Press which provided publishing opportunities for women writers of color. Aunt Lute's publication of renowned anthology *This Bridge Called My Back* by Gloria Anzaldúa and Cherrie Moraga in 1981 made Third World feminist writers more visible. While Cisneros published poetry with Third Woman Press and reserved some of her work for independent presses, she published her fiction, *The House on Mango Street*, through the southwestern Latino press Arte Público, which was increasingly successful.

Arte Público, which was founded in 1979 by literary scholar Nicolás Kanellos, initially published many Latino/a writers who are now famous but were unknown in the 1980s. In 1980, Arte Público became partly backed by University of Houston, which made it an academic press. Given Arte Público's academic affiliation, it could be said that Cisneros's complex relationship with the university does not end at Iowa. In 1984, Arte Público published Cisneros's *House on Mango Street*, followed by Helena María Viramontes's *The Moths and Other Stories* in 1985, and Denise Chavez's *The Last of the Menu Girls* in 1986. These publications by prominent Chicana writers is often referred to as the "Chicana renaissance," a period facilitated by the writers' training in MFA programs.

Cisneros, Viramontes, Chavez, as well as Ana Castillo, were all actively writing in the seventies and followed similar trajectories from MFA programs, to the small

presses, and finally the mainstream. Chávez earned her master's in Creative Writing at the University of New Mexico, where she wrote *The Last of the Menu Girls* as her thesis (Kevane 39). Viramontes earned her MFA at the University of California in Irvine, where she began to write *Under the Feet of Jesus*, published by Plume in 1995 (Kevane and Heredia 34-44, 141-154). Ana Castillo's *The Mixquiahuala Letters*, published by Bilingual Press in 1986, and later republished by Bantam Books in 1992, is also included in this renaissance. Despite the decline of educational opportunity programs during this decade, college-educated Chicana and Latina writers found an outlet and newfound visibility through Arte Público.

While *Mango Street* was being read in the university classroom, it had not yet achieved widespread public national recognition. In 1985, Cisneros won the Before Columbus American Book award for *Mango Street*, which also received academic acclaim. Arte Público later categorized the novel in the "Young Readers" section of its catalog, causing Cisneros to lose a major portion of her university reading audience (Saldívar-Hull 82). Arte Público's decision to reorient *Mango Street* toward a younger audience mimicked Random House's categorization of Nicholasa Mohr's *Nilda* as children's literature in the 1970s, as I discussed in the introduction. Mohr and Cisneros developed a narrative voice that challenged the racist and sexist values of American literary institutions, but their work became infantilized rather than recognized as literary acts of resistance.

It is important to acknowledge that Arte Público's strategy to reorient Cisneros's audience affected her both artistically *and* financially. In the late 1980s, Cisneros met agent Susan Bergholz, who negotiated the rights to *Mango Street* back from Arte Público

and then sold them to Random House. McGurl limits his discussion of Cisneros's relationship to the academy with Iowa, but Arte Público participated in another form of silencing Cisneros's work. By deciding which audience *Mango Street* was marketed to, the press minimized the novel's contribution to the university classroom. Even more so, the economic relationship between professors assigning texts in the classroom often sustains a text's circulation, and Arte Público's decision to market the novel to younger audiences impacted Cisneros financially. Cisneros often worked multiple jobs to sustain her living expenses despite winning literary accolades for *Mango Street*. Her serendipitous meeting with Bergholz provided her with the financial and artistic independence she needed to sustain her work: "I learned the business side the wrong way, by signing on the dotted line—and then later on I had to get an agent who helped save me from the mistakes I'd made... So the best thing that ever happened was to find Susan Bergholz... When I talk to young women, I tell them you don't need a husband, you need an agent" (Olsen and Schaeffer 222).

Cisneros's relationship with Bergholz restored her artistic right to her work, and it likely saved *Mango Street* from literary extinction. In 1989, the same time Bergholz retrieved the rights to *Mango Street*, literary critic Ellen McCracken made a well-timed warning about the novel's impending obscurity: "Difficult to find in most libraries and bookstores, it is well known among Chicano critics and scholars, but virtually unheard of in larger academic and critical circles." She expressed that while major publishers could easily capitalize on Richard Rodriguez's *Hunger for Memory* (1982), Cisneros's work resisted similar recognition because "it [spoke] another language altogether, one to which the critics of the literary establishment remain blind" (McCracken "Sandra Cisneros" 63).

Shortly thereafter, *Mango Street* became a national best-seller and transformed Cisneros into a canonical literary figure.

Cisneros's transition from the independent press into the mainstream exemplifies the feminist literary movement in progress she catalyzed. Just as Chicana women were excluded or unacknowledged within the Chicano nationalist movement, Cisneros's work risked being trivialized at Arte Público. Martín-Rodríguez argues that Chicano/a-oriented presses, which he refers to as "la marketa," differ from the mainstream market in that they maintain a nationalist readership for Chicano/a writers (114). He argues this is not possible in the mainstream market where Chicana/o literature is commodified. Martín-Rodríguez argues that Random House's marketing of *Mango Street* toward a multicultural audience shifts readers' expectations of the book, thus diminishing the book's "counterhegemonic impulses" (129-132). While Martín-Rodríguez clearly favors "la marketa" as maintaining an authentic reading experience of Chicano/a texts, I propose that the mainstream press has been especially liberating for Cisneros, especially in terms of financial and artistic autonomy. In the case of *Mango Street*, "la marketa" mimicked the same marginalization women experienced within the movement itself.

If Cisneros's reflection on her experience at the Iowa Writer's Workshop motivated *Mango Street*, then her departure from Arte Público marked a rupture from nationalist loyalties that limited her reading audience, and her royalties. Cisneros was not the only writer who transitioned from independent presses into the "mainstream." Many of her contemporaries, including her fellow "girlfriends" (as they called themselves) Alvarez, Castillo, Chávez, Viramontes, as well as Judith Ortiz Cofer, were already publishing with small presses before the mainstream took notice in the late eighties and

early nineties. However, Cisneros was the first, and arguably the most visible, Latina literary figure to do so. A re-reading of *Mango Street*, with this historical hindsight in mind, allows readers to better appreciate how the woman-centric literary movement that Cisneros belonged to untethered Latino/a literature from the male-dominated nationalist movement of the 1960s.

The House on Mango Street and the Beginning of a Movement

In the 2009 re-edition of *House on Mango Street*, Cisneros includes an essay “A House of My Own” as the new introduction to the book’s twenty-fifth anniversary publication.¹ Cisneros begins by offering a portrait of herself as a young writer in Chicago and presents a retrospective essay to help her readers contextualize a Latina literary movement in progress. More importantly, this new introduction guides the reader away from the narrator Esperanza’s perceived individual “upward mobility” and places her within a larger collective of women. Cisneros uses the essay to situate herself in the nascent Latina literary movement of the eighties and accredits renowned literary scholar, editor, and *Third Woman* publisher Norma Alarcón with unifying her with her colleagues on the page and in person. In what reads like an open letter to Alarcón, Cisneros identifies the U.S. Latina woman writer’s charge to serve:

At Iowa we never talked about serving others with our writing. It was all about serving ourselves. But there were no other examples to follow until you introduced me to Mexican writers Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz, Elena Poniatowska, Elena Garro, Rosario Castellanos. The young woman in the photo was looking for another way to be—‘otro modo de ser.’

¹ This essay is included in the 2015 publication of Cisneros’s collection of personal essays with the same title.

Cisneros realizes that she may have been experimenting with style but retroactively inserts herself in a matriarchal Chicana literary lineage. Furthermore, she rhetorically shifts the attention away from her isolating experience as a writer to acknowledge her position within a larger collective of feminist writers: “Until you brought us together as U.S. Latina writers—Cherríe Moraga, Gloria Anzaldúa, Marjorie Agosín, Carla Trujillo, Diana Solís, Sandra María Esteves, Diane Gómez. . .Denise Chávez, Helena Viramontes—until then, Normita, we had no idea what we were doing was extraordinary” (*Mango Street* introduction 2009). Cisneros’s friendship with Alarcón seems to have healed some of the wounds of her graduate training.

Marc McGurl attributes Cisneros’s rise to the post-World War II MFA classroom, but I’d suggest that Cisneros’s experiences as a first-generation college student, and later her involvement in the Third World feminist movement, are equally important. The *House on Mango Street* is a result of Cisneros’s formal training at Iowa but also a reaction to it. If Iowa gave Cisneros the tools to understand form and theory, it also provided a model for what she did *not* want to emulate. Cisneros, like her contemporary Julia Alvarez, who I discuss later, did yet not have models of Mexican, Chicana or Latina writers for reference. Therefore, I propose that not only is *Mango Street* a reaction to the institutions that represent the “great American writer” as male, white, and monied, but it serves an experimental prototype for what was to come in U.S. literature as Latina women from different socioeconomic class backgrounds began to publish their work. The novelty of the university experience and the sense that a Latina woman could pursue writing is evident through Esperanza’s coming of age.

The novel introduces the reader to Esperanza’s nascent radical identity in the

vignette titled “My Name.” I approach this vignette as the young Esperanza’s inheritance of multiple stories: “In English my name means hope. In Spanish it means too many letters. It means sadness, it means waiting” (*Mango Street* 10). Esperanza inherits her name from her great-grandmother, an indigenous woman who is kidnapped by her Mexican grandfather. The narrator then meditates on the astrological significance of the protagonist’s name: “She was a horse woman too, born like me in the Chinese year of the horse—which is supposed to be bad luck if you’re born female—but I think this is a Chinese lie because the Chinese, like the Mexicans, don’t like their women strong” (10). The novel’s early vignette parallels the opening of Maxine Hong Kingston’s *The Woman Warrior*, published in 1975. Esperanza’s discussion of her name alludes to Kingston’s introduction of her silenced aunt, or the ghost haunting her stories, in *Woman Warrior*’s “No Name Woman.” Kingston’s seminal novel served as a literary prototype for U.S. Latina writers, including Cisneros and Alvarez, who did yet not have the recovered literary foremothers accessible to readers today.

The Woman Warrior opens with a young narrator listening to her mother’s cautionary tale about her forgotten aunt, who commits suicide after her village turns against her for adultery, evidenced by her pregnancy. The narrator’s mother warns: “Now that you have started to menstruate, what happened to her could happen to you. Don’t humiliate us. You wouldn’t like to be forgotten as if you had never been born. The villagers are watchful” (Kingston 5). Rather than digest her aunt’s story as a cautionary tale of what a woman should not do, the narrator fills in the silences of her life and attempts to restore her agency:

She looked at a man because she liked the way the hair was tucked behind

his ears, or she liked the question-mark line of a long torso curving at the shoulder and straight at the hip. For warm eyes or a soft voice or a slow walk—that’s all—a few hairs, a line, a brightness, a sound, a pace, she gave up family (Kingston 8).

The narrator beckons her aunt’s ghost, her unfriendly muse, to invert gender expectations. The narrator’s aunt is not only punished for her sexual transgression, she is ultimately destroyed for betraying her community. When her in-laws’ house is pillaged the night of her childbirth, the forgotten aunt gives birth and then drowns herself and her infant in the family well. The narrator illuminates the aunt’s “bad luck” Esperanza references in *Mango Street*: “It was probably a girl; there is some hope of forgiveness for boys” (Kingston 15). The narrators of *Woman Warrior* and *Mango Street* inherit stories that they ultimately redeem. Esperanza’s desire for a better narrative inheritance causes her to reject her great-grandmother’s story in favor of a new one. She thinks, “I have inherited her name, but I don’t want to inherit her place by the window” (11). The text’s allusion to *Woman Warrior* recognizes Kingston as a literary foremother while situating a burgeoning Chicana literature in direct conversation with Asian-American feminist narratives, establishing a discursive alliance that would later recall Third World feminism.

The vignette also references Malcolm X and the black radical movement of the sixties. Like the radical leader, Esperanza rejects indoctrination in order to create a new identity based on her alternative educational process. Esperanza dismisses her scholastic identity given to her by the state in favor of a politicized one: “At school they say my name funny as if the syllables were made out of tin and hurt the roof of your mouth. . . . I

would like to baptize myself under a new name, a name more like the real me, the one nobody sees. Esperanza as Lisandra or Maritza or Zeze the X. Yes. Something like Zeze the X will do” (11).

Esperanza adopts her new pseudonym from black radical leader Malcolm X, whose movement is clearly making an impression on her but whose exact politics she may be unaware of. In the interview with Satz, Cisneros remarked that she derived Esperanza’s nomenclature from her love affair with Malcolm X’s autobiography: “I love the ‘X’ in Malcolm X and the idea of his choosing that as a name. I am and always have been enamored with exotic names...and so the name came out intuitively” (Satz 5). The significance of “My Name” situates *Mango Street* in the artistic and political climate of the immediate past, from movements in progress, into the formation of a new narrative.

The allusions to *Woman Warrior* and *Autobiography* lends to the radicalism of Esperanza’s artistic development, while situating *Mango Street* in a broader dialogue. Without the publications of *Woman Warrior* or Malcolm X’s *Autobiography*, *Mango Street* would not have literary predecessors to be based on. Both *Woman Warrior* and *Autobiography* function as resistance narratives in U.S. literature, a tactic Esperanza employs by rejecting her great-grandmother’s narrative. The novel’s reference to both texts reveals its debt to the multiple narrative of sixties radicalism. Chinese-American feminist narratives bump up against the bravado of Malcolm X’s black radical machismo, and both of them combine with Cisneros’s training at Iowa to inform *Mango Street*. The phenomenon of bearing witness to multiple movements, of hearing a diverse range of political voices contend with each other, manifests within the novel as polyvocality.

Esperanza is introduced to the possibility of attending college through her

neighborhood mentor Alicia. In the vignette “Cathy, Queen of Cats,” Esperanza turns the narrative over to her neighbor Cathy, who discloses in her gossip that “Alicia is stuck-up ever since she went to college” (12). Esperanza becomes more aware of her racial and class background when Cathy mentions that “the neighborhood is getting bad”; the new neighbors that Cathy’s family wants to avoid look just like Esperanza and her family (13). Esperanza’s interaction with Cathy positions her own family against those with property and inheritance. Cathy brags about her French heritage and discloses the one day her father will “fly to France” and find a distant relative on her father’s side in order to inherit the family house. Esperanza thinks, “In the meantime, they’ll just have to move a little farther north from Mango Street, a little farther away every time people like us keep moving in” (13). The juxtaposition of Cathy’s inheritance with Alicia’s college attendance creates a rift between the women from two socioeconomic classes.

Cathy can rely on a financial inheritance, her French “house,” and her established Euro-American past. Alicia, on the other hand, must work to finance her university education, which results in a rupture from her family’s expectations for her. The divide between Cathy and Alicia echoes Cisneros’s statements about feeling “different” at Iowa. Martin-Rodriguez argues that Cisneros employs the “house” in *Mango Street* as a metaphor for the book in which her characters and stories live. He says that by creating a narrative space, or “rooms” for each character, each is permitted a “room of her own” (Martin-Rodriguez 73). In contrast to Cathy, who as a white character can boast of her metaphorical narrative heritage, Alicia and Esperanza as Latinas must establish their own narrative spaces through the educational process.

The character Alicia is the first to attend college in her family, but her progress

has consequences. In the vignette “Alicia Who Sees Mice,” Esperanza portrays Alicia as a surrogate mother to her younger siblings, and even more provocatively, as a substitute wife to her widowed father. The reader is introduced to Alicia through her father’s voice, which invalidates Alicia’s claims of mice in the kitchen because he is not present to see them. Alicia is a first-generation Chicana college student who is caught between the civil-rights and feminist advances that allow her a formal education and paternalistic ideologies that are threatened by educated women on the other. Alicia’s father scolds that “a woman’s place is sleeping so she can wake up early with the tortilla star.” However, Alicia is haunted by the mice in her kitchen when she dares to use it as a place to study rather than as a place for cooking. Esperanza says:

Alicia, who inherited her mama’s rolling pin and sleepiness, is young and smart and studies for the first time at the university. Two trains and a bus, because she doesn’t want to spend her whole life in a factory or behind a rolling pin. Is a good girl, my friend, studies all night and sees the mice, the ones her father says do not exist. Is afraid of nothing except four-legged fur. And fathers (*Mango Street* 31-32).

Alicia’s “room” is inhabited by mice, symbolic reminders of her class and her father’s machista gender politics. Like many Chicanas within el movimiento, Alicia is forced to choose between her personal and professional fulfillment or the demands of traditional Mexican culture by Chicano men. By denying the existence of the mice, Alicia’s father invalidates her experience of the sexist system he benefits from.

As Esperanza comes of age, she starts becoming aware of her gender and the shame and guilt that ensue from the desire to advance. In “The First Job,” the narrator

reveals that she lies about her age in order to secure a job at the local dime store.

However, Esperanza doesn't want money for trivial pursuits of childhood. She wanted a better education: "Catholic high school costs a lot, and Papa said nobody went to public school unless you wanted to turn out bad" (*Mango Street* 53). The dime store becomes an isolating site for Esperanza, who is in the company of strange adults. On her first day of work, she is assaulted by an older Asian man working the night shift. The transgression shocks Esperanza: "He had nice eyes and I didn't feel nervous anymore. Then he asked if I knew what day it was, and when I said I didn't, he said it was his birthday and would I please give him a birthday kiss. I thought I would because he was so old and just as I was about to put my lips on his cheek, he grabs my face with both hands and kisses me hard on the mouth and doesn't let go" (55). Esperanza's attempted transition into an adult space reveals to her that adults sometimes abuse their power, especially the men in the neighborhood who leer at girls.

"The First Job" is Cisneros's first published counter to the macho constructions of "barrio" literature, such as Piri Thomas's *Down these Mean Streets* (1967). Cisneros has remarked that her male contemporaries tended to romanticize their experiences in "el barrio" as a rite of passage into manhood. For women and girls, it was a dangerous: "I found [el barrio] frightening and very terrifying for women. The future for women [there] is not a promising one. You don't wander around 'these mean streets.' You stay at home" (Satz 3). "The First Job" exposes girls' limitations of movement in the neighborhood, which include prematurely working to afford school. On the contrary, the popular "barrio" novels exist due to one's male privilege and the ability to move untethered throughout one's neighborhood. Cisneros's inclusion of "The First Job" places *Mango*

Street in conversation with the Nuyorican arts movement of the 1960s and 70s, of which Piri Thomas was a member. Like her contemporary Julia Alvarez, who I address later, Cisneros was reading work by Latino male contemporaries but could not relate to the romanticized machismo inherent in their work.

Throughout the novel, Esperanza becomes increasingly aware of her narrative power and her ability to manipulate characters. In “Born Bad,” Esperanza and her friends Lucy and Rachel play a game of charades that shifts from impersonating celebrities such as Wonder Woman, the Beatles and Marilyn Monroe, to their neighbors and family members. Esperanza’s decision to impersonate her Aunt Lupe, once a beauty with “swimmer’s legs” and now a disabled person, reveals feelings of guilt attached to creating characters that are personal to the writer. Aunt Lupe becomes Esperanza’s trusted audience for her poems, and it is Aunt Lupe who tells the protagonist: “You must keep writing. It will keep you free, and I said yes, but at the time I didn’t know what she meant” (*Mango Street* 61). Aunt Lupe’s death causes Esperanza to question her narrative responsibility to her characters: “The day we played the game, we didn’t know she was going to die. . . We imitated the way you had to lift her head a little so she could drink water, she suck it up slow out of a green tin cup. We took turns being her. . . And then she died, my aunt who listened to my poems” (61). In retrospect, Esperanza realizes that her aunt had been dying, but this vignette reveals the guilt an author faces at the possibility of betraying one’s audience.

Felicia Cruz traces the novel’s arc of the narrative “I” from the childlike narrative of young Esperanza early in the text, to the apprentice-writer in the text’s middle, to the final authoritative “I” in the final vignette. The authoritative “I” refers back to the novel’s

opening, but situates the narrator in the position of established storyteller, of "looking back" and recounting rather than actively narrating, like the young Esperanza (Cruz 933-34). The narrator ultimately likens this game to an apprentice's mistake, and Aunt Lupe's death marks a shift in the narrative voice.

For the women of Mango Street, the "rooms" or houses they have are not safe spaces for writing. As a writer, Esperanza shows that women's artistic spaces are threatened by patriarchal violence. In "Edna's Ruthie," Esperanza, Lucy and Rachel befriend the adult daughter of their neighbor. Ruthie appears on Mango Street after an argument with her husband, and she discloses to Esperanza that she chose marriage over a career in show business. Ruthie, a former children's book author, teaches Esperanza how to craft analogy and metaphor. Esperanza reveals, "Ruthie sees lovely things everywhere. I might be telling her a joke and she'll stop and say: The moon is beautiful like a balloon. Or somebody might be singing and she'll point to a few clouds: Look, Marlon Brando. Or a sphinx winking. Or my left shoe" (*Mango Street* 68). Ruthie must now recite her ideas orally because her physically abusive relationship has impaired her ability to read and write. Esperanza, adopting Ruthie as a literary mentor, learns to recite C.S. Lewis's "The Walrus and the Carpenter" in the hopes of impressing her. However, Esperanza is only a reminder of Ruthie's abandoned artistic past. Ruthie remains in a liminal position of not having a home of her own, nor the ability to express herself creatively even if she did.

Esperanza attempts to find another mentor in Minerva, a fellow poet and neighbor, but Minerva has inherited a cycle of poverty and violence. Minerva's economic background does not support her poetic inclinations: "But when the kids are asleep after

she's fed them their pancake dinner, she writes poems on little pieces of paper that she folds over and over and holds in her hands a long time, little pieces of paper that smell like a dime" (*Mango Street* 84). Esperanza says that Minerva's poems are "always sad like a house on fire" (84). By witnessing both Ruthie and Minerva's circumstances, Esperanza realizes that her role as narrator is limited: "Next week [Minerva] comes over black and blue and asks what can she do? Minerva. I don't know which way she'll go. There is nothing *I* can do" (85). Esperanza uses the sense of defeat she feels for Minerva and Ruthie and channels it into her desire to write. By assuming the authorial "I" in her own story, Esperanza exerts a newfound control over the narrative, rather than allowing events to happen to her and the women around her.

Esperanza's odyssey on Mango Street results in an awareness of her gender and class status that she has not yet articulated. By telling the stories of her neighbors, Esperanza narrates her evolving education and the Chicana consciousness it creates. Saldivar-Hull argues that Esperanza's desire for education is not about an "escape to an academic ivory tower, but is one option that allows the Chicana working-class intellectual the possibility of a return 'for those who cannot out'" (102). Saldivar-Hull regards Esperanza and Alicia as "organic intellectuals" whose ability to change their communities comes from their first-hand experiences. Saldivar-Hull writes:

Like Anzaldúa in her urge to return to South Texas to continue her work on the border, Cisneros presents the young Esperanza with a consciousness that the task of Chicana activist, feminist intellectual involves transforming the role of the traditional intellectual. Instead of serving as functionaries for the dominant class and gender, Alicia and

Esperanza threaten to become ‘new intellectuals’ who confront and defy the dangers of Mango Street and engage in real sociopolitical and cultural confrontations by speaking to their own people. The return is...the book itself (102).

I would add that this “return” refers not only to the characters and to Cisneros, but also to those who write about them. The novel then is not so much about Esperanza’s upward mobility as it is about cyclical return to Mango Street. In order to serve others through the education and through writing, Esperanza must undergo a dual process herself: an education by the university and an alternative education that cultivates an awareness of gender, raza, and class. In order for Esperanza to return to Mango Street through the medium of writing, she must also recognize the privilege a formal education gives her in her community.

Alicia serves as a steadfast mentor for Esperanza, and her experiences set the tone for Esperanza’s rift with traditional cultural expectations for girls and women. Unlike Alicia, Esperanza has a supportive family but her father still subscribes to traditional gender roles. Esperanza expresses her dissatisfaction with gender norms in Mexican culture through silent revolutions. She envisions herself as the femme fatale in the movies who possesses agency. Esperanza thinks, “Her power is her own. She will not give it away” (*Mango Street* 89). She translates this power to her domestic space: “I have begun my own quiet war. Simple. Sure. I am one who leaves the table like a man, without putting back the chair or picking up the plate” (89). Esperanza’s conscious decision to break tradition suggests that her small acts over time will ultimately cause a personal revolution. Besides Alicia, Esperanza also heeds her mother’s advice to “go to school

[and] study hard” (91). Her mother and her comadres serve as reminders of what happens when women submit to cultural expectations. Her mother tells her, “shame is a bad thing, you know. It keeps you down. You know why I quit school? Because I didn’t have nice clothes. No clothes, but I had brains . . . I was a smart cookie” (91). While Alicia represents the risk of being called “stuck-up” or a sellout, Esperanza’s mother warns her of the consequences of allowing critics to impede her progress.

Esperanza receives a blessing to leave Mango Street through a twist of fate, or rather, through the Three Fates. Esperanza’s writing partner, Minerva—named after the mythological Roman goddess of wisdom and the arts—fails to escape patriarchal control, but Esperanza’s chance encounter with the three sisters enables her to leave home. Esperanza’s description of them lends to the vignette’s mythical tone: “They came with the wind that blows in August, thin as a spider web and barely noticed. Three who did not seem to be related to anything but the moon. . . The aunts, the three sisters, *las comadres*” (103). The sisters see into Esperanza’s future and advise: “When you leave you must remember to come back for the others. A circle, understand? You will always be Esperanza. You will always be Mango Street. You can’t erase what you know. You can’t forget who you are” (*Mango Street* 105). Cisneros’s reference to the Fates suggests *Mango Street*’s role as a Latina writer’s origin story, a narrative odyssey that Esperanza must undertake to forge a new story, one that is grounded in the United States. When Esperanza laments that she doesn’t have a home, Alicia reminds her, “Like it or not you are Mango Street, and one day you’ll come back too” (107). Despite her jealousy of Alicia’s original “home” in Guadalajara, Esperanza recognizes that her origins are found on Chicago’s Mango Street and that this unique position informs her stories.

Esperanza's odyssey results in *The House on Mango Street*, the formation of a new text to be included in a community of Latina and Chicana writers. The final two chapters of *Mango Street* suggest, as Cruz has argued, that Esperanza has attained her house and speaks authoritatively in the role of storyteller (Cruz 934). The verb tense shifts from future perfect to the present in the vignette "A House of My Own":

Not a flat. Not an apartment in back. Not a man's house. Not a daddy's. A house all my own. With my porch and my pillow, my pretty petunias. My books and stories. My two shoes beside the bed. Nobody to shake a stick at. Nobody's garbage to pick up after. Only a house quiet as snow, a space for myself to go, clean as paper before the poem (108).

Esperanza creates a woman-centered "home" that supports the intellectual writing process. Esperanza applies the knowledge she gleaned from witnessing other women's lives and their responses to patriarchal dictates that infringe upon women's opportunities for education and the arts. The women of Mango Street cannot "out" the way Esperanza has, and so Esperanza collects their stories in order to write them (110). The informed reader traces Esperanza's narrative throughout *Mango Street* and in doing so undergoes the same alternative education, or what Saldívar-Hull calls "organic intellectualism," as Esperanza (102).

The adult Esperanza insinuates that she has experienced both educational processes—the "traditional" university experience, albeit not traditional for a Chicana, as well as the "coming to consciousness" of the woman writer. In the final vignette "Mango Says Goodbye Sometimes," Esperanza reveals that she is in the process of writing *Mango Street*: "I like to tell stories. I am going to tell you a story about a girl who didn't want to

belong... I put it down on paper and then the ghost does not ache so much. I write it down and Mango says goodbye sometimes. She does not hold me with both arms. She sets me free” (110).

What is most radical about *Mango Street* is that it makes Chicana and other minority female characters as its focal point. The final chapter emphasizes its literariness through poetic prose while establishing an "anti-academic" voice (Cruz 916). In other words, Cisneros creates the world of *Mango Street* in order to establish opportunities for Chicana and Latina writers to create fiction. In this way, *Mango Street* differs from *Woman Hollering Creek*, which Cisneros wrote consciously for a “mainstream” audience. In the late eighties, Cisneros used the momentum and the exposure her relationship with Bergholz granted her in order to purposefully establish a visible U.S. Latina literary presence she dreamt of in *Mango Street*.

Woman Hollering Creek and the Mainstream

The fact that Cisneros established her public identity in the pages of *Los Angeles Times* paralleled the ways Mexican-American women writers shared their work earlier in the twentieth century. As Tey Diana Rebolledo discusses in *Women Singing in the Snow*, Mexican women have a long, albeit forgotten, history of printing literary work in newspapers. Between 1880 and 1890, Spanish-language newspapers flourished in the new U.S. territories of New Mexico, Texas, Arizona and California. These newspapers often featured literary supplements by well-known writers in Spanish and English and influenced the formation of male-dominated literary societies. Women were permitted into poetry and drama societies, but they were presumably from wealthy families and were formally educated. Additionally, between 1913 and 1920, only two well-known

women writers, María Enriqueta and Rosario Sansores, were featured regularly in the leading San Antonio newspaper *La Prensa*. Local women's writing was often censored by a biased editorial board made up of men who published a few pieces by an author and then would not publish them again (Rebolledo, *Snow* 20-21).

This proto-Chicana literary tradition in English extends as far back as 1872 with María Amparo Ruiz de Burton's *Who Would Have Thought It?*, followed by the now canonical *The Squatter and the Don* (1885). From 1920 to 1950, Chicana writers such as Josefina Niggli and María Cristina Mena published in American periodicals such as *Century* and the *American Magazine*, and *Mexican Life* and *Ladies' Home Journal*, respectively (Rebolledo, *Snow* 24). In the sixties, Chicano literary scholars recovered Jovita Gonzalez's *Caballero* as a proto-Chicana epic novel written for a primarily Anglo audience and was co-authored by the white American writer Eve Raleigh.² Like *Caballero*, all of the writers above needed to be recovered by Chicano literary scholars and historians, and this foundational work was predominantly done during the seventies and eighties to include a range of minority authors in the academy. *The House on Mango Street* would likely have suffered the same fate as Cisneros's foremothers had Bergholz not negotiated the rights back from Arte Público.

Bergholz sold *Mango Street* and Cisneros's subsequent story collection, *Woman Hollering Creek*, to Random House and its subdivision Vintage, in 1989 and 1991, respectively. Bergholz became an instrumental force in transferring artistic and financial independence back to Cisneros. It should be noted that Bergholz was also responsible for negotiating big deals with New York publishers for Julia Alvarez, Ana Castillo, and

² For a discussion of *Caballero* as a precursor to Chicana literature, see Cotera.

Denise Chavez. The year 1991 was a watershed moment for U.S. Latina literature: the publication of *Woman Hollering Creek* and Julia Alvarez's *How the García Girls Lost Their Accents* represented a breakthrough for U.S. Chicana and Latina writers.

It is Bergholz who propelled Cisneros and her contemporaries into popular media outlets, from the *L.A. Times* to women's glossies such as *Vanity Fair* and *Cosmopolitan*. The September 1994 issue of *Vanity Fair* glamorously featured Cisneros photographed glamorously with Alvarez, Castillo and Chávez, who were collectively touted as "Las Girlfriends" (Rebolledo 126). This exposure provided the writers with a broader reading audience, but this has not always been viewed positively within the realm of Latino/a literary studies. The 2011 *Norton Anthology of Latino Literature* introduces "Las Girlfriends" as a "media-manufactured drive to promote their works as kind of a movement" (Stavans 1465). However, the emphasis on "media-manufactured" undermines the alliances that emerged among these writers, initiated by Cisneros from her San Antonio home. For new students of U.S. Latino/a literature encountering these authors for the first time in the *Norton*, it diminishes the importance of this historical period. It also denies the long feminist literary history of Latina and Chicana writers publishing in periodicals to become acknowledged as writers.

Rather than dismiss "Las Girlfriends" as a "kind of a movement," I propose we see them as a progressive feminist alliance that formed among Latina writers to initiate cultural change from the outside in. In fact, Cisneros coined the "raunchy," ambiguous name "Las Girlfriends" to highlight their cultural connection and collective power. The *Vanity Fair* writer, Michael Shnayerson, wondered: "Were Las Girlfriends...lesbians? Loose women? Or, given that each keeps an altar to various virgins not far from her

computer, literary cultists?” In fact, the feature also highlighted the friendship and mutual respect between Cisneros and Alvarez: “In one teaching gig, Cisneros used Julia Alvarez’s poems; Alvarez, it turned out, was using *Mango Street* in another; eventually, mutual admiration drew them together” (128). There is an undeniable sensationalism of the writers in the article, but the piece also managed to highlight the mutual feminist politics in the women’s work. The *Vanity Fair* feature rightly stressed “Las Girlfriends” as a collective that is informed by access to education, the publishing market, and by feminism.

Unlike *Mango Street*, *Woman Hollering Creek* debuted directly into the mainstream. The collection features narrative vignettes of girls and women living in Seguin and in San Antonio, Texas, two towns that are separated by a creek that forms a natural border. “Woman Hollering” is a loose translation of La Llorona, a woman who according to legend drowned her children and as punishment now haunts riverbeds. Metaphorically, the creek also represents women’s voices that refused to be silenced. On literary and meta-literary levels, this collection marks Cisneros’s transition into the mainstream. As Ellen McCracken writes in her important work *New Latina Narrative*, *Woman Hollering Creek* “uses postmodernism’s complicity with the dominant order to critique that very order. The text works against containment even as it is being contained” (17). McCracken argues that Latina writers of the Boom participated in a “modified Orientalism” with their publishers with respect to the minority culture they represented. Borrowing a term from Edward Said, McCracken suggests that Latina writers had to comply with publication codes that were framed by a multicultural “optics,” or the desire to consume an idealized or presumably authentic version of

minority culture. Although Latina writers spoke for themselves, they had to write about their culture in a way that would make it appealing for consumers to buy (McCracken 5-6). The creek metaphorically works as the cultural form that restructures the literary landscape.

Like her Mexican-American literary foremothers, Cisneros was conscious of writing for a predominantly Anglo audience, but used the mainstream for didactic purposes. Rather than acquiesce to the cultural commodification of her work, Cisneros inserted unromantic representations of Chicano/a characters from working class backgrounds. The short vignette “Mericans” demonstrates the possibility of literary tourism, or a superficial reading of “ethnic” literature in order to experience a particular culture while evading its history. The story’s young narrator Michelle, or Micaela, impatiently waits for her “awful grandmother” to finish her prayers inside the San Antonio mission church, where she watches pilgrims and tourists congregate. Michelle is ostracized from playing with two brothers, Keeks and Junior, who run around the grounds role playing Flash Gordon and Ming the Merciless, or the Lone Ranger and Tonto. Michelle observes Junior’s encounter talking to a markedly different couple outside the church: “They’re not from here. Ladies don’t come to church dressed in pants. And everybody knows men aren’t supposed to wear shorts” (20). The couple represents the uninitiated visitor, or reader, to the cultural space of the church, or story. Junior, who only moments ago had been playing pretend, approaches the tourists’ fetishization of him as opportunity to get what he wants:

‘Quieres chicle?’ the lady asks in a Spanish too big for her mouth.

‘Gracias.’ The lady gives him a whole handful of gum for free, little

cellophane cubes of Chiclets, cinnamon and aqua and the white ones that don't taste like anything but are good for pretend buck teeth (*Woman Hollering* 20).

The visitors assume that Junior doesn't speak English, and he plays into their native informant fantasy only to disrupt it. The conversation continues: "Por favor, says the lady, *Un foto?* Pointing to her camera." To which Junior responds "Sí." After the woman snaps Junior's photo in front of the church, he immediately breaks character and yells, "Hey Michele, Keeks. You guys want gum?" Junior's aside surprises the tourists who exclaim, "But you speak English!" Junior replies, "Yeah. We're Mericans." The phrase "We're Mericans" is repeated, mimicking a child's schoolyard taunt. The statement not only disrupts the visitors' expectations for an "authentic" Mexican experience, but it also haunts the grandmother inside praying for her Americanized grandchildren (20).

I view "Mericans" as an example of the "doubly encoded" form that McCracken regards as a characteristic of postmodern Latina fiction. Like Junior, the text plays along with the cultural expectations of the reader, only to shift her presumptions of what ethnic literature is. The story refuses to romanticize Mexican cultural history for its reader, much like Mr. Gracia, the angry *L.A. Times* reader. Instead it interjects protagonists who are "Mericans," a slight variation on "Mexicans." Junior's performance of Mexicanness and his assertions of being "Merican" valorizes a cultural existence that was always there if only Americans had bothered to pay attention.

In "Never Marry a Mexican," Cisneros explores themes of betraying "la raza" by playing with the stigmatized "Malinche" archetype. The narrator Clemencia stresses the

class differences between her middle-class Mexican father and his family's rejection of her working-class Chicana mother: "If he had married a white woman from *el otro lado*, that would've been different. That would've been marrying up, even if the white girl was poor. But what could be more ridiculous than a Mexican girl who couldn't even speak Spanish" (69). As a result of her own rejection by a Mexican family, Clemencia's mother taught her to avoid Mexican and Latin American men as potential lovers. Clemencia's rejection of Mexican lovers in favor of white, married ones recalls the misogynist story of the Spanish colonizer Hernan Cortez and his native translator, known in history as Malinche or Malinalli.

The story itself plays with class differences and firmly grounds Clemencia, a substitute teacher and painter, as occupying an ambiguous class status: "Any way you look at it, what I do to make a living is a form of prostitution. People say, 'A painter? How nice,' and want to invite me to their parties, have me decorate the lawn like an exotic orchid for hire. But do they buy art?" (71). Clemencia understands there are times she is being used as a "token" by the elite, and she uses her inclusion in their circles to invert power structures.

In many ways, Clemencia's ambiguous class status works as a critique of the Latina writer's status in the mainstream. Clemencia admits: "I'm amphibious. I'm a person who doesn't belong to any class. The rich like to have me around because they envy my creativity; they know that can't buy *that*. The poor don't mind if I live in their neighborhood because they know I'm poor like they are, even if my education and the way I dress keeps us worlds apart. I don't belong to any class" (72). The adjective "amphibious" connects to the water metaphors that appear in "Woman Hollering Creek"

and in the title itself. Together they suggest the process of women's narratives actively shaping the artistic landscape in which they are contained. As an artist, Clemencia is aware of the broader audience that supports her work and understands that she must compromise to make a living. Clemencia is aware that her education creates a rift between her and her working-class neighbors, but she is unapologetic.

In "La Boom," a 1989 *Mother Jones* feature on breakout Chicana writers, Cisneros described the alienation of Chicana writing from American literature, from the Chicano male literary tradition, and (I'd also add) from the male-dominated landscape of U.S. Latino letters. At the time of the piece, Chicana women were still excluded from Chicano literary anthologies, even as they were being recognized by the mainstream publishing market. Cisneros is now famously quoted as saying that Mexican American writers are "definitely the illegal aliens of American lit...the migrant workers in terms of respect" (*Mother Jones* 15). Cisneros's statement mirrored that trailblazing quality of her work.

Cisneros used *Woman Hollering* to expand on some of the themes she introduces in *Mango Street*, solidifying a distinctive Latina feminist literary tradition. Cisneros reclaimed the barrio as a site where the Chicana artist may not entirely belong, but it is where she does her work. Clemencia thinks: "I thought it would be glamorous to be an artist. I wanted to be like Tina or Frida...I was ready to suffer with my camera and my paint brushes in that awful apartment for \$150 each because it had high ceilings" (*Woman Hollering* 72). The imagery of the San Antonio apartment and its location among Mexican bakeries, Latino grocery stores and cafeterias with "more signs in Spanish than in English," demonstrates Clemencia's initial complicity with romanticizing a Latino

neighborhood. The depiction gives the impression of a tourist walking through the barrio during the day but would refuse to venture into at night. Clemencia juxtaposes this quaint view of a Latino neighborhood with its nocturnal inverse: “The barrio looked cute in the daytime, like Sesame street. . . . But nights, that was nothing like what we knew up on the north side. Pistols going off like the wild, wild West.” When Clemencia’s sister Ximena tells her that they should go home, Clemencia responds: “Shit! Because she knew as well as I did there was no home to go to” (73). Clemencia’s education and craft displaces her from any home or community, recalling the young Esperanza in *Mango Street*.

“Never Marry a Mexican” follows Clemencia’s long-term affair with her married art teacher Drew, whose bearded features grants him the nickname “Cortez.” Drew in turn calls Clemencia “Malinalli, Malinche, my courtesan” during sex, evoking the historically contentious relationship between the Spanish conquistador and his indigenous translator and lover, often regarded as traitor to her people (74). Within the Chicano movement itself, the term “malinche” was used as a slur against feminist Chicanas. Given Clemencia’s resolve to “never marry a Mexican,” she finds herself in a relationship with a married white man who never leaves his white Texan wife for her. As an act of revenge, Clemencia begins sleeping with Drew’s son, her art student, when he is a teenager. She reclaims her power by actively constructing the affair with Drew from her perspective: “I paint and repaint you the way I see fit, making the world look at you from my eyes. And if that’s not power, what is?” (75) Modern feminist interpretations of la Malinche restore the historical figure’s image as a royal indigenous woman who was betrayed by her people and given as a gift to Cortez. Mallinalli rose to power by helping Cortez conquer the land. Clemencia uses her position of power in white artistic circles to

invert the power structures—she uses acts of betrayal and revenge to create work she ultimately profits from.

In a narrative flashback, Clemencia recalls the Christmas she and Drew decided to end their affair. Drew also implies that he not could leave his wife and “marry a Mexican,” branding Clemencia as the Other Woman. Clemencia’s movements through Drew’s house allow the reader to tour the stifling environment as if an intruder. Frustrated by the house’s sterility, Clemencia upsets the wife’s toiletries to make her presence noted, albeit subversively. She proceeds to litter the wife’s toiletries with gummy bears, including placing them in expensive lipstick containers and in her diaphragm case. Most menacingly, Clemencia undoes the Russian babushka dolls, steals the baby and replaces it with a gummy bear. She thinks, “Drew could take the blame. Or he could say it was the cleaning woman’s Mexican voodoo...It didn’t matter. I got strange satisfaction wandering about the house and leaving them in places only she would look” (81). Clemencia uses the gummy bears to make herself visible, even though Drew and Megan’s Mexican housekeeper will be the scapegoat. Clemencia regains her power from the babushka baby serves she steals:

On the way home, on the bridge over the *arroyo* on Guadalupe Street, I stopped the car, switched on the emergency blinkers, got out, and dropped the wooden toy into that muddy creek where winos piss and rats swim.

The Barbie doll’s toy stewing there in the muck. It gave me a feeling like nothing before and since (82).

Throwing the baby in the *arroyo* works to disrupt the orderliness of the babushka dolls, or any presumed order in form. Clemencia’s infraction against her art teacher and

paramour represents a rupture with her formal training.

In this retelling of the Cortez-Mallinalli legend, la Malinche gets the last word through her art. She utilizes the tools from her formal training to disrupt form with her point of view. However, Clemencia uses her vagrant status and training to tell the story her way, assuring her listener, “you know what I have to say isn’t always pleasant” (83). Through her painting, Clemencia assumes a feminist viewpoint that has otherwise been historically silenced and otherwise manipulated by patriarchal reconfigurations of powerful women. Read as a metaphor for American letters, the scene parallels the process of Cisneros and her contemporaries entering the mainstream to create change from the outside in.

The significance of “Las Girlfriends” as a name for the literary collective that emerged with Cisneros can be found in “Bien Pretty,” the final story in *Woman Hollering Creek*. Lupe, the narrator, is an educated Chicana artist who is removed from her people and who tries to reclaim her authentic culture through painting. She becomes involved in a failed love affair with Flavio, an indigenous Mexican man. However, she doesn’t see him as a man but rather as the subject for her painting about legendary Aztec warrior Prince Popocatépetl and his princess and volcanic deity Ixtaccíhuatl. Lupe’s fascination with Aztec legend and myth recalls the reclamation of Aztec and Mayan traditions in the Chicano nationalist movement. It also reveals a culture that revered Chicana goddesses as sacred but didn’t translate this reverence to equality for women.

The mythical creation of her lover as Popocatépetl is soon disrupted by Flavio’s real backstory. When Lupe realizes her prince is really a twice-married man with several children in Mexico, her hopes for interpreting the painting are deflated. After a bout of

escaping reality by watching *telenovelas*, Lupe becomes frustrated with the lack of agency offered to the heroines. In her dreams, she begins “slapping the heroine to her senses, because I want them to be women who makes things happen, not women who things happen to.” Rather, Lupe wants stories about “[r]eal women. The ones I’ve loved all my life....The ones I’ve known everywhere except on TV, in books and magazines. *Las girlfriends. Las comadres*. Our mamas and *tias*. Passionate *and* powerful, tender and volatile, brave. And above all, fierce” (161).

Belkys Torres writes that Cisneros adapts the telenovela format for *Woman Hollering Creek* in order to centralize women’s needs for solidarity and community. Rather than re-create a genre in which women characters aren't unified and compete for upward mobility and marriage, Cisneros incorporates telenovela themes of gossip, romance and melodrama to promote woman-centered coalitions (Torres 214). The love story that endures in Cisneros’s writing is the one about women’s relationships: friends, sisters, daughters, and mothers.

A rereading of “Bien Pretty” suggests that Cisneros wasn’t being coy when she named herself, Alvarez, Castillo and Chávez “Las Girlfriends.” Not only were these women in control of the narratives they were creating, but they were also in control of the narratives created about them in the media. “Las Girlfriends” should be seen as an appropriate name for a cross-cultural feminist literary alliance that successfully changed American literature from the outside in. The impact of this movement can still be felt within the publishing industry and American literature. Not only are all four members of “Las Girlfriends” still publishing, their commercial success created opportunities for subsequent generations of Chicana and Latina writers, as well as for U.S. ethnic writers

in general. The Latina Boom is not a phenomenon concentrated in the nineties, but rather it was a disruption of the literary market, and one that paved the way for multiple Latina narratives in American letters. The next chapter discusses *Dreaming in Cuban* (1992) a Boom novel that undoubtedly benefitted from the publication success of Cisneros's *House on Mango Street*.

CHAPTER TWO

Reading Beyond the Market: Cristina García's *Dreaming in Cuban* and the Reconsideration of American Literature

Cristina García entered the literary scene following the commercial success and critical acclaim of Cisneros's *House on Mango Street*. Due in part to the popularity of *Mango Street*, writing that focused on Latina identity, immigration, class mobility, and gender politics became desirable to the New York publishers. García found herself in the midst of the publishing market's desire to shape her career in ways that would continue to fuel the demand for fiction written by U.S. Latina women. Given the publishing market's newfound interest in Latina women's writing, García found herself in a critical debate surrounding mainstream Latina narratives. García herself adamantly rejected any notion that her writing promoted upward mobility and assimilation into a dominant, presumably white American culture. This chapter revisits the context in which García published and reconsiders interpretations of her work as a romance of an upwardly mobile American Dream. In doing so, I argue that *Dreaming in Cuban* is a defining novel of the U.S. Latina Boom for its active critique of the mainstream publishing market, including the questions of who belongs there and which readers it caters to.

While many of her Boom contemporaries were publishing in the eighties, García was working as a journalist. During the 1980s, García worked as *Time* magazine's Miami Bureau Chief covering Latin America and the Caribbean. In an interview, she described interacting with the Miami Cuban community for the first time: "It was a shock, it really was. I felt extremely alienated. I was given a tremendously hard time by my peers and

family. They frequently called me a communist and all kinds of ridiculous labels to me just because I was a registered Democrat” (Lopez 607). She also expressed her frustration with the grand narrative the conservative Miami Cuban community perpetuated in the media: “[I] think the people who purport to speak for the large community are not speaking for as many people as they think. However, they tend to dominate the airwaves and the news and they have a stranglehold on the debate about Cuba” (Lopez 608). This constructed story about the Cuban experience in the U.S. only offered the stories of those who García viewed as a minority. Through the medium of fiction, García was able to construct additional viewpoints on the Cuban-American experience that offered her readers alternatives to the narratives that dominated the airwaves. Whereas García did not feel welcomed by her fellow journalists in Miami, she was well received by the feminist community of Latina writers comprising the U.S. Latina Boom.

García’s novel *Dreaming in Cuban* builds upon the tradition that was established by her predecessor Sandra Cisneros in *The House on Mango Street*. When an interviewer accredited Oscar Hijuelos’ 1991 Pulitzer Prize and Julia Alvarez’s *How the Garcia Girls Lost Their Accents* as inciting a “mini-boom,” García acknowledged her peer Sandra Cisneros: “I would like to add another person to that list, Sandra Cisneros. Her short story collections have also been very well received” (Lopez 612). Not only does García’s interjection acknowledge Cisneros as her Latina feminist peer, but it also allows scholars to reconsider the origins of the Latina Boom. Raphael Dalleo argues that *Dreaming in Cuban* functions as an “intertextual descendant” to Cisneros’s *Mango Street*, building upon themes of female freedom and independence that would become Cisneros’s literary legacy (11-12). Read this way, García established herself as one of Cisneros’s readers

who interpolates a Latina literary tradition by responding to her work in kind. García's literary "response" then became another voice in the larger discussion Cisneros initiated in a U.S.-based Latina feminist literary movement.

By comparing García to Cisneros, Dalleo attempts to frame the writers of their generation as "part of a Latina sisterhood" that builds on the Chicana literary tradition of the 1980s (6). Dalleo writes: "By dealing with some of the same themes as Chicana fiction, García makes gestures toward her complicated inheritance as a Latina" (8). However, it is not that Chicanas were the only writers active in the 1980s, but they certainly received the most critical attention early on by Latino/a literary scholars. On the other hand, Annabel Cox argues (as Dalleo does) that regarding García's work as Latina literature can homogenize otherwise distinctive identities. Cox states that "until variations in the cultural identities expressed within each of the groups that may be included under the term Latina such as the Cuban-American are critically acknowledged and accepted, the Latina label itself will never be the inclusive yet diverse bracketing it aims to be" (Cox 375-376). I would argue that the term "Latina" is not used to collapse multiple identities into an umbrella term, but rather it is used to demonstrate a shared sense of politics.

Cuban-American women writers, such as Aleida Rodríguez and Sara Rosel, illustrated a similar discursive solidarity in the 1970s and early '80s by contributing to the important anthology *Cuentos: Stories by Latinas* (1983). Martha Quintales contributed epistolary essays to *This Bridge Called My Back*, where she asserted herself as "a Cuban woman" and a "Latina lesbian feminist" (148). Quintales's essays discussed the distress of identifying exclusively with her culture, but she also admits to finding both "the joy

and the pain” of finding women like herself, with whom she is able to share intimate details of her life (150). Additionally, the late playwright and writer Dolores Prida was instrumental in exposing audiences to Cuban-American women’s narratives during the late 1970s and ‘80s. Given this context, we can see that García’s work builds upon an already active, if not entirely accessible, tradition of Cuban-American women’s narratives in the United States. Rather than attribute the popularity of García’s work to the success of Hijuelos’s Pulitzer, I’d argue that *Dreaming in Cuban* built upon a feminist literary tradition that was in progress since the 1970s. This tradition was always in conversation with other women who identified as Latinas, or as Latina feminists, and who responded to each other’s work in writing. Another important Latina Boom successor to this tradition was Achy Obejas, a Cuban American lesbian writer who also enjoyed mainstream popularity with the story collection *We Came All the Way from Cuba So You Can Dress Like This?*, which was published by Simon and Schuster in 1994. García’s decision to align herself with her contemporaries was a political act of solidarity and not a co-optation of the term “Latina” by mainstream publishing.

Historically, García has always been vocal about her views of the mainstream publishing market. In a 1995 interview, García explained that the wave of writing by U.S. Latinos and Latinas after 1989 was an opportunity to tell the stories that their parents or grandparents did not get to tell. She explains: “[the] more educated and the more comfortable Latino writers feel writing in English, the better literature we are going to get. Immigrants have to make their way into the U.S. Eventually, English becomes the first language in terms of social interaction, of education. Those of us who straddle both cultures are in a unique position to tell our stories . . .” (612). Many scholars have argued

that the process of higher education has led many U.S. Latina writers to celebrate assimilation into U.S. dominant culture in their work. However, García's attitude indicates that access to education grants writers the tools to enrich the American literary tradition. Education does not become a process of homogenization or assimilation, but rather it grants writers the ability to discern their narratives from those that prevailed in the U.S. literary canon, namely work by white male authors. García envisioned a literary mainstream that was no longer defined by "a white male sensibility" but was more receptive to Latina narratives so that it was no longer viewed exotic or marginal (613). She explained:

What I mean is not that we'll become part of the melting pot nor that our identity and culture will become diluted, but that the mainstream itself will be redefined to include us. We'll be part of the mainstream not by becoming more like 'them' and less like 'us,' but by what it means to be an American in the twenty-first century. This is changing and its definition will be necessarily broader and more inclusive. I don't think this means leaving our culture in the dust. (Lopez 613)

Latina acceptance within the publishing mainstream was not a process of assimilation. Rather, as Garcia rightly argues, it was an inversion of the mainstream that changed American letters by including more work by Latino and Latina writers, who would take up the charge to write more narratives themselves. U.S. Latina writers changed the realm of American letters by offering a different narrative of U.S. history as told by women. For example, *Dreaming in Cuban* presents the reader with alternative sides of U.S.-Cuban relations, such as the Bay of Pigs invasion and the Mariel Boatlift. Additionally, U.S.

Latina fiction writers resisted a monolingual literary tradition by boldly inserting Spanish and Spanglish words and idioms throughout their work. Writers often constructed these themes around multi-generational family dynamics, which provided the reader with distinctive experiences of history and language acquisition.

García attended Barnard College in the late seventies, graduating in 1979. She later received a master's in political science from Johns Hopkins University. In a discussion with Bridget Kevane, García admitted to taking only one English course at Barnard, but she used that opportunity to begin reading as much as possible, confessing: "I spent my two years in graduate school reading literature. I barely made it out of graduate school" (Kevane and Heredia 71). She later embarked on a career in journalism, which she regarded as preliminary training for writing prose fiction (Kevane and Heredia 72). She regarded the writers she read up until the age of thirty as her "mentors." Among them were Kafka, Woolf, and Tolstoy. After the age of thirty, she was reading work by women authors of color who provided examples for writers like herself: "I was primarily a reader, and I think the reading is what led me to writing. I was always drawn to contemporary writers like Toni Morrison, Louise Erdrich, and Maxine Hong Kingston. Their relative 'outsider' positions help make them exceedingly powerful observers" (Kevane and Heredia 74). García could be said to be self-trained, learning to write through the act of reading. García's statement indicates that writers such as Morrison, Erdrich and Kingston write from a perspective that is informed by being a woman from a marginalized group. However, these writers also address themes of alienation within their communities. García's own sense of feeling like an "outsider" within the Miami Cuban community is what ultimately enabled her to write from a unique, if not controversial,

perspective.

García is one of the most successful Boom writers, having published a total of six novels, three books for young adults, a book of poetry, and two edited anthologies of Latino/a literature. *Dreaming in Cuban* is one of the defining novels of the Latina Boom. The novel was published by a division of Random House in 1992 and was nominated for the National Book Award in that year. As with Cisneros, García gained a national reading audience when renowned literary critic Michiko Kakutani published a favorable review of *Dreaming in Cuban* in *The New York Times*, as well as by other critics. Kakutani lauded the novel as a “dazzling first novel” and declared García as “a magical new writer.” She praised García’s work as “possess[ing] the intimacy of a Chekhov story and the hallucinatory magic of a novel by Gabriel García Marquez.” Comparisons to García Marquez were attractive to the literate *New York Times* reader that was familiar with the Colombian writer and desired similar work. Kakutani boldly promised that that novel was “fierce, visionary, and at the same time oddly beguiling and funny” as well as a “completely original novel.” She concludes that García is “blessed with a poet’s ear for language, a historian’s fascination with the past and a musician’s intuitive understanding of the ebb and flow of emotion” (Kakutani “Review”). Publishers were keen on Kakutani’s influence and printed an extended blurb from her review in the paperback editions of *Dreaming in Cuban*. Kakutani’s promotion of García’s debut novel was instrumental in marketing García to a mainstream audience and solidifying her place as an important new American writer.

Mention of García’s novel appears in early critical responses to the U.S. Latina Boom, which tended to privilege readings of assimilation and the American Dream. Two

of the field's most influential critics, Gustavo Pérez Firmat and Ilan Stavans, established the foundation for U.S. Latino/a literary studies. Their widely-cited critical texts *Life on Hyphen: The Cuban-American Way* (1994) and *The Hispanic Condition* (1995) were the first to examine the relationship between Latino/a literature and the market. While their criticism was valuable for the development of scholarly discourse around this new canon, it was not a sustainable practice for the interpreting literature by U.S. Latina writers because it privileged a patriarchal perspective on literature.

In his essay "Culture and Democracy," Stavans argues that Latino/as will transform U.S. culture not through political participation, but through the marketplace. Stavans suggests that the "narrative boom" of the 1990s ushered in a higher standard of Latino/a writing, one that featured characters as "exotic citizens proud of a life in the margins, divided selves" (186). While I agree that this decade established a new standard in Latino/a letters, I find it problematic that Stavans accredits the success of such authors to a curious Anglo readership "eager to find out more about Latinos." This is problematic because it positions Latina writers as cultural translators, not cultural producers. Furthermore, Stavans regards an upwardly-mobile, college-educated Latino readership as market competitors to the Anglo audience. In Stavans's view, in order for Latino/a readers to compete with Anglo consumer power and secure cultural capital, they must go through the process of higher education and be able to produce and consume the cultural commodities, in this case books, desired by white America.

Similarly, Pérez Firmat's often-cited text treats García as peripheral to the Pulitzer Prize-winner Oscar Hijuelos. Firmat's thesis is that Cuban-Americans of the "one-and-a-half" generation, or those who are born in Cuba but raised in the United States, are tasked

with “translating” culture for an Anglo audience. He charges popular Cuban-American writers with writing *from* Cuba but *toward* the United States (Firmat 144). García is presented as a cultural ambassador rather than as an inventive literary figure that establishes new modes of writing.

These two critical texts privilege what I view as the imaginary reader-consumer, or the presumed reader that buys “ethnic” literature for passive cultural consumption. By equating the writers’ success with their readers’ consumer power, Stavans and Firmat offer what critics Dalleo and Machado Sáez consider an exhaustive reading of García’s work and Latino/a literature in general (Dalleo and Machado Sáez 112). They argue that “Latino/a studies must move beyond theorizations based on food as metaphor for identity and culture . . . [The] metaphor is ultimately too simplistic in its formulation of the dynamics involved in the market” (112). Ralph Dalleo and Elena Machado Sáez offer a productive discussion on early criticism on the consumer and the market. They assert that cultural products created by Latino/as should not be measured by consumer desire to purchase that product. They problematize Pérez-Firmat’s and Stavans’ view of culture as a “one-directional process, with the eater consuming the product” which they view as “cannibalizing” Latino/a culture (Dalleo and Machado Sáez 112). They caution “The transformative power articulated through the food metaphor operates on cannibalistic and/or assimilationist logic. Underlying this metaphor is an essential conceptualization of culture as static and therefore finite and exhaustible, as opposed to reproducing or shifting” (112). Such views dismiss García’s role as a *reader* of the ethnic and Latina writers, which makes her an innovator reshaping the American literary mainstream and the canon.

This problem of exoticizing “ethnic” writing is not exclusive to Latina women. In his book *Black Writers, White Publishers*, John K. Young argues that:

the basic dynamic through which most African American literature has been produced derives from an expectation that the individual text will represent the black experience (necessarily understood as exotic) for the white, and therefore implicitly universal audience. This dynamic is doubly in effect for a minority woman writer, who is expected to ‘speak for her gender *and* her race *and* culture.’ (Burr qtd. in Young 12)

The idea that the *de facto* reading audience for both “ethnic” and “mainstream” literature is white produces a marketable premise that the writer must always explain to her culture to her (presumably uninformed) reader. This assumption of ethnic groups as always informing and confirming whiteness does little to unpack invisible white privilege; it presumes whiteness as an inherently American identity. The cultural production by Latina writers in the 1990s established canons that are not “marginal” to white writers (and readers), but invert the cultural structures that perpetuate white male writers as the sole authority of the American story. In a 2007 interview with Ylce Irizarry, García says:

Some kind of funny inversion has happened, where the so-called exotic or from-the-margins literature is now part of the American literary appetite . . . there is almost a sense of cynical pandering to audience. Especially with first novels, there is a sense of having to explain, translate, or emphasize the more colorful or folkloric aspects of one’s culture to make it palatable to a mainstream audience. Writers internalize this . . . When you’ve written something that evokes a response, [publishing] houses

want you to repeat it . . . The marketplace is a reality. (190)

García is clearly aware of the market demands on U.S. ethnic writers. She indicates that she is not strictly bound by her publisher's expectations: "I can't compromise my own work; I write what I want . . . we have to be careful to represent our culture on our own terms and not to be translating it or overexplaining it to an imaginary audience" (Irizarry 191). In the pages that follow, I explore how this awareness allows her to critique these demands in her work. I approach the novel's exploration of the American Dream and cultural production as acts of disruption, inversion, and inclusion.

Disrupting the American Dream

Dreaming in Cuban unfolds chronologically from 1972-1980 and includes narrative flashbacks to important dates in Cuban-U.S. political relations. The celebration of the U.S. bicentennial in 1976 is presented in stark contrast to the protagonist Pilar Puente's developing punk-feminist politics. Pilar uses her punk politics to resist the nation's attempt to solidify a mythology around its founding date.¹ Pilar comes of age in New York City, where she attends art school and later Columbia University. However, the seventies figure prominently for allowing Pilar to develop her own language. Pilar develops a distinct artistic perspective informed by the women's movement and the punk music scene. She interprets these messages into her artwork, which serve as counternarratives to the construction of a patriarchal U.S. history that the bicentennial sought to reinforce. Despite her U.S. upbringing, Pilar longs to re-unite with her maternal grandmother, Celia del Pino, in Cuba. Since Pilar and Celia cannot be together physically, they communicate through letters and dreams. Unlike her daughter, Pilar's

¹ See Cox.

mother Lourdes Puente is anti-Castro and attempts to revise her personal narrative in the U.S. as a business owner. In her mind, Lourdes's staunch position against Castro allows her to adopt an anti-communist American identity that resulted from Cold War politics.

Lourdes Puente's narrative arc seemingly follows the trajectory of the American Dream. The American Dream presupposes that everyone has access to a prosperous life if one works hard enough. At minimum, hard work offers upwardly mobile access to the middle class. This attitude privileges meritocracy as providing access to capital and negates systemic factors such as race, class, gender, and citizenship. She imagines herself as successful only because she accepts that revolutionary Cuba is the antithesis of U.S. capitalism. As Pilar remarks: "She's convinced she can fight Communism from behind her bakery counter" (136). Lourdes's success as a business owner of the Yankee Doodle bakery mimics the constructed figure of the Cuban exile narrative writ large, and she presents herself to her customers as an assimilated immigrant in the United States. She sends her mother Celia photos from her bakery in an attempt to export this fiction: "Each glistening éclair is a grenade aimed at Celia's political beliefs, each strawberry shortcake proof—in butter, cream, and eggs—of Lourdes's success in America, and a reminder of the ongoing shortages in Cuba" (117). For Lourdes, the U.S. is more than a place of sustenance; it is a site of consumer excess, and this excess is equated with personal success.

In her discussion of *latinidad* in García's novel, Marta Caminero-Santangelo explains how the Cuban diaspora carefully constructed an image of themselves as staunchly anticommunist and middle-to-upper class. Against the backdrop of the 1960s, the new Cuban immigrants represented themselves as racially white to distance

themselves from civil rights groups that were predominantly associated with black communities. The media configured the wave of Cuban exiles after the 1959 Revolution are configured as successful immigrants: they easily assimilated into white America, secured good jobs, and rejected the politics of the left. The novel is acutely aware of the fiction and includes it in order to unravel it by comically presenting Lourdes as unable to assimilate due to her accent.

The American Dream becomes appealing to Lourdes because of her traumatic past in Cuba. The political is personal for Lourdes: she was raped by Castro's army on her husband's property, and the pregnancy that followed ended in a miscarriage. This secret haunts her spiritually, and, later, quite literally in the form of her father's ghost. She uses her bakery as her soapbox to celebrate all things she deems American. Lourdes's celebration of America is a compensation for the pain she feels with respect to Cuba. In Cuba, her marriage into the propertied Puente family made her a ranch owner with her husband Rufino and allowed her to climb the class ladder. At the start of the revolution, two men from Fidel Castro's army arrive to seize the Puente ranch for the government. Prior to find Rufino surrendering to the young men, she is thrown from her horse. Lourdes's secret is revealed to the reader in a narrative flashback told in the third person:

She jumped from her horse and stood like a shield before her husband. 'Get the hell out of here!' she shouted with such ferocity the soldiers lowered their guns and backed toward their Jeep. Lourdes felt the clot dislodge and liquefy beneath her breasts, float through her belly, and down her thighs. There was a pool of dark blood at her feet. (70)

Lourdes's powerlessness with her pregnancy is contrasted by a fleeting moment of power over Castro's soldiers and his revolution. Despite having lost her second child, her equestrian prowess allowed her to defend her property and to intimidate the soldiers. One of the few items Lourdes brings with her to the U.S. is her riding crops. They symbolize her personal power, as well as her momentary triumph over the injustices of the revolution.

The soldiers return shortly after Lourdes's victory to claim the ranch for the government, but also to reclaim their macho power over Lourdes. Upon their return, the soldiers hand Lourdes an official paper declaring the Puente estate the official property of the Revolution. The deed instills the soldiers with a power they did not previously have, and which in turn they abuse. Lourdes defiantly tears the deed apart, but the soldiers retaliate: "The other soldier held Lourdes down as his partner took a knife from his holster. Carefully, he sliced Lourdes's riding pants off to her knees and tied them over her mouth . . . Then he placed the knife flat across her belly and raped her" (71). The soldiers use the very symbol of Lourdes's power, her riding crops, to debilitate her.

Lourdes's abdomen is scarred by a soldier's knife: "When he finished, the soldier lifted the knife and began to scratch at Lourdes' belly with great concentration. A primeval scraping. Crimson hieroglyphics" (72). Lourdes's rape and the seizure of the Puentes' property illustrates the revolution's necessary inversion of economic class and political power in Cuba. Ironically, the governmental deed, combined with the soldiers' illegible writing on Lourdes's body, overrides any documentation of their actions. The passage exposes the historical and personal silences surrounding Lourdes's trauma. Lourdes is physically and psychically marked by the miscarriage and the rape. Lourdes's

daughter Pilar remains under the impression that the family fled Cuba due to the seizure of the Puente ranch. There is a narrative silence around her mother and her mother's trauma.

Lourdes's rejection of the revolution and her embrace of the American dream are tied to her need to recuperate her loss of power. In fact, the process of assimilation requires that Lourdes embrace the erasure of her former story: "She ponders the *transmigrations* from the southern latitudes, the millions moving north. What happens to their languages? The warm burial grounds they leave behind? . . . Lourdes considers herself lucky. Immigration has redefined her, and she is grateful. Unlike her husband, she welcomes her adopted language, its possibilities for *reinvention*" (italics mine 73). Lourdes's idea of the revolution remains fixed to her miscarriage, and she carries this trauma with her to the States. For her, immigration to the U.S. means replacing the story of her miscarriage with a more favorable story of economic success.

Lourdes seeks to reinvent herself as proprietor of her bakeries, but her attempts to reclaim her power cause her to abuse her authority in her business and at home. Lourdes's desire to integrate into the U.S. results in her entrepreneurial drive to acquire capital and to expand her bakery. In Lourdes's view, her bakery presents an opportunity for upward mobility for other immigrants in Brooklyn. She buys the bakery from a "French-Austrian Jew who had migrated to Brooklyn after the war," and uses it to indoctrinate other immigrants: "By two o'clock . . . Lourdes has cash deposits on seven birthday cakes . . . 'See this,' she announces to her new employee, Maribel Navarro, riffling her orders like a blackjack dealer. 'This is what I want from you'" (66). Lourdes views herself as a model that other immigrants (and migrants) should follow.

The interaction between Lourdes and Maribel exemplifies, among other things, the friction between Cuban and Puerto Rican groups in New York, a friction that existed despite governmental attempts to unify “Hispanics” as a census group during the 1970s. Lourdes measures her success in paper receipts and dollar bills, or representations of capital. However, Maribel has underwhelming sales on her first day at work, which Lourdes reads as her lack of initiative. Lourdes strives to be seen as a good immigrant, in contrast to the Puerto Rican migrants who she believes are economic dependents to the U.S. García has remarked that she felt Lourdes expressed the classism present in the Cuban community: “[In] some sectors of the community there is a superiority complex. Growing up I definitely sense that the Cubans felt they were better than the Puerto Ricans and the Dominicans. I was thinking very close to Lourdes, how she, as part of her generation and her experience, would view it” (Lopez 613). Davila has also written about the distinctions of class and citizenship between the two ethnic groups. The main point of contention is the path to citizenship: regardless of class status, Puerto Ricans migrate to the U.S. with citizenship, albeit one that is fraught with colonial history. On the other hand, Cubans arriving after 1959 were largely homogenous in that they held middle-to-upper class status when they arrived, but were not citizens. Davila argues that Latinos’ entry into the middle class are linked to social hierarchies and presupposed citizenship (Davila 37-38). Lourdes’s tyrannical expectations for her employees cause her to fire Maribel, proof that she regards immigrant (and migrant) labor as expendable. Lourdes empowers herself by disempowering her employees.

Lourdes buys in to the Dream by equating her assimilation process with her consumer power, quite literally. She is represented as grossly overweight and craving

food, sex, and power in excess.² Lourdes learns about what it means to be an American from the *Family Circle*, preparing “food only people in Ohio eat,” like Jell-O molds and barbecue (137). Her obsession with consuming middle-American foods alienates Rufino and Pilar. Pilar questions Lourdes’s performance of nationalism, thinking: “Like this is it? We’re living the *American dream*?” (italics mine 137). The food references made in *Dreaming in Cuban* are metaphors García uses to resist assimilation. Pilar is disillusioned with the “dream” because in her view Lourdes’s participation in a national culture is merely a parody of it. For Pilar, in order to fully participate in American culture, she must approach it her own way.

If Lourdes and her bakeries represent a desire to enter the mainstream, then Pilar’s painting attempts to resist the mainstream through artistic expression. In the section “Enough Attitude,” the novel employs a parallel between the nascent punk scene in 1970s New York and the role of Latina feminist narratives in Garcia’s career. Pilar’s narrative echoes the opening lyrics to Lou Reed’s “Walk on the Wild Side,” which is referenced in the section’s title: “The family is hostile to the individual. This is what I’m thinking as Lou Reed says he has enough attitude to kill every person in Jersey” (134). Pilar’s presence in the NYC underground music scene—particularly in the Bottom Line, the legendary venue where she sees Reed perform—reflects her love of untold stories: “I just love the way Lou Reed’s concert feel—expectant, uncertain. You never know what he’s going to do next . . . I like him because he sings about people no one else sings about—drug addicts, transvestites, the down-and-out” (135). Pilar identifies with Reed’s unpredictability and his evolving sense of self. His poetic songs and their underdog

² For a helpful understanding of Lourdes’s eating disorder in the novel, see Shemak.

narratives serve as Pilar's soundtrack throughout the novel.

Feminism and punk music give Pilar the tools she needs to critique larger social structures. Pilar's participation in feminist politics is not valued at her art school, and so she shares her opinions on patriarchal structures. She thinks:

People still ask where all the important women painters are instead of looking at what they did paint and trying to understand their circumstances . . . Nobody's even heard of feminism in art school. The male teachers and students still call the shots and get the serious attention and the fellowships that further their careers (García 138-39).

Pilar observes that women artists are supposed to make extra money by modeling nude, adding "What kind of bullshit revolution is that?" (García 139). For Pilar, the seventies marks a time in which she is able to fuse punk aesthetics with feminism in order to assert the importance of women's point of views in art. Pilar is frustrated with the scholarly discussion of women at school because it doesn't move theory into practice. Art is the medium Pilar uses to practice her feminist politics and to make women's work visible.

Pilar's artwork serves as a metaphor for the entry of Latina letters into mainstream publishing. As a feminist punk, Pilar struggles with the marriage of commercialism and art. After all, Pilar views art as a way to depict bottom-up narratives. She plays Lou Reed, Iggy Pop, and the Ramones, citing them as muses for her work. She calls them "an artistic form of assault" and says she tries "to translate what I hear into colors and volumes and lines that confront people, that say, 'Hey, we're here too and what we think matters!'" (García 135). Pilar's desire for "lines that confront people" parallels García's novel's: *Dreaming in Cuban* calls for active reading not passive

consumption. For Pilar and for the implied author, true inclusion in American culture does not involve mimicking a false idea of Americanness, as Lourdes does at the barbecue. Democratic participation for Pilar means creating room for Latina narratives to exist alongside other stories of what it means to be American.

Pilar wrestles with how to have her artistic voice be heard without selling out. When Lourdes offers to commission her artwork to be displayed in her second bakery, Pilar asserts that true artists don't paint in bakeries, saying, "Look, Mom, I don't think you understand. I don't *do* bakeries." Lourdes approaches Pilar's artistic skills pragmatically, reminding her that the bakery "paid for [her] painting classes" (138-139). Lourdes is right. Even fine-arts training cannot be divorced from the market. Artists need the means, patrons, and an audience to be supported. Lourdes's envisions a mainstream audience for Pilar's artwork: "This could be a good opportunity for you, Pilar. A lot of important people come to my shop. Judges and lawyers from the courts, executives from Brooklyn Union Gas. Maybe they'll see your painting. You could become famous" (139). This dialogue reveals the tension between political art and commercial art. Pilar struggles with whether or not to create commissioned art because she worries she will have to sacrifice her politics for the sake of a sale. In order to reach a broader audience and gain the attention she desires, Pilar must compromise with the market.

Lourdes' request that her daughter paint a mural of the Statue of Liberty provokes the memory of the del Pinos' arrival in New York. Pilar recalls: "Mom and Dad took me on a ferry and climbed up behind Liberty's eyes and looked out over the river, the city, the beginning of things" (García 140). Historically, the statue represents the gateway for immigrants—most of them European—entering the U.S. through Ellis Island. Lourdes

associates this symbol with the hopeful expansion of her bakery and her fulfillment of the American Dream on the day of the U.S.'s celebration of its bicentennial in 1976. Pilar, on the other hand, is conflicted by the memory of arrival and the silence surrounding their migration: "Mom refuses to talk about Abuela Celia. She gets annoyed every time I ask and shuts me up quickly, like I'm prying top secret information. Dad is more open, but he can't tell me things I really want to know, like why Mom hardly speaks to Abuela or why she keeps her riding crops from Cuba" (138).

Lady Liberty serves as a site of tension between Lourdes and Pilar because their arrival marks the erasure of their personal history from Cuba. Their story mimics Euro-American immigration in that presumes all foreigners are openly welcome in the United States. In reaction to this myth, Pilar approaches the work of painting for the viewers at her mom's bakery as an opportunity to subvert the narrative traditionally associated with Lady Liberty. Lourdes's full-page advertisement in the local paper promises to unveil a "MAJOR NEW WORK OF ART for the 200TH BIRTHDAY OF AMERICA, SUNDAY 12 NOON (free food and drinks)" (143). Lourdes waives the opportunity for profit in order to expose Pilar to a prospective customer base and to allow her own chance at the American Dream. Pilar, however, does not even comply with the terms of the sale. She uses the moment to express her point of view. She paints the Statue of Liberty with punk themes, including menacing "black stick figures pulsing in the air around Liberty" and a safety-pin through her nose. She revises the base's traditional inscription from Emma Lazarus's "The New Colossus" to the punk slogan "I'M A MESS."

Though she feels anxious about defying her mother's request, Pilar envisions a receptive audience when Lourdes unveils the painting to her customers: "I imagine the

sound of applause, of people calling my name. But my thoughts stop dead when I hear the hateful buzzing” (García 144). Lourdes is depicted comically atop a stepladder as a mirror to the refashioned Statue of Liberty. The imagery of Lourdes recalls verses from Lazarus’ poem “New Colossus”: “A mighty woman with a torch, whose flame / Is imprisoned lightning, and her name / Mother of Exiles.” The crowd’s disapproval of Pilar’s work indicates their participation in the myth of the national holiday. Lourdes thwarts a customer’s attack on Pilar’s artwork, striking the man with her purse. At that moment, Lourdes defends Pilar’s right to the American Dream over her own. Pilar narrates the scene as Lourdes tumbles onto the man, calling her mother “a thrashing avalanche of patriotism and motherhood, crushing three spectators and a table of apple tartlets. And I, I love my mother very much at that moment” (García 144). Lourdes’s fall is an ironic recreation of punk performance, with Lourdes catapulting her body off an imaginary stage to protect her business and her daughter. This emulation of Pilar’s punk heroes allows her daughter to feel tenderness toward Lourdes.

The hostile reception at Lourdes’s bakery turns the Puente women’s dreams into delusions. For Lourdes, her attachment to the bakery as a means of upward mobility is her tragic flaw. When her bakery is not well received in the community, she ultimately protects her own vision for Yankee Doodle before catering to her customers. Pilar sabotages the opportunity for mainstream reception by adhering to her political beliefs. By exposing their flaws equally, the passage marks a crucial moment of mother-daughter reconciliation: Lourdes’s defense of Pilar in her bakery allows her to reclaim the personal power she lost in Cuba. Pilar, on the other hand, learns to negotiate her politics with her desires for commercial success.

Writing for the Desired Reader

Just as Pilar learns how to negotiate her aesthetics with the art and commerce from Lourdes, she learns to develop a feminist point of view from her grandmother Celia. Celia and Pilar develop a telepathic connection. Celia lives in Cuba, is a supporter of *la revolución*, and maintains a post on the beach to guard her island from an attack. She is separated from her daughter Lourdes after the revolution when Lourdes escapes to the United States. However, their politics are what keep them apart. Due to their geographical and political divides, Celia and Pilar must find ways to circumvent traditional communication channels and speak telepathically. It is revealed that Celia has charged Pilar to record everything, including the messages she delivers to her psychically (García 7). Pilar questions the stories told in the history books and speculates what it'd be like if she had the authority to write: "Who chooses what we should know or what's important? I know I have to decide these things for myself. Most of what I've learned that's important I've learned on my own, or from my grandmother" (García 28). Like Esperanza in *House on Mango Street*, Pilar is committed to creating art about women whose stories are overlooked. She ponders stories about women in the Congo or prostitutes in India, suggesting that her education would be different if women's stories were a central focus. Pilar's assertion about women's stories calls into question the patriarchal tone of history. An awareness about women's stories around the globe shifts consciousness around history and the oppressive structures silencing women's narratives in history. Pilar's desire to write about them allows her to contribute to a body of knowledge focused on women's experiences rather than men's exclusively.

Dreaming in Cuban employs multiple forms and styles, including magical realism

and the epistolary. In her discussion of Morrison and Isabel Allende, P. Gabrielle Foreman argues that “magical realism, unlike the fantastic or the surreal, presumes that the individual requires a bond with the traditions and the faith of the community, that s/he is historically constructed and connected” (Foreman 286). Foreman also contends that Allende “revises” the master text *One Hundred Years of Solitude* to posit “women as the site of the magical” (286): “she feminizes generic codes to employ magic realism as a bridge to a history recoverable in the political realm, a history that she will ultimately constitute . . . as distinct from the magical” (286). Morrison and Allende ultimately use magical realism to establish certain characters as storytellers; as such they record history (Foreman 300). Foreman’s discussion of Allende is especially helpful for understanding *Dreaming in Cuban*. While Allende has been considered a South American writer, her exile status in the United States and her English-language publications, both translated and original, aligned her work with the U.S. Latina Boom. Like Morrison and Allende, García implements magical elements to recover Pilar’s connection to her community. By connecting with Celia psychically, Pilar is able to recover the community she loses when she leaves Cuba. Pilar then bridges the political and the magical to reclaim her role as a storyteller and historian, a role she inhabits after inheriting Celia’s letters.

García’s work and her privileging of women’s place within history allows for a recuperation of stories. Due to the Cuban embargo, Pilar and Celia cannot assume communication through main channels; the novel references spotty mail service and telecommunications (5, 18). Pilar’s psychic connection to her grandmother Celia allows her to circumvent the restrictions on communication so that she can assume her duty to record everything (García 7). Since Pilar is severed from her family in Cuba, she attempts

to recreate this community first by running away to Miami and later by visiting a botánica in uptown Manhattan (García 57-59, 200, Dalleo and Machado Sáez 120-22). The use of the magical in the novel allows Pilar to reconstruct her place within her community and to recuperate her family history.

The majority of the novel is told in the third person, including the stories of minor characters. However, Pilar's sections and Celia's letters are told in the first person. The letters written by Celia appear throughout the novel to provide a backstory to many of the plot's gaps. In an interview, García has called Celia the "spiritual guide" of the novel, explaining that she learned more about Lourdes and Pilar through Celia. García also says that the novel "bulged with the weight of Celia's history" and that the letters were a more "language-driven" than narrative-driven aspect of the novel: "The letters were the least edited part of the book. The other parts were rewritten maybe hundreds of times. But the letters came out almost intact" (Lopez 108-09). Andrea O'Reilly Herrera's seminal article on the novel—one of the few that closely addresses the letters—regards Celia's letter-writing as an act of alternative historical preservation. Herrera argues that the novel articulates women's collective history, defying Western notions of history in favor of one told from multiple perspectives (80). While Celia's letters offer a historical account of Cuban women's history on the island they are also an exercise in verse. Celia's letters are a model for Pilar to emulate.

Celia's letters are addressed to Gustavo, a Spanish lawyer who first appears in the novel through Celia's flashbacks. In 1934, Gustavo appears as a customer in the camera shop where Celia works and reveals his secret plans to document the impending Spanish Civil War (35). Gustavo visits Celia daily, and the two discuss the mutual political

struggles between Spain and Cuba: “He brought her butterfly jasmine, the symbol of patriotism and purity, and told her that Cuba, too, would one day be free of bloodsuckers” (36). Gustavo and Celia fall in love, but he is married. Celia’s interactions with Gustavo lead to her own political awakening about Cuba. When he leaves her to return to his wife in Spain, Celia becomes inconsolable.

When the heartbroken Celia later refuses Jorge del Pino’s marriage proposal, Jorge insists that she write Gustavo. Jorge gives Celia an ultimatum: if Gustavo doesn’t respond to her, she will marry Jorge (37). Although Celia never hears from Gustavo, she begins a writing ritual addressed to her estranged lover: she writes on the eleventh day of each month for twenty-five years (37-38). Celia never mails the letters, though. Instead she keeps them in her personal archive, documenting her life in Cuba between the years 1935 and 1959. Through letter writing, Celia develops her own poetic style, a style that she keeps hidden from her husband.

Celia’s love affair with Gustavo is an allegory of the construction of a desired reader. As the addressee of her letters, Gustavo becomes the ideal audience, providing Celia with the motive to write. In a letter written on December 11, 1942, Celia writes: “I still love you, Gustavo, but it’s a habitual love, a wound in the knee that predicts rain. Memory is a skilled seducer. I write to you because I must” (García 97). Her writing has become a habit that she must act upon, and she is unconcerned with the addressees’ response. Instead, he becomes an allegory of the imagined reader who desires her words. Gustavo has become her muse, and Celia discloses her desires in her writing to him. The inner world Celia establishes in letter writing contrasts with her dissatisfaction as a wife and mother; the epistolary gives Celia the freedom to write what she wants.

In her seminal critical text on the genre, Carol Altman creates the term "epistolary" to describe "the use of the letter's formal properties to create meaning." This is dependent on both the critic's description of the letter-novel as well as the novelist's or novel's "actualization of the letter's potential to creative narrative, figurative, and other types of meaning" (Altman 4). *Dreaming in Cuban* employs the epistolary form to create a narrative within a narrative. Furthermore, the epistolary allows for consideration of multiple narrative vantage points—including Pilar's from New York and Celia's from Cuba—privileging neither standpoint.

Celia uses the letters to assert a distinct viewpoint as a Cuban woman. In a letter dated May 11, 1945, Celia muses on her distinctive perspective of World War II:

If I was born to live on an island, then I'm grateful for one thing: that the tides rearrange the borders. At least I have the illusion of change, of possibility. To be locked within boundaries plotted by priests and politicians would be the only thing more intolerable (99).

Celia's vantage point from Cuba allows her to imagine a dynamic geography that allows for change. Writing then becomes an act of survival of her own stories. The letters also forebode Celia's nascent desire for Castro's revolution and narratively speaking, fill in the gaps unknown to Lourdes and Pilar. The letters pull the reader into Celia's intimate thoughts as she distinguishes herself as writing from a unique perspective.

Though Lourdes hates Celia's politics, there are parallels between the two characters. Both are intuitive saleswomen. Celia's profession as a camera saleswoman in a Havana department store that caters to American tourists demonstrates that she and Lourdes are not so different after all. Celia had the ability to guess her customers'

occupations, and that “she could precisely gauge how much a customer had to spend on a camera. Her biggest sales went to Americans from Pennsylvania. What did they take so many pictures of up there?” (38). The humorous reference to the gratuitous photography, rather than photography for political documentation, causes Celia to question U.S. consumerism. In a letter dated May 11, 1954, she muses that there are “too many stories of young girls destroyed by what passes as tourism in this country. Cuba has become the joke of the Caribbean, where everything and everyone is for sale” (164). Celia’s transition from capitalist to Communist acts as a foil to Lourdes’s politics. Celia’s increasing opposition to U.S. involvement in Cuba becomes evident through the letters as well.

The portrayal of Fidel Castro’s revolution presents a conundrum for the woman writer in *Dreaming in Cuban*. On one hand, Castro’s revolution granted Cuban women access to public positions in ways they hadn’t experienced before: they could take up arms, enter medical school, and earn advanced degrees. Celia herself becomes highly visible as judge of the People’s Court, a position that contrasts her previous domestic role as a wife and mother. Women viewed these aspects of the revolution as attractive because they could participate in society in ways that hadn’t been afforded earlier in history. The new positions they held in society afforded them a newfound social power and satisfaction they could not achieve in the private, domestic sphere. However, this power was contradicted by Castro’s censorship of writers, artists, and political dissidents.

Despite her allegiance to Castro, Celia is acutely aware that anti-revolutionary art is criminalized under Fidel’s rule. When Celia’s son Javier returns from Czechoslovakia lovesick and dying, she takes as judge a final case, this one of a teenage boy who is

reported for writing “antirevolutionary” short stories (158). The young author, Simon, creates characters that “escape from Cuba on rafts of sticks and tires, refuse to harvest grapefruit, and dream of singing in a rock and roll band in California” (158). After the revolution, poets and writers are exiled to the Isle of the Pines, where they are imprisoned and tortured. Celia privately thinks that “artists have a vital role to play” and decides to reorient Simon’s “creativity” toward the revolution. She is sure that there will be “more liberal policies” for art once the “system has matured” (158). Because the reader is privy to Celia’s letters, they can infer that Celia’s empathy toward Simon stems from her own desires to write.

Celia’s optimism is countered by Pilar’s disillusionment when Pilar finally does reunite with her grandmother in Cuba. The reunion between Celia and Pilar in Cuba is not as idyllic as they expected. When Pilar sees the streets in Havana, she feels as if she’s traveled back in time to a “Cuban version of an earlier America” (220). Pilar realizes that she has created a fiction of Cuba in her mind that is distinct from its reality. She likens her memory of Cuba to the story of Castro’s boat, *Granma*: “Some boat owner in Florida misspells ‘Grandma’ and a look what happens: a myth is born, a province is renamed, a Communist party is launched” (220). The parallel between *Grandma* and Pilar becomes a metaphor of the fiction Pilar has created for herself. She remarks that people are tied to the past by “flukes”: “Look at me, I got my name from Hemingway’s fishing boat” (García 220). Pilar soon realizes that she must assume control over her narrative rather than allow the past—or myth—to dictate it.

The real purpose of Pilar’s return to Cuba is not to remain permanently, but rather to inherit Celia’s stories. Celia is aware politics and death have left her without any

beneficiaries; Lourdes is too attached to her politics to remember anything about Celia, and Felicia and Javier have died from heartbreak. When reunited with her granddaughter, Celia is able to transmit her stories directly to Pilar, rather than have her rely on second-hand accounts. Celia begins to tell Pilar how she arrived in Cuba, and Pilar receives her energy psychically: “As I listen, I feel my grandmother’s life passing to me through her hands. It’s a steady electricity, humming and true” (222). Through this transmission, Celia grants Pilar the power of storytelling.

Celia discloses her intentions for Pilar prior to entrusting her with the letters: “Women who outlive their daughters are orphans . . . Only their granddaughters can save them, guard their knowledge like the first fire” (222). Pilar’s return to Cuba realizes Celia’s desire for a reader, Celia’s writing works as a meditation on language, social observation, and personal preservation, all the while carefully crafting a reader—Gustavo—that desires and is desired by her writing. The epistolary makes the reader, or narratee, almost as important an agent in the narrative as the writer. This dynamic is what Altman has in mind when she says the epistolary depends on second-person narrative “internally” (here Gustavo) and “externally” (the actual text’s reader) to create a union between reader and writer (Altman 89). The letters call on the novel’s reader to participate in the construction of the story, and in doing so echo García’s desire to shape America’s literary mainstream by incorporating Cuban-American and other Latina narratives

As Altman argues, the epistolary narrative differs from diary novel in its desire for exchange: “In epistolary writing the reader is called upon to respond as a writer and contribute as such to the narrative” (89). As a genre, the letter allows the reader to

intervene, to correct style, and to shape the story, becoming a participant in the narration of the developing story (Altman 91). In this case, Pilar has physically returned to Cuba to restore her connection to her family, a connection she inherits through Celia's knowledge. While the letters appear in fragments throughout the novel, they are the only sections that seemingly follow a linear chronology. While the letters are kept for Pilar, it is the responsibility of the novel's reader, or what Altman calls the "Super Reader," to piece the story together. The binaries between the internal and external become blurred, as do the binaries between the private and the public (Altman 111). The exchange makes what was otherwise private (the letters) known to Pilar, who uses this newfound information to act politically. The letters precipitate Pilar's newfound consciousness of the politics that created her family's rift. The letters' allow her to move from the private sphere into public knowledge and to see how "the personal is political."

Pilar is the one responsible for collecting all of the family's narratives and weaving them into a larger story. Pilar's inheritance of Celia's unopened letters serves as the novel's climax. Shortly after receiving them, she begins to dream in Spanish, but she also decides that she cannot adhere to the stories she is told (235). She no longer feels nostalgic about Cuba, especially when Celia warns her that she cannot create art against the state. The warning is a violation of her punk aesthetics. Pilar fantasizes that if she ever met El Líder, she'd tell him that "art . . . is the ultimate revolution" (235).

Pilar's decision to return to New York, while seemingly traitorous to Celia, allows her some distance from the myths surrounding her past. Her declaration that she belongs in New York—not "instead" of Cuba, but *more* than in Cuba—is emblematic of García's participation in U.S. literature as a Latina feminist writer. Whereas Esperanza in *Mango*

Street must leave her home in order to write stories, Pilar must return home to Havana and leave it in order to tell her story. The art that Pilar ultimately creates is one that includes dissenting voices and disparate narratives but that foregrounds her own point of view.

In fact, Celia's final letter is dated at the start of the revolution, the same date as Pilar's birth. She promises to stop writing Gustavo because Pilar will "remember everything" (245). Catherine Palczewski writes that a letter's date "reminds the audience that life, and writing, are often fragmentary. Still, the fragments fit, to form a body, to form a letter, to form a story" (6). The relationship between Celia and Pilar becomes a metaphor for the Boom: Celia produces the type of writing she wants read and reproduced and recorded by her successors. In turn Pilar inherits the stories, reconstructs them, and innovates a new narrative, which takes the form of the novel *Dreaming in Cuban*. By concluding with Celia's last letter in 1959, the novel's ends where it began, rupturing with any simple "realist" conventions (Simpkins 148). Pilar is now Celia's agent in communicating her story, and Pilar must reorder the letters in order to tell it. By concluding the novel with the beginning, the external reader is encouraged to revisit the narrative they have been presented with, a structure that encourages the acts of reading and re-reading that are crucial to literary comprehension. As such, García's novel configures itself not just within a Latina literary canon, but also within the larger American canon.

García envisions an American literary mainstream where narratives by and about Latina women are more prevalent. The collective outcome of the Boom was to write stories that would no longer be marginalized, but that would instead receive the attention

they deserve from the publishing mainstream. García's first novel, *Dreaming in Cuban*, offers an unexpected conclusion, presenting a younger generation of readers with an open-ended question about Pilar's motives. However, the uncertainty surrounding Pilar's return does not mean she rejects her Cuban backstory in favor of an American one, as some critics have argued. Pilar uses stories and letters to reconnect to her community because opposing politics and geopolitical divides have severed her from it. Storytelling grants her the power to assert the narrative from her perspective rather than have it dominated by U.S. historians, the conservative exile community, or Fidel Castro's mythology of his revolution. García's novel leaves open the possibility for the story to be continued by younger writers like Chantel Acevedo and Jennine Capó-Crucet, and for the questions to be answered by a new generation of readers. In my next chapter, I explore how writers of the Latina Boom collectively established new opportunities for younger writers to enter the mainstream publishing market. I do this by turning to another important Boom writer, Julia Alvarez, to discuss how writers collectively used the publishing market to create a legacy for their work.

CHAPTER THREE

“Every Revolution Needs a Chorus”: Writing and Teaching as Feminist Revolution in Julia Alvarez’s *In the Name of Salomé*

Julia Alvarez is one of the most prolific writers of the U.S. Latina Boom, having published three books of poetry, five novels, one collection of essays, two works of nonfiction, and twelve books written for children and young adults. In her memoir *Something to Declare*, Alvarez—who earned an MFA in Creative Writing from Syracuse University in 1975—describes feeling isolated among her peers at Bread Loaf one summer and relying on William Carlos Williams’s work as an example of poetic language. For Alvarez, Williams’s poem “So Much Depends” mimicked the Spanish idiom *todo depende* in English, and in his poetry she discovered a way of writing what she calls “Hispanicisms” into the English language (*Declare* 165). She later discovered *The Woman Warrior* by Maxine Hong Kingston, who ultimately served as her literary model for writing Dominican American women’s voices into her work (168). As she searched for other models in bookstores, she found work by Latino and Chicano men, such as Piri Thomas, José Antonio Villareal, and Gary Soto, but found no writing by Latina women. Alvarez’s quest to find models by women like her incited a new literary tradition—often regarded as the Latina Boom of the 1990s—and established a model for a younger generation to follow.

Alvarez’s connection to the literary collective “Las Girlfriends,” which included Chicana writers Sandra Cisneros, Denise Chávez, and Anna Castillo, during the nineties provided her with the cultural visibility she needed to create her own corpus of literature.

In this chapter I address how Alvarez's connection to the literary collective "Las Girlfriends" provided her with the cultural visibility she would not have attained as an individual writer. Much of the scholarship on Alvarez's work focuses on two of her earlier novels, *How the García Girls Lost Their Accents* (1991) and the historical novel *In the Time of the Butterflies* (1994), but I analyze Alvarez's contributions to the Latina Boom through a reading of *In the Name of Salomé*, which appeared at the Boom's turning point in 2000. *In the Name of Salomé* is an important text that deserve more attention because it recognizes the value of writing oneself into national culture, recovers her literary foremothers through fiction, and lays the groundwork for her metaphorical descendants, especially writers and students, to follow.

I was introduced to the writers of the Latina Boom through Julia Alvarez, whose work made a deep impression on me as a teenager. On the day I discovered Alvarez, I did not know what I was looking for, but the wonder of encountering her on the page has remained with me. As an adolescent with a voracious reading appetite, I would accompany my mother on frequent book runs to Barnes and Noble. The chain had become the giant in book sales during the nineties, and the magnitude of its offerings, from the latest issue of *Sassy* or *Seventeen* magazine to the displays of employee-recommended hardcovers, made it a playground for my intellectual curiosity. I learned to read from my mother, and there has never been a time where my bookshelves weren't crammed with books. My mother taught reading skills and ESL in an elementary school in Newark, New Jersey, and she often spent her own money on books for her students, as many devoted educators do. I was usually allowed one or two new purchases during these runs, so I had to be selective. She granted me my private moments between the stacks as

she disappeared to the children's annex of the store.

Given this freedom, I would amble along the "Fiction" aisles. Multicultural books had not yet been categorized on "special interest" shelves, such as "Latino/a and Hispanic," "African-American/Black," or "Asian-American." I remember running my fingers across the spines of the new books, permitting my hands to divine my next selection. When I reached the end of an aisle, I'd startle from this trance to encounter some patron nestled in a chair, lost in the act of reading. I'd observe them quietly, maybe we'd acknowledge one another, and then continue on my quest. I was fifteen, and maybe feeling a little defeated that I wasn't accepted into any of the sophomore honors courses, despite my teachers' resounding recommendations. I was yet to learn not to judge my intellect on the assessment of others.

As I continued this ritual in the aisles, I came across a bright orange spine, skimmed the title, and paused: *How the García Girls Lost Their Accents* by Julia Alvarez. The title struck me as peculiar because I'd never read any books with protagonists who had a name like "García." The surname "García" existed within my own family tree, on my maternal grandmother's side. I pulled it from the shelf and began reading immediately. The novel opened to the García family tree, an image that later served as my road map for understanding the multiple narratives running throughout the book. I stood in wonder as I flipped through the novel's thin pages, encountering not one, but four narrators: Yolanda, Carla, Sandra, and Fifi, the four the sisters García. In my years of reading I had never experienced this feeling before. When I finally looked up, my mother was standing in front of me. I handed her the paperback, bombarded her with its synopsis, and declared, "I want this book."

So much about the novel excited me as a young reader. Alvarez's style, her narration and her use of Spanglish were unlike anything I'd ever read before. I certainly didn't read this kind of fiction in either my English or Spanish literature classes in high school. Alvarez's use of reverse chronology was different from the linear structure I had become accustomed to, with the exception of reading Jorge Luis Borges in Spanish class. Her inclusion of Spanglish mimicked the sounds and syntax of my own family gatherings in New Jersey and the Bronx. Then there were the narrators themselves. I was accustomed to identifying with a single narrator and trusting their development of the plot, being present with each sister as their stories shifted from the first-person to the third challenged my reading process in ways that differed from identifying with a single narrator and trusting their development of the plot.

I was especially struck by the play on Yolanda García's nickname "Yo"—later as a scholar, I'd recognize that many critics interpreted this "I" subject as Alvarez's literary alter ego. But as a young reader and writer, my identification with Yolanda García allowed me to insert myself, "yo," in the narrative in profound ways. In my creative writing classes, I'd emulate Alvarez's style in my short stories. As a student, I'd lobby my English teachers to make assigned reading. I wasn't entirely successful at either endeavor, though I did manage to get my teachers to read Alvarez. However, I now realize that my intimate relationship with Alvarez's work set my intellectual foundation as a student, a writer, and an academic.

From the University to the Publishing Market

Much of Alvarez's success is due in part to her agent Susan Bergholz, who also represented Chicana writers Sandra Cisneros, Ana Castillo and Denise Chávez. As I write

in chapter one, the four authors were collectively touted as “Las Girlfriends” in a *Vanity Fair* article that took them to a wider readership (Rebolledo, *Guerrilleras* 126). In the photo that accompanied the article, Alvarez sits in the center of her Chicana “amigas,” all donning chic, vermillion-hued attire. The feature also announced the publication of *In the Time of the Butterflies* that year. Although she had published *Homecoming*, her 1984 poetry collection with Grove Press, Alvarez’s work didn’t achieve widespread critical acclaim until the publication of *García Girls* in 1991.¹ The Chicana set of “Las Girlfriends” had all been publishing their prose with smaller presses, and their work is derived from a larger Chicano literary tradition in the U.S. Alvarez too was influenced by this tradition, but she was the first Dominican American writer to be published in the mainstream market and to establish a distinct narrative perspective from her Chicana contemporaries. The literature Alvarez published in the nineties stressed the relationship between the Dominican Republic and the United States, exploring (among other things) the consequences of Dominican dictator General Rafael Trujillo’s rule on Dominicans in the diaspora. Alvarez’s work specifically addressed how this history impacted generations of Dominican women living in the U.S. and on the island.

Early criticism on U.S. Latina/o literature tended to focus on literary production by Chicanos, Puerto Ricans, and Cuban-Americans, and perhaps because of this history critics failed to recognize Alvarez’s contributions to the developing contemporary canon. In their 1989 essay “At the Threshold of the Unnamed,” Eliana Ortega and Nancy Sternbach contended that Latina literary production was determined by their respective histories within the United States. Using the Treaty of Guadalupe-Hidalgo (1848) as their

¹ In her critical essays, Alvarez addresses how the commercial success of *García Girls* granted her the financial security to forgo tenure and continue writing. See *Declare* 213-14.

historical framework, they argued that Chicanas had the “most fully developed [feminist] literature and criticism.” Ortega and Sternbach declared U.S. literary production by Dominicans and Central Americans a “womanless literature” (Ortega and Sternbach 9). Although her poetry collection *Homecoming* was published in 1984, Alvarez was not acknowledged in this early criticism on Latina literature. It was not the first time she was snubbed. As Silvio Torres-Saillant discusses, Dominican writers were excluded from Latino literary anthologies in the 1990s, despite Alvarez's contributions to the poetry canon and the international fame that *García Girls* brought her in 1991 (Torres-Saillant 251).

Latino/a literary scholars tend to separate Chicana writers from Latina Caribbean writers because the two populations have different historical and political relationships to the United States. Against this background, I turn attention to the ways in which Latina authors address shared experiences *within* the U.S. By viewing the Latina Boom as a U.S.-based literary movement, we can better appreciate the artistic and political alliances Latina writers from different ethnic backgrounds forged as they became a visible presence in American literature. Despite the sensational tone of “Las Girlfriends” in the *Vanity Fair* feature, the image grants readers and viewers a new perspective on Latina writers, and on American literature.

Alvarez's own educational trajectory parallels those of her contemporaries in the “Las Girlfriends” collective that I discuss in chapter one. Like Cisneros, Alvarez attended college during the civil rights and women's rights movements, earning her bachelor's degree from Middlebury College in 1971. Alvarez's family was wealthier than Cisneros's, granting her access to boarding schools before college. However, Alvarez's

experiences in college and in her M.F.A. program at Syracuse led her to seek out other writers of color and form their own reading and writing groups. In their quest for identifying minority writers in the U.S., Alvarez and her contemporaries began to write poetry and prose that included the perspectives of those who looked and sounded like themselves. Alvarez began college in the late sixties and participated in the multiple social movements in of the time:

The civil rights movement was just getting started. All those movements—women’s, multicultural—were in the future. That cracking open of American culture, with people who had long been left out saying, ‘I, too, sing America,’ it had not yet happened. Not until college and graduate school did I feel the social world around me include people like me (Kevane and Heredia 23).

The sixties and seventies were a period in which Latina women writers were negotiating their own spaces in a university system that served as a microcosm of society. Their poetry and prose would allegorize the experience of narratively and lyrically forcing their way into the U.S. literary landscape.

The multivocal perspective of the concurrent civil rights, nationalist, and feminist movements proved useful to Boom writers because it addressed three essential goals in the canon of Latina literature: first, to demonstrate the family dynamics in Latino culture; second, to build community within their respective groups; and lastly, to build alliances across ethnic categories and engage in a new literary discourse. Their work employs what Mikhail Bakhtin defines as heteroglossia, or a novelistic language that includes “specific points of view on the world, forms for conceptualizing the world in words, specific world

views, each characterized by its own objects, meanings and values” (1213). These elements all work on the plane of the novel to “mutually supplement one another, contradict one another, and be interrelated dialogically” (Bakhtin 1213). By creating dialogism, or what I refer to as multivocal perspectives, they engaged in creating literary worlds that featured the disparate voices within Latino families and communities. The writers the Latina Boom are from immigrant families or are first-generation Americans. Their work addresses classism, racism, prejudice, language, and patriarchal structures within their own communities and in U.S. society at large. The act of writing by Latina women became a form of discursive community building that resisted the white male author as the authoritative figure of canonical U.S. literature.

The Latina Boom emerged from their individual literary activity of 1980s, and also from their collective promotion of each other’s work in the 1990s. Alvarez regards the early eighties as the first period in which a Latina literary presence emerges in the U.S., starting with the 1983 publication of *Cuentos: Stories by Latinas*, edited by Alma Gómez, Cherríe Moraga, and Mariana Romo-Carmono. She ruminates on identifying her contemporaries:

The very next year Sandra Cisneros published her collection of linked stories, *The House on Mango Street*; Ana Castillo published her book of poems *Women Are Not Roses*; I published *Homecoming*. At Bread Loaf, I met Judith Ortiz Cofer and heard her read from [what would become] *The Line of the Sun*. Lorna Dee Cervantes, Cherríe Moraga, Helena María Viramontes, Denise Chavez. Suddenly there was a whole group of us, a tradition forming, a dialogue going on. . .If Hemingway and his buddies

could have their Paris group, and the Black Mountain poets their school,
why couldn't we . . . Latinas have our own made-in-the-U.S.A. boom?

(*Declare* 169)

Alvarez's 1997 essay precedes Cisneros's forward to the twenty-fifth anniversary re-edition of *Mango Street* (2009), "A House of My Own," but both document a literary movement. Therefore, the Latina Boom of the nineties ushered Latina writers into the platform of the New York publishing market, but it did so only because of the momentum caused by their educational experiences and their affiliations with small presses. As Alvarez explains, the movement resulted from the writers' individual experiences, their literary training, and the recognition that their work served as a "dialogue" and that formed a new U.S. literary tradition. The Boom sought to implement form with Latina viewpoints, forging a new hybrid genre of prose, fiction and verse within American letters.

The discursive and personal relationship between Cisneros and Alvarez is especially significant for recognizing the shared literary and activist themes in their writing. Both writers incorporate pedagogical elements into their writing while using their platforms to enact change through teaching. Also, both Cisneros and Alvarez experienced alienation in their respective MFA programs, leading them to create work in response to their formal training.² In an interview with Juanita Heredia, Cisneros describes discovering Alvarez's poetry:

I knew her first as a poet and was so moved by [*Homecoming*]. I wrote her a fan letter. She was teaching in Illinois, and I was working here in San

² In Heredia's interview with Alvarez, the author admits that women in her MFA program formed an "alternative workshop" to identify different points of views in writing. See Kevane and Heredia 24.

Antonio. I was enamored of a Latina writing about issues that were close to me with the craftsmanship that I admired, that I aspired to, and I wrote to tell her that . . . We came into contact later via our mutual agent (Kevane and Heredia 48-49).

Intimacy between Alvarez and Cisneros was established as they discovered and read each other's work. Cisneros's appreciation of Alvarez as her contemporary proves that work by Chicanas did not appear first, as is sometimes believed. While Chicana writers may have been published more frequently, Dominican American writer Alvarez was a foundational part of the Latina Boom from the very beginning.

Susan Bergholz's decision to promote a Dominican American writer in a group of Chicanas gave Alvarez a public visibility she did not enjoy individually. This strategic inclusion of Alvarez in the Chicana literary collective emulated cross-cultural alliances initiated by the Third World feminist movement during the 1980s. Bergholz's promotion of "Las Girlfriends" was an effective marketing campaign, but the relationship that developed between the authors owed more to the cross-cultural, anticolonial alliances established in anthologies such as *This Bridge Called My Back* and in *Cuentos*. The promotion of "Las Girlfriends" as a collective emulated the models established by Anzaldúa and Moraga, as well as Alma Gómez and Romo-Carmona, but theirs was transmitted through the lens of popular culture.

Toward the end of the decade, Alvarez capitalized on her reputation when she published the novel *In the Name of Salomé*. Alvarez used her visibility to introduce readers to two of her recovered literary foremothers, national Dominican poet Salomé Ureña and her daughter, scholar Camila Henríquez Ureña. Through her own writing,

Alvarez was able to make visible untold narratives from history, especially those of the Mirabal sisters and the Henríquez Ureña women, while paving the path for newer writers to publish. While the novel has been regarded as “historical fiction,” Alvarez employs her characteristic reverse chronological format in the plot, making the novel more experimental than strictly genre fiction.

Raphael Dalleo and Elena Machado Sáez have taken issue with critics who say the Latina Boom writers as betrayed the progressive politics of sixties in order to achieve marketplace success (133). Dalleo and Machado highlight the “conspicuous” absence representation of the sixties in the Boom writers’ work, despite the authors’ frequent reference in interviews to the political activity of the decade (138). They argue that Alvarez’s novels “call attention to the ways in which U.S. and Caribbean *literary* history overlap. The scope of her work points to the connections and fissures between the fields of U.S. ethnic and postcolonial studies, particularly the extent to which the experience of the Sixties has shaped both fields” (138). They also declare that the social movements within the U.S. were connected to the movements of decolonization, where literature was used as “a weapon against injustice and oppression.” For Dalleo and Machado, Alvarez critiques the ideal of the writer as “spokesman and as a man of action,” yet she is “nostalgic” for the reverence that writers experienced in the 1960s (138).

Salomé and the Body Politic

In the Name of Salomé presents the alternating narratives of Salomé Ureña, the Dominican poet, and her daughter Camila Henríquez Ureña, a Vassar professor. Salomé’s narrative is told in the first person and follows a linear chronology from 1856-1897, spanning Santo Domingo’s historic struggle for sovereignty. Camila’s story is told in the

third person and moves chronologically backward from 1960, at the dawn of Fidel Castro's revolution, to the time of her mother's death in 1897. Salomé dies when Camila is only three years old, and Camila makes it her quest to reconstruct her mother's memory by reading, editing, and teaching Salomé's poetry in the U.S. and Cuba. The fictionalized version of the mother-daughter relationship between Salomé and Camila allegorizes the role Julia Alvarez herself played in creating a U.S. Latina literary tradition and developing the pedagogical framework for reading it.

Salomé Ureña's narrative arc follows the evolution from her writing under the pseudonym "Herminia" to becoming Santo Domingo's national bard. During the time of her quinceañera, a colonial ceremony in which young women "come out" in preparation for suitors, Salomé emerges as a poetic witness to the multiple revolutions happening throughout the Americas. When the assassination of Abraham Lincoln occurs on Salomé's birthday, and she thinks, "we liked our bearded president of our neighbor to the north. He had struggled for the freedom of people of our color" (49). Salomé likens the struggles of people of color in the U.S. to the ongoing anticolonial struggle of Santo Domingo, illuminating the interconnected histories between the two countries (Socolovsky 6-7).

After Spain repossesses the territory from Haiti and divides the island of Hispaniola, Salomé vows to write her country's liberation into existence: "I dreamed of setting us free. My shield was my paper, and my swords were the words my father was teaching me to wield. I practiced on paper and I practiced in my head: rhymes, refrains, anthems, hymns . . . I would free la patria with my sharp quill and bottle of ink" (*Salomé* 50). Salomé's education, which she gained from her father in private, correlates with the

development of literacy of the population as a whole. Since little reading material existed, Salomé participates in creating the work she wants to see.

Salomé's own education subverts the Spanish colonial expectations of what a girl should know, which was shaped by Catholic ideologies of womanhood. The sisters Bobadilla run the only school for girls in Santo Domingo, and the lessons emphasize manners rather than ideas. During Spanish rule, girls were expected to learn poise, the alphabet, and Catholic prayers (15). Despite the lessons, or because of them, women remained illiterate. The anticolonial revolutionaries, on the other hand, favored women's literacy and their right to own property. Salomé's own father, a proponent of girls' education, tutors his daughters in private, pulling them from the Bobadilla school after he learns they "didn't know who Lope de Vega was or Dante or the pistil and the stamen in one of the flowers he picked" (50). Salomé's father provided her with the education that allows her to participate in the world around her, and instructed her to use literacy as a tool of resistance.

Salomé soon learns that her writing has social repercussions that classical poetry styles had not. She notes that Spanish censors allowed "anything in rhymed line" to be published in the newspaper, turning "every patriot into a poet" (55). Upon witnessing the renowned poet Josefa Perdomo praise their Spanish rulers in verse, Salomé vows to never write anything "pretty and useless" or welcoming of their "intruders" (56-57). When Salomé's private teacher invites his brother Miguel, an aspiring poet, to class, Miguel inadvertently becomes Salomé's literary agent. The two brothers are exiled to Haiti under the new dictatorship, but Miguel has managed to submit Herminia's "seditious" poetry to the paper. Despite putting her family at risk of exile, Salomé realizes that her own

political awareness reverberated through Santo Domingo. She thinks, “Papá was beside himself. Why was I bent on defying him? Exile would be the least of it . . . But secretly, I was glad. Poetry, *my* poetry, was waking up the body politic!” (62). The publication of Herminia’s poems results in a paradigm shift for Salomé’s new readers, who begin to participate in the revolution.

The fierce anticolonial tone of Herminia’s poetry causes Salomé’s compatriots to riot against their U.S. occupiers, as her words actively shape revolutionary Santo Domingo. The bodiless, unidentified Herminia becomes an ideology, often referred to as “la musa,” for her compatriots to organize around. However, Salomé’s use of a pen name, and therefore an abstract concept instead of an actual woman, allows others to appropriate her name for their own purposes. Refusing to appease any imperial invader, European or American, Salomé outs herself at the time of conflict. When a sentimental poem about North American winters is published under Herminia’s name, Salomé intervenes by delivering her revolutionary poem “A la Patria” to the newspaper herself (67). She publishes the work under her given name, revealing Herminia’s true identity and assuming authority over her work. Salomé’s revelation of her name becomes one of the many ways she challenges authorial mediation of her work.

Even after Salomé reveals her identity, she continues to experience tension between Salomé the abstract muse and Salomé the embodied poet. Salomé’s house is turned into an impromptu literary salon where amateur writers ask for her opinions on philosophical topics, or promote their own work by association with “la musa.” Remembering her encounters with work written by Victor Hugo, Shakespeare, and Sor Juana Ines de la Cruz, she thinks: “We were not a country rich in books; the few

collections of this or that author circulated among a group of readers who all knew of each other. Salomé is welcoming of any new written work by her fellow Dominicans, and she uses her status as unofficial poet laureate to help shape a national literature (92).

Salomé's salon is turned into a space where men project an idealized concept of *la musa* onto her, negating her physical body and holding her to European standards of womanhood. In this context, Salomé agrees to review the work of amateur playwright Federico Henríquez because she desires a creative and romantic equal. Federico, however, sees an opportunity for his personal advancement. Salomé thinks:

[T]he look I saw there was the glazed one of an admirer. He was seeing the famous poetisa who had agreed to read *The Hebrew Girl* and whom he hoped would write a poem in the paper in praise of it. He was not seeing me, Salomé, of the funny nose and big ears with hunger in her eyes and Africa in her skin and hair. (94)

Salomé's feelings for Federico propel her to write romantic verse in response, prompting her father and sister to criticize her for its sentimentality, likening it to the flowery European-style verses of the colonial supporter Josefa. Ramona, Salomé's sister, reminds her that she called Federico's play "derivative and tedious," and advises her against praising him for sentimental reasons. When she receives the finalized anthology, Salomé learns that Federico has used their brief association to solidify his own placement in a national literature. His poem in honor of their friendship, which Salomé reveals "had not come to much," has been included. In contrast to his platonic poem for Salomé, Federico wrote a poem his fiancé that was characterized by its "sighs and vows of adoration"(99). Through her disappointment with Federico, Salomé learns that while her revolutionary

verses reinforce the bodiless poet, whereas her gender prevents her from expressing an embodied sensuality like her male counterparts.

Embodying the Erotic

Salomé's experience of her sexual awakening leads her to write her body into her revolutionary verses. When Salomé writes the poem "Quejas," she thinks "it was as if by lifting my pen, I had released the woman inside me and let her free on paper." She draws direct attention to her physical self by writing "answer the wild longing in my heart! / put out my ardent fire with your kisses." Her sister reminds her that as *la musa de la patria*, no one thinks of her as having a body (143-44). Salomé's own poetry is about her *objet d'esir* Pancho, but her decision to publish a poem becomes a feminist act. Salomé does not publish "Quejas" to get the attention of a lover, but rather as a protest against double standards. She sympathizes for a teenaged neighbor who is cast out by her family because of an illegitimate pregnancy. Salomé thinks, "There was another revolution to be fought if our patria was truly to be free" (145). Salomé asserts agency over her work by delivering the poem to the newspaper office in person, as she did when she assumed authorship for her poems.

For Salomé, the personal is political. She believes her desires as woman deserve equal weight as her patriotic work: "[I] had begun writing in a voice from deep inside me. It was not a public voice. It was my own voice expressing my secret desires that Pancho was dismissing" (177). By drawing attention to Salomé's desires, Alvarez recalls Audre Lorde's theory of the erotic, which Lorde defined as "a resource within each of us that lies in a deeply female and spiritual plane, firmly rooted in the power of our unexpressed or unrecognized feeling" (Lorde 53). Lorde wrote that the erotic is a source of power and

information that can provide “energy for change,” but that is often suppressed by “male models of power” (53).

Recalling her father’s disapproval of her love poems, Salomé rejects patriarchal models of writing. When Pancho appears after reading the published piece, Salomé thinks: “Perhaps by writing my poem, I had discovered that I had a body. Then as if it were the most natural thing in the world for a woman to do to the man she loves, I reached for his hands and touched my lips first to one palm and then the other” (146). By publishing her erotic poetry, Salomé determines which poems are visible, rather than adhering to Santo Domingo’s colonial protocol of womanhood. She shifts the inclusion of women’s image in verse from the passive object of desire to the active subject of the poem.

Salomé’s erotic work is muted by her husband Pancho, who utilizes her poetry as the vehicle for his nationalist agenda. After marrying Pancho, Salomé is subjected to his manipulation, and he serves as both editor and publisher of her work. Pancho’s involvement in Friends of the Country, Santo Domingo’s literary society, makes him the gatekeeper of her literary corpus. He tells her, “you must not squander away your talent by singing in a minor key. . . you must think of your future as the bard of our nation. We want songs of la patria, we need anthems to lead us out of our past and into our glorious destiny as the Athens of the Americas” (177). Alvarez’s reference to Friends of the Country in the novel recalls what Angel Rama has called the *letrado*, or a masculine noun describing the literate urban class, in nineteenth-century Latin America. After 1870, the *letrado* helped solidify national literature through the incorporation of local color and writing about the modernized city. Rama writes:

[T]he written word designed the foundations of a national identity and constructed a version of it in people's minds, all in the service of a particular political project...Less substantial, but more crucial, was what occurred in peoples' minds: the dreams that these written materials led them to conceive, as the page dissolved into reveries before their eyes, exciting their imagination, unleashing and channeling the force of their desire (71).

Salomé's work is used to formulate a national identity and is only considered revolutionary when it conforms to a male ideology of nation. Pancho's desire for nationalism conflicts with Salomé's desire for sexual revolution. Salomé is adamant about the gendered dimension of her work when she retorts, "I am a woman as well as a poet" (177). What Pancho views as "personal" poems, Salomé sees as an expression of female desire that deserves to be publicly acknowledged and included in the formation of the nation.

What Salomé cannot accomplish in print, she accomplishes as an educator. Salomé becomes disillusioned when her work is appropriated by military dictator Ulises "Lilís" Heuraux, who "liked to recite passages of [her] patriotic poems before battle" (*Salomé* 187, 228). She answers the call of the positivist educator Eugenio María de Hostos to open a secondary school for girls, directly challenging Spanish colonial expectations of gender in favor of a progressive, pan-American approach. Salomé thinks, "I found myself converted to Hostos's way of thinking. He was right. The last thing our country needed was more poems. We needed schools" (187). Salomé establishes an *instituto* for girls, based on her own education she received from her father, her husband

Pancho and Hostos, but that also draws deeply from her own experiences. In what I view as a pedagogy of the erotic, the revolution would continue through the girls Salomé educates to become teachers.

Salomé's pedagogy directly challenges the original Spanish systems maintained by the sisters Bobadilla, and it also as protests Lili's authoritarianism. When Lili attempts to shut down the *instituto*, Salomé's former students confront the government by taking up the charge of teaching. Luisa, one of the instituto's first graduates, exclaims: "We won't give up our instituto. Long live our maestra!" Salomé's uses teaching as activism to shape the egalitarian, anticolonial, and anti-imperial nation she envisions (*Salomé* 175). She thinks, "I looked at their bright, young faces and felt a surge of hope. These, too, were my children I was sending into the future to start over" (301). As a teacher, Salomé provides her students with the knowledge she received as a poet and as privately educated a girl. By making her knowledge public, Salomé models feminist practices for her students to emulate in their own classrooms, which manifests as activism outside of it. By educating girls to become teachers, Salomé shapes Santo Domingo, projecting the future she envisions by "rebuilding [the] patria, girl by girl" (271). The instituto builds young women's literacy, which allows them to participate politically in the country at-large. By counteracting the appropriation of her verses, Salomé finds a way of inciting the erotic through pedagogy.

Inheriting Knowledge

Camila's narrative moves backward in time to her childhood, and the reader learns that Salomé dies when Camila is three years old. Camila feels some comfort in knowing that she is her mother's namesake, but she spends most of her life attempting to

recover the memory of Salomé. The young Camila inherits knowledge from Salomé through the acts of reading and writing. Camila is the only girl among Salomé's four children, and her name "Salomé Camila" also signifies her role as the inheritor of her mother's knowledge. Salomé's sister, "Mon," begins to educate Camila after Salomé's death, making sure the young Camila remembers her mother by her work and not her illness. Mon teaches Camila to recite Salomé's work at the age of three and transcribes the poems exclusively for Camila to guard at a later age. The act of recitation transmits Salomé's knowledge unto her daughter through Mon's teaching.

Camila's recitation of her mother's poetry and Mon's prayers connects her back to her lost mother. Mon teaches Camila to make the sign of the cross and recite "In the name of the Father, the Son, and the holy spirit of Salomé, my mother" (318). Mon understands that connection to Salomé is Camila's connection to herself. Following in the path Salomé, Mon provides Camila with an alternative type of education by instilling Salomé's teachings in her. Mon employs Salomé's pedagogy of the erotic to connect Camila with a deeply feminine knowledge, which in turn helps her with the physical loss of her mother. In "Uses of the Erotic," Lorde writes:

That self-connection shared is a measure of the joy which I know myself to be capable of feeling, a reminder of my capacity for feeling. And that deep and irreplaceable knowledge of my capacity for joy comes to demand from all of my life it be lived within the knowledge that such satisfaction is possible (Lorde 57).

However, when Camila teaches her stepmother Tivisita the prayer, Camila's father Pancho calls for Camila's return home, away from her blasphemous aunt. Pancho's

decision to alienate Camila from her aunt Mon denies Camila the pleasure of learning Salomé's knowledge through the intimacy of poetry.

Camila reunites with her estranged aunt Mon at her own coming-of-age *quinceañera* party in Santiago de Cuba. During her visit, Mon reveals that Pancho has lied about Salomé's memory, including commissioning a portrait of her with fairer and more delicate features, like those of Camila's stepmother Tivista. Mon disapproves of the portrait, stating: "That's not what your mother looked like. . . .Your mother was much darker for one thing" (280-81). While Mon is hesitant to reveal that Salomé is Afro-Dominican, she encourages Camila to move beyond the façade Pancho has created and to discover her mother's essence through her work. Mon advises the young Camila: "Get to know your mother from her poems. That is the truest Salomé. That is Salomé before..." (281). Mon's inability to complete her sentence suggests Pancho's false image of Salomé as a persona that is nationalist, sexless, and whitened.

Mon is also responsible for calling attention to patriarchal manipulation of Salomé's work. As a birthday present for her fifteenth birthday, Mon gives Camila a book of Salomé's poetry that she has personally copied and bound together. She tells Camila that Salomé's work was "tinkered with" by Pancho, who "thought he knew better" (282). In her private conversations with Camila, Mon requests that one day Camila publish her mother's true work since she is "inclined in that direction." Upon receiving the gift, Camila begins to recite the original of her Salomé's poem "Sombras," realizing as she does how her father edited the work. By gifting Camila with the original poems, Mon transmits Salomé's knowledge and thwarts Pancho's efforts perpetuate a myth around Salomé's memory.

The novel correlates with the patriarchal mediation of Salomé's work with Camila's sexuality. Camila's brothers sustain Pancho's image of Salomé throughout Camila's life. Camila discovers that her brother's Max has begun writing a sonnet in the style of Salomé. He composed the poem in Camila's personal copy of her mother's poems, disrupting the spiritual space established between mother and daughter. Not only does Max intrude on the intimate space of the page Camila shares with her mother, but he also expresses his desires for Guarina, a friend for whom Camila feels romantic affection: "Reading it, Camila felt a pang of jealousy. Max has no right to worm his way into her special friendship with Guarina" (278). Camila cannot express her desires for another girl on the page without her brother's mediation. Her brothers, however, are allowed to express their heterosexual desires freely and without punishment. For Camila, the pleasure she experiences reading her mother's work is an affirmation of the love she feels for Guarina.

The tension between Camila and her brothers grows as they determine which of Salomé's work will remain in circulation. While Camila and Pedro are graduate students at the University of Minnesota, the young Pedro compiles an edition of Salomé's "best work" to be published in Madrid (238). He assumes responsibility for Salomé's work from Pancho, who was responsible for publishing the first edition of her poetry. Pedro believes that if Salomé's work is not republished, her legacy will be obliterated. When she reviews Pedro's selections for the new edition, Camila learns that Pedro has omitted her favorite poems by her mother: "'Personal poems,' Pedro calls them as if that diminishes their value. At the center of her brother's personality there is a deep conservatism that astonishes her in a man who thinks of himself as rational and modern"

(244). As Pancho did with the first edition of Salomé's work, Pedro favors the nationalist poetry over the erotic poetry, presenting a one-dimensional image of Salomé, and one that undermines her femininity.

Pedro's manipulation of Salomé's work corresponds with his intervention of Camila's sexuality. Camila begins a relationship with Marion while studying in Minnesota, and she is subjected to Pedro's spying, in addition to the World War I-era suspicion of foreigners. She learns from his letters to his friend that he has idealized Camila as a woman with "perfect character," and his discovery of her relationship with Marion proves her traitorous to the family, as well as to their expectations of heterosexuality (250-251). Just as Salomé's sexuality on the page was monitored by Pancho, and perpetuated by her sons, Camila is subjected to her brothers' heteronormative ideologies. In order to liberate her sexuality, Camila must assume agency over her mother's work, something she is able to do during her time as a university professor.

The university becomes the site where Camila negotiates her sexuality, exile status, and the power of her mother's legacy. As a graduate student in Minnesota, Camila must perform the unofficial role Caribbean ambassador to the United States. While attending the university during World War I, Camila and her brother Pedro are immediately suspicious to the vigilante groups monitoring "foreigners" in Minneapolis. She carries letters certifying that she and her brother are earning graduate degrees, and that they've sworn to uphold the U.S. Constitution (*Salomé* 233). Their father Pedro "Pancho" Henríquez briefly served as president of the Dominican Republic before being ousted from the country by the U.S. Marines. By accepting admission to the university,

the Henríquez siblings are expected to suppress any discussion of U.S. occupation in their country and are used as pawns for U.S. exceptionalism.

To maintain their asylum, Pedro and Camila must comply with U.S. propaganda campaigns. When the campus paper reports, “Children of Former President of San Domingo Prefer the USA,” Pedro and Camila defend their stance by writing a letter outlining their reasons for attending the university. Pedro has brought Camila to Minnesota for her advanced degree with the hope that her English would improve her diplomacy skills with President Wilson, allowing her to negotiate on her father’s behalf (235). However, the department chair urges them to pledge their patriotism if the university is to employ them. Camila thinks:

Spain is out of the question. Mexico is still reeling from civil war and American intervention. Their own country is occupied, and so is their neighbor Haiti. Puerto Rico is now owned by the United States, and Cuba is headed for the same compromised situation. Where can they go that isn’t enemy territory anymore? (247).

The novel’s allusion to the Monroe Doctrine exposes U.S. intervention in the Americas as a violent disruption for those living in occupied territory. Camila must wrestle with the fact that she is being offered asylum by the country that caused her family’s exile. While Pedro turns down the faculty position in protest, Camila defies her brother’s expectations and takes a position in the Spanish department. By accepting the dean’s offer, Camila asserts her autonomy and blocks Pedro’s attempt to use her as the family pawn against the U.S. President. Since her national and sexual identities are policed by nation and family, the university becomes Camila’s refuge.

Camila's career is overshadowed by Pedro, who earns the prestigious title of Norton Lecturer at Harvard. The historical Camila Henríquez Ureña held two doctorates and worked at Vassar as a Spanish professor but was lesser known than her famous brothers. Her brother Pedro Henríquez Ureña was a literary scholar and renowned writer who held academic positions at the University of Minnesota and at Harvard (Torres-Saillant 263). In 2000, Torres-Saillant said Camila deserved the same accolades as her brother, but much of her writing from her seventeen year academic career in the U.S. had yet to be recovered (263-264).

The question of who should assume Salomé's legacy creates tension between Camila and Pedro even after twenty years apart. Camila has taught herself verse by emulating her mother's work, rewriting Salomé's poetry and changing masculine pronouns so the poems would be addressed to her, not her brothers (120). At a gathering in Cambridge, Camila is called upon to recite, and she reads from her own manuscript. While prestigious Latin American male poets—including Juan Ramón Jiménez and Pedro's colleague Jorge Guillén—praise her work, Pedro is skeptical. The next night, Camila wears Salomé's black silk dress to Pedro's lecture, thinking "[it] is odd. . . that her body conforms exactly to her mother's body, as if she were somehow resurrecting her mother in her own flesh" (121). She is inspired by Pedro, who is declaring that intellectuals must pledge themselves to "*our* America . . . the America our poor little countries are struggling to create." Recalling her poetry reading the earlier night, Camila thinks:

She, too, wants to be part of that national self-creation. Her mother's poems inspired a generation. Her own, she knows, are not clarion calls,

but subdued oboes, background piano music, a groundswell of cellos bearing the burden of a melody. Every revolution surely needs a chorus (121).

She fantasizes about continuing Salomé's work by writing, although Pedro discourages her.

Camila has left a position at a university in Havana to pursue a career as a poet in Cambridge. There is a catch to Camila's newfound independence—she collects a pension from the Trujillo dictatorship, which supports her because she is the unmarried daughter of a former president. Camila justifies the stipend as a compromise she is making for her art (115). Pedro, however, suggests that she should “keep writing for her own pleasure” and take a job opportunity at Vassar. When Camila challenges her brother, citing his speech, it is clear that Pedro feels more entitled to write the revolution, albeit from afar: “I am defending it with my pen. It is a small thing, but those are the arms I was give. . . . Defending it from the bought pens, the dictators, the impersonators, the well-meaning but lacking in talent” (125). Although prominent twentieth-century Hispanic poets encourage Camila to write, Pedro's influence trumps their opinions. The novel reveals the interconnected historical and patriarchal forces at work that kept women's writing—especially writing by a Dominican woman living in the United States—unknown to many readers.

Camila and the University

At Vassar, Camila is exposed to her students' views of non-U.S. writers when she teaches her mother's poetry. Camila thinks: “Americans don't interest themselves in the heroes and heroines of minor countries until someone makes a movie about them” (7).

When Camila instructs her students to read Salomé's poem "A la patria," they respond with criticism. Her student remarks: "They're too bewailing, oh woe is me and my poor suffering country. Is this poet supposed to be any good? I never heard of her." The students' responses to Salomé's work demonstrates is emblematic of the American public's ignorance of U.S. involvement in the Caribbean and about the aesthetic value of Caribbean writers like Salomé. Camila is forced to validate her mother's work by comparing her to canonical American poets: "As good as your Emily Dickinson, as good as your Walt Whitman" (39). When Camila walks home from class that night, she thinks: "Everything of ours—from lives to literature—has always been so disposable" (39). Camila's authority as a professor is also dismissed when her students reject her lesson for the day—her attempts at introducing her mother's poetry to an American institution have been futile.

Despite Camila's disappointment with her students, she charges Nancy, her student assistant at Vassar, with archiving her family's legacy. The novel opens with a family tree of the Henríquez Ureña family, similar to the ones in Alvarez's novels *García Girls* and *In the Time of the Butterflies*. The reader soon learns it is Nancy, not Camila, who has recorded the family tree and has left notes throughout. Beneath the name "Salomé Ureña, 1850-1897, the National Poetess," Nancy has scribbled, "Should I have heard of her?!" Next to Francisco "Pancho" Henríquez, Nancy notes that his four month presidency is "kinda short." Nancy seems most impressed by Camila's brother Pedro, who served as Harvard's Norton Lecturer in the 1940s. As for the historical background, Nancy notes there are "tons of revolutions and wars, too numerous to list!" The family tree works two-fold: first, it demonstrates the biases or historical gaps those in the U.S.

have against Dominican Republic; second, it exposes those gaps to educate the reader throughout the novel. Moreover, the family tree provides a roadmap that allows readers to follow the contrasting, nonlinear narratives.

The historical gaps are exposed through Nancy, who is charged with recording Camila's personal history. Camila selectively omits from her story the fact that her father is removed from the presidency by the U.S. Marines. Nancy likens Camila to Alice Roosevelt and the Eisenhowers, and suggests Camila write a memoir about her family. Camila waves the suggestion away, thinking "She has been approached before, by journalists and historians south of the border" (41). When Nancy remains awestruck that her professor was First Daughter, Camila responds "I wish it had only been four months ... The effects went on for a long time is what I mean." Camila then thinks, "Nine years spent trying to reclaim his country. A president without a country. Someone (not her!) *should* write a book about it" (41). Characteristically, Alvarez has referenced herself, for *In the Name of Salomé* is exactly the book Camila calls for. This "wink" in the narrative makes the reader aware of Alvarez's responsibility to write women's stories that have been historically silenced.

Camila encounters imperialist attitudes in the academy, where she often functions as an ambassador for her mother's work. However, she is acutely aware that she is being framed as a victim, contrary to her mother's memory: "She is, after all, the anonymous one, the one who has done nothing remarkable. . . she is in demand for sentimental reasons, the daughter who lost her mother" (69). She agrees to speak at Wellesley for Cinco de Mayo, despite not having any connection to Mexico. A friend remarks: "It doesn't matter. . . [it's] a 'Latin American holiday,' so even if you come and talk about

Carmen Miranda, the deans will think the campus is international” (70). The university becomes the site where American audiences pity their Caribbean counterparts, but where they remain unengaged in its history. Maya Socolovsky argues that “although the text shows the interconnectedness of history and nation by speaking of the common ideologies of the Americas, it also shows the losses of memory and specificity incurred when U.S. intellectuals tokenize the Caribbean and Central America” (15). This passive listening allows the audience to consume Latin American culture as anecdote rather than as knowledge.

Camila experiences her own awareness of her mother’s political legacy when she is confronted by a student. Camila is guilty of passively teaching her mother’s poetry on lecture tours, until she meets an exiled Dominican student named Manuelito during at Middlebury in Vermont. Camila tends to downplay politics, but Manuelito implicates the Henríquez family in the Trujillo regime. Manuelito’s father has been killed by the regime, and he asks Camila to submit his poetry on his behalf to a national contest held in Salomé’s memory. Her family’s government involvement allows Camila to move freely whereas Manuelito cannot. Manuelito is crucial for making Camila aware of her privileges by her association with the regime.

Manuelito directly challenges Camila when she refuses to smuggle in his poetry, causing Camila to rethink the value of Salomé’s work and her role in promoting it. When Marion reminds Camila that Salomé’s poems were “subversive,” Camila rewrites the script she planned for her Middlebury lecture. As a result of Manuelito’s presence in the lecture hall, Camila declares:

‘I cannot celebrate my mother’s work when her country is in shambles.’

She brings up the recent disappearances, the murders, the massacre of the Haitians she has never mentioned publicly before. . . Her own opinions were reserved for texts, for roundtables on women's contributions to the colonies, for curriculum committees implementing one theory of language learning over another. 'But if I remain quiet, then I lose my mother completely, for the only way I really know her is through the things she stood for' (85).

Camila's awareness about Salomé's work transforms her from cultural ambassador to an engaged teacher. Salomé's own pedagogy sought to resist imperialist "invaders" and rouse her students to political participation. Furthermore, Camila realizes that her mother's work is meant to engage with its readers, not be used as a cultural relic reserved in archives. At the end, she quotes from her mother's work: "To keep her dreams from dying / Was all the monument she dreamed of having" (86). Her performance earns a standing ovation from her audience, including Manuelito. Camila employs her mother's pedagogy of the erotic to transmit Salomé's politics of resistance to the audience, which evoke a response.

Crystal Parikh contends that Alvarez's work "teases out the ways in which feminist agency always emerges from and is folded back into the material, corporeal, and affective conditions that constitute femininity in the first place" (14). Parikh also argues that feminist agency in Alvarez's work—whether her characters are situated in the First World as liberal feminist subjects, or the developing world of the Dominican Republic—always occurs in women's everyday acts and everyday struggles. Camila's transformation occurs when she speaks back to the First World structures that resulted in her own

displacement, much like Miguelito's.

The novel begins and ends with Camila leaving the United States for Cuba on the eve of Fidel Castro's revolution. She has abandoned her pension from Vassar and packs a trunk of her mother's papers and poems that her brothers omitted from the archives and in print. By joining Castro's literacy brigade, Camila transmits her mother's knowledge to the people. In Sierra Maestra, Camila recites her mother's birth poem to women sorting coffee beans. When a worker asks if the poem is written by a mother, Camila declares that her own mother Salomé is the author. Just as her lecture in Middlebury roused her audience, Camila's recitation of her mother's poem and history incites applause from the women, who recognize Salomé as a woman and as a writer. Camila says that despite losing her only source of income, "Teaching literature was everywhere, in the campos, classrooms, barracks, factorías—literature for all. . . My mother's instituto had grown to the size of a whole country" (349).

While Camila is less idealistic about Castro's revolution by 1973, the year in which the novel ends, she is hopeful for a new generation. Camila was less than successful introducing her mother's work in the U.S. academy, but her success promoting literacy in Cuba suggests that the true power of literature lies in everyday struggles. For Camila, the real power of poetry comes from embodying its knowledge rather than reserving it for cerebral functions without much engagement. It is more fulfilling to bring her mother's work to the people than to have a passive audience who merely observe her while lecturing. Camila shifts in her role as ambassador to her mother's legacy to an active literary educator, a change that allows her to fully know Salomé on and off the page.

Just as the fictional Camila guards her mother's literary flame, Alvarez resurrects the stories of the Henríquez Ureña women as a teaching tool for her U.S. readers. In the case of *In the Name of Salomé*, Alvarez used her established reputation to publish stories that weren't addressed by academics or historians. The novel's own timeline, beginning in 1960 and moving backward to the births of both women, Camila and Salomé, represent a return to origin while also tracing the "birth" of each woman as a writer. Salomé and Camila undergo shifts from awareness of the world around them, to the desire to express that world in writing, and to share or publish their words with their readers. *In the Name of Salomé* speaks to the importance of identifying a literary history, and it is the fourth novel featuring Dominican women's narratives that Alvarez published that decade.

Alvarez, like Cisneros and García, envisions a democratic view of American literature that challenges the U.S. reader's indoctrinated beliefs about their nation and its history.. By the end of the nineties, "las Girlfriends" and their contemporaries developed a canon visible enough to establish their presence in U.S. literature. The appearance of the Latina literary canon gave raise to a new wave of writers that benefited from their presence. By the mid-nineties, work by canonical writers Edwidge Danticat and Junot Díaz appeared, both who undoubtedly benefited from Alvarez's historical focus of Hispaniola. In 1994, Danticat published her novel *Breath, Eyes, Memory*, which is stylistically similar to Alvarez's *García Girls* and *In the Time of the Butterflies*. Díaz published his acclaimed collection of stories *Drown* in 1996. Publishers began to focus on writing by a younger generation of Dominican-American writers, such as Angie Cruz, Nelly Rosario, and Loida Maritza Perez.

The writers discussed in this project published the majority of their work in the

nineties, but they've continued publishing and teaching in the twenty-first century. They've each established a respective work of prose, poetry, nonfiction and Young Adult literature. All of the texts explore the connections between writing oneself into existence and using the market or other sustaining institutions to expose their work to a larger audience. The most recent edition of the *Norton Anthology of American Literature* features selections from Cisneros's *Woman Hollering Creek* and Alvarez's *Yo!* (1997), testifying to the importance of nineties Latina literature in the U.S. English classroom.

More importantly, the Latina Boom is a testament to the diversity of American culture—and all of its complexities—and its endurance against the systemic social structures that attempt to exclude their stories. The bold presence of Latina Boom writers in the nineties ushered forth a new literary framework for newer writers to follow, proving that their work was not “market-driven” or temporary, but that writing by Latinos and Latinas is an important contribution to American literature.

EPILOGUE

Afterlives of the U.S. Latina Boom

Throughout this project, I have contended that U.S. Latina writers utilized mainstream publishing to advance their collective literary and political project to a broader audience. Their presence and success granted a new generation of writers the ability to write and publish with larger houses, too. While many of the authors I discuss here continue to write and publish with major New York publishers, not all of the Latina Boom writers have maintained their relationship with the big presses. Of all the Latina Boom writers, Ana Castillo has been the most vocal about the tension between mainstream publishing and her desire to remain true to the feminist and anti-capitalist subjects she regularly explores in her work. In this epilogue, I will use her recent memoir *Black Dove* (2016) and her bestselling novel *So Far From God* (1994) to reflect on the Boom's impact in the new millennium. Furthermore, I will address how a younger generation of Latina writers utilizes the mainstream to expose their stories to larger audiences.

As I write in chapter 1, Castillo was part of the “Chicana renaissance” of the 1980s and later a member of the literary collective “Las Girlfriends.” Before crossing over into mainstream publishing, Castillo published her poetry and fiction through presses like Bilingual Press/Prensa Bilingüe, Arte Público, and feminist presses that promoted women of color. Before publishing with these independent presses, Castillo self-published her poetry as chapbooks. In the 1980s, she published her poetry collections *Women are Not Roses* (1984), *My Father Was a Toltec* (1988), and the epistolary novel

The Mixquiahuala Letters (1986). It was also during the 1980s that Castillo embarked on writing her dissertation, published 1993 as *Massacre of the Dreamers*, a collection of critical essays in which defines Xicanisma, a term she originated to advance the tenets of Chicana feminism. In 1993, Castillo earned her doctorate in American Studies from the University of Bremen in Germany, where she says her work on Chicana feminism and the oppression of Mexican-American women was more accepted (*Massacre* ix-x). Like Gloria Anzaldúa, Castillo's critical work puts her at the crux of theory and experimental literature, simultaneously addressing academics and popular audiences. Her canonical novel, *So Far from God*, appeared in 1993, at the same time she completed her dissertation. After the success of *So Far from God*, Plume published a re-edition of *Massacre of the Dreamers*. Like her Boom contemporaries, Castillo continued writing and publishing her poetry and prose through the mainstream throughout the 1990s the early 2000s.

In the late 2000s, Castillo returned to publishing with the feminist and academic presses that, that were the original outlets for her work. The University of New Mexico Press, which printed the first edition of *Massacre of the Dreamers*, re-issued a twentieth anniversary edition in 2014. The re-edition of *Massacre* appeared in the same year that Cherrie Moraga published a fourth edition of *This Bridge Called My Back*, allowing for a revitalization of Chicana and Third World feminist thought in an era of amplified xenophobia of Mexican-Americans and immigrants. The survival of this work is crucial for understanding the historical context that led to our country's recent election of a demagogue because Castillo's writing works to resist white supremacist, patriarchal constructions of U.S. culture. Her work provides readers with the language and political

tools necessary to resist.

Castillo's memoir *Black Dove: Mamá, Mi'jo, and Me* is a personal history of her life as a feminist writer, a daughter to a working-class Mexican woman, and a single mother to a Chicano son who was incarcerated for robbery. Like Cisneros's *A House of My Own*, *Black Dove* does the important work of developing an archive about the Latina Boom writers through autobiographical reflection. Corporate publishers have recently shifted toward autobiography and confessional nonfiction because they are more profitable genres. However, Castillo decidedly printed her last two works—the erotic novel *Give it to Me* and the memoir *Black Dove*—with the Feminist Press, an independent publisher funded by the City University of New York. In a 2016 online interview with the *Broadly*, Castillo says that despite attaining canonical status with big publishers, she left because she sensed a “certain kind of safe writing was desired” of her:

I left the latest major publisher I was with and found a home with the Feminist Press, which has been supportive of women's writing and women's rights around the world. It's so great to be with a publisher that gets you . . . Though they might not have the financial resources to put me on *Good Morning America*, they are behind me. (Masad)

Unlike her contemporary Sandra Cisneros, Castillo eschews the backing of major publishers, finding other avenues for her work to remain in circulation. However, this is done at the expense of widespread publicity for her work. Castillo's transition to Feminist Press signals a return to the principals espoused by Third World feminists in the 1980s.

Memoirs like *Black Dove* provide readers with the context for understanding the evolution of the Latina Boom. Castillo utilizes the essay form to reflect on how she is

shaped by the politics of the 1960s and '70s, which includes the arts movements that emerged during those decades. While not formally trained, Castillo studied the era's writers, among them Nikki Giovanni, Amiri Baraka, Toni Morrison, Kafka, and Gabriel García Márquez (*Black Dove* 82). In the titular essay, Castillo describes becoming a writer in the era of the Kent State shootings, the Vietnam War, and the assassinations of Martin Luther King, Jr. and President Kennedy. She says: "I was in college studying art when I made the choice to pursue poetry, and later, prose. Writing and literature became my life and would be my own form of activism. Any idea of actually 'studying' writing felt like potentially murky ground at best and dangerous at worst" (*Black Dove* 264). Castillo's feelings of alienation as a "brown female" artist and writer in college were what first informed her narrative perspective, leading to what she has called "conscientización" (*Massacre* 40). The increased dialogue surrounding the intersection of race and gender during the 1970s, compounded by the exclusion of Latina women writers and artists from the university curricula, helped to inform this new wave of writing.

Like the memoirs written by Cisneros and Julia Alvarez, Castillo's testimony of the Latina Boom in *Black Dove* counters the assumptions made by Stavans and other scholars that theirs was a "market-driven" movement. The Latina Boom writers had always participated in creating the environment for their work to be understood by the academy and the mainstream alike. Castillo says that she began teaching ethnic studies at the university level, explaining that Latino writers supported themselves financially as teachers while promoting "a literature that had . . . erupted out of cultural pride and political commitment" (*Black Dove* 265). As I noted in the introduction, the main framework for Latino literary studies during the 1970s and 1980s was Piri Thomas's

Down These Mean Streets and Richard Rodríguez's *Hunger for Memory*, which Castillo regards as occupying opposing sides of Latino political thought. Despite their labor in the university classroom to promote this new "eruption" of literature in the mainstream, Latina women writers, Castillo attests, "were not considered" (265). Castillo's discussion of teaching part-time to provide for her son exposes the material conditions of Latina literary production—her memoir is a testament to the physical labor that undergirded their literary movement. Similarly, Latina women's labor to promote an emerging canon bookended by male writers parallels women's invisible labor in the nationalist movements of the 1960s and '70s; despite their crucial role as cultural producers, their importance as writers was mostly downplayed until the 1990s.

By the 1990s, the U.S. was deeply engaged in discussions surrounding multiculturalism, causing Americans to think beyond the black-white binary. In 1993, *TIME* magazine published a special issue featuring a computer-simulated image of a mixed race woman. The image was meant to provoke the viewer to think about the impact of immigration to the United States, an impact made bigger by NAFTA and by the increased globalization of the labor market. The woman's image, which featured her olive skin and dark hair and eyes, seemingly foretold of the visible changes to America by the twenty-first century.¹ However, this assertion negated the fact that Latinos were already mixed-race people and had been natives of the United States, or the land it occupied, for centuries. While this image and the sentiment behind it was veiled as celebratory multiculturalism, it evoked the history of eugenics in the U.S. and the supremacist desire to whiten minority populations (Bost 87). These reports about the

¹ See Bost for an in-depth analysis on this topic.

shifting demographics of the United States piqued interest in learning about Latino cultures and other minority cultures, creating a market demand for new voices by Latina women. Latina women writers seized this opportunity to publicize their movement, as well as to educate their readers on Latino cultures of the United States.

Castillo identifies the 1990s as a time in which Latinos and Latinas were becoming more visible, allowing Latina writers to enter the mainstream:

In my gut, I knew that one day the drawbridge to the great literary castle would come down and Latina writers would cross. Not all of us, of course, only those poised to dash over. In the economic system we lived in, it was not enough to be talented or work hard—you had to be ready By then I was turning forty and I had been writing for twenty years. I was ready, all right. (*Black Dove* 266)

Castillo's description of the Boom reveals her adaptability to the market forces that ushered in work by Latina writers. The concept of a "Boom" suggests a sudden, unexpected development, however Castillo's testimony affirms that such production had been in progress for two decades. Latina women writers lacked the social and economic privileges held by their white counterparts, and their entry into the mainstream wasn't a matter of privilege but was instead an opportunity that had been afforded to them. They seized an opportunity to make visible what had otherwise been invisible to the mainstream.

The year after completing her dissertation, Castillo published *So Far from God* with W.W. Norton. In *Black Dove*, Castillo recalls not being able to find a publisher for *Massacre of the Dreamers*. Her novel, written around the same time she'd completed

Massacre, had taken her six months to write. Castillo writes: “Everything I had put down and qualified in essays was reimagined as fiction. I became the Samarian woman at the well telling my comadres and compadres of the strange and wondrous strangers who’d wandered by asking for a cool drink of in exchange for their truth” (*Black Dove* 225). The biblical reference to the Samarian woman is telling: figuratively, Chicanas and Latinas were the underrepresented Samaritans of U.S. literature, toiling away at the proverbial well until a chance encounter allowed them to spread their message far and wide. Susan Bergholz, the literary agent who represented “Las Girlfriends,” acquired book contracts for Castillo with major publishers. Seeing an opportunity, Castillo effectively utilized the mainstream to disseminate Chicana feminist thought in pop culture format.

Raising Consciousness in the Mainstream

Like her Latina Boom contemporaries, Castillo used fiction as a way of inserting Latina narratives into U.S. literature and educating her reader feminism and Chicana politics. As a scholar and an educator, Castillo co-created the theories and contexts by which to understand contemporary Latina narratives. In addition to *Massacre of the Dreamers*, Castillo translated *This Bridge Called My Back* into Spanish and co-edited *Third Woman: The Sexuality of Latinas* with Norma Alarcón and Cherríe Moraga. However, it is highly likely that the reader W.W. Norton targeted for *So Far from God* was not familiar with the work by Chicana scholars in the 1980s; the novel’s objective was to introduce its new reader to an established school of thought promoted by feminist writers of color.

In true instructional form, Castillo provides her reader with a road map for the

narrative. The table of contents includes chapter titles that emulate the episodic nature of the telenovela, or the popular soap operatic genre imported primarily from Mexico and Venezuela.² The novel implements a format introduced to U.S. readers in the wildly popular 1990 translation of *Como Agua Para Chocolate (Like Water for Chocolate)*, which recalled the Mexican dime-store novel by revealing the chapters in “installments.” The chapter titles qualify as what would now be called a “spoiler alert,” revealing the characters’ deaths and the conclusion before the reader delves in. But what is more important is *how* the reader reaches the end, and plot twists are introduced along the way. The process of reading *So Far from God* is less about its ending and more about raising the reader’s consciousness throughout.

Castillo has defined “conscientización” as the process by which Chicana women realize their layers of oppression. As I wrote in chapter 1, Chicanas who disagreed with their Chicano and Latino male activist counterparts parted ways with the nationalist movement in order to begin their own. Chicana feminism, or what Castillo calls “Xicanisma,” dealt not only with issues of *raza* and working-class perspectives, but with issues surrounding women’s gender oppression and sexual expression. For Castillo, the Chicana’s raised awareness of her place in society would ideally lead to activism (*Massacre* 10). However, this cannot be done without fully understanding how capitalist structures and white male supremacy join with ethnic chauvinism to undermine her place in U.S. and global society. The novel exposes these layers of oppression to demonstrate how Chicana women’s narratives as not always seen as authoritative.

The novel takes place in the fictional town of Tome, located outside of Santa Fe,

² To learn about the history of the Mexican novella and the telenovela, see Estill.

New Mexico. The plot follows a matriarchal Chicana family, led by Sofia and her four daughters, Esperanza, Fe, Caridad, and La Loca. While there is an actual town of Tome, Castillo uses creative license and names a fictional pueblo. Castillo is clearly using the town as the setting to impart important lessons for her characters, replete with melodrama and comedy. This is not the only wordplay that appears in the novel: Castillo regularly regards the city of Santa Fe as “Fanta Se,” (or “fantasy”), setting the reader up for the fantastical and magical elements that the characters regularly encounter.

If the reader is to trust the development of the plot, and the fantastical events that ensue, they must first learn to trust women’s side of the story as it unfolds. The novel begins with the public funeral and the resurrection of Sofi’s youngest daughter, La Loca. At age three, La Loca experiences an epileptic seizure and is declared dead by the local physician. Whether or not Loca actually died is debatable throughout the text. But if we are to trust La Loca’s account, she completed a Dante-like journey through hell and purgatory before returning to the world of the living. Loca’s account is questioned by Tome’s priest Father Jerome, whose own faith wavers upon witnessing her resurrection, saying “Is this an act of God or of Satan that brings you back to us, that has flown you up to the roof like a bird?” He then coaxes her, “Come down, come down . . . We’ll all pray for you” (*Far* 23-24). La Loca’s complete irreverence for the priest causes her to reclaim her version of the narrative: “No, padre. Remember it is I who am here to pray for you.’ With that stated, she went into the church and those with faith followed” (24). The spectacle causes Sofi’s daughter to be rebaptized by the town as “Loca” for the rest of her life, challenging the validity of Loca’s testimony throughout the novel.

Castillo employs magical realism throughout the novel, which encourages the

reader to accept the fantastical in what they've read. Wendy B. Faris has argued that the "text contains an 'irreducible element' of magic, something we cannot explain according to the laws of the universe as we know them" (167). She continues: "In the light of reversals of logical and irreducible elements of magic, the real as we now it may be made to seem amazing or even ridiculous. This is often because the reactions of ordinary people to these magical events reveal behaviors that we recognize and that disturb us" (Faris 168). By contrast, Marta Caminero-Santangelo argues that the novel is self-conscious about its use of magical realism and "leads us not to García Márquez but to a different relationship between the magical and political, with something important to say about the threat of apathy and passivity to forms of collective activism" (95). As I argued earlier, the marketing strategies of the Latina Boom were similar to their "Boom" contemporaries, but their prose emerges from their collective place in U.S. society. Castillo constructs the magical world of Tome to invert accepted structures of capitalism and patriarchal religious and sociopolitical orders. In order to accept the characters' feminist narratives as true, the reader must interrogate their internalized beliefs surrounding gender and racial oppression. Castillo thus implements magic to imagine a world where women's narratives are valid.

If La Loca challenges the patriarchal doctrine of the church, her sister Esperanza challenges stigmas within her own community. Esperanza is characterized as the only "college-educated" daughter in the family, with a B.A. in Chicano Studies and an M.A. in communications. Esperanza leaves her job as a local reporter to become a national news anchor in Washington, D.C. Her boyfriend Rubén, a Chicano activist, responds by calling Esperanza a "careerist," a slight variation on the epithet *vendida*. The term *vendida*, or

“sellout,” was given to Chicana women in the movement who aligned with the broader feminist movement, or who challenged the sexist structures of the *movimiento*.

Despite Rubén’s feigned commitment to La Raza, a commitment that includes smoking peyote and frequenting the sweat lodge, he hypocritically marries a white woman and moves to the suburbs. Castillo incorporates typical male authority figures in Chicano culture, including Father Jerome and the Chicano activist Rubén, as foils to the Chicana characters. Their perspectives, grounded in patriarchal constructions of the world, are assumed to be “real.” The narratives provided by the Chicana characters, on the other hand, are rendered illogical by the men and by those who assimilate to their thinking.

Esperanza’s relationship with Rubén brings about her own consciousness about gender oppression in the Chicano movement. Esperanza’s commitment to “La Raza” shifts when she is excluded from male-only rituals in the sweat lodge ceremonies. Just as Esperanza begins to assume power over her narrative, Rubén attempts to relegate her to a minor role: “She was beginning to feel like part of a ritual in which she herself participated as an unsuspecting symbol, like a staff or a rattle or medicine” (36). In the Chicano movement, women often played the role of minor characters in the restructuring of Chicano myths and rituals. Even though Rubén asks Esperanza to participate in the ceremonies, she is viewed as a prop rather than as a participant, illuminating the gender dynamic women experienced in the movement. Historically, women’s roles within the Chicano movement were traditional, despite its Marxist ideals. Within the movement, women were exalted as mothers and wives but not as co-creators of a grassroots movement. Esperanza’s breakup with Rubén reflects the Chicana’s departure from the male-dominated Chicano movement and the taking control of her own story.

Another reason Castillo implements magical elements is to educate her readers about Chicana feminist mythologies. As Tey Diana Rebolledo discusses in her 1989 *Mother Jones* article about the “Boom,” feminists had to undergo their own education about their identities: “That mythic land, that imaginary homeland Chicano writers have created . . . that’s not our myth, that warrior Aztec thing the men writers have. We’ve found our identity elsewhere. We’ve found our heroines and our role models, and we’ve moved on to the larger issues” (“La Boom” 15). Castillo’s incorporation of myth in the novel aims to orient her characters toward their own construction of Judeo-Christian belief systems that empower them rather than oppress them. Dogma ultimately fails Caridad after her violent attack and it also fails Loca, whom no one believe; it leads to the alienation of those who do not comply. Rubén’s interpretation of indigenous myth excludes Esperanza from the Chicano community. The characters undergo their own consciousness-raising about feminine deities, indigenous myth, and legend in order to become agents of change within the novel.

The novel examines how women are harmed by myths surrounding their sexuality, and Caridad exemplifies the ways that to replace harmful social beliefs can be replaced with more affirmative ones. Caridad must undergo her own healing process after being attacked by the *malogra*, a legendary wool spirit that attacks sheep in the night. Castillo utilizes the legend to double as a cautionary tale about women’s sexuality: if a woman dares to go out at night and enjoy herself, as Caridad had, she is at risk for violence. The *malogra* is described as “not a stray and desperate coyote . . . but a thing, both tangible and amorphous. . . . It held the weight of a continent and was indelible as ink, centuries old and yet as strong as a young wolf. It had no shape and was darker than

the dark night, and mostly, as Caridad would never ever forget, it was pure force” (*Far* 77). The fact that Caridad cannot name a human attacker but a mythological creature signals that deeply entrenched attitudes about women’s sexuality and objectification are to blame rather than any one person.

Rather than perpetuate the stories that oppress women, Caridad replaces them with narratives that allow for personal transformation. Caridad’s love story with Esmeralda shifts Western paradigms of the “Adam and Eve” origin myth and the myth of “original sin.”³ As lovers, Caridad and Esmeralda become daughters of Tsichtinako, an indigenous Acoma origin myth where the first humans are two women. In their attempt to escape Francisco, who has been stalking Caridad out of jealousy, Caridad and Esmeralda jump off the Acoma mesa: “Tsichtinako was calling!’ . . . The Acoma people heard it and knew it was the voice of the Invisible One who had nourished the first two humans, who were also both female, although no one had heard it in a long time” (211). Sofi’s iteration of having daughters that “fly” is echoed through the myth’s modern re-telling. Caridad and Esmeralda literally “fly,” or leap, off the mesa, but they do not die a physical death. Rather, the two women merge with the earth: “Deep within the soft, moist dark earth where Esmeralda and Caridad would be safe and live forever” (211). Yet again the novel is asking the reader to question their beliefs, especially ones where women are protagonists. Here, Castillo uses fiction to visualize what she has proposed in *Massacre*: “As women and as Native people, we must reconstruct our history with what is left unsaid and not what has been recorded by those who have imposed their authority on us” (*Massacre* 111). Rather than die, the women become part of a larger story that has been

³ See Castillo’s discussion of origin myths in *Massacre of the Dreamers*, especially chapter five.

told for centuries.

The legend of La Llorona is used to introduce the reader to pre-Columbian religious practices and to transform the mythical woman into a feminist Chicana archetype. Legend says that La Llorona, or the “Wailing Woman,” was a woman who drowned her children in a river, and she is damned to haunt bodies of water for eternity. She enters as a minor character in the narrative to educate La Loca, to deliver news of Esperanza’s death in the Gulf, and to restore her “bad reputation” as a poor wife and mother throughout history. Loca befriends La Llorona near Tome’s acequia, as legend foretold. La Loca comes to discover La Llorona on her own, since Sofi never wants to pass on the negative story onto her daughters. The visit from La Llorona introduces a moment of recognizing reconstructed feminist myths and restored Chicana lore. The narrator informs the reader that Llorona:

may have been Matlaciuatl, the goddess of the Mexica who was said to prey upon men like a vampire! Or she might have been Ciwapipiltin, the goddess in flowing robes who stole babies from their cradles and left in their place an obsidian blade, or Cihuacoatl, the patron of women who died in childbirth, who all wailed and wept and moaned in the night air.

(161)

By introducing possible origin myths of pre-Columbian goddesses, the novel suggests that stories surrounding feminine power are misconstrued in patriarchal configurations of them. Therefore, for Loca to befriend La Llorona, who she only refers to as “she,” in the novel dually educates the character and the reader in a manner unadulterated by Chicano, Mexican, Southwest or other retellings that stigmatize radical women. Additionally,

Esperanza, who is regularly considered a “mitotera” (or “instigator”), chooses La Llorona, “a woman who had been given a bad rap by every generation of her people since the beginning of time,” to channel the message of her death to her family. In a nation that failed to investigate a Chicana reporter’s death in the Gulf, Llorona becomes an alternative means of acquiring the knowledge that ultimately leads to the characters’ activism.

Castillo also uses the myth of La Llorona to resist narratives about assimilation into the “mainstream.” Just as Cisneros’s arroyo served a double meaning in *Woman Hollering Creek*, various “channels” appear throughout the novel and serve as modes of narrative intervention: the aqueduct where La Loca meets La Llorona; the television airwaves where a spectral image of Esperanza is displayed; and Fe’s radio frequencies. Fe’s fantasies of assimilation into white society through marriage and a bank job are destroyed when her fiancée calls off the wedding. Fe assumes the role of a mythical “Gritona,” wailing for a month and ultimately destroying her vocal cords. Her voice is likened to a “faulty World War II radio transmitter, over which half of what she was saying did not get through, something like talking to Amelia Earhart just before contact was broken off altogether and she went down” (85). The gaps in Fe’s voice in the narrative are represented by underscores, which make the reader a participant in the construction of the story and dialogue and enable the reader’s education. Furthermore, the radio-like frequency of Fe’s dialogue also represents another channel for reshaping U.S. literary narratives.

Fe’s desire for upward mobility and the American Dream literally kills her, but not without becoming aware of its repercussions first. At the start of the novel Fe

participates in society not as an activist but as a consumer, desiring an “automatic dishwasher, microwave, Cuisinart” and other appliances. After losing her job at the bank, Fe transitions from a “white collar” to a “blue collar” working environment, where she is surrounded by women who are the opposite of what she aspires to be. It is on the weapons assembly line that Fe begins to realize the reproductive repercussions of the lethal chemicals that the women work with. Reproductive choice and healthcare accessibility are tenets of the Chicana movement. The migraines and miscarriages experienced by her coworkers begin to awaken the otherwise detached Fe to these concerns. It is Fe’s quick progression to the top of the professional ladder at Acme International—a company that in the novel creates products used in the Gulf War—that ultimately kills her.

Fe’s “consciousness” is raised through her reading of the worker’s manual, which was not accessible to Acme International’s lower-level workers. She has been working with ether, a chemical used in war, and the act of reading raises her awareness of the chemical’s toxicity. She confronts her “cholo” manager by questioning its proper disposal, demanding: “So WHERE __ IT GO?. . . WHERE DID - GO, PENDE __, SON-A-... IF NOT __ ME?” (189). Fe’s disability, which Cory Teubner has argued is vocal aphasia, represents what happens when women do not survive to tell their stories. I view Fe’s vocal disability as the inability to tell her narrative in its entirety due to her silencing by Acme—or the silencing of Chicana voices in a larger capitalist structure. Before her death, Fe challenges the manager on not properly “inform[ing] a girl who had only wanted to make some points with the company and earn bonuses to buy her house, make car payments, have a baby, in other words, have a life like people do on T.V.” (189). The

fact that Fe's desire to enter the "mainstream" is lethal demonstrates economic barriers for Chicanas who desire it, even when they play by the rules. Fe embodies a more educated and enlightened incarnation of the archetype La Gritona, or Llorona, as she is called earlier in the novel. Whereas her wails earlier in the novel animated historical retellings of a jilted woman, Fe's attempts to yell at her manager transform her to a conscious, subversive worker. Unlike her sisters, Fe just "plain dies" and does not return as a spirit. Caridad's death allows for transformation through stories, Esperanza's through political engagement, and La Loca's through innocence. However, Fe's participation in a corporatized military machine does not allow for such transformation—war has no positive outcome except for death. And workers in a corporate system are dehumanized by becoming more of a number than an actual human.

The novel's objective is for its reader to become educated about larger issues and ultimately to change the world around them, just like the matriarch Sofi does. Sofi undergoes her own consciousness-raising when she decides to run for mayor. Her announcement is met with dismay by her comadre: "Why stop at mayor? Why not elect herself la juez de la paz or la comandante of Tome as they had in the old days? Why not be Queen of Tome for that matter?" (137). Just as Father Jerome had been skeptical about Sofi's production of "a species that fly," la comadre is doubtful that Sofi can effect change in the community (84). The narrator informs us: "As the reader might well imagine, she was among those doubting Tomases who were never convinced of the things Sofi and her family were capable of doing" (137). When Sofi proposes that she wants to work for "community improvement," la comadre retorts she had a lot of "imagination." Here, the reader is challenged to accept the magical elements of the novel:

the novel heightens an otherwise mundane act of improving the community as just as fantastical as having daughters that “fly.” Has the story been all fantasy, or were Sofi and her daughter’s stories merely discounted? Sofi attains “consciousness” when she uses a word she learns from Esperanza, calling her comadre a “conformist”: “That’s what my ‘jita la Esperanza used to call people who just didn’t give a damn about nothing! And that why, she said, we all go on living so poor and forgotten!” (139). Despite Esperanza’s absence, her stories have finally penetrated Sofi’s “imagination” to become mayor, fight gentrification, open a neighborhood co-op.

The novel concludes with Loca’s procession into Tome on Good Friday, a ceremony that allows her to embody the three sisters’ stories and functions as a metaphor for transitioning Chicana stories into the mainstream. The traditional religious procession is dedicated to the current global ills, including unemployment, environmental pollution, the AIDS crisis (embodied by La Loca), and the ongoing war. The announcement and public mourning of Esperanza’s death through La Loca represents the ultimate retaliation for Esperanza: her legacy resulted in consciousness-raising and education. Rubén, Esperanza’s former Chicano lover, is presented as mourning her death via flashbacks of her political labor in college. His flashbacks reveal Rubén his own guilt of selling out:

[H]ow that woman loved to fight! But for some people, fighting was good and led to good things. Back in college, if it wasn’t for la Esperanza who led the protests, they never would have had one Chicano Studies class offered on the curriculum. If it wasn’t for la Esperanza, who would have known about the struggle of the United Farm Workers on campus? Who would have ever told him about anything at all? (239)

Through the figure of la Esperanza above all, the reader is educated about Chicana politics, as Rubén's memories testify. Rubén's memory causes him to interrogate his own participation in sexist structures, which in turn allows for his own healing. Furthermore, his memory restores the historical role women played in the movement and in shifting university curricula to include ethnic studies classes. Esperanza's jump from local news to war reporting leads to her physical death, but her role as educator, even in "ectoplasmic" form, remains.

In a 1997 interview with Elsa Saeta, Ana Castillo discussed who her audience was for her work, and how that audience shifted when she entered the mainstream. Castillo stated that she wrote to women who looked like herself because: "that is the void we have had in literature: a void in the representation in the literature of women who look and think and feel like me and who had similar experiences in society. I wanted to fill that void. Why should I want to write about characters that are all too familiar to American literature?" (140-41) By writing to Chicanas, Latinas, and other women of color, she affirms narratives that have been underrepresented in fiction and in society at large. However, in order for *So Far from God* to perform well in the mainstream, she had to reconsider her audience. Bergholz encouraged her to think more broadly: "Now I'm much clearer on the importance of acknowledging that there is a wider audience in the country and abroad I welcome it because by welcoming it—it's not that I personally get accepted, but that we are communicating as a culture to other people." As such, *So Far from God* addresses multiple audiences, but mostly targets the reader who needs education about Chicana culture, whether that be a young Latina or Chicana going through her own consciousness-raising, intersectional feminists seeking the differences

among women, or a curious reader seeking education.

Castillo has mentioned that her agent Susan Bergholz made her change the tragic ending of the book, reminding her of her contractual obligations to Norton. Castillo's original intent was to align Sofi with the archetypal mother in Greek tragedy, but Bergholz reminded her that she promised Norton "a happy ending" (Saeta 147). Castillo wrote her own Greek tragedy grounded in the history of the indigenous traditions to create Chicana feminist myth (Saeta 147). However, she also regarded her original ending as a way of the character Sofi submitting to the patriarchy. Rather than have Sofi bound by institutions that oppress women, Castillo envisioned a way for her characters to change their surrounding environment through activism. Castillo was successfully able to appeal to the publisher's demand while maintaining her authority over her novel. The ending to *So Far from God* teaches the reader that she is responsible to effecting change in her environment, empowering her to participate in the democratic process. The novel then is not simply providing an easy solution to the difficult social and cultural issues it presents, but it does offer ways of analyzing them and working through them. Castillo's compliance with her mainstream publisher demonstrates awareness about the novel's accessibility to a broader readership. For the first time in history, Chicana writers had the power to, in Castillo's words, "communicate as a culture" to other people at home and abroad. On the other hand, the success of *So Far from God* in 1993 allowed *Massacre of the Dreamers* to be published by another major press, Plume, in 1994—a move orchestrated by Bergholz.

The novel concludes with Sofi's transition from mayor of Tome to the President of the organization M.O.M.A.S., or Mothers of Martyrs and Saints, due to the death of

her four daughters. Although their annual convention is based in activism and political organizing, it eventually becomes commercialized. Outsiders and vendors begin producing “useless products”: T-shirts, posters, votive candles with one’s preferred saint or martyr, “automatic writing” pens, and tarot cards of La Loca Santa and her sisters “drawn by a lovely and talented artist in Sardinia, Italy” (250). The inclusion of the tarot deck offers an understanding of the canonization and commercialization of Latina literature. As tarot cards, Sofi’s stories are melded with New Age belief systems and pagan customs (in this case Chicana myth-making) that become available for sale. In the novel even a longstanding occult tradition becomes commodified for the global market place, replete with “translation” by an international artist. However, these metaphors work twofold with Chicana stories entering the mainstream literary market: women’s stories are valid, too, and are worthy of national and international recognition and financial compensation. Even though New Age traditions usually function as countercultural practices, they always existed within the realm of human exchange and monetary compensation. Such traditions may have been practiced underground or out of plain sight, but they became more popular in mainstream culture. Likewise, Chicana and Latina literary traditions thrived with independent presses, and they carried that tradition into the mainstream. In response to the many Chicano male critics, Castillo suggests that there is no true form of literary expression untouched by human exchange—in fact, literary expression *relies* on human exchange, especially in the form of readership.

The stories of La Loca, Esperanza, Fe, Caridad and Sofi become “canonized” and circulated in the form of the tarot. Sofi becomes represented as the Empress card and Queen of Swords, as a woman who was “a strong woman who was nevertheless

powerless to the sorrow she suffered.” Esperanza becomes memorialized as the Knight and who despite being criticized as a *mitotera*, is celebrated for her political resolve. Caridad becomes the “High Priestess” and “Page of Wands” as medicine woman, and La Fe becomes “Queen of Wands,” due to “seeing herself as a “güera,” or an assimilated woman. La Loca becomes represented by the Fool for being “one who walked without fear, aware of the choices she made in the journey of life. . .” (250). Like the tarot, these women’s stories become embedded in a collective storytelling tradition in which signs and images—like Castillo’s Xicana theory—can be interpreted only by those who take the time to learn them. One’s interpretation of the tarot deck changes with each reading, emulating the act of reading literature. The practice of tarot card reading involves learning and understanding another person’s story. The reader undergoes the process of consciousness-raising, and the novel guides the reader through their own politicization process through the narratives of five Chicanas.

Castillo’s work ultimately guides her readers to understand the world from a leftist perspective, which includes Marxist and Chicana perspectives, and as well as addressing how certain groups are disenfranchised by capitalism. As such, she builds upon the legacy of the sixties and seventies by transmitting her Xicana theory in various literary forms. However, *Black Dove* expands the conversation by addressing her personal experiences, including her experiences with the prison-industrial complex. She struggles with having raised her son with strong feminist ideals, but interrogates how he still engaged in criminal activity. Her son Marcelo’s time in prison causes Castillo to meditate on a system that criminalizes young black and brown men, causing her to sympathize with the mothers of Trayvon Martin and Tamir Rice (*Black Dove* 172). As

such, *Black Dove* urges the reader to reconsider Chicano cultural politics in the age of the Black Lives Matter movement, providing a discursive space for activists to recognize the commonalities of Black and Chicano/a movements throughout history. The intention for the reader is to then *act* upon the new information they received. As such, Castillo's writing is firmly grounded in her own evolution as a Chicana feminist activist, and she uses her work to impart her Chicana theories to her reader.

For Castillo, activism and reading are inextricably linked; her work sets a precedent for writing and reading as social change. In *Black Dove*, the importance of the Chicana writer becomes revitalized in an era of mass incarceration: Castillo teaches her son how to write fiction and testimony while he is in prison as a means of survival. What's more, Castillo as mother and activist conjures up the image of her novelistic matriarch in *So Far From God*, Sofia. Figuratively, Castillo functions as a literary foremother to the writers that come after her, especially those who incorporate consciousness-raising into their work. Just as the Latina Boom writers read and responded to each other's work in the nineties, the emergence of their respective memoirs confirms a material history that is still being written. Collectively, their movement functioned—and still functions—as a form of political activism that envisions true democratic participation through narratives that were otherwise excluded from the national conversation.

U.S. Latina Literature in the New Millennium

The writers in this project, Cisneros, Garcia, Alvarez, and Castillo, all utilized the mainstream market to create a corpus of their own writing. In the 1990s, the Latina Boom writers often reviewed each other's work, which publishers printed for marketing

purposes. They relied on the community that formed in that decade to cross-promote each other's work and to expand their readership. They've each established a canon featuring prose, poetry, illustrated prose, anthologies, memoir, and Young Adult literature. All of the texts explore the connections between writing oneself into narrative existence and using the market reach a larger audience.

The segue from writing adult fiction to young adult fiction and children's literature is an interesting one: all three are bringing their work to a younger generation that may eventually read their earlier work. In the case of Alvarez, scholars view the foray into young adult literature as pedagogical activism. Cisneros has also been active in speaking to youth prior to and after earning literary fame, and *The House on Mango Street* has been approached as both young adult and adult literature. Garcia has written two children's books and one young adult novel. By forming a corpus of work for multiple generations, they have made it possible for readers to have access to their writing in classrooms and beyond.

More importantly, the Latina literary canon is a testament to the diversity of American culture—and all of its complexities—and its endurance in spite of the systemic social structures that attempt to exclude their stories. The bold presence of Latina Boom writers in the nineties ushered forth a new literary framework for newer writers to follow, proving that their work was not market-driven and temporary, but rather that writing by Latinos and Latinas is an important and lasting contribution to American literature. The Boom set the precedent for a diverse range of Latina voices to be published in the new millennium. By the mid-2000s, a figurative “passing of the torch” by Latina Boom writers led to a younger generation of Latina writers entering mainstream publishing,

among them Cristina Hernandez, Janine Capo-Crucet, Patricia Engel, and Kirstin Valdez Quade. Whereas the 1990s saw Latina Boom writers reading and responding to each other's work, especially in the form of promotional blurbs in their work, the new millennium sees them reading and promoting the work of the generation they influenced. The younger writers have been endorsed by the likes of canonical Latino/a writers, including Ana Castillo, Judith Ortiz Cofer, Cristina García, Esmeralda Santiago, and Junot Diaz. All of these mentioned writers use social media, such as Tumblr, Twitter, and Facebook to promote their work. The newer generation still has the fascination of book clubs working in their favor, and they've become more accessible in the high-speed Internet age.

Cristina Henríquez, who centers her work on Panamanians in the diaspora, published stories from *Come Together, Fall Apart* in the *New Yorker* as early as 2005, leading up to her official debut in 2006. Henríquez, like her Boom predecessor Cisneros, graduated from the Iowa Writers' Workshop and received a grant from Cisneros's foundation to support her writing. Like Cisneros, Henríquez cultivated a newfound awareness about her literary identity as a result of—and in response to—her formal training at Iowa. Her encounter with Cisneros's work after her training as a writer at Iowa shifted the course of her writing to include Panamanian-Americans, whose narratives were excluded from the broader American narrative. In an interview, Henríquez describes her self-awareness as a U.S. Latina writer:

When I got to graduate school, I was writing stories that were set in the United States pretty exclusively because that's what I had grown up reading. All the writers that I loved were white Americans writing stories

set in the United States. So I was sort of mimicking them. Then almost by accident I started to discover Latino literature. It started because I found an excerpt from *The House on Mango Street* in an anthology I bought in a used-book store. When I read it, it occurred to me suddenly that I had had all these experiences my whole life, going to Panama and visiting my dad's side of the family there. . . . I had never written about any of them. I didn't think any of them were worth writing about. I didn't think anyone would want to hear those stories. That's what reading *Mango Street* did for me. It made me see and believe that those were stories worth telling.

(McPhilimy "Interview with Cristina Henríquez")

U.S. Latina Boom writers made visible a Latina literary tradition, and one that would ultimately allow for the innovation of American narratives like Henríquez's. Henríquez continues: "So I started writing about Panama, and as soon as I did, there was a hell of a difference. There was something profoundly different about the stories. I wasn't mimicking anymore. I had to find my own way." Henríquez's statements about her cultural differences echo what Cisneros has said about her experiences at Iowa. Her commentary indicates how the established American canon informs what is valuable as literature in the United States; what is deemed valuable is what is "mimicked," published and taught. Her discovery of *Mango Street* provided her with the model to create her own narratives about her family and those who looked like her, realizing one of the objectives of the U.S. Latina Boom.

Henríquez followed her 2006 novella with two novels *The World in Half* (2009) and *The Book of Unknown Americans* (2014). Her first novel, *The World in Half*, tells

the story of college geology major Miraflores Gallardo in her quest to find her biological father in Panama. Named after one of the locks in the Panama Canal, Miraflores's own existence is a result of U.S. intervention abroad. Miraflores's journey to Panama City reveals the parallels between her birth parents' relationship and the geopolitical consequences of U.S. occupation over the Canal Zone. As Miraflores becomes educated about Panama through her guide and love interest Danilo, the reader also learns about the U.S. occupation of Panama. Henríquez's novel assumes the pedagogical aspects of Alvarez, García and other predecessors, such as Alvarez and García. She introduces the reader to postcolonial history through a family drama.

Throughout the novel, Miraflores's guide and love interest Danilo regularly uses Panamanian slang, which Miraflores explains, and is characteristic of Henríquez's work. While Miraflores does not succeed in reuniting with her father, who has died, her journey allows her to fill in the gaps about her ailing mother's past. Like Pilar in *Dreaming in Cuban*, Miraflores recuperates her family's history after inheriting a box of love letters her father wrote her mother. Miraflores's return to the U.S. with this new knowledge reveals her own story to be unique to U.S.-Panama relations and a distinct story in the realm of U.S. literature.

In 2014, Henríquez published *The Book of Unknown Americans*, which has enjoyed widespread promotion and popularity. The novel mainly follows the love story of two teenagers, Mayor, the son of Panamanian immigrants, and Maribel, a recent Mexican immigrant. Set in a tenement building in Delaware, the novel includes a chorus of characters that together directly critique the U.S. immigration system. The novel humanizes immigrants by revealing their motives for moving to the United States,

debunking current narratives of undocumented immigrants as criminals. To supplement the novel, Henríquez utilized her Tumblr site to expand on the narratives she creates in *Unknown Americans* by including first-person accounts from first generation immigrants throughout the United States. The extension of the novel onto social media invited her readers into the narrative in a participatory manner; the novel served as the “call” and the readers’ construction of their own narratives as blog posts functioned as its “response.” Henríquez challenges the limits of the novel, using social media to resist public dominant beliefs about American national identity and highlighting immigrant and first-generation second-generation stories as inherently part of the national story.

The week Henríquez’s novel was published, two high-profile reviews appeared in the *New York Times*, one by the influential literary critic Michiko Kakutani and another by Ana Castillo. The broad promotion of *Unknown Americans* in the *New York Times* solidified Henríquez’s work as an essential read. Historically, Kakutani has successfully introduced the U.S. Latina Boom writers to the *Times*’ literate and cosmopolitan audience. A successful review from Kakutani bodes well for any writer, and she has worked especially to promote diverse voices in U.S. literature. The other review, by Ana Castillo, validates Henríquez’s novel as an essential work in the realm of Latino/a letters. Castillo used her status as a canonical Chicana writer to introduce the “mainstream” to a younger voice. However, Castillo’s review of the novel is telling of how the mainstream works for and against Latina writers in the new millennium.

Jennine Capó Crucet and Patricia Engel both centralize Miami in their work. In *How to Leave Hialeah* (2009), Capó Crucet’s stories focus on the first- and second-generations of Cuban Americans living in Florida. Capó Crucet’s writing aligns more

with realism, and any “magical” elements of Cuban culture are not incorporated for entertainment. In the story “Resurrection,” the protagonist Jesenia enlists a santera to help her revive Celia Cruz from the dead. The santera’s attempts to fulfill Jesenia’s request become farcical, and not only because of the absurdity of the scenario. The narrator directly addresses the reader: “What happens next is up to you because it relies on your knowledge of Santería.” In contrast to the magical elements incorporated in García’s *Dreaming in Cuban*, Capó Crucet’s narrator holds the reader accountable for understanding the story. She interjects in the narrative by saying:

The point is, barring your own attempts at research—and you know how lazy you can be, how else do you find time to read stuff like this?—you need to be *told*, preferably by someone you’d consider an expert, an insider.

Rather than depict a carnivalesque portrait of her characters engaging in santería ceremonies, Capó Crucet offers an otherwise mundane interaction at the santera’s house. Oscila is presented as skeptical but nonetheless savvy businesswoman who capitalizes on her community’s hopes and dreams. The Cuban American community in Hialeah doesn’t offer any mystical insight on the Latino experience. The collection’s title story features a young female protagonist who leaves Hialeah to attend a prestigious university in the northeastern U.S., seemingly betraying her family and culture for an education. Capó Crucet continues this theme in her novel *Make Your Home Among Strangers* (2015).

Colombian American writer Patricia Engel’s *Vida* (2010) uses Miami as the site of protagonist Sabina’s escape from New Jersey. Sabina is notably more privileged than the other characters she associates with, and yet Sabina is unable to feel welcome there.

Engel pointedly writes about young Colombian American female protagonists in her two novels, *It's Not Love, It's Just Paris* (2013) and *The Veins of the Ocean* (2016). Capó Cruet and Engel write about home as the place their characters cannot return to, mostly because the protagonists' restlessness and education have distanced them from their families. They also discuss Latina identity as a fundamental aspect of their characters' background, but they present culture in a forthright, unsentimental tone.

Kirsten Valdez Quade published stories from *Night at the Fiestas* in the *New Yorker* before her story collection was published by W.W. Norton in 2015. Quade's work is a departure from how Latina identity is typically discussed in U.S. literature. Her stories focus on New Mexicans who have lived in the Southwest for generations, reminding the reader of Spanish colonization in the United States. She told NPR, "My family's presence can be traced back to 1695 and some of the earliest conquistadors. [There's] a long family history in the region." Her stories recall Ana Castillo's *So Far from God* in addressing the historical origins of new mexicanos, but they are decidedly more gothic in tone.

Quade's title story in the collection centers on Frances, a high school girl who travels from her small town to Sante Fe to experience las fiestas of Zozobra in the early sixties. Frances's father drives the bus from the small town of Raton to the city, but Frances attempts to distance herself from her father during the ride. The protagonist envisions herself as the heroine of Thomas Hardy's *Tess d'Uberville*, and she dreams of recreating herself through literacy and by attending the University of New Mexico (UNM) the following year. She meets and flirts with a seedy male artist on the bus, and but her dreams of reinvention are tarnished when he discreetly calls her a "whore" before

departing. Frances finds a paper bag with one hundred forty dollars in cash on his seat, and she justifies keeping the money as retaliation for his transgression. Despite the horror she feels at encountering him at the fiestas, Frances reminds herself that she is deserving of the money because she will use it at UNM to become a new person. Narratives such as those discussed here are in many ways the result of the women's movement, and of the creation of multifaceted Latina characters that appeared during the Boom. The writers mentioned here all have published with major publishing house, and they are publishing at the same rate the writers of the Boom did. However, mainstreaming itself is a filtration process by which certain voices remain excluded.

Another transition—one this project has not focused on but that deserves mention—is to bypass big publishing houses altogether and to circulate work by means of self-publishing. Mayda Del Valle, a Chicago-born, Puerto Rican slam poet became popular in the 2000s due to her appearances on the national slam poetry circuit, most prominently at the historic Nuyorican Poet's Café in New York City. Del Valle wrote, printed, and distributed her poetry through chapbooks, which she often sold after readings. She was regularly featured on HBO's Def Poetry Jam, a slam poetry series that was conceptualized for television by Russell Simmons. The popularity of the HBO series brought the tradition of street poetry to mainstream audiences. Del Valle specifically has incorporated herself in the lineage of the Nuyorican poets and reinterprets this tradition for modern audiences.

I first learned about del Valle's work in college from my classmate Luis, who identified as a queer Colombian poet and who regularly read at open-mic nights in downtown Manhattan. Around my sophomore year in college I was introduced to New

York's underground poetry scene, including the Nuyorican Poet's Café in the Lower East Side. Luis would often slip me poems to read before British literature class, either his or someone else's, and we would reconvene after our lessons on Chaucer or Elizabeth Bishop. One day he asked, "Why don't you think our voices are ever represented?" To be fair, he wasn't referring to our British literature class specifically. Quite frankly, not many Hispanic or Latino students were English majors at our college; we could probably count each other on one hand. These conversations would often happen in the hallways, until the day I realized he wanted me to do something about it.

One week, he invited me out to hear Del Valle perform, and I was mesmerized by her now widely circulated and broadly recorded poem "tongue tactics." Luis knew that as the chairwoman of the university's Latin Pride Month, I had a sizeable budget to support artists visiting our school. Working with our home department of English and my student organization, Luis and I created a monthly poetry venue in which we invited artists who would become Def Poetry Jam alumnae, such as Del Valle and Bassey Ikpi. Looking back, I realized that Luis taught me the importance of creating and providing the space for writers we felt merited recognition. Their readings were acts of resistance toward a curriculum that omitted their importance.

Del Valle's earlier work regularly addressed her experience as a university-educated Latina who resisted the stereotypes imposed on her. In "tongue tactics," she initiates her response to an academic's criticism about sounding "uneducated" by declaring her command over the word:

i'm speaking in tongues
blending proper

with street
talk
everyday
meets
academic
bastardizing one language
creating new ones” (“In Progress” 25)

Del Valle’s poem also exposes institutional reception of the Latina writer. Frustrated that she isn’t accepted by academics in the Spanish department, Del Valle uses the stage to create the venue for which poets like herself can do their work. Del Valle creates and engages her own audiences, rather than vetted them through institutional forces. Del Valle’s affiliation with Def Poetry Jam garnered the attention of President and First Lady Michelle Obama, who sought to highlight the work of a fellow Chicagoan at the “White House Poetry Jam” in 2009. Their invitation helped establish a national audience for what has otherwise been an underground genre (McCormick “White House poetry”.)

On the other hand, mainland-based Puerto Rican-Jewish playwright Quiara Alegria Hudes success with the Broadway hit *In the Heights*, adapted for the stage by Lin-Manuel Miranda. She’s also written a trilogy of Pulitzer-prize winning plays about a young, Philadelphia-raised Puerto Rican man who returns from the Iraq War with Post Traumatic Stress Disorder. In this case, the stage may provide a better outlet for the voices of “lower case people” than the publishing market. An even larger reverberation of Hudes’s work has been Lin-Manuel Miranda’s adaptation of her book *In the Heights*.

And lastly I turn to Mira Gonzalez, a poet who uses Twitter and Tumblr to tease

her verses to her readers. Gonzalez has enjoyed success due to her accessibility, sardonic wit, and hyper-realist descriptions of millennial life. Her discusses frank sexuality and isolation from her peers in her poetry collection, *I Will Never Be Beautiful Enough for Us to Be Beautiful Together*. Gonzalez enjoys “alt-lit” popularity and has been endorsed by *Girls’* creator Lena Dunham. Yet Gonzalez shirks any mention of her ethnicity. Her Wikipedia page and biography assert she is the “stepdaughter of (California-based punk band) Black Flag’s Chuck Dukowski.” When an interviewer from *VICE* boldly asked her who her father was, she stated: “My daddy is a Mexican-Jewish businessman who I think is trying to kill me. My stepdad is Chuck Dukowski of Black Flag” (DiTrapano). The interviewer makes much of Gonzalez’s patriarchal lineage, perhaps because of her last name. Gonzalez doesn’t play up her ethnicity, but her Tumblr profile reads as “Mira Tortilla” as farce. Gonzalez seemingly circumvents expectations for a writer with a Hispanic last name by creating the demand and context for her own work. However, Gonzalez used social media, specifically Twitter, to self-publish, which in turn created the audience she wanted for herself. As such, Gonzalez works within the confines of Twitter’s 140-character limit to innovate verse. In an interview, Gonzalez said: “My goal with writing poetry, specifically, was to make something that could appeal to a large audience by adhering to a short attention span” (Gross). The demand for her work led for the Brooklyn-based independent press, Sorry House Books, to publish her first poetry collection.

The impact of the Latina Boom can still be felt three decades later. As I conclude my graduate career, I’ve realized that this project was reflective of my own journey as a reader. My own path as a literary scholar began the day I met Yolanda, Carla, Sandra and

Fifi García in the aisles of Barnes and Noble. My original copy remains on my desk as a reminder of my past, the pages worn, dog-eared and yellowing. The first page is stained with orange juice from the day I stayed home from school with a cold, reading in bed. Yolanda's assertion of being a feminist helped me realize that I was one, too. My love affair with the García girls propelled me to the library after school, searching for more literary companions like the Garcías. There I met Sandra Cisneros, Ana Castillo, and Judith Ortiz Cofer. I read *Latina* magazine for inspiration. I was introduced to Esmeralda Santiago's book *When I Was Puerto Rican*, by my best friend Lucy and her mom Eneida, who exclaimed that she was "always Puerto Rican." When the library didn't carry what I wanted, I bought more books at Barnes and Noble. When I went to college, I had more books at my disposal in the library, but even though I studied both English and Spanish I did not have the opportunity to study U.S. Latina writers. My junior year I enrolled in a course on Latin American women's writing and reread Alvarez, the only U.S. Latina on the syllabus. But I did use what criticism and literature was available to teach myself. Not only did the Latina Boom create a canon of literature for readers like me, it also helped establish a new field of literary criticism for academics. For a young reader like myself who was motivated by personal inquiry, the accompanying scholarship allowed me to delve more deeply into the work. Literature of the Boom was imperative for providing readers with an understanding of gender, class, ethnicity, and language. Moreover, I felt that writing by and about Latina women was important. Not only was the work I read reflective of my own bilingual reality, it was art.

Finally, this project traces my evolution as an educator. I began teaching courses on Latina literature in 2006 at my alma mater, Montclair State University. Teaching was

a process of trial and error, and I initially had no systemic way of introducing Latina Boom writers to my class. Throughout my teaching career at Montclair and at Maryland, I've had conversations with students that have motivated me, challenged me, and even frustrated me. My reading of each author's work presented here is influenced by the countless discussions I've had with students in my classroom and in my office. As a student of Boom literature, my deep engagement with these texts allowed me to form my own pedagogical framework grounded in higher education, the publishing market, U.S. literary studies, feminist criticism, and Latino/a studies. I wrote this project in response to the frustrations I felt while teaching and writing about Latina Boom writers—and I've tried to take my readers through the learning process with me. Latina Boom literature gave me—and continues to give me—the tools to understand the social world around me, and in turn, to teach others to do the same.

In 2014, Alvarez received the National Medal of the Arts, the highest award given to artists, from President Barack Obama. In his remarks at the reception, Obama noted that the work created by the artists is not “incidental to the American experience [but] central to it—they are essential to it” (“Remarks” 2014). Alvarez's award given to her by the country's first African-American president allowed her to fulfill one of the dreams of the civil rights era: to have the voices of women like herself be included in the broader narrative of the United States, by a man who looks unlike any of his forty-three predecessors. At the time of completing this project, Sandra Cisneros has also been awarded the National Medal of the Arts for “enriching the American narrative” (“Remarks” 2016).

The impact of the Latina Boom can still be felt three decades later, and the

literature provides the tools to shift readers' thinking about a national culture. More importantly, the Latina literary canon is a testament to the diversity of American culture—and all of its complexities—and its endurance against the systemic social structures that attempt to exclude their stories. The bold presence of Latina Boom writers in the nineties ushered forth a new literary framework for newer writers to follow, proving that their work was not “market-driven” or temporary, but that writing by Latinos and Latinas is an important contribution to American literature. The writers of the Latina Boom saw a unique moment to transform the American publishing industry, and collectively they were able to build their own institution and use it to impact popular culture and the classroom.

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