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**Literary Translations: Telenovelas in Contemporary Chicana  
Literature**

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**Literary Translations: Telenovelas in Contemporary Chicana  
Literature**

**by**

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## **Dedication**

I dedicate this dissertation to those who have gone before me: my grandparents, Elaine Jeffers and Laurie Otto Graf, and Mary Grace and Joseph John Sherer and to those who have held my hand along the way: including and most especially my parents, Maura Ann and Gregory William Graf, my two older brothers and their wives and children, John and Kristy Graf, and their daughter, Cloe, Jim and Joy Graf, and their precious jelly bean on the way, and to my younger brother and best friend, David Graf, a man whose intellectual acumen is only surpassed by the depth of his heart. Finally, I dedicate this dissertation to  
God with whom all things are possible.

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## Preface

The obvious question is how and why did I, a white woman from the Midwest of the United States ever start watching Spanish-language soap operas? First of all, as I would explain time and again to various family members, they are not soap operas, they are telenovelas. Unlike soap operas, which go on endlessly for generations, (family members, including my 88 year old grandfather have watched *One Life to Live* for decades), telenovelas end within months. I first started watching soap operas as a grade school kid with my grandparents. In their retirement, my grandparents' schedule revolved around watching the soap opera *One Life to Live*. When I visited them, I often laid on the floor while they sat in their matching grey swivel chairs to watch the soap before we all took a nap. If it had been a while since I had last seen them or the show, one of the first things I would ask my grandparents about, was the soap. What happened to Vicki's other personality Nicki Smith? Was Carlo Hesser convicted for Todd's murder? Did Nora have an affair with Sam? Over the years, the soap opera became a central way for me to reconnect to my grandparents and close the gaps in time between my annual visits at Christmas and over the summer. I could always relate to them by talking about the soap. Even now as I an adult, I joke with my grandfather, Paw Paw, about the fantastical twists and turns of *One Life to Live*. Most recently for example, I asked him why Bo Buchanan and Rex Balsam were stuck in the 1960s and more importantly, how and when was GiGi going to travel back in time to rescue them?

Just as the soap was, and continues to be, a shared experience that allows me to relate to my grandparents despite our differences in age and intermittent visits, the

telenovela also allowed me to connect to Mexican and Chilean women when I lived in South America despite our differences in age, culture and nationality. Watching telenovelas was one of the primary ways I got to know my host family when I lived in Cuernavaca, Mexico. In the late afternoon, Elena, my host mother, and I would walk to the local panadería to pick up fresh pan dulce and maybe stop at the Super to buy corn flakes and milk for a late dinner. When her daughter Norma, came home from work at the family owned automotive shop around the corner, the three of us would gather around the television to feast on pan dulce and watch the latest installments of their favorite novelas. Men never joined us, although this seemed more incidental given that Elena was divorced and her son worked evenings. Having traveled to Mexico to study Spanish for three months, I initially utilized the time spent watching telenovelas as another opportunity to improve my language skills. Often, I would inquire in my broken Spanish about the various goings on and Elena and Norma would try to explain the complicated plot twists to me in simple ways. Although I struggled to understand the rapid-fire dialogue, the dramatic music clued me in as to whether it was the villain on screen or one of the star-crossed lovers. My understanding was aided by the fact that I understood the morally bound universe of the novela, where true love most often prevails and evildoers are punished. My ridiculous questions and confusions provided an endless source of entertainment for my host family and me. However, my lack of proficiency in Spanish was also frustrating at times because I could not follow the conversation between Elena and Norma or fully articulate my own thoughts. Yet, I still enjoyed sharing in their daily ritual, a time and space set aside to spend time together, eating, laughing, and watching novelas.

Telenovelas also served as a means to foster friendship with the women I met while living and working as a volunteer in Chile. Often times, when I went to visit Chilean women in the local community we wound up watching novelas together; whether it was sitting with Erica and her daughter after lunch, over tea with Mirta in the late afternoon, or Tia Flor in the evening. While I also spent time with these women in the kitchen cooking and cleaning, or accompanying them to the doctor or meetings at church, my favorite pastime was to relax with them in front of a novela. It was one of few times when the women were not serving their maridos (husbands), running after their grand kids, or preparing events for the church (fundraisers, retreats). It was a way for us to connect to each other as women despite our differences in age, culture, and nationality.

Years after my time spent living in Latin America, I continue to enjoy the melodramatic twists and turns of the plot, as *la Gata Salvaje* (Rosaura) cannot stop weeping, *Mariana de la Noche* wanders in the night, Rubí plots against Hector, and *Peregrina* seeks revenge on Adolfo. What started as an invitation by the women in my Mexican host family to join them in their evening ritual of telenovela viewing has since become a daily habit (U.S. Spanish language networks like their Latin American counterparts also conveniently air novelas in the evening), a source of entertainment (as I translate episodes to family members) and an intellectual interest (as I have been writing my dissertation over the past two years telenovela viewing has become regarded as research).

What keeps me tuning in night after night? What draws me to continue to watch telenovelas on Univisión instead of reruns of *Seinfeld* or *Will and Grace* on the WB? I suppose part of my answer is that I am a hopeless romantic. I enjoy watching the Latin

American lovers, whose intensity seems to surpass that of their American counterparts. Referring to each other affectionately, as “mi vida,” my life, “mi suspiro” my breath, or “mi alma” my soul, the lovers express exaggerated emotion, beyond all sense or believability that is entertaining to watch as a viewer. Perhaps it fulfills my own insatiable desire to play out a romantic fantasy that, like most women, I have held since I was a little girl, in which a gallant knight on a white horse sweeps a beautiful, humble maiden off her feet. On a rational level, I realize that passionate, obsessive love cannot be sustained for a lifetime and often does not make for a stable relationship. Yet the telenovela extends the fantasy that an intense, all consuming love completes one’s life. With each new novela the same fantasy is played out again and again. Before one novela ends, the network is already advertising a new one, a slightly different version of the same romantic fantasy with familiar faces. (As I write this, the novela *Peregrina* (Pilgrim) is in its últimos capítulos (last chapters) and Univisión has already begun promoting a new novela, *Heridas de Amor* (Wounds of Love)).

In addition, telenovelas typically present a Cinderella, rags to riches narrative of a woman from the lower class that falls in love with a wealthy man from a well-known family. In a novela, marriage often results in the major advancement of a woman’s socio-economic status. In reality, more women work than ever before, whether by choice or out of necessity. Most women do not have husbands who make enough money to maintain a household on a single income and others do not want to be financially dependent on their spouse. Telenovelas allow viewers, like me, to escape their financial responsibilities and exist in a world in which all their material needs and desires are fulfilled.

Novelas uphold the ideal of a romantic love that overcomes all obstacles, including differences of social class, and race or ethnicity; or such differences are fabricated as potential obstacles to separate lovers. For example, a protagonist may be initially presented as of humble origin and in fact turn out to be of aristocratic heritage. In reality, rarely is an individual's background so ridiculously obscured and racial and class differences are often barriers that cannot be surmounted despite the strong love that exists between two people. Novelas provide a means of escape by presenting viewers a harmonious world in which love easily dissolves differences of race and class. Yet, ironically, while the content of the novela is an idealistic, romantic narrative that blurs sharp distinctions of race and class, the act of watching the novela provides a transformative space, as I have noted, in which viewers can overcome differences in race, class, and gender to connect to each other.

While telenovelas are a source of romantic fantasy, the shows are also cathartic. I enjoy watching the villains- each one more extreme than the last- and their desperate attempts (lying, cheating, stealing, even killing) to get what they want. On one hand, I identify with the villains' desperate attempts to cover up their wrong doings, which only exacerbates the problem and ultimately sabotages their future. On the other hand, it is fun to know that despite the villains' best efforts, eventually if even in the final episodes or minutes, the truth will come out and the villain will be duly punished. The use of dramatic irony in the telenovela allows viewers, like me, access to what's really going on while the characters remain unaware of the fateful circumstances that surround them. It is gratifying as a viewer to be placed in a privileged position of power, already knowing the inevitable outcome to which the characters remain blind.

So, if I know what is going to happen, why do I watch? It is gratifying as a viewer to know that at the end of the novela everything will be ironed out, the lovers will finally be united and the villains punished. The novela's happy ending (in which lovers unite in marriage) satisfies my own deepest desire to have life organized and complete in a way that it is not in reality. My sense of identification with the happy couple also reflects my own positionality as a heterosexual woman who desires traditional marriage and a family. Thus, as entertainment the novela presents female protagonists to whom I can relate and through whom I can live vicariously. This is obviously not true for all viewers.

The novela's happy ending also reaffirms a certain moral order; no bad deed goes unnoticed or unpunished and all goodness and virtue is rewarded. The "good" characters embody Christian virtues (humility, chastity, simplicity) and are aptly rewarded while the "bad" characters exhibit sinfulness (pride, lust, greed) and get what they deserve. This is gratifying as a viewer, it provides the satisfaction of seeing "bad" characters having to pay for the wrong they have done. Part of the allure of the telenovela, is that it provides viewers a sense of justice and vindication which is often impossible in real life. Overall, the novela presents a just world that lacks the ambiguity and contradiction of real life.

While I enjoy watching telenovelas for the entertainment and escape they provide, I am also equally aware of the shortcomings of the melodramatic, romance genre that presents a world in which love always overcomes and erases class, racial, and gender differences. I am interested in how Chicana authors transform the telenovela, drawing on this popular form with roots in literature, to disseminate narratives that challenge the narrow, black and white moral confines of the novela. Readily including or alluding to telenovelas in their own literary production, Chicana authors utilize a form with

incredible cultural currency to emphasize and critique social inequalities along racial, class and gender lines.

# **Literary Translations: Telenovelas in Contemporary Chicana Literature**

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Chicana literature is often discussed in relation to broad literary or theoretical movements (post-modernism, magic realism, or feminism) but these approaches often fail to account for or even consider other culturally derived sources of critical interrogation. For example, Chicana authors, through direct references or allusions, demonstrate that Spanish-language soap operas, known as telenovelas, have a cultural currency that can bridge people across generations, nationalities, and class differences. Telenovelas also have theoretical value, for these productions often feature stories that address issues of race, class, gender, nationality, language, and violence. Reading contemporary Chicana literature through the lens of the telenovela, including its history and status as a cultural form, reveals the ways in which Chicana authors not only rely on but also revise the form. They disrupt the rigid Manichean world view present in telenovelas by challenging heteronormative romance and traditional gender roles to allow for alternate stories, where endings are not always tidy or happy. Drawing on recent ethnographic research in

communication studies, I examine the history of Spanish-language television within the U.S. to substantiate the cultural currency of and show how the telenovela permeates and informs Mexican-American identity. Relying on the work of Jesús Martín-Barbero, I trace the development of the melodrama and romance genres out of which telenovelas emerge, evolving from newspaper serials, radionovelas, fotonovelas, to comic strip novels or libros semanales. I focus on the literary roots of the telenovela genre (with its origins in 19<sup>th</sup> century European serialized fiction) in relation to early Mexican-American historical romance narratives (María Amparo Ruiz de Burton, Jovita González, and Eve Raleigh). Based on Gustavo Aprea and Rolando C. Martínez Mendoza's definition of the telenovela genre, I examine how contemporary Chicana fiction (Denise Chávez, Ana Castillo, Sandra Cisneros, and Nina Marie Martínez) both conforms to and deviates from the generic conventions. I provide a culturally based critical strategy for offering alternate readings of Chicana literature to show how these authors use the popularity of the telenovela form to reach a specific audience and lend new insight into how viewers, familiar with the genre conventions, are comparable to literary critics.

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## **Introduction: The Evolution of the Telenovela Genre**

Telenovelas are an international media phenomenon that has captured audience members' attention worldwide, including in the U.S.<sup>1</sup> In 2004, the *Boston Globe* estimated the total number of telenovela (Spanish-language soap opera) viewers around the world at two billion. The industry produces over 12,000 telenovela television hours annually, at an average cost of US\$48,000 per episode. Of the telenovelas that are broadcast in the Americas and Spain, 42% are produced in Mexico, followed by 15% in Colombia and 13% in Brazil. Dr. Carolina Acosta-Alzuru, Associate Professor of Journalism and Communication at the University of Georgia, points to these statistics as evidence of Mexico's, "undeniable dominance in the international arena" in regards to telenovela production. Mexico's Televisa is the largest media company in the Spanish-speaking world, and owner of Univisión, the leading Spanish-language media company in the U.S.

Recent research shows that on average 30 telenovelas air in the U.S. daily on five different Spanish-language channels (Univisión, Telemundo, Azteca América, TeleFutura, and América TeVé). In December 2005 Nielsen started including Univisión in the National Television Index (NTI), making it the first Spanish-language network to join NTI. During its first week of measurement by Nielsen's in January 2006, Univisión beat out ABC, CBS, NBC, and FOX, in the 8-9 p.m. time slot among the coveted adult 18-34 demographic, including all U.S. audiences whether Hispanic or non-Hispanic, with its hit telenovela *Contra Viento y Marea*. More recently, in January 2008, Univisión

again clinched the number one spot beating out ABC, CBS and The CW for the most viewers (3 million adults 18-49) in the 8-9 p.m. time slot with the airing of the telenovela, *Al Diablo con Los Guapos*. Telenovelas have solidified Univisión's place as a major network contender, even crossing over to English-language TV with ABC's production of *Ugly Betty* an English version of the popular Colombian telenovela, *Yo soy Betty, la fea* (1999-2001).<sup>2</sup>

### **Theorizing the Telenovela**

Given the form's global popularity, it is clear that telenovelas have a cultural currency that can bridge people across generations, nationalities, and class differences through a discursive network, however temporary or informal, that forms among viewers who collectively engage in making meaning out of the cultural form. Popular forms reflect the shared assumptions on which a specific culture is based and analysts theorize the meaning of these cultural productions. As a popular cultural form telenovelas reveal the assumptions about the constructions of race, gender, class, and nation, upon which a given society/culture is based. Thus, the theoretical value of the telenovela is the information it contains or yields about the specific historical and national context in which it is created.

The telenovela is largely studied in relation to the fields of popular culture, mass media, cultural studies, film, communication and education.<sup>3</sup> I am interested in how the telenovela (and its underlying assumptions) is translated into a literary form. The narrative formula of the Mexican telenovela includes: stock characters (payaso/clown, curandera/healer, priest), familiar settings/locations (El D.F./Mexico City, población,

hacienda, rancho), national iconography (La Virgen of Guadalupe, Popo/Ixta, Mexican flag), star-crossed lovers who overcome obstacles to be together, a morally ordered/black and white world view, narrative closure and a requisite ending with the marriage of the happy couple. It can be problematic to go from one cultural form, television, to another, literature (given that they are studied within different academic disciplines that have distinct theoretical underpinnings, scholarship conventions and research models), but the two have always been intertwined; the telenovela has its origins in the elite novel form. Given Mexico's undeniable dominance in telenovela production worldwide and the form's popularity in the U.S., I am specifically interested in how and why Chicana authors directly engage with the Mexican telenovela in their literature. Chicana authors mediate the popular form, taking what they find useful to construct their own theories about and models of reality and discarding or critiquing the rest. One of the central issues guiding my research is Chicana authors' blatant disregard for literary convention; they do not adhere to the confines of traditional genres, such as melodrama or historical romance. Instead they enact a literary border crossing moving from the telenovela to literature and back again and ultimately translate the telenovela into a literary genre.

Chicana literature is often discussed in relation to broader literary or theoretical movements, such as post-modernism, magic realism, or feminism, but these approaches often fail to account for or even consider other culturally derived sources of critical interrogation, such as the telenovela.<sup>4</sup> In this study I close read four contemporary Chicana novels through the lens of the Mexican telenovela to illuminate how the authors incorporate certain characteristics (episodic, melodramatic, etc.) of this national form and reject others (focus on traditional romance, resolution via marriage etc.) in order to

critique the mythologies about race, class, and gender it promotes. I also show how Chicana authors guide readers to see the oppressive aspects of the telenovela by depicting viewers who are actively involved in discursive networks in which they critically engage with telenovelas and resist the conservative ideology promoted within the shows.

### **Literary Translators**

The primary texts I examine are Denise Chávez's *Face of an Angel* (1994), Ana Castillo's *So Far From God* (1993), Sandra Cisneros' *Woman Hollering Creek* (1991) and *Caramelo* (2002), and Nina Marie Martínez's *¡Caramba!* (2004). Each of these Chicana authors engages with the telenovela genre, both implicitly and explicitly, in their literature. They are all building up to and eventually succeed in creating a literary translation of the telenovela. In *Face of an Angel*, Chávez moves away from the early historical romance tradition and toward the telenovela; a move which is not entirely complete until the publication of her subsequent novel *Loving Pedro Infante* (2001). Similarly, Cisneros' initial engagement with the telenovela begins in her collection of short stories *Woman Hollering Creek* and her literary translation does not come to fruition until *Caramelo*. Given Cisneros' preoccupation with and attention to the popular cultural form, she readily identifies Castillo's novel (which is published prior to and motivates her to write *Caramelo*) as a telenovela as well as Martinez's novel, which is published a few years after and surpasses *Caramelo* because of the way it blends the visual aspects of the fotonovela with the telenovela. I have chosen these four primary texts because of the way in which the authors riff off of and respond to one another in their work, specifically in regards to the creation of a Chicana telenovela.

## **Literary History and Genre Conventions**

In order to further understand the telenovela's social function and the cultural knowledge it transmits, it is also important to establish the literary history and conventions of the genre. With an understanding of the form's literary roots (as it is linked to melodrama, romance, etc.) as well as the various incarnations of the telenovela in different national contexts (i.e. telenovela vs. soap opera), it is possible to see how the telenovela serves as a valuable critical lens through which to examine Chicana literature.

The current critical discussion regarding the conventions of the telenovela includes critics who identify the popular cultural form as part of the melodrama genre and those who argue that the telenovela is a distinct genre. The debate itself emphasizes the literary aspects of the telenovela, the ways in which the form is aligned with traditional literary genres and described and analyzed using rhetoric associated with literary criticism (i.e. characterization, plot development, central conflict, resolution, etc.). There is an explicit connection between the narrative development of a telenovela and a novel, thus encouraging viewers and readers to read the two genres similarly, making connections between the stories and their own lives. This reaffirms the connection between the popular cultural form and literary production. The form's literary aspect is even further underscored by the fact that telenovela episodes are referred to as *capítulos* in Spanish, meaning chapters.

## **Telenovela as Melodrama**

Martín-Barbero situates the telenovela squarely within the melodrama genre tracing the form's literary roots to the serialized melodrama of nineteenth-century

European literature, which evolved into the fotonovela, comic book (historieta), radionovela and ultimately became the telenovela.<sup>5</sup> The defining characteristics of the melodrama genre include: excessive emotion, archetypal characters, black and white worldview, narrative closure, a serialized format, and the dynamics of provocation and pacification.

Melodrama “elicits extreme emotion from the characters and the public” (Estill 174). Part of the way in which the form evokes emotion is through the use of archetypal characters. As Martín-Barbero explains, melodrama draws on “four basic emotions—fear, enthusiasm, pity and laughter,” corresponding to “four types of characters—the traitor, the hero who imposes justice, the victim and the fool” (*Communication* 116). Characters in a melodrama are one-dimensional; they become mere symbols or archetypes that can be easily identified as good or evil. “This evaluative reduction of the dramatic characters to either good or evil,” Martín-Barbero states, “tends to split reality into Manichean divisions” (116). With archetypal characters that signify the struggle between good and evil, melodrama presents a neatly ordered worldview.

The black and white worldview of melodrama facilitates narrative closure. In the classic struggle between good and evil, the audience knows who will win. Most telenovelas incorporate this formal aspect of melodrama and typically the shows end with “problems solved, lovers reunited, long lost family members found, villains getting what they deserved” (Barrera and Bielby 2). For example, in *Peregrina* (2006) the female protagonist after whom the show is named, grows up performing as a dancer in the circus, but her true identity as the illegitimate child of the millionaire Don Eliseo is later revealed and by the show's end she has inherited the family fortune and is happily

married. The telenovela is a sort of modern day morality tale in which the struggle for love “defines who is worthy of domestic bliss or fated to solitude” (Mayer 260). Within the neatly ordered confines of the telenovela, lovers overcome all obstacles (returns from the past, reversals of fortune) to be together. Narrative closure (symbolized by the marriage of the happy couple in telenovelas) is a central characteristic of melodrama.

Another hallmark of melodrama is its serialized format. Martín-Barbero explains that the serial “breaks writing away from the canons of the text and opens it to popular narrative, a logic of oral ‘telling *to* someone’ directly present” and the oral storytelling is “constructed on the basis of the ‘and then’ instead of the ‘in consequence’ based on logical continuity” (*Communication* 132, 138). Melodramas unfold organically as do viewers’ own lives, thus allowing audience members to identify their lives in the real world with the world of the story.

The serialized format of the melodrama also contributes to the dynamics of provocation and pacification within the genre. The serial provokes and arouses the interests of viewers by exploring forbidden or disturbing issues that reflect the underbelly of urban living such as poverty, drug abuse, and crime, while also utilizing intrigue and suspense to cloak the unrealistic nature of the solutions that are offered, such as the marriage of the happy couple and the triumph of morality and justice. “The serial,” Martín-Barbero states, “stirs people up and denounces the atrocious contradictions of society, but in the same process tries to resolve these problems without moving people to action” (*Communication* 137). Viewers can feel outraged at the injustices of the modern world, which they see reflected in the telenovelas, while temporarily taking solace in the improbable solutions the shows offer. It is in “these dynamics of provocation—

pacification” that viewers find the narrative resolution “momentarily tranquilizing” (Martín-Barbero *Communication* 137). The pacification that telenovelas offer, although temporary, is part of the form’s appeal. The shows offer viewers escape from a morally ambiguous world in which justice is not always served and satisfy viewers’ desire for a morally ordered, black and white world, by presenting narratives in which good always overcomes evil. In other words, viewers do not have to do anything but *stay* where they are socially, economically, etc.

### **Telenovela as Distinct Genre**

In contrast to Martín-Barbero and Lopez who clearly identify the telenovela as a melodrama, other critics, like Gustavo Aprea and Rolando C. Martínez Mendoza define the telenovela as a distinct genre. In their article, “Hacia una definición del género telenovela,” Aprea and Mendoza identify the characteristics of the telenovela genre, which include, archetypal characters, conventionalization of place, focus on the happy couple, mythological transformation, the happy ending symbolized by marriage, and a tension between the logics of desire and convention.

Aprea and Mendoza explain that in the telenovela,

There is a tendency to define people as archetypes constructed through their physical features (clothing, gestures, looks, very codified) and in relation to social stereotypes [...] Something similar occurs with the conventionalization of the locations where the action takes place (mansions, humble homes, night clubs, etc.). (21-22)<sup>6</sup>

Like traditional melodrama with simply drawn stock characters, the telenovela also utilizes archetypal characters and places; however, they are used to symbolize and represent a specific cultural, ethnic group, community, and nation. Podalsky provides examples of how such tropes, namely conventional characters and places, function metaphorically and metonymically within Mexican telenovelas. It is important to note the language of literary analysis that she uses to discuss how the telenovela functions as a national text that disseminates cultural knowledge. Again, the fact that critics write about the popular cultural form in literary terms emphasizes the connections they are making between the two forms. Podalsky explains how in telenovelas conventional locations function as symbols or referents for Mexican culture and nationality. She states, Mexican telenovelas “frequently feature mariachi and ranchera music” and include “‘typical’ Mexican locations like the rancho, the cabaret, and the vecindad (neighborhood)” as well as “character-types drawn from early Mexican film melodrama” (Podalsky 151, 164). This is evident in recent telenovelas, like *La Gata Salvaje* (2003) in which the female protagonist, Rosaura, grows up on a rancho and falls in love with the ranch hand, and *Velo de Novia* (2003) in which Andrea, a young woman with a bad heart, lives in the vecindad with her parents and the various school children they have taken in.

While in a traditional melodrama characters represent universal archetypes, such as heroes and villains, in telenovelas, the characters embody archetypes and gender roles specific to Latin American culture. For example, in Mexican telenovelas, female characters typically embody the values of chastity and morality associated with the Virgin of Guadalupe or they embody promiscuity and betrayal, traits associated with La Malinche.<sup>7</sup> In *Heridas de Amor* (2006), La Doctora Fernanda is a good, honest woman

along with her eldest daughter Miranda who is sexually chaste and morally virtuous compared to their foils, La Tía Berta, Fernanda's sister, who lies and schemes to steal Fernanda's husband away, and Florencia, Miranda's younger sister, who like her aunt steals her sister's fiancé Fabricio. Culturally specific female archetypes, like La Virgin and La Malinche are "considered fundamental to the construction of Mexican national identity" because they reinforce traditional gender roles (Podalsky 164). These examples show how familiar images, of the rancho or vecindad and female archetypes serve as metonyms for Mexican culture and nationality. They create what Lopez refers to as "a televisual 'national' in which the imagined community rallies around specific images of itself" ("Our Welcomed Guest" 262). Although the telenovela exhibits some characteristics of the melodrama genre, such as archetypal characters, these elements function differently within the popular cultural form by reflecting and facilitating the formation of a Latin American cultural and national identity among viewers.

In addition to archetypal characters and the conventionalization of place, another central characteristic of the telenovela genre is the requisite transformation of and struggle for the happy couple to be united. The central motives that maintain and prolong the struggle in the shows include unrequited, lost or forbidden love. Eventually the couple overcomes all the obstacles in their way, and "this magical happiness, presented almost like a supernatural force, is what permits, within the limits of social convention, desire to triumph in the telenovela" (30).<sup>8</sup> Viewers know that despite the forces that separate the protagonist couple, the show "has to finish with a reestablishment of the initial equilibrium: the awaited and required happy ending" symbolized by a wedding (22).<sup>9</sup> For example, in *Destilando Amor* (2007) the heroine Mariana and her mother,

Clarita, work harvesting agaves on La Montalveña Hacienda. Mariana falls in love with Rodrigo, the owner's son, and one night the two have sex. Not long afterwards, Rodrigo leaves for England to continue his studies at Cambridge. Mariana realizes she is pregnant and travels to Europe to try to find Rodrigo, only to end up miscarrying the child in a serious car accident. None the wiser, Rodrigo returns to Mexico and marries another woman, from the upper class. However, despite all these obstacles and more, eventually Rodrigo divorces his wife and marries Mariana.

Another central characteristic of the telenovela genre is the inherent tension created by the desire and push to conform to reality outside the narrative, as well as the genre conventions within which the narrative must fit. Aprea and Mendoza refer to Todorov's definitions of the two types of verisimilitude: social verisimilitude, which "has to construct personalities, situations or places in accord with real life" and genre verisimilitude, which "conforms to the rules of the established genre, derived from previous works within that genre" (26).<sup>10</sup> There is a permanent conflict within the telenovela between the desire to exaggerate characters' traits and the desire to present things as they are in real life. Aprea and Mendoza refer to this as "a game of tensions between the logic of the "world of desire" and the "world of social conventions" (29).<sup>11</sup> Ultimately they conclude that the telenovela allows for the reconciliation of these two seemingly contradictory worlds through the marriage of the happy couple, which creates a pact between the logic of desire (pursuit of happiness, at any cost) and the logic of convention (religious institutional tradition). This tension is similar to the dynamics of provocation and pacification, which Martín-Barbero identifies as being central to melodrama. However, as Aprea and Mendoza point out, within the telenovela, only one

resolution is presented to pacify viewers. Social convention dictates that telenovelas must end with the “constitution of at least one monogamous and heterosexual couple that leads to the construction of a family through the institution of marriage crystallized in a religious ceremony” (24).<sup>12</sup>

Resolving the ongoing debate about whether the telenovela fits into the category of melodrama or is its own distinct genre, although relevant, is not the primary goal of my analysis. For the purposes of my study, I refer to aspects of both Martín-Barbero and Aprea and Mendoza’s definitions, recognizing the telenovela as a cultural form that contains characteristics of the melodrama genre, while at the same time using these elements to reflect and represent the specific Latin American nations in which the shows are produced whether its Mexico, Colombia or Brazil etc. I will show how, as a cultural form that disseminates mythologies about race, class, gender and heterosexuality, the telenovela influences and facilitates identity formation among viewers. While the theories of critics like Martín-Barbero and Aprea and Mendoza about the telenovela are useful to identify the formal and thematic elements of the genre, they are not sufficient to describe how the popular cultural form is translated and applied theoretically in a literary context. Current scholarship on the telenovela does not account for how and more importantly why authors incorporate elements of the popular cultural form and the extent to which literary production conforms to or deviates from the genre conventions. Such work fails to critically examine how Chicana authors challenge the stereotypes and assumptions reinforced in the telenovela by, for example, revising the traditional romance narrative in their literature. My analysis shows how Chicana literature positions female characters as

resistant readers who critically engage the popular cultural form, contesting stereotypes and assumptions instead of automatically accepting them.

### **Spanish-language T.V. in the U.S.: An Overview**

Before initiating an analysis of how the telenovela is translated in Chicana literature, it is important to establish the history of Spanish-language television in the U.S. and provide an overview of the research concerning telenovela consumption in the U.S. (including the variety of reasons viewers watch novelas), to allow readers to have a better sense of the social function (assimilation and cultural maintenance) telenovelas serve within the Latino community. In terms of my study, this information ultimately reveals the power and popularity of the national form from which Chicana authors draw as well as the cultural context within which they are writing.<sup>13</sup>

For over fifty years, the telenovela has captured viewers' attention. The first telenovelas were produced in the 1950s in Brazil, *Sua vida me pertence* (1950), Cuba, *Senderos de amor* (1951) and Mexico, *Ángeles de la calle* (1951). Telenovelas arrived in the United States in the 1960s, with the foundation of Univisión, which imported the shows from Mexico and was designed to function as a conduit for Mexican programming. Although Univisión's parent company, Televisa,<sup>14</sup> let go of its initial intentions to give telenovelas a literary quality in favor of commercial success, it still focused on making the shows educational. For example, Televisa produced novelas such as *Ven conmigo* (1975) “to provide educational entertainment, with strong messages about adult literacy, family planning, and other national concerns” (Estill 170). While telenovelas incorporated educational content and addressed social concerns, the shows

were also an increasingly popular form of entertainment. The first global telenovela, *Los ricos también lloran* (1979) was produced in Mexico and “shown not only throughout Latin America, but also in Europe, parts of Asia, the former Soviet Union, and the United States” (Barrera and Bielby 2). In the 1980s telenovelas became the number one cultural export of Latin America. During this time countries like Venezuela, Colombia, and Brazil challenged the historical dominance of Mexican telenovelas in the U.S. market (Barrera and Bielby; Mayer). Despite competition from media outlets in other Latin American countries, Televisa had an edge due to an agreement with Sky Entertainment Services that bundled Televisa with News Corporation, TCI, and TV Globo for global satellite distribution (Mayer 480). But Univisión soon faced competition from within the U.S., when a second Spanish-language network, Telemundo, was formed in 1987 followed by a third, Azteca América, in 2001, which made the market even more competitive and diverse. In 2002, Univisión formed another Spanish-language channel, TeleFutura.<sup>15</sup>

Despite its initial success with *Angélica, mi vida* (the first telenovela produced in the U.S.), Telemundo struggled to make gains into Univisión’s dominance of the market. When Telemundo dropped telenovelas from its 1998-99 prime-time schedule (in favor of other programs based on old U.S. dramas like *Charlie’s Angels* and *Starsky and Hutch*) its ratings plummeted (Podalsky 158). The network quickly returned to the novela format for evening programming, “this time importing novelas like Colombia’s *Betty la Fea* (Ugly Betty) and Brazil’s *Xica da Silva* (Woman of the Forest),” which quickly boosted its ratings (Podalsky 153). This incident underscores the popularity of telenovelas among Latinos in the U.S. and the inability of a Spanish-language network to succeed without including telenovelas as part of its regular broadcasting program.

The fact that there are three Spanish-language broadcasting networks, over five Spanish-language channels,<sup>16</sup> and a growing Latino audience in the U.S. points to the popularity and longevity of this popular cultural form, not only within Latin America but the U.S. as well. According to the field research there are various reasons, in addition to entertainment, why Latinos in the United States watch telenovelas and the ways in which Latinos engage them as cultural products. The media use theories are helpful to my analysis of how the telenovela genre is translated in Chicana literature because they provide a theoretical framework and vocabulary to discuss audience reception of the popular cultural form. The field research emphasizes the contested nature of the telenovela genre, which is often criticized as being lowbrow, superficial entertainment that reinforces traditional gender roles and upholds the patriarchal power structure.<sup>17</sup> Yet, at the same time, the popular cultural form is also lauded as a powerful medium that, depending on a viewer's critical engagement, can facilitate criticism of the mythologies about race, class, gender, and sexual orientation disseminated in the form. Many critics and authors have an ambiguous and troubled relationship with the form, aware of its obvious flaws and likely dangers, as well as its potential to raise awareness about social issues and challenge racial, class, and gender stereotypes and assumptions.

As a serialized narrative, the telenovela is similar to its English language counterpart, the soap opera, yet as a national form, it reflects the specific Latin American context out of which it developed. "The telenovela," according to Ana Lopez, "has become a privileged site for the translation of cultural, geographical, economic, and even political differences into the discourse of nationness" ("Our Welcomed Guest" 262). Lopez identifies the telenovela as a site where "nationness" is translated through popular

culture. As a cultural form that reflects the specific nation in which it is produced, there are different incarnations and versions of the telenovela genre throughout Latin America and the world. The fact that the telenovela is acknowledged as a cultural and national form is crucial to my study, because it verifies that the telenovela is a cultural text that, similar to a literary text, can be used simultaneously as a vehicle to disseminate and contest dominant cultural values.

### **Telenovelas versus Soap Operas**

Given the distinct socio-political contexts in which the telenovela and the soap opera were created, it is not surprising that the two popular forms developed distinctly in regards to content, form, audience and social purpose. In the U.S., “soaps had their origin in radio serials of the 1930s, which developed a system of selling transmission time to sponsors, who in turn, produced programming as a platform for commercials,” and in Mexico Telesistema (later known as Televisa) “shifted control of production and distribution from the hands of sponsors to those of producers, making sponsors buy advertising spots instead of programming time” (4-5). While the contents of soap operas were determined by and furthered the commercial interests of sponsors (largely soap companies like Proctor and Gamble), the contents of telenovelas were controlled by producers who initially wanted to endow telenovelas with a literary quality and considered inviting famous writers, such as Carlos Fuentes and Juan Rulfo, to give plots “a Mexican cultural element” (Barrera and Bielby 5; Estill 170). However, as previously noted, these original intentions were soon replaced with the desire to create a source of funding for the television enterprises.<sup>18</sup> Although these original intentions were

abandoned in Mexico, in Colombia and Brazil telenovelas began as adaptations of literary texts.<sup>19</sup> The literary nature of the telenovela is even reflected in the form's nomenclature, as Lopez notes, which evokes the novelistic form, compared to the title soap opera, which emphasizes its commercial roots ("The Melodrama in Latin America" 8). It is not a stretch to suggest that there are generic similarities between the telenovela and contemporary Chicana fiction, when one understands the novelistic traditions on which the popular cultural form is based. The fact that the telenovela has its roots in literature is particularly important to my analysis, as I show how and why Chicana authors, by incorporating elements of the popular cultural form in their literature, highlight the relationship (the merging, diverging, and bringing together again) of the two forms.

In addition to the differences in content (whether serving commercial or literary purposes), soap operas and telenovelas also differ in formal aspects. As a narrative form, the American soap opera "consists of episodic, open-ended narratives and plots based on relationships between characters; [a format] conducive to the structure of housework and the content of domestic concerns" (Barrera and Bielby 4). The open-ended nature of the soap opera reflects the context in which it was developed; it is structured such that it is easy for stay-at-home care givers to watch intermittently while performing various household tasks and tune in when convenient without feeling lost or confused, as it is one continuous narrative. Soap operas refuse closure and defer the viewers' desire for more knowledge, thereby emphasizing the form's polysemic nature. The open-ended, porous structure of the soap opera allows for a multiplicity of meanings; thereby remaining morally ambiguous. Telenovelas, on the other hand, have an inherently "tidy" structure,

and present complete narrative closure, which reduces the multiple meanings to one “clearly legible moral resolution” (Estill 173). Adriana Estill further explains that the final closure of the telenovela creates a permanent, stable world where “complete” individuals win or lose and the audience can participate in that completion. In this rubric, it makes sense that the Latin American telenovelas eventually come to an end; after all, the closure that a telenovela provides essentially confirms the worldview. (174)

By providing narrative closure and presenting a clear moral lesson, telenovelas confirm the Latin American worldview, which is strongly influenced by the Catholic Church and based on the fundamental belief in a just world in which good, faithful people are rewarded and bad, sinful people are punished.<sup>20</sup>

The preference for an ordered, just world in which morally upstanding citizens are rewarded and corrupt citizens are punished also reflects, according to Estill, the desires of second and third world countries to see justice meted out on a global scale. Estill makes a compelling economic argument as to why this is the case. As she explains, within a global economy, citizens of developing and underdeveloped countries, many of whom live in poverty and labor in sweat shop conditions (such as in *maquiladoras* along the U.S./Mexico border) want to believe that their efforts will be rewarded, not just on a spiritual level, but also on a practical, economic level. In a capitalist system, which moves to the dictates of international markets and the bottom line, the human element is often overlooked. Thus, as cultural products, telenovelas reinforce a worldview in which people who are corrupt and motivated by avarice and greed (metonyms for capitalist, first

world countries) wind up unhappy and alone, and those who are just and motivated by compassion and love (metonyms for developing, second and third world countries) end up happy and surrounded by family and friends.

For example, in *Rubí* (2004), named after the female protagonist, a beautiful and malicious woman, motivated by greed and jealousy who seeks out rich business men, like Héctor and Luis, to pull her out of poverty, ends up disfigured, having suffered a major accident, and unhappy and alone, having married for money instead of love. In stark contrast to *Rubí*, her sister, Cristina, an honorable and compassionate woman who lives in the *población* and takes care of her ailing mother and illegitimate daughter, ends up happily married to Cayetano, the father of her child, who works as a chauffeur. The Manichean worldview and strong moralistic nature of telenovelas is evident in their momentous finales that “cement identities and narrative meanings” (Estill 174). Like an allegory, the telenovela ends with a clear message, that seeking after money is bad and results in unhappiness, while self-sacrifice and virtue lead to happiness. While the typical telenovela plot shows how a heroine may rise in social class by marrying a man from a wealthy, aristocratic family, *Rubí* reinforces the dangers of social mobility by depicting a woman who does not stick to her own class and consequently winds up worse than dead, disfigured. Her most valuable resource, her allure and beauty, rendered useless. So, while the telenovela extols the virtues of self-sacrifice, it also serves as an allegory about class.

Telenovelas placate the lower classes by making them feel “good” on a moral level despite their material discomforts. In the black and white world of telenovelas the good, moral people always win out and “this narrative invests a great proportion of the Mexican population with moral and social power, in order to compensate them for not

having financial power” (Estill 181). By investing the majority of viewers with a sense of moral superiority, telenovelas distract them from challenging the social injustices of a fundamentally racist, classist, and sexist society. As Laura Podalsky explains, the popularity of novelas may depend “on the way they entirely ignore the ‘reality’ of Latino/as in favor of a melodramatic aesthetic that allows for allegorical readings” (158). Instead of focusing on the harsh reality of life for the majority of the urban masses, telenovelas provide a tidy morality tale, in which the poor are heralded as the heroes of the story. Telenovelas perpetuate the myth of “social mobility that lies at the heart of the ‘American dream’” (159). The narratives encourage viewers to dream about the possibility of social advancement, while simultaneously making them feel comfortable accepting their lot. Telenovelas pacify viewers by providing wished-for solutions to life's problems. By giving viewers temporary solace the shows quell their desire to fight for change in the real world.

Given the distinctions in content and form between soap operas and telenovelas, it is not surprising that the national genres also target different audiences. Unlike soap operas that networks air during the day and are primarily targeted to stay-at-home caregivers, telenovelas “air mornings, afternoons, and evenings and to watch them is a family affair” (Barrera and Bielby 1). The difference in scheduling also reflects the Mexican producers' desires to appeal to a wide audience; as a result, telenovelas became prime-time entertainment, targeting women and men. The fact that telenovelas draw male and female viewers is significant because it underscores the widespread appeal of the popular cultural form, and thus the far reaching impact and influence of the dominant cultural values it disseminates. The cross-gender appeal of telenovelas is crucial to my

analysis of how it is translated in literature, because it emphasizes the importance of the popular form in influencing women and men within Latin American culture as a whole and the Mexican culture specifically. Thus, the telenovela serves as an effective site through which Chicana authors can contest the traditional gender roles promoted within the form.

Ultimately, the most important distinction between soap operas and telenovelas is the different social purpose each national form serves and the cultural work in which it engages. While soap operas serve the purpose of providing diversion for stay at home care givers and a platform to promote commercial products for the home and beauty products for women, telenovelas, although also used to promote the commercial interests of television producers, additionally, according to Jesús Martín-Barbero, offer Latina/o viewers reflections of their cultural backgrounds. As he explains,

the fact that the [telenovelas] moved from the “housewives” time slot, in the middle of the day, to prime-time family hours, was because television viewers discovered something in [telenovelas] which North American serials, despite their visual attractiveness and narrative skill, did not offer: a complicity with certain markers of cultural identity. (“Memory and Form” 282)

Telenovelas visually represent Latin American culture, thus allowing Latina/o viewers to see themselves reflected in the popular form. As markers of cultural identity, telenovelas do not present a “purely deceptive nostalgia but rather a dimension [...] with which Latin Americans construct their present” (282). The popular cultural form is not merely presenting a nostalgic longing for, in some cases, a mythical homeland, but rather

operates as a site through which Latina/o viewers negotiate their hyphenated and multi-ethnic identities in a transnational context. As the U.S. Latino population grows and more people emigrate from Mexico and other Latin American countries to the U.S., it becomes necessary for telenovela producers to address the complexities of immigration, an issue of growing concern and relevance for many of their viewers living in the U.S. who have multi-ethnic backgrounds and may or may not have ever traveled to their parents' and/or grandparents' countries of origin.

### **Telenovela's Dual Functions: Assimilation and Cultural Maintenance**

A brief overview of some recent field studies done in the disciplines of communication, radio, television, and film that examine audience reception of telenovelas, reveals the extent to which telenovelas influence and facilitate identity formation (along the lines of race, class, gender and sexual orientation) among Latina/os living in the U.S. Recent ethnographic research illustrates that for Latina/os living in the U.S., the media serves dual functions, “acculturation to mainstream values and norms and the preservation and fortification of their ethnicity and culture” (Rios “Latina/o Experiences” 105-6).<sup>21</sup> Given the important social function of the telenovela, it is apparent why Latina/o authors, like some critical viewers, utilize the genre as a site to contest the dominant cultural values disseminated through the form.

Yet there are critics who do not acknowledge the potential for the telenovela to serve as a site of resistance or contestation and instead focus on the negative, even dangerous, aspects of the genre. Such critics argue that the telenovela solely facilitates assimilation to mainstream values by promoting commercial interests, cements existing

social hierarchies, and romanticizes poverty thus dissuading viewers from challenging the injustices of a classist society. Early studies of telenovelas in the 1970s, when media imperialism theories were popular, focused on the presumed alienation effect of media that reinforces dominant ideology. In fact, Venezuelan scholars at the time referred to telenovelas as “el huésped alienante” (the alienating guest) and argued that the shows had “a harmful influence upon popular culture and consciousness” because they served “as agents for the creation of a capitalist and consumerist international global village engineered by the U.S. and U.S.-allied interests” (López “Our Welcomed Guest” 256). With the initial north-south flow of media and imported programming, Latin American countries were concerned about how popular cultural forms, like the telenovela were being used not only to make money for capitalist countries, but also to reinforce the dominant ideology and social structures to keep those countries in power.

Many have argued, therefore, that telenovelas reinforce the existing social order by re-inscribing traditional roles along the lines of race, class, and gender. In the shows, “racial division is unstated but present: lower class characters have noticeably indigenous or mestizo features, while rich characters have more European features” (Estill 179). This is evident in *Peregrina* (2006) where the maid, Abigail, and her father, Melquíades are darker skinned than the woman of the house, Doña Victoria, who is lighter skinned and has blond hair. Also, darker skinned, lower class characters are often depicted as “bad” or morally corrupt and evil, while white, upper class characters are deemed “good” and morally upstanding. This is evident in *Rubí*, where Maribel, the lighter skinned, blonde haired daughter of the wealthy patriarch is also virtuous and compassionate compared to Rubí, the selfish and greedy, dark haired daughter of a poor single mother living in the

*población*. This example also underscores the way telenovelas reinforce gender stereotypes, (as previously noted) often presenting female characters as either good, a la Maribel, or bad, a la Rubí.

Another negative aspect of telenovelas is that they may entice viewers to become over invested in the fantastical reality the shows promote. For example, one of the viewers Diana Rios interviewed in her research indicated a concern about how telenovelas can disrupt people's lives, if fans, like his aunt, organize their schedules around them. As Rios explains, the respondent was even more "concerned that fans use novelas to displace real people in their lives, 'When people get over involved in the episodes, they think the characters are their family and friends'" (64). Such over-identification with the fictional characters in the serialized narratives is another insidious way in which telenovelas distract viewers from the real social conditions of their lives. Arguably, for some viewers, telenovelas shift from being a temporary escape, to becoming a permanent distraction that prevents them from challenging the injustices of the pervasive racism, classism, and sexism in society.

### **Cultural Maintenance**

After critically assessing the ways in which telenovelas can serve as a vehicle to promote U.S. capitalist interests, and uphold the existing social order by reinforcing conservative values, Latin American countries (and Mexico in particular) decided to harness the power of the popular cultural form for themselves. While the telenovela was initially thought of as an "alienating guest" it was transformed into "*O Salvador da Patria* [the savior of the nation, also the title of a popular Brazilian telenovela] and the

success of the telenovela [was] equated with development, modernization, and the growing national/international clout of Latin American TV networks” (López “Our Welcomed Guest” 256-7). The cultural form shifted from exclusively serving the capitalist interests of the U.S. to providing commercial success for countries in the continent out of which it emerged. In fact, current media studies refer to the telenovela’s success as “reverse media imperialism” and explain that as a lucrative export from Latin America the popular cultural form refutes the hegemony of American culture (Lopez “The Melodrama in Latin America” 8).

In addition to the commercial advantages the telenovela provides to Latin American countries, the popular form also facilitates cultural maintenance among Latinos in the U.S. through the transmission of cultural knowledge, language acquisition and socialization. Barrera and Bielby explain that the popularity and success of Spanish-language television in the United States “is mostly due to the neglect of Spanish-speaking communities by the major American broadcast networks,” whose efforts “to reach Latino audiences have been modest in scale and mostly unsuccessful (Fisher; Baxter, “KCBS”)” (6).<sup>22</sup> By neglecting the Spanish-speaking audience, major U.S. television networks created a vacuum, which opened up opportunities for alternative programming resulting in the creation of three Spanish-language networks.

As a popular form, telenovelas serve the social function of allowing Latinos, both immigrants as well as those born in the U.S., to connect to their cultural and national roots. Lopez explains that the audience pool for Spanish-language television in the U.S. “is not only the *recién llegados* [recently arrived] who still don’t speak English, but also potentially the large group of ‘born-again Hispanics’ who were born in the US but retain

Spanish and a Hispanic or Latino cultural identity” (“Our Welcomed Guest” 267). Lopez’s research underscores the fact that the telenovela functions as a site through which viewers strengthen ties to their cultural and ethnic identities. Telenovelas “contribute to the construction and reproduction of Latino culture through mass media” by fostering a sense of national identity among viewers (Barrera and Bielby 8). The research confirms, as previously noted, that telenovelas play an integral role in facilitating Latina/os’ negotiation of their multi-ethnic, transnational identities. This relates back to Martín-Barbero’s point about the specific cultural work in which the telenovela engages, as distinct from its English-language counter part, the soap opera.

Telenovelas provide a site through which viewers can construct and reproduce a Latino cultural identity; the popular form has the potential to profoundly impact viewers’ understanding of themselves and the world. As Mayer explains, “telenovelas mediate meanings that people identify with as part of a larger set of values and knowledges embedded in both the nation and Latin American popular culture” (481). Thus, Chicana authors transform the popular form by utilizing it as a site to contest the mythologies about race, class, gender, and sexual orientation it promotes, so that viewers can imagine and construct alternate identities that do not necessarily conform to conservative, traditional roles.

### **Field Studies and Audience Reception**

The ways in which telenovelas help viewers negotiate their bicultural, transnational identities as ethnic Americans through the transmission of cultural and linguistic knowledge is evident in the field research. For example, the four young

Mexican-American girls in Mayer's study treated "María Isabel, the protagonist of a telenovela, as a mobile signifier whose identities as a woman, an Indian, and a Mexican reflected their own multiple and shifting identities" (489). While most of the girls self-identified as Mexican-American, they also felt Mexican, Hispanic, and American were equally valid and appropriated all of these identities as their own.<sup>23</sup> For them, María Isabel "embodied the mainstream and the minority, a dualism that the girls felt in their own lives as ethnic, working-class girls" (Mayer 489). As U.S. citizens, the girls identified with the mainstream in a way that their parents, as Mexican nationals, did not, but as Mexican-Americans, the girls were also considered part of the minority based on their racial and class status. The girls could also relate to María Isabel's linguistic struggles to learn "proper" Spanish in order to fit in with her husband's upper-class family, because they also struggle to speak Spanish better to avoid ridicule when visiting their families in Mexico.

Mayer's research indicates that telenovelas allow viewers to reconcile the tensions between life in the modern city (with its values of consumerism) and the simple life of the rural countryside (with its values of humility and honesty) (Podalsky 152). In the case of María Isabel, she is successfully transformed "into a modern citizen, one who is urban and well spoken in Spanish" while preserving the "folk traditions of her native culture" (Mayer 490). Telenovelas serve as a site through which Latina/o viewers negotiate living in a modern American context while preserving their native language and culture.

The three primary elements, according to Barrera and Bielby, through which telenovelas transmit cultural knowledge include, religion, scenery and language (11). Telenovelas provide visual representations of religious traditions, for example the

reverence of the La Virgen de Guadalupe and scenery, including images of specific places, such as parks, from different countries, that viewers had visited, lived in, or heard or read about (Barrera and Bielby 9). In addition to visual images telenovelas also use language to allow viewers to maintain contact with their Latin American culture. Echoing Mayer, Barrera and Bielby explain that telenovelas allow viewers to “maintain Spanish-language fluency or even re-learn the language after it had been forgotten” (10). Barrera and Bielby illustrate how “the viewing process reinforced, legitimated, and normalized [Latinos’] experience with their cultural heritage,” which assisted them “in maintaining and defining themselves as a culture that is unique within the larger dominant American culture” (14). This underscores the fact that telenovelas facilitate cultural preservation among Latino viewers (through the transmission of cultural knowledge and language acquisition) and do not aid solely in assimilation into dominant U.S. culture.

The research also demonstrates that telenovelas assist in cultural maintenance by facilitating socialization among viewers. The act of watching the shows is a communal activity that solidifies and strengthens familial ties. This socialization leads to the formation of discursive networks that develop among family members and friends who interpret the meaning of the shows together. Many faithful fans first developed viewing habits in their countries of origin as young children watching telenovelas along with older family members: “Sustained by culture and maintained by familial practices, telenovela viewing is often a taken-for-granted routine of everyday life [...] mothers, fathers, sons, daughters, aunts, uncles, grandfathers, and grandmothers gather before the television for the daily half-hour or hour segment” (Barrera and Bielby 1). As previously noted, unlike soap operas, which primarily target women, telenovelas attract male and female viewers

alike. However, as Rios indicates there are viewers (primarily men) that spend time watching telenovelas with friends and family members more “because they want to spend time with and show respect, *respeto*, to family and cordiality, *simpatia*, to friends” than because they have a deep affinity for the shows (61). For example, one young Puerto Rican male explained that he reluctantly watched telenovelas with family members, “from a baby to 11 years old, I would walk in, it was more involuntary” and he only tolerated them as an adult out of respect for his mother and sister and later for friends (Rios 62).

This is further echoed by Mayer who notes that one young Mexican-American boy that she interviewed admitted embarrassingly that he watched telenovelas, but only as a way to spend time with his mom, who did not speak much English and was largely bedridden due to diabetes (Mayer 486). The fact that many male viewers, although reticent to become or openly admit to being active viewers, watch telenovelas in order to accompany others demonstrates that it is an important communal activity shared among family and friends. There is tremendous cultural value, not just in the content of telenovelas (the national mythologies about race, class, gender, and sexual orientation disseminated within the form) but in the act of watching itself, and the discursive networks and socialization that develops around the shows. It is within discursive networks that viewers can debate and contest the conservative values and traditions the telenovelas reinforce.

Telenovelas also facilitate socialization by allowing viewers living in the U.S. to maintain contact with family members and friends in Latin America. Mayer found that, for viewers who frequently visited family members in Mexico over breaks and holidays,

telenovelas strengthened these ties and helped to maintain the social networks they fostered in their country of origin (484). For those viewers without strong familial bonds in Mexico, telenovelas served an educational role and filled in the gaps about a country they rarely visited (Mayer 485). Either way, telenovelas allow viewers to unite across national boundaries thus maintaining contact with their cultural, national roots. Mayer's research illustrates the transnational discursive network that develops among telenovela viewers. For example, the young girls in her study indicated that they share media information over the phone with their family members living in Mexico; aunts and cousins provide news about new telenovelas that will eventually air in the U.S, in exchange for information about upcoming Hollywood movies (485). Critics who point to the positive aspects of the genre emphasize the social function of telenovelas as a popular cultural form that joins viewers in an interpretive community across national boundaries.

Yet, while a transnational bond forms among telenovela viewers, there are important distinctions between the cultural contexts in which the novelas are viewed. Most of the girls in Mayer's study identified watching telenovelas as an important part of their cultural heritage, yet felt their viewing patterns were more flexible to the rhythms of their own lives than the viewing habits of family members living in Mexico (485). For example, for Lupe, one young woman Mayer interviewed, watching telenovelas became a way to resist the demands placed on her by the patriarchal structures of her family and the larger society, given that she had to carve out time to do so, while her female counterparts on the other side of the border, who are confined to the domestic sphere, may not find the act of watching telenovelas a way to resist male authority. Telenovelas perform the important social function of facilitating discussion among viewers who have different

responses to the popular form based on national context. Through a transnational discursive network, viewers are able to exchange and discuss the distinct meanings they assign to the shows, potentially reconciling their divergent viewpoints.

In addition to the ways in which telenovelas allow Latinos in the U.S. to maintain contact with their cultures and nations of origin (through the transmission of cultural knowledge, language acquisition, and socialization), the popular cultural form also serves as a site of resistance, through which viewers can contest the conservative ideology reinforced therein.<sup>24</sup> Assessing the transgressive potential of the telenovela is a crucial step in the formulation of my argument because by recognizing the form as a potential site for contestation, I am able to show that Chicana authors utilize elements of the telenovela in their literature, specifically in order to contest the conservative ideology promoted within the form. I show how the telenovela serves as a vehicle to both disseminate and deconstruct conservative ideology, making it a site of transmission and transformation. Such a view empowers the role of critics, authors, and viewers alike, as it acknowledges that viewers are not always passive receptors of popular cultural forms, nor are authors oblivious to the ways in which they can co-opt popular cultural forms to critique the conservative values they uphold.

### **Audience Function**

Although many critics dismiss popular culture as “unavoidably contaminated by dominant ideology,” Lopez argues that adopting such a view overlooks the fact that the texts of mass culture, including telenovelas are not always necessarily manipulative in every context and for every reader or viewer [...]

furthermore popular culture forms may represent attempts at social control, but they also have to meet the real desires and needs of real people. These texts are, after all, “popular.” It is necessary to conceive of these texts of popular culture as possible sites of hegemonic resistance and to rethink the concept of the dominant as a possible vehicle for cultural contestation. (Lopez “The Melodrama in Latin America” 12-13)

Lopez acknowledges the complexities and contradictions of the telenovela, which is often used by those in power to maintain social control yet, also can serve as a site of contestation through which viewers challenge the social order.

Like Lopez, Rios also acknowledges the potentially negative aspects of media, which promotes consumerism and reinforces “Anglo-Saxon cultural superiority,” but she emphasizes that audience members utilize both “ethnic-oriented and general market (English-language) media for their own purposes” (“Latina/o Experiences” 107). Rios invests the audience with more agency and considers the ways in which viewers take active roles in media selection and use. Instead of focusing on the “communication function” of media, “analyzing what it does *to* audience members ” Rios focuses more on “audience function,” analyzing what a person does *with* a media form (“Latina/o Experiences” 106). Such a perspective does not overlook the fact that telenovelas can reinforce imperialist ideology and promote discrimination based on race, class, gender and sexual orientation, but considers that critical viewers can also use the very site through which such values are disseminated to challenge and resist these mythologies.

This is critical to my argument because I posit that through their literature Chicana authors draw upon the very idea and impact of agency to depict critical viewers

who challenge the conservative ideology promoted within the telenovela form. More importantly, by translating the telenovela genre in their literature, Chicana authors exemplify critical viewers, who use the form for their own purposes, namely as a site to contest the racist, classist, sexist and homophobic attitudes disseminated within the shows.

### **Critical Engagement**

The field research exemplifies ways in which viewers critically engage the telenovela. For example, Mayer's study reveals that while the girls could identify with María Isabel in some ways (linguistically), they also strongly disagreed with the portrayal of racial identity in the telenovela. Although María Isabel was depicted as an indigenous woman, initially shown wearing "braids tied in ribbons and an all-white dress," she "was a fair-skinned, tall woman with European features" (Mayer 488). Given her racial identity as a woman of color, María Isabel is treated as an inferior by her in-laws, who are disappointed in her husband for marrying below him. The girls felt that the racist attitudes portrayed in the telenovela were "indicative of the identity clash between Mexican attitudes toward race and their own" (Mayer 490). This example underscores that viewers acknowledge discrepancies between their own values and those upheld in telenovelas; thus they openly challenge those mythologies about race, class, gender, and compulsory heterosexuality promoted in the shows that clash with their own beliefs. The girls in Mayer's study expressed dismay that Mexicans, like María Isabel's in-laws, reflected the "antiquated racial views" of their own parents, which contradicted their own beliefs in a multiracial society (Mayer 491). Such a reaction is not surprising, given that

as women of color living in the U.S., the young girls Mayer interviewed struggle against the same racial discrimination as María Isabel, albeit in a distinct context.

Overall, Mayer's analysis shows that while female viewers reconnect to their cultural heritage by watching telenovelas, they also most identify with female characters that challenge traditional gender roles within Latin American culture. At the same time that *María Isabel* strengthened the girls' ties to Mexico by reminding them of their cultural roots, the telenovela also emphasized the clash of their dual identities as Mexican-Americans. As U.S. citizens, the girls did not relate to the antiquated racial views they associated with native Mexicans, or their female counterparts who did not have to carve out time to watch novelas. Within a U.S. cultural context, the girls used telenovelas to reconnect to Mexico, yet within a Mexican cultural context, the girls resisted the racist, sexist and classist attitudes the novelas portrayed. The research demonstrates that the telenovela can "fortify Latino cultural values and provide cultural respite" and/or "support cultural change toward dominant Anglo values and behavioral norms" (Rios 60). Critics acknowledge the contested nature of the telenovela as a national form that serves the dual purposes of cultural assimilation (accommodating mythologies about race, class, and gender) and cultural maintenance (through the transmission of cultural knowledge, language and socialization).

### **Telenovelas and Chicana Literature**

All the Chicana authors included in this study engage critically with this national cultural form, but, none so directly as Cisneros, who theorizes the importance and function of the telenovela genre in relation to Chicana literature in her novel *Caramelo*.

Her work provides a useful place to begin my analysis because it offers a detailed consideration of the importance and socio-historical function of the telenovela as a national medium through which mythologies about heterosexual romance are disseminated. Moreover, Cisneros explicitly directs readers' and critics' analysis and interpretation of her work by identifying the characteristics of the telenovela genre upon which it draws. Thus, I draw upon the framework and vocabulary Cisneros provides to examine the fiction of other Chicana authors who also critically engage the national form.

Cisneros enters the critical discussion surrounding her work by inserting a lengthy footnote about telenovelas, identifying the characteristics of the genre (verisimilitude, unbelievability, melodrama, exaggeration, focus on domestic sphere, romance) upon which the novel draws. Cisneros includes footnotes throughout *Caramelo*, not only to further educate the reader, but also to direct critical interpretation of and engagement with the text. The fact that she specifically chooses to use the note, a textual element characteristic of academic writing, to convey relevant socio-historical information, underscores her interest in guiding the critical dialogue surrounding the novel. The note, according to Gerard Genette, author of *Paratexts: Thresholds of Interpretation* (1997), serves "as a supplement, sometimes a digression, very rarely a commentary" and "what we find in notes, then, are definitions or explanations of terms used in the text, and sometimes the mention of a specific or figurative meaning" (327, 325). As Genette further explains, one of the advantages of notes is the disruption and disorder they provide in the linearity of the text. Such moments of interruption allow authors to engage readers on a second level of discourse, by providing supplementary information or commentary that often deepens their understanding of the text. Thus Genette concludes

that if an author denies herself the note, she denies herself “the possibility of a second level of discourse, one that sometimes contributes to textual depth” (328). Cisneros’ liberal use of footnotes throughout *Caramelo* exemplifies Genette’s theories, as she uses the notes to provide relevant historical, cultural, and linguistic information that arguably, engages readers on a second level of discourse and deepens their understanding of the novel by introducing nuances and meaning behind the multilingual, multicultural references in the text.<sup>25</sup>

### **Mexicanized Melodrama**

Cisneros’ desire to direct readers’ interpretations of the novel in relation to the telenovela genre is evident when she interrupts the text with a footnote to the chapter “A Scene in a Hospital That Resembles a Telenovela When In Actuality It’s the Telenovelas That Resemble This Scene” (402). The chapter title (in a style similar to an episode summary) directly references the form to announce the author’s engagement with it.<sup>26</sup> Furthermore, it indicates that the chapter chronicles a hospital scene as dramatic as a telenovela, or rather that it epitomizes the dramatic intensity of life, which is reflected in telenovelas. But it is in the note where Cisneros indicates to the reader, the importance of telenovelas, their history and how they function culturally, in relation to the chapter and perhaps the novel as well. Cisneros, then, interrupts the narrative to explain the socio-historical context out of which the telenovela genre emerges and help readers understand the cultural capital and popularity of the novela form within the Mexican culture.

Given the importance of Cisneros' definition to my argument I include her lengthy footnote here in its entirety:

A famous chronicler of Mexico City stated Mexicans have modeled their storytelling after the melodrama of a TV soap opera, but I would argue that the telenovela has emulated Mexican life. Only societies that have undergone the tragedy of a revolution and a near century of inept political leadership could love with such passion the telenovela, storytelling at its very best since it has the power of a true Scheherazade—it keeps you coming back for more. In my opinion, it's not the storytelling in telenovelas that's so bad, but the insufferable acting. The Mexicans and Russians love telenovelas with a passion, perhaps because their twin histories confirm *La Divina Providencia* the greatest telenovela screenwriter of all, with more plot twists and somersaults than anyone would ever think believable. However, if our lives were actually recorded as telenovelas, the stories would appear so ridiculous, so naively unbelievable, so preposterous, ill-conceived, and ludicrous that only the elderly, who have witnessed a lifetime of astonishments, would ever accept it as true. (409)

Cisneros begins by theorizing the importance of the telenovela as a popular cultural form that developed, according to her view, in response to the precarious political history of Mexico. Aspects of Mexico's tumultuous history read like the plot of a telenovela; with reversals of fortune, (the poor overthrowing the wealthy during the revolution), forbidden love (the relationship between the Spanish conquistador, Hernán Cortés and the Indigenous woman, Doña Marina, his interpreter and mistress) and children born out of wedlock (the illegitimate son Cortés had with Doña Marina). Cisneros refers to these

salient points of Mexico's history (such as the revolution) as the reason why its people are enthralled by the twists and turns of a good story. She demonstrates explicitly how historical context affects storytelling and literary production.

Through the footnote, Cisneros guides readers—even those familiar with the telenovela genre—and facilitates a nuanced reading of her novel by emphasizing the importance of the telenovela as a national (in this context, Mexican) form that disseminates mythologies about heterosexual romance. Cisneros links the telenovela as a narrative form to the oral tradition and the talents of famous storytellers, like Scheherazade, who used her narrative skills to delay her execution and prevent the subsequent beheading of other virgins. Just as Scheherazade kept the Persian King coming back for a thousand and one nights to hear more tales, so too do telenovelas keep viewers, tuning in night after night to be entertained and educated. The act of watching becomes an established commitment, like the agreed upon date between Scheherazade and the Persian King. Good storytelling, like romance, cannot be resisted, which is why the telenovela is such a powerful cultural form, because the popular entertainment transmits stereotypes and assumptions about gender and romance on a national scale.

In the note, Cisneros also draws a parallel between authors of literary works who tell stories and La Divina Providencia, the divine storyteller who weaves the narratives of our lives. The articulation of divine providence in Spanish feminizes divinity and specifically represents *female* creative power, the same power she holds in the crafting of her own dramatic fiction. The comparison is an important one, for Cisneros posits that if we mapped out the course of our lives with all the bizarre and uncanny twists of fate, they would eclipse the seemingly over exaggerated and dramatic plots of a telenovela. She

argues, that if our lives were presented as scripts for a telenovela, they would probably be discounted as entirely too unbelievable to be real. And yet, as she says, most old people, who have lived long enough to see the absurdities of life, would admit that in reality, *La Divina Providencia* presents us with situations in life that far surpass the narratives any storyteller could imagine.

As both an aside and an integral part of how the reader should make meaning in the novel, Cisneros re-contextualizes the age-old question: does life imitate art or is art an imitation of life. In this case, Cisneros states explicitly that telenovelas emulate Mexican life; they are humanity's attempt to capture in a popular cultural form the dramatic nature of life. If telenovelas are melodramatic, it is because, as Cisneros' chapter title indicates, they reflect the dramatic intrigue of real life. Cisneros is not only comparing or collapsing the two genres, life and the telenovela, but also showing or suggesting that the telenovela grows or emerges out of life not vice versa. Paradoxically, telenovelas, while melodramatic and hyperbolic, must also construct situations in accord with real life. At the same time that telenovelas are often critiqued for their unbelievability, in order to conform to genre conventions they must also achieve a high level of verisimilitude (similar to Aprea and Mendoza's concept of the tension between the logic of desire and the logic of social convention) to keep viewers *believing* there is some plausibility to the narratives presented.

Cisneros' intervention in the text yields the following critical considerations: 1) establishes the telenovela as a national form through which mythologies about heterosexual romance are disseminated 2) emphasizes the connection between the popular cultural form and literature, which are linked through storytelling and narration,

3) underscores that *La Divina Providencia*, as the female creative power, is the ultimate storyteller, and 4) posits that telenovelas, while considered unbelievable, also achieve a high degree of verisimilitude given that they reflect the dramatic nature of our lives. Her decision to use the scholarly footnote as a place to convey the historical and cultural context of the telenovela form not only indicates an effort to direct critical interpretations of her work, but also provides a critical lens through which to interpret other Chicana fiction. Furthermore, Cisneros theorizes the importance of the telenovela as a popular cultural form that influences gender politics on a national scale. With the critical vocabulary that she provides in the footnote (melodrama, political power, unbelievability, divine providence, history) readers, in particular literary critics are able to produce a more nuanced reading of Cisneros' text, one which calls attention to the transgressive nature of the text, via telenovelas.

By making the connection between the national form and literature explicit, Cisneros compels the reader to read and interpret her novel specifically, and Chicana literature overall, through the lens of the telenovela and recognize it as a Mexicanized melodrama (an incarnation of the melodrama genre that is specific to or grows out of the Mexican culture). Also Cisneros' emphasis on the telenovela's popularity and ubiquitousness within the Mexican culture reveals the power of the form within this cultural context to transmit information about such ideas as gender roles and heterosexual romance. Because the telenovela is a culturally derived critical form- not a theoretical apparatus from a removed cultural, historical moment that is anachronistic- it provides readers with a way of reading Cisneros' work, along with others', that accounts for the people and culture represented in it.

## Chapter Outlines

In Chapter 1, I examine how in *Face of an Angel* Denise Chávez builds on foundational fictions, like *The Squatter and the Don* and *Caballero*, while simultaneously challenging the gender inequalities promoted within the historical romance tradition. I show how Chávez alters the historical romance narrative to create an early literary prototype of the telenovela genre. While Chávez initiates the translation of the telenovela genre, it is not fully realized until the publication of Castillo's *So Far From God*. In Chapter 2, I show how Castillo departs from the romance tradition completely and reformulates the telenovela into a legible, recognizable narrative form. Castillo's text provides a model for other Chicana authors, specifically Sandra Cisneros and Nina Marie Martínez, to revise and expound on in their own telenovelaesque novels. In Chapter 3, I trace Cisneros' long time engagement with the telenovela form, which has evolved from her initial focus on love and romance in poetry to an exploration of gender roles and expectations in *Woman Hollering Creek*, and ultimately a more extensive and critical examination of the popular cultural form in *Caramelo*. I conclude in Chapter 4 by examining how Nina Marie Martínez surpasses Castillo and Cisneros by blending the foto-and tele-novela genres in her novel *¡Caramba!*.

Overall, I illustrate how Chicana authors incorporate thematic and formal elements of the telenovela genre in order to contest the conservative ideology promoted within the form. I demonstrate how as a cultural form, the telenovela appears in a variety of incarnations depending on the national context in which it is created. The telenovela reflects the heterogeneity of people and cultures within Latin America and this diversity is also evident in Latina/o authors' distinct translations of the form in their literature.

Ultimately, I demonstrate that using the telenovela, as a culturally derived, critical lens to examine contemporary Chicana literature, reveals the ways in which Chicana authors transform the popular cultural form by breaking away from the requisite happy ending, symbolized by the marriage of the heterosexual couple to contest its oppressive aspects and show alternate endings where, for example, women achieve their independence from men and resist traditional gender roles by not getting married and becoming wives and mothers.

The ways that Chicanas break these formulaic rules would not be readily apparent if we, as readers and critics, did not see or understand the convention of the telenovela genre within which they are working. This is particularly important because the romance and melodrama genres that form the base of the telenovela are often criticized for perpetuating traditional gender stereotypes and reinforcing female subjugation. But Chicanas show that women often recognize the fallacy of and resist the romantic notions reinforced within the form. By examining the characteristics of the popular cultural form on which Chicanas draw, my analysis sheds light on how they break away from the genre conventions and revise the form, thereby establishing themselves as resistant readers, who actively engage the telenovela genre and do not blindly accept the conservative ideology promoted therein

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<sup>1</sup> For more statistics on telenovelas worldwide see the web pages of the Dori Media Group, an active participant in the international television market ([www.dorimedia.com](http://www.dorimedia.com)) and the Produ Publishing Group, the leading information provider on Spanish-speaking entertainment industries (<http://produ.com/>), as well as the blog of

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Dr. Carolina Acosta-Alzuru, an Associate Professor in the Grady College of Journalism and Mass Communication at the University of Georgia (<http://telenovelas-carolina.blogspot.com/>). For more information on the growing popularity of telenovelas in the U.S. see the following articles: “Spanish-Language Primetime TV Special Beats ABC and FOX; Univisión's Premio Lo Nuestro 2005” and “Univisión Novela Clinches #1 Spot Beating out ABC, CBS, NBC and FOX as It Makes Its Debut in Nielsen Ratings” *Business Wire* (2005-6); Luis Clemens “Hooked on Telenovelas” *Marketing y Medios* (2005), and Laura Martínez “Telenovela is Spanish-Language King” *Multichannel News* (2008).

<sup>2</sup> Colombia's hit telenovela was also produced in Mexico (*La Fea Más Bella* 2006-7) and various other countries around the globe including India (2003), Germany and Russia (2005) to name a few.

<sup>3</sup> Recent studies on the telenovela genre in the field of popular culture include: Vivian Barrera and Denise D. Bielby, “Places, Faces, and Other Familiar Things: The Cultural Experience of Telenovela Viewing among Latinos in the United States,” *Journal of Popular Culture* (2001); Ana Lopez, “The Melodrama in Latin America: Films, Telenovelas and the Currency of a Popular Form,” *Wide Angle* (1985); in the fields of mass media and communication: Vicki Mayer, “Living Telenovelas/Telenovelizing Life: Mexican American Girls' Identities and Transnational Telenovelas,” *Journal of Communication* (2003); Adriana Estill, “The Mexican Telenovela and Its Foundational Fictions,” *Latin American Literature and Mass Media* Ed. Edmundo Paz-Soldán and Debra A. Castillo (2001); Diana I. Ríos, “Latina/O Experiences with Mediated

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Communication,” *Our Voices: Essays in Culture, Ethnicity, and Communication* Ed. Alberto Gonzalez, Marsha Houston and Victoria Chen (2000); Gustavo Aprea and Rolando C. Martínez Mendoza, “Hacia Una Definición Del Género Telenovela,” *Telenovela/Telenovelas: Los Relatos De Una Historia De Amor* (1996); Ana Lopez, “Our Welcomed Guests Telenovelas in Latin America,” and Jesús Martín-Barbero, “Memory and Form in the Latin American Soap Opera,” *To Be Continued... Soap Operas around the World* Ed. Robert C. Allen (1995); Mary Ellen Brown, *Soap Opera and Women's Talk: The Pleasure of Resistance* (1994); Jesús Martín-Barbero, *Communication, Culture and Hegemony: From the Media to Mediations* (1993); in the field of cultural studies: Laura Podalsky, “Los Globalizados También Lloran Mexican Telenovelas and the Geographical Imagination,” *Contemporary Latin American Cultural Studies* Ed. Stephen Hart and Richard Young (2003); and in the field of education: Diana Rios, “U.S. Latino Audiences Of ‘Telenovelas,’” *Journal of Latinos and Education* (2003).

<sup>4</sup> Recent studies on Latina/o literature and postmodernism include: Fatima Mujcinovic, *Postmodern Cross-Culturalism and Politicization in U. S. Latina Literature: From Ana Castillo to Julia Alvarez* (2004); Marcial González, “Postmodernism, Historical Materialism and Chicana/o Cultural Studies,” *Science & Society* (2004); Paula M. L. Moya, “Postmodernism, 'Realism,' and the Politics of Identity: Cherríe Moraga and Chicana Feminism,” *Reclaiming Identity: Realist Theory and the Predicament of Postmodernism* (2000); Francisco A. Lomelí, Teresa Márquez, and María Herrera-Sobek, “Trends and Themes in Chicana/o Writings in Postmodern Times,” *Chicano Renaissance: Contemporary Cultural Trends* (2000). Recent studies on Latina literature

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and feminism include: Anne J. Cruz, Rosalie Hernández-Pecoraro, and Joyce Tolliver, *Disciplines on the Line: Feminist Research on Spanish, Latin American, and U. S. Latina Women* (2003); Edna Acosta-Belén, and Christine E. Bose, “U.S. Latina and Latin American Feminisms: Hemispheric Encounters” *Signs* (2000); Norma Alarcón, “Chicana Feminism: In the Tracks of 'The' Native Woman,” *Between Woman and Nation: Nationalisms, Transnational Feminisms, and the State* (1999); Margaret Villanueva, “Ambivalent Sisterhood: Latina Feminism and Women's Studies,” *Discourse* (1999); Maribel Ortiz-Márquez, “From Third World Politics to First World Practices: Contemporary Latina Writers in the United States,” *Interventions: Feminist Dialogues on Third World Women's Literature and Film* (1997); Elizabeth Martínez, “In Pursuit of Latina Liberation,” *Signs* (1995). Recent studies on Latina/o literature and magic realism include: Marta Caminero-Santangelo, “‘The Pleas of the Desperate’: Collective Agency versus Magical Realism in Ana Castillo's *So Far From God*,” *Tulsa Studies in Women's Literature* (2005); Elizabeth T. Hayes, “‘Commitment to Doubleness’: U. S. Literary Magic Realism and the Postmodern,” *Spectral America: Phantoms and the National Imagination* (2004); Shannon Schroeder, *Rediscovering Magical Realism in the Americas* (2004); Amy Greenwood Baria, “Within the Realm of Possibility: Magic and Meditation in Native American and Chicano/a Literature,” *Dissertation Abstracts International, Section A: The Humanities and Social Sciences* (2001); Frederick Luis Aldama, “Oscar ‘Zeta’ Acosta: Magicorealism and Chicano Auto-bio-graphé,” *Lit: Literature Interpretation Theory* (2000); Karen Christian, “Performing Magical Realism: The

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'Boom' in U. S. Latina/o Fiction” *Americas Review: A Review of Hispanic Literature and Art of the USA* (1996).

<sup>5</sup> For a detailed history of the melodrama genre in Latin America, going back to Europe in the 1800s, and evolving from newspaper serials and fotonovelas to radio and ultimately telenovelas see Jesús Martín-Barbero, *Communication, Culture and Hegemony: From the Media to Mediations* (1993) and “Memory and Form in the Latin American Soap Opera,” *To Be Continued ... Soap operas around the world* Ed. Robert C. Allen (1995).

<sup>6</sup> This and all subsequent translations of Aprea and Mendoza are my own. The original is: En el ámbito de lo figural se puede distinguir la presencia de grupos de tropos que son del orden de la operatoria metafórica, las denominadas ‘figuras del exceso’ (hyperbole, antítesis, oxímoron) características del melodrama, considerado en general como una de las fuentes de filiación de la telenovela [...] Junto con ésta, actúa una operatoria del orden de lo metonímico. Existe una tendencia a definir los personajes como arquetipos construidos a través de sus rasgos físicos (vestuarios, gestos, miradas, muy codificados) y en relación con una tipología social estereotipada [...] Algo similar ocurre con la convencionalización de los ambientes en los que se desarrolla la acción (mansiones, hogares humildes, clubes nocturnos, etc.) (21-22).

<sup>7</sup> For more on the three dominant female archetypes of Greater Mexico, La Malinche, La Virgen of Guadalupe, and La Llorona, see José Limón’s article “La Llorona, the Third Legend of Greater Mexico: Cultural Symbols, Women, and the Political Unconscious,” in *Between Borders: Essays on Mexicana/Chicana History*

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(1990). 399-432.

<sup>8</sup> “Esa felicidad mágica, presentada casi como una fuerza sobrenatural, es la que permite que, “ dentro del marco de las ‘convenciones sociales,’ el deseo triunfe en la telenovela” (30).

<sup>9</sup> “En la telenovela se sabe desde el comienzo que lo contado debe acabar con un restablecimiento del equilibrio inicial: el esperado y exigido final feliz” (22).

<sup>10</sup> “Conforme con las leyes de un género establecido [...] se derivan de las obras anteriores de dicho género” (26).

<sup>11</sup> “Mundo del deseo,” “mundo de las convenciones sociales” (29).

<sup>12</sup> “La constitución de al menos una pareja monogámica y heterosexual que llevará la construcción de una familia por medio de la institución matrimonial cristalizada en una ceremonia religiosa” (24).

<sup>13</sup> While there are male authors that engage the telenovela form, such as Luis Alberto Urrea in his short story “First Light” or Eduardo Santiago in his novel *Tomorrow They Will Kiss* (2006), there are more female authors that do so. Given the variety of literary texts written by women, specifically Chicanas, that engage the telenovela genre as well as Mexico’s historical dominance in the telenovela market, I decided to narrow the focus of my dissertation to examine Chicana literature exclusively.

<sup>14</sup> Since 1992 Univisión has been jointly owned by Televisa and Venevision (Venezuela's leading television network).

<sup>15</sup> For a critical analysis of Spanish-language television in the U.S. see Arlene Dávila’s *Latinos Inc.: The Marketing and Making of a People* (2001). In particular

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chapters 4 and 5 in which she examines the importance and treatment of language by the Hispanic marketing industry and the Spanish TV networks (specifically Univisión and Telemundo) respectively, and what it suggests about the imagining of a U.S. Latinidad. She critiques the Spanish TV networks' use of the Spanish language as a unifying identifier of Latinos in the U.S. and the importation of Latin American programming which suggests that U.S. Latinos “can prove their Latin American prowess” by being familiar with the bits of cultural knowledge depicted on TV (161). This type of cultural knowledge is irrelevant for many U.S. Latinos, as Dávila points out, who may not speak Spanish and/or have not traveled to Latin America. Spanish TV networks have elevated “Latin American cultural expression as the most authentic manifestation of Latin culture,” which suggests that the cultural expression of U.S. Latinos is less or in-authentic (162).

<sup>16</sup> Including América TeVé, the independent Spanish channel based in Miami, Florida and CNN en Español.

<sup>17</sup> Critics who acknowledge the potentially negative aspects of the telenovela genre include: Adriana Estill, Laura Podalsky, Ana Lopez, Diana Rios (see note number 3 above and the bibliography for more complete references). See also Sonia Saldívar-Hull's analysis of the tele and fotonovela genres, specifically in relation to Sandra Cisneros' “Woman Hollering Creek” in *Feminism on the Border* (Berkeley: U of California P, 2000).

<sup>18</sup> For more on the producers' original intentions to endow Mexican telenovelas with a literary quality and how this subsequently changed due to commercial

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interest see Yolande Le Gallo *Nuevas Mascaras, Comedia Antigua: Las Representaciones de las Mujeres en la Television Mexicana* (1988) and Olga L. Bustos-Romero “Mujeres y telenovelas: audiencia cautiva: sumisa o critica?” (1993).

<sup>19</sup> See Arvind Singhal, Everett M. Rogers, and William J. Brown's article “Entertainment Telenovelas for Development: Lessons Learned” (1993).

<sup>20</sup> I do not mean to suggest that the desire for a morally ordered universe is exclusive to or inherent in the Latin American culture or the Catholic Church. However, I think Estill makes a compelling argument as to why a black and white world view is potentially more attractive to people living in second and third world countries or those living in the U.S. who face discrimination on the basis of race, class, gender, etc. who may be particularly eager to see justice meted out on a global scale.

<sup>21</sup> See Vivian Barrera and Denise D. Bielby, “Places, Faces, and Other Familiar Things: The Cultural Experience of Telenovela Viewing among Latinos in the United States,” *Journal of Popular Culture* (2001) in which they interviewed 13 women ranging in age from 18 to 38 years old, mostly from working-class families, and either first-or second-generation immigrants living in California; Diana I. Ríos, “U.S. Latino Audiences Of ‘Telenovelas,’” *Journal of Latinos and Education* (2003) in which she interviewed 16 Latinos (Puerto Rican and Mexican American), 11 women and 5 men ranging in age from late teens to late 60s, who were of the working and professional classes in Hartford, Connecticut between 1999 and 2001; and Vicki Mayer, “Living Telenovelas/Telenovelizing Life: Mexican American Girls' Identities and Transnational

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Telenovelas,” *Journal of Communication* (2003) in which she interviewed 20 Mexican-American girls between the ages of 10 to 16 from a predominantly working-class community on the west side of San Antonio, Texas over a two year period from 1997 to 1999.

<sup>22</sup> In *There Was a Woman: La Llorona from Folklore to Popular Culture* (2008), Domino Renee Perez examines how mainstream television networks have attempted to appeal to a Latin@ audience, not out of a concern for cultural representation but in order to make more profit. For example, TV networks, like ABC, have started including Latin@ characters in popular TV series, like *Lost*, and soliciting images from the Latin@ community to use in advertisements like the *Got Milk* campaign, which featured an image of La Llorona produced by Latino students at the Art Center College of Design in Pasadena.

<sup>23</sup> Interestingly, none of the girls identified as Indian, which suggests that they did not relate to the Indigenous aspect of María Isabel’s ethnic/racial heritage or recognize this characteristic as reflective of themselves.

<sup>24</sup> By using the term resistance in relation to Chicana literature, I do not mean to invoke Barbara Harlow’s definition of “resistance literature” as outlined in her seminal work of the same title (New York: Methuen 1987), in which she examines the relationship between literature and third world national liberation movements (specifically in Palestine, Lebanon, and South Africa). Instead, for the purposes of my study I refer to Ralph Rodriguez’ definition of “contestatory literature” which he defines in the article, “Chicana/o Fiction from Resistance to Contestation: The Role of Creation

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in Ana Castillo's *So Far From God*" (*MELUS* 2000) as literature that "employs varying narrative strategies to critique, resist, and oppose racism, sexism, homophobia, and/or classism" (67). Throughout my study I use the terms resistance and contestation interchangeably to refer to the struggle against forces of oppression, such as racism or sexism.

<sup>25</sup> Examples of Cisneros' footnotes in *Caramelo* include those that provide explanations or references to key people and events in Mexican and US history ranging from: the conquest (Héran Cortés, Bernal Díaz del Castillo) and the Mexican Revolution (Porfiro Díaz, General Huerta, Emiliano Zapata, Pancho Villa) to the violent legacy of the Texas Rangers in South Texas, the squadron of Mexican fighter pilots that fought during WWII and the draft lottery during the Vietnam War. She also includes notes that explain textual references to popular Mexican and Latin American artists, performers, and cultural artifacts, such as Enrique Aragón and Gladys Vasconcelos, Mexican performers, Libertad Lamarque, an Argentine singer and film star, Wenceslao Moreno, the Spanish ventriloquist, Cri-Crí, the singing cricket who predated Jiminy Cricket and *La familia Burrón*, a popular Mexican comic book, to name a few. Cisneros also provides English translations of Spanish words and phrases and explanations of cultural idioms or Mexican slang in the notes, such as *rebozo*, a shawl, *piropos*, catcalls, and the various uses of the words mamá/madre and papá/padre.

<sup>26</sup> Like Ana Castillo in *So Far From God*, Cisneros also uses long chapter titles that summarize the action contained therein, a hallmark of the telenovela genre, which includes synopses of capítulos or chapters.

## **Chapter 1: Foundational Fictions: Denise Chávez's *Face of an Angel* and the Historical Romance Tradition**

Drawing on the historical romance tradition, Chávez begins the novel with a description of the union of Manuel Dosamantes Iturbide and Elena Harrell. Born in Guanajuato, México, Manuel Dosamantes comes to the U.S. as a young man in search of a brighter future: “At age thirty-five Manuel Dosamantes was in the prime of his manhood. He was tall, with a large chest and slim hips. A quiet man, he worked hard and ran a successful farm with various employees. He owned a great deal of land in Agua Oscura as well” (8). After settling in the state of New Mexico and establishing himself as a successful farmer, Manuel waits to find a woman to give him children and make him feel as if all his hard work was worth it. In the summer of 1885 he meets the woman for whom he has waited so long. Elena Harrell comes from Chihuahua, México to visit her paternal Aunt in Agua Oscura: “She was eighteen years old, a radiant young woman with blond hair, blue eyes, and a lovely face. She was tall, stately, thin, but substantial [...] Elena had grown up in luxury [her father was an Anglo and her mother was from one of the wealthiest families in Chihuahua] but, despite that, she was a simple, selfless girl” (9). Like most couples at the heart of a foundational fiction, Manuel and Elena are destined to be together; “it was inevitable that they should be drawn to each other” (9). After meeting at Elena’s welcoming party, they talked all night and “Elena felt as if she’d known Manuel all her life” (10). Within a few months they are married and subsequently have five children; “Manuel was very happy. All the rest of his life” (11).

The scenario, by now, is familiar to most, particularly consumers of telenovelas: two star-crossed lovers who, against seemingly insurmountable odds, find their way to each other, the promise of marriage and continuity, not simply a stock plot, but rather what Doris Sommer identifies as a “foundational fiction.” In her seminal work, *Foundational Fictions: The National Romances of Latin America* (1991), Sommer defines the foundational fictions of Latin America as “almost inevitably stories of star-crossed lovers who represent particular regions, races, parties, economic interests, and the like. Their passion for conjugal and sexual union spills over to a sentimental readership in a move that hopes to win partisan minds along with hearts” (5). In contemporary parlance, romance refers to a love story, but in the nineteenth century it served to distinguish the genre as “more boldy allegorical than the novel” (Sommer 6). The union of star-crossed lovers in these novels can be read allegorically as symbolizing the consolidation of conflicting national identities across differences of race/ethnicity and class. While these foundational fictions served the political function of modeling for readers how to create a unified national identity, they also served a social function of entertaining readers, much like current popular television serials, with romantic narratives in which socio-political differences are overcome through marriage.

Sommer's work is useful not only to understand the political and social function of foundational fictions, but also to establish the history of serialized romance and the print communities that developed around the genre in nineteenth-century Mexico. Romance novels took over newspaper columns in colonial Mexico in the early nineteenth century, much like the serialized fiction of Balzac and Dickens in Europe during that time and print communities formed around these romance novels as “everyone who read the

paper was either laughing or (usually) panting and crying over the same installment of the serialized novel” (Sommer 40).<sup>1</sup> The consolidation of print communities around serialized romance narratives in colonial Mexico is similar to the formation of interpretive communities around contemporary serialized television shows, like telenovelas.<sup>2</sup> The way in which readers of serialized novels were joined together by their shared emotional reactions to the latest installment, is similar to how viewers of serialized TV shows today are joined together by their similar responses to the latest episode of a show.

Romance narratives have a long tradition within Mexican American literature. María Amparo Ruiz de Burton’s *The Squatter and the Don*, originally published in San Francisco in 1885, is one of the earliest historical romance novels in Mexican American literature.<sup>3</sup> Like other romance novels coming out of Spanish America during the mid-nineteenth century, Ruiz de Burton’s narrative emulates European novels from that time period that were marked by an element of *costumbrismo*.<sup>4</sup> *Costumbrista* novels functioned “to promote communal imaginings primarily through the middle stratum of writers and readers who constituted the most authentic expression of national feeling” (Sommer 14). Referring to essays from the anthology, *Languages of Nature: Critical Essays on Science and Literature* (1986), edited by Ludmilla Jordanova, Sommer explains that by identifying with the heroes and heroines, readers of *costumbrista* novels, “could be moved to imagine a dialogue among national sectors, to make convenient marriages, or at least be moved by that phantasmagorical ideal” (14). In *costumbrista* novels “the romantic conciliations seem grounded in human nature, variously interpreted in this optimistic period but always assumed to be rational and constructive” and “erotic

passion was [used] to bind together heterodox constituencies: competing regions, economic interests, races, religions” (Sommer14). The romantic conciliations in these novels are constructive in the sense that they envisioned a unified national identity symbolized by the marriage of two people joined across national, racial, class, and religious differences. Thus, in *costumbrista* novels, like *The Squatter and the Don*, erotic passion is used to create dialogue and unity among national sectors.

In the introduction to the 1992 edition of Ruiz de Burton’s text, editors, Rosaura Sánchez and Beatrice Pita identify *The Squatter and the Don* as being “in line with many contemporaneous Spanish *costumbrista* novels” that offer “descriptions of a variety of social practices” particularly in regards to romantic conciliations (43). Sánchez and Pita explain that the novel can “be read allegorically, with each family or character representing a particular ethnic collectivity, class, subclass, or remnant of a class, all crucial elements within the historical subtext” (6-7). Read in this way, the romance narrative, specifically the union of star crossed lovers, symbolizes or imagines the consolidation of divergent populations across national, racial, and class lines.

According to Sánchez and Pita, the novel “demands a double reading as both a romance and historical novel” (14). As a romance narrative the novel plots a couple’s quest to be happily united, but as a historical novel “the quest is not merely for the love of a maiden, but also for land and justice” (Sánchez and Pita 5). The historical and romantic discourses in *The Squatter and the Don* can be read against one another. As Sánchez and Pita explain the “romance invites a closure and resolution that the historical narrative rejects. In a historical romance, unlike a Harlequin romance or a folktale, typical characters and conflicts are viewed in relation to social and historical phenomena”

(14). In *The Squatter and the Don* the romantic discourse serves to frame the historical one. The novel reconstructs the rapid capitalist development of the California territory in the nineteenth century, which results in the dispossession of the Californios of Mexican origin who lose their land to invading Anglo squatters. The novel critiques the injustice of the political and legal systems that disenfranchise the Californios and allow monopolies like the railroad to expand westward and take land thereby ruining the ranches. On one level, the novel is a quest for displaced Californios to overcome political and economic obstacles (such as the railroad monopoly) to keep their land. On another level, the novel is also a quest for young lovers, like Mercedes Alamar, daughter of Californio Don Mariano, and Clarence Darrel, son of squatter William Darrell, to overcome political and economic obstacles that separate them in order to be together.

As a foundational fiction, *The Squatter and the Don* disseminates and challenges mythologies about class, race, gender and national identity. Sánchez and Pita indicate in the introduction, that while discourses of nation or ethnicity are important in the novel, “they are over determined by discourses of class” (20). Ruiz de Burton challenges various class assumptions or mythologies about both the Californio and squatter populations. For example, she provides a more nuanced depiction of the Anglo population, indicating that not all Anglos were landless squatters without any money to buy land owned by the Californios; some were middle class settlers, like Clarence Darrell, who were willing to pay the owner’s price for the land (Sánchez and Pita 22-23). Ruiz de Burton also challenges the typical portrayal of Spaniards in traditional nineteenth century American romances as lazy and treacherous and instead depicts Spanish Americans, like the Alamares family, as aristocrats of Spanish or Mexican *criollo* descent who were wealthy

in land and cattle (Sánchez and Pita 40). In such a portrayal Ruiz de Burton counters both class and racial/ethnic assumptions about Spanish Americans during the nineteenth century. However, as Sánchez and Pita note, while Ruiz de Burton recuperates a positive image of the Californios as upper class and of partly European descent (with fair-skin and blue-eyes), she displaces the negative images of Spanish Americans as dark skinned and lower class onto the native Indian population (40).

In addition to challenging mythologies about class and race, Ruiz de Burton also contests traditional gender roles.<sup>5</sup> For example, Mary Moreneau Darrell undercuts her husband William's power by going behind his back and plotting with her son Clarence to purchase the Alamares' land to which William laid claim. In doing this, Mary defies traditional gender roles, dictating that a woman must be obedient and subservient to her husband. Yet, interestingly it is this deviation from traditional gender roles and Mary's direct challenge of patriarchal power that allows for the romantic union between her son Clarence and Mercedes. By purchasing the land, Clarence establishes himself as an entrepreneur thereby securing his family's position as settlers, not squatters, and his position as a viable candidate to ask for Mercedes' hand in marriage. Even in this early Mexican American romance narrative there is an example of a female character challenging the patriarchal order. Although, it is important to note that the only female character that contests traditional gender roles, which confine women to the domestic sphere, is a white woman. Subsequent female authors further challenge the traditional gender roles promoted within the romance genre by emphasizing how as women of color Chicanas struggle to overcome gender, class, and racial barriers.

While Ruiz de Burton follows the conventions of the romance genre, ending the novel with the marriage of the hero and heroine (Clarence and Mercedes), she also deviates from generic conventions by refusing to reduce the complexities of the historical context into a neatly ordered moral universe typical of romance novels and instead leaves the issue of the railroad monopoly unresolved. Rather than presenting a rigid Manichean, black and white worldview, Ruiz de Burton presents social matters that:

are both more complex and relative; there are no absolutes, no fixed sites for good and evil, only numerous gray areas, overlapping oppositions and shifting polarities, as social contradictions are seen to be manipulated by the powers-that-be, pitting one segment of society against another, in the end to the detriment of the powerless. (Sánchez and Pita 8)

Ruiz de Burton portrays the complexity of a system in which the Californios and Squatters, although initially pitted against each other, are united in the end against the threat of the railroad monopoly.

Jovita Gonzalez and Eve Raleigh's historical romance, *Caballero* (1996), serves as yet another foundational fiction within Mexican American literature. In his article "Mexicans, Foundational Fictions, and the United States: *Caballero*, a Late Border Romance," José E. Limón extends Sommer's work on foundational fictions in Latin America to examine the roots of the historical romance genre in Mexican American literature specifically. The one representative romance novel of Mexico that Sommer's analyzes is Ignacio Manuel Altamirano's *El Zarco* (1901), which, as Limón points out, hardly addresses the border question.<sup>6</sup> Limón's article, which examines how the romance narrative is used to negotiate shifting national identities along the U.S.-Mexico border in

the nineteenth century, is critical to my considerations about how contemporary Chicana authors rewrite the romance narrative to contest borders along the lines of race, class, gender, and sexuality.

Limón's analysis focuses on *Caballero*, a romance narrative set in the Mexico-Texas lower border of the 1840s, which “became viable as a foundational fiction for resolving Anglo-Mexican conflict” during the early twentieth century when it was published (347). As he explains, “through the idiom of sexualized desire, *Caballero* proposes a symbolic resolution to the social crisis experienced by the Mexicans who first felt the full imperial power of the United States and who, after 1848, were left on the other side of the border to negotiate an uncertain fate” (Limón 346). In this late border romance, the resolution of ethnic conflict between Mexicans and Anglos and the consolidation of national identity is symbolized, as in *The Squatter and the Don*, by the marriage of initially star-crossed lovers. For example, Susanita, Don Santiago de Mendoza y Soria’s green-eyed, blond-haired daughter, marries Lieutenant Robert Warrener, a Virginia gentleman in the U.S. occupation army and María de los Angeles (Angela), Don Santiago’s dark-haired daughter who hopes to be a nun, marries Red McLane, a Texas frontiersman with political ambitions. These romances are triumphant and “project the wished-for consolidation of the groups they semi-allegorically represent” (Limón 350). I agree that these romance novels are triumphant as foundational fictions that envision how to successfully negotiate conflicting national identities, but they also largely overlook the issue of gender inequality within both the Anglo and Mexican populations. While these marriages show how Mexican women (like Susanita and Angela) and Anglo men (like Robert Warrener and Red McLane), are united across

differences of race, class, and nationality, they do not address the subordinate role women, particularly women of color, hold within these romantic unions.

Limón argues that the pragmatic marriage of Angela and Red, based on “convenience with consciousness and conscience” more than “rapturous love,” is indicative of “a certain social reality” in Texas in the mid-twentieth century (351). Their marriage projects “recognition of the Mexican community’s historical primacy and repression; rejection of racism and violence in favor of pragmatism and mutual respect and admiration; and, notwithstanding the leadership of the emerging elites on both sides, full consideration of the working classes in any meaningful consolidation” (Limón 351). This last point bears attention, as Limón explains: a fourth relationship of desire appears in the novel between American civilians who settle in southern Texas and hacienda peons, like those working for Don Santiago, “who begin to exchange indentured servitude for wages earned from the Americans” (345). According to Limón, the national consolidation projected in *Caballero* is symbolized not only by the marriage of Anglos and Mexicans in Texas but also by “the peons’ fulfilled desire for American lucre in return for their free labor” (346). In *Caballero* the peons serve as the mediating term that resolves the conflict between Anglo Americans and Mexicans in Texas in the nineteenth century, a function similar to the Indians in *The Squatter and the Don* and the role they play in resolving the conflict between Anglo Squatters and Californio Aristocrats in California in the nineteenth century.<sup>7</sup> Both romance narratives provide an imaginary resolution for national consolidation across class lines.

As a foundational fiction *Caballero*, negotiates and disseminates, often competing, mythologies about national, racial and ethnic identities as well as class.

Limón directly addresses the fact that *Caballero* must be read in national terms, meaning that it must be interpreted within a border framework, which focuses more on national, racial, and ethnic identities than on gender. As a foundational fiction, Limón illustrates how *Caballero* negotiates national identity along the U.S.-Mexico border in the mid-nineteenth century rather than the gender dynamics of romantic relationships. Thus, while Angela's marriage to Red "continues the norm of patriarchy" as she enters the relationship to help promote his political and economic goals, if the novel is read allegorically, as a national narrative, Angela may represent as Limón argues, Gonzalez and Raleigh's sense that the new social formation must "admit the Mexican in a still-subordinate position, attenuated by the care and respect that the idiom of romance and marriage makes narratively possible" (351). This interpretation emphasizes that while foundational fictions, like *Caballero*, use romance to resolve national, class, and ethnic conflicts, the narratives also reinforce inequities along gender lines.

If, as Gonzalez and Raleigh argue, the new social formation in the nineteenth century must admit the Mexican in a subordinate position to the Anglo, the new social formation in the twentieth century must admit the woman, but in a still subordinate position to the man. This is evident in how Angela enters a relationship with Red to promote his political and economic goals. While the foundational fictions of the nineteenth century foreground nationalism and the negotiation of national identities, twentieth- and twenty-first-century Mexican American literature foregrounds localized national discourse specifically that of the Chicano national movement.<sup>8</sup> Many Chicanas writing in the later half of the twentieth century critique the underlying patriarchal structure and inherent sexism of nationalism and the national movements that silenced

women's voices.<sup>9</sup> In much of their early literary work, Chicanas decry their simultaneous exclusion from both feminist and minority rights movements that focused primarily on fighting for equality based on gender or race.<sup>10</sup>

Chicana authors build on the historical romance tradition, while examining the consequences of adhering to these foundational fictions.<sup>11</sup> Nineteenth-century foundational fictions envision a unified national identity symbolized by the marriage of two people joined across national, racial, class, and religious differences. In these texts romantic conciliations are used to negotiate conflicting national identities for Americans and Mexicans in 19<sup>th</sup>-century America. Chicanas reveal the price that is paid to maintain these foundational fictions, and show what the romance narratives actually wrought, namely entrenched sexism and female subjugation. For example, in *Face of an Angel* (1994) Denise Chávez builds on foundational fictions, like *The Squatter and the Don* and *Caballero*, while simultaneously challenging the gender inequalities promoted within the genre.<sup>12</sup> Chávez aims to wed the historical romance tradition of the past with Chicana feminist concerns of the 80s, at the time joining the literary past and present. She alters the historical romance narrative to create an early literary prototype of the telenovela genre.

*Face of an Angel* represents the historical romance tradition in that the narrative is a family saga that focuses on the domestic sphere and chronicles the various marriages and romantic relationships in the Dosamantes and Loera families, beginning with Manuel Dosamantes and Elena Harrell, the couple at the top of the family tree. Yet, unlike other historical romances, the novel's central aim is not to show readers how to consolidate conflicting national identities through heterosexual love, like earlier foundational fictions.

Although the marriage between Manuel and Elena highlights the consolidation of Mexican and American nationalities, the other romantic relationships in the novel do not emphasize couples' successful negotiation and unification of multi-national identities. Instead, most of the other relationships between men and women do not end happily and the marriages fail as a result of infidelity and abuse, thus exposing the sexism within the Chicano, and more broadly Mexican, culture. While Chávez draws on foundational fictions at the outset of the novel, she ultimately moves away from the historical romance tradition and toward the telenovela, a modern popular cultural form of the romance narrative.

Chávez's novel, however, is not simply a random starting point from which to consider literary translations of the telenovela. Three years prior to the publication of *Face of an Angel*, Sandra Cisneros published *Woman Hollering Creek and Other Stories* (1991). In her title story, in particular, Cisneros reveals how the telenovela, as a national form, disseminates expectations regarding romance, gender, and sexuality. Like Cisneros, Chávez shows how heterosexual romance can result in betrayal, abuse, and domestic violence. The telenovela is a better critical model than the historical romance genre, because it serves as a site for Chicana authors to question idealized depictions of love and expose the underbelly of romantic relationships, which can be a source of violence and abuse, a sad reality covered over by historical romance narratives, which promote the conciliatory nature of romance through which conflicting national, class, and ethnic identities are resolved. While critics have analyzed Chávez's text in relation to the concepts of work, trauma, memory, language, romanticism, and spirituality, among other things, I, following Cisneros' example, see the telenovela as a culturally derived critical

lens through which to analyze the novel.<sup>13</sup> Although at first glance, the novel appears to fit in the historical romance tradition, as it is a sweeping saga of love lost and regained, ultimately, it depicts heterosexual union as a site of violence and abuse, not a means to resolve conflicting national identities. By moving away from the historical romance tradition, Chávez creates a text that is more similar to a telenovela (in form and content) and uses the telenovela as a site from which to critique the mythologies about race, class, gender, and sexuality it reinforces.

Chávez's critique focuses on the mythologies about heterosexual romance and gender roles promoted in the popular visual form, such as that marriage offers women social position, financial security and physical safety. She underscores the domestic violence, sexual abuse, and infidelity that often occur in marriages and families and shows how this affects women's and children's lives in a disastrous way. While the telenovela is a sort of modern day morality tale in which the struggle for love “defines who is worthy of domestic bliss or fated to solitude,” *Face of an Angel* presents a more complicated, if somewhat pessimistic, view of love and marriage, in which all the female characters, regardless of whether they are good or bad, suffer unhappy marriages, which end in separation or death (Mayer 260). Instead of concluding in the typical telenovela fashion, with a tidy resolution symbolized by marriage and the creation of family, Chávez deviates from the standard telenovela ending and presents the women in the Dosamantes and Loera families supporting each other instead of turning to their husbands. She emphasizes the illusion of romance and undercuts the dominative image of heterosexual marriage as the only option for women by suggesting that physical tenderness between two women, such as that between Mamá Lupita and Oralia, is just as gratifying, if not

more so in some cases. Chávez illustrates how women encourage and empower each other to reject traditional gender roles that dictate that a woman must obey her husband and endure physical and emotional abuse silently. She concludes the novel with female solidarity and empowerment and shows that women do not need men or romance to be happy and sometimes the safest most loving place for women is with each other.

Although Chávez only directly references the telenovela once, the text exemplifies many of the formal characteristics of the genre. The novel focuses on the domestic sphere, has multiple plot lines, includes exaggerated or excessive displays of emotion, melodramatic devices (such as the revelation of hidden family identities), and has a degree of unbelievability. Chávez prefaces the text with a diagram of the Dosamantes' family tree, calling attention to the history of the intertwining family relationships around which the text revolves. The family name, Dosamantes (translated as two lovers) calls to mind foundational fictions which, focus on the union of two star crossed lovers. The novel is narrated by one of the youngest female members of the Dosamantes family, Soveida, to whom the women in the family confide their secrets, making her responsible for recording the stories of their families. She tells their stories because the other women in the family, like her grandmother, Mamá Lupita, encourage Soveida to share their history. Soveida explains,

My grandmother Lupita says, 'Soveida, you like to read. What you're reading is the story of the world. Everyone has a story, your mamá has a story, your daddy has a story, even you have a story to tell. Tell it while you can, while you have the strength, because when you get to be my age, the telling gets harder.' (4)

In response to Mamá Lupita's advice, Soveida agrees to tell the story of the Dosamantes and Loera families. As she states, "I speak for them now. Mother. Father. Brother. Sister. Cousin. Uncle. Aunt. Husband. Lover. Their memories are mine. That sweet telling mine. Mine the ash. It's a long story" (4). In the course of telling their stories, Soveida reveals the history of female abuse and sexism in the family. She begins by acknowledging that, "The stories begin with the men and always end with the women; that's the way it is in our family" (11). In this direct address to the reader, Chávez calls attention to the powerful presence of the patriarch, the male figure head of the family. The statement "that's the way it is in our family" indicates a sense of tradition or custom that is not altered or deviated from. However, the narrator also states that although the stories begin with the men, they end with the women, indicating that in spite of the ways in which men appear to be in control, it is the women in the Dosamantes family who are the ones to survive and live to tell the story, as Soveida illustrates.

Chávez deviates from one of the central characteristics of the telenovela genre, namely that the narrative "revolves around the constitution of at least one monogamous and heterosexual couple" (Aprea and Mendoza 24), and instead depicts marital relationships that are marked by infidelity and physical abuse. This is particularly evident in Soveida's description of her grandfather Profetario and her father Luardo:

To me he was a blustery man, big as the sky, always yelling at my grandmother Lupe. He was a man who lived under the yoke of his father Manuel's perfectly balanced life. Profetario was a rascal, living with two wives, two families. The Dosamantes name fit him, eternally split between

two lovers. My father, Luardo, was like his own father, a divided man, unable to ever come together within himself. (11)

Profetario's infidelity is an exaggerated performance of foundational fictions, which revolve around the establishment of a family. If one family is ideal having two is superior and in this sense Profetario is the ultimate macho. Yet at the same time that Profetario's actions can be read as a hyperbolic performance of foundational fictions, ultimately, male infidelity runs counter to the image of the happily married couple promoted within these romance narratives.

Chávez further deviates from the traditional telenovela plot by depicting male characters who are not punished or brought to justice for their infidelity. Typically when the issue of infidelity is addressed in telenovelas, the male and female characters that are unfaithful to their marriage vows are generally depicted as villains and their actions are interpreted as immoral within the framework of the show. Furthermore, the characters are eventually discovered and punished or shown suffering accordingly. For example, in *Rubí* (2004) the male protagonist's godfather, Genaro Duarte, has two wives Elisa and Lilia (with her two kids Luis and Natalia). Throughout the show Genaro suffers severe heart problems due to the stress of trying to maintain two households. Eventually his lie is exposed and he faces the rejection of his godson, Héctor, and his biological son Luis, who are both ashamed of and hurt by his actions. In *Destilando Amor* (2007) the male protagonist, Rodrigo Montalvo Santos, and his sister Sophia are both cheated on by their spouses who are having an affair together. Rodrigo's wife Isadora and Sofia's husband Francisco are eventually exposed and as a result do not receive a penny of the Montalvo Santos' family fortune. Not only is Francisco depicted as an evil villain, he is also

contrasted to his foil, James, the good upstanding friend and business partner of Rodrigo, who winds up with Sofia. In both of these telenovelas the act of infidelity is depicted as immoral and the unfaithful characters are punished. While telenovelas like *Rubí* and *Destilando Amor* may deal with the issue of infidelity, the shows conclude with and uphold the image of a monogamous couple, united in marriage, such as that between Héctor and Maribel and Rodrigo and Gaviota respectively. In contrast, in *Face of an Angel*, Chávez defies the morally ordered, black and white universe depicted in telenovelas by showing unfaithful husbands, like Profetario, who are not punished for cheating on their wives, which underscores how adhering to foundational fictions serves to uphold the patriarchy.

Not only does Chávez challenge the mythology of the monogamous couple and the sanctity of marriage reinforced within the telenovela genre, she also shows what foundational fictions hide, namely the physical and emotional abuse that can occur within marriage. Soveida's cousin, Mara, describes Papá Profe's abusive behavior towards Mamá Lupita; "Papá Profe hit Mamá Lupita," Mara states matter-of-factly (51). For Soveida, "this terrible news about [her] grandfather, Papá Profe, came as a shock. A word had never been uttered against Papá Profe in the official family record" (51). "No, Mara, it can't be true," Soveida responds in disbelief (51). Again, Chávez shows how the patriarch of the family is not usually questioned or challenged. Mara explains,

Adrino told me that someone told him—some Dosamantes from California who was visiting—he can't remember who, he thinks it was Tío Trebolio, after one of his all-nighters—that Papá Profe used to beat Mamá

Lupita and then cry himself to sleep. First chapter of the uncensored  
Dosamantes history book. (51)

Mamá Lupita's abuse, like most domestic violence, is omitted from the “official” family history. The covering up of female abuse within individual family histories is related to and reflective of the subjugation of women within the larger Chicano National Movement, a reality which, as previously noted, Chicanas address in their early poetry and feminist criticism of the 80s. Just like Chicana authors criticize the movement's failure to address the issue of gender inequality, an issue also overlooked, as Chávez points out, in foundational fictions, Mara and Soveida look unflinchingly at the reality of sexism in their family's past and provide a more accurate, uncensored version of history.

The description of the abusive episodes in the text reflects the melodramatic style of the dialogue in a typical telenovela, in which men and women engage in heated exchanges, often cursing each other or the situation. For example, Mamá Lupita recalls a melodramatic exchange with Profé,

‘I know you like it little, woman, but you are my wife. You always will be . . . I don’t want to hurt you, woman, but you make me,’ he used to say after he’d pushed me around, used me up, and then apologized to me for *his needs*.

‘What about the other woman? Is she your wife, too?’

‘Damn you, whore!’

‘Me, a whore! Look to your puta, Profetario!’

‘I’m your husband!’

‘In name only. Now leave me alone, I have work to do.’

‘Come here, cabrona!’

‘Let me go, Profe. Haven’t you had enough already? Why must you drink so much? I thought you were so happy with your puta.’

‘Damn you, woman, and damn this life of mine.’ (396)

This exchange confirms the awful reality that Soveida initially refuses to accept. It reveals the painful ways in which Profe abused Mamá Lupita, verbally and physically, after he had been drinking. It also underscores Profetario's unhappiness, which Mamá Lupita thought would be assuaged by his lover. In this passage, Chávez emphasizes that although, Profetario may prove himself as the ultimate macho by having two families, doing so does not make him happy.

Although the novel includes melodramatic exchanges typical of a telenovela, it does not pacify the viewers, like the shows do, with equally positive interactions between men and women. While telenovelas lull viewers into believing in idealized depictions of marriage and family life and offer unrealistic solutions to real social problems, such as domestic violence, Chávez provides no solace for the reader; instead she depicts female characters that continue to suffer throughout the book. By doing this she emphasizes that the affects of domestic violence are long lasting and cannot be easily resolved with a quick solution. Chávez also illustrates the fact that “conquered women know no other way” and thus often feel resigned to accept their current situation (317). For example, while Mamá Lupita complains to God for allowing her husband's infidelity, she also seems resigned to accept it. She explains, “Profe was a man who believed his way the best and his penis the most sacred. He gave me five children, three of them too many, and few hours of rest, but he was my husband. I was his one and only legal wife. You allowed

all the stuff with Maria [his mistress] to happen. I wish you hadn't been so lenient, but there you have it" (409). At the same time that Mamá Lupita acknowledges Profetario's chauvinist attitude, she also states that he was her husband and she was his legal wife, suggesting that therefore she must accept such behavior. Mamá Lupita's reaction, that she wishes the infidelity and abuse had not occurred, but as she says, "there you have it," is reflective of a patriarchal society in which a woman does not feel she has the freedom to question the way things are or demand something better. Telenovelas tell women that marriage should make them happy and if their lived experience is contrary to the mythology of the idealized romance promoted in the shows, they are apt to quietly accept it, like Mamá Lupita does, assuming they are an exception.

Chávez reinforces the cost of adhering to foundational fictions, which by presenting marriage as the ultimate goal can make women feel they must stay married even if they are in an abusive relationship. For example, Soveida's mother, Dolores, endures the same embarrassment and rejection of having an unfaithful husband that Mamá Lupita does. Dolores attests to Luardo's divided nature, who like his father Profetario, is unfaithful. She explains to Soveida, "He'd leave the house early and would come back later, smelling of another woman or his own vomit. I should have locked the door and never let him come back in. His absences got longer and my tears got harder until one day they just dried up" (22). Dolores admits that she knew her husband was having an affair and waited too long before kicking him out. After suffering for years, she eventually becomes numb to the pain, which is ironic given that her name means pain in Spanish. Dolores is the physical embodiment of and endures a lot of pain. She describes his mistress as the "nameless, faceless woman who left her imitation gold-lamé

slippers under Luardo's bed" (50). Even after their divorce and all the hurts and sorrows of living with Luardo, "Dolores put up with him and always forgave him" (51). Just like Mamá Lupita, Dolores also silently endures her husband's infidelity and abuse, perhaps because she saw what her mother went through and thought she too had no other option.

Chávez also underscores that the silence that surrounds domestic violence creates a cycle that is perpetuated, sometimes for generations. The cycle of abuse continues with Soveida who is also cheated on and abused by her first and second husbands. Referring to her first husband, Ivan Eloy, Soveida states: "he lack[s] a moral code. He [i]s guiltless, blameless, and shameless when it [comes] to women. That [i]s all. But it [i]s everything" (190). Frustrated and fed up with Ivan's behavior, Soveida temporarily moves back into her mother's home in the hope of forcing him to make a decision between her and "la otra" the other woman, La Virgie. Soveida returns to the house she shares with Ivan only to find "four pairs of still wet panties drying on the shower-curtain rod" and a suitcase in the bedroom full of women's clothing, size six (190). Disgusted, she takes the suitcase and panties to the small yard outside and when Ivan returns with La Virgie a fight ensues. Given its dramatic nature and level of absurdity, the ensuing dialogue that Chávez describes could be taken directly out of a telenovela:

"She's visiting. She's my guest!"

"Oh, yeah? Well, to bad. This is *my* house, you bitch! Just get the hell out of here. Get her out of here, Ivan!"

"He invited me here."

"Your stuff is outside."

"What? Outside? It's raining! Ivan, do something!"

“Well, you can just pick your shit up on the way out. I’m staying!”

“Soveida!”

“Get her out of here. This is *my* house!”

“Soveida, just go away!”

“I won’t go away, get her out of here!” (191)

The melodramatic exchange between Ivan and Soveida is similar to the one between Profetario and Mamá Lupita; both dialogues highlight the verbal abuse to which the women are subjected. Chávez describes a ridiculous scene with La Virgie’s panties strewn across the yard along with the rest of her stuff getting wet in the rain. The trauma continues as Ivan takes La Virgie to a hotel only to return and have anal sex with Soveida, who ends up in tears as she sees the look of disgust on Ivan’s face. Chávez underscores that physical and emotional abuse is the price that women pay to maintain foundational fictions.

Chávez shows how the repeated cycle of abuse teaches women to expect such treatment. This is particularly evident with Soveida whose second marriage is no less traumatic than her first. Soveida reflects on her second husband, demonstrating an acute awareness of his limitations: “I blame myself. Then. And now. For knowing from the beginning that Veryl could never love me the way I wanted to be loved” (228). Soveida describes feeling “sullied, empty, bruised, and madly in love” after her first intimate encounter with Veryl (228). In this passage, Chávez shows that Soveida equates pain and suffering with love. Soveida admits that she agreed to marry Veryl even though she knew things would never be normal because she “was never used to normal” (229). Coming from a family in which both her grandmother and mother were abused, Soveida is not

accustomed to normal [read: healthy, non-abusive] relationships between men and women. Their relationship is brought to a bitter, fatal end, as Soveida returns from work on their anniversary to find that Veryl has suffocated himself to death. She finds him “on the bed with a plastic bag wrapped tightly around his head. His hair was damp. I could see beads of what had once been his breath. The humid plastic clung to his features and made his face look grotesque” (260). Veryl’s final act is a cruel torture as he leaves Soveida with the awful guilt that he took his own life, on their anniversary no less. Chávez culminates this dramatic scene with the tragic image of Soveida rocking the body of her dead husband, like a child; “I held him in my arms, a sorrowful Pietá, my heart chiseled in stone” (260). Conjuring the image of Christ’s body draped over the Virgin Mary’s lap, Chávez leaves the reader with a sense of Soveida’s despair. She emphasizes the negative affects of domestic violence by showing that Soveida is not used to normal relationships and equates love with suffering. By depicting a marriage that ends in death, Chávez rejects the mythology of marital bliss promoted within foundational fictions.

While Chávez depicts three generations of women who continue to subject themselves to physical and emotional abuse in their marriages, she also presents one female character, Connie, who has been disavowed of her romantic illusions and counsels her son against marriage. Connie is the owner of the *El Farol* restaurant and the mother of Larry Larragoite, the manager and Soveida’s boss. When Larry questions Connie about giving him the restaurant she replies, “I’ll give it to you, Larry, on the condition that you *don’t* get married” (241). This atypical response from his Mother urges Larry to ask her what she will do with the restaurant if he does get married. Connie explains,

“I’ll probably give it to you anyway, but don’t. There are other ways to pass the time. Live your life before you tie yourself up for eternity. Marriage isn’t like going to confession. With marriage, you still carry the burden of guilt around with you. I was never free when I was married [...] I’ll never marry again. May hell flood over and come rushing in through the front door near the bird cages and my tropical fish, I’ll never marry. White or brown or black. As long as the man’s a man, I’ll never marry.”  
(241)

In contrast to a stereotypical telenovela heroine, for whom marriage is the ultimate goal, Connie describes marriage as an onerous, unending, burden. She reiterates that she will never remarry, not even if hell floods. Connie continues to counsel Larry, “Just promise me you won’t lose yourself in any one person. Stay free, Larry [...] Too soon you’ll be tied to them with invisible ropes. They’ll want to noose you, the way those two men tried to lasso me, and all in the name of the Sacrament. What sacrament?” (242). Connie equates marriage to a prison house, a death sentence, in which people become trapped and strangled to death. She suggests that marriage, deemed as a sacrament by the Catholic Church, legitimizes enforced servitude or slavery between men and women. This causes her to question whether or not marriage is a sacrament. In this passage Chávez presents a strong indictment of the sacrament of marriage, which is antithetical to the traditional romance narrative reinforced in telenovelas. In doing so, she illustrates that one of the negative affects of promoting an idealized image of marriage is that when reality does not reflect this, a woman can become disillusioned and cynical.

Not only does Chávez critique the image of the happily married couple promoted within telenovelas by depicting relationships marked by infidelity and abuse, she also undercuts the mythology of the close-knit family, what Rosa Linda Fregoso calls the “familial romance,”<sup>14</sup> which depicts the home or domestic sphere as a safe place for women. The extent of the abuse in the Dosamantes/Loera family is painfully evident in the story surrounding Mara's sexual abuse by her uncle Luardo. At age five, Mara went to live with Dolores and Luardo after her mother's tragic death. It was during this time when Mara stayed with her aunt and uncle, before moving in with Mamá Lupita, that Luardo abused her. Years later, Mara confides in Soveida about what happened, “I had my boogeyman, hell, and he had me. Luardo would come into my room and touch me. I wanted to scream” (52). Slowly in the course of talking with Mara about the past, Soveida comes to accept the truth. She remembers,

When Mara stayed at our house, she usually slept on the pull-out bed in Luardo's workroom. It was a small, dark room next to the kitchen, at the back of the house. Only Luardo had a key to this room, and he always kept it locked. The only time the door was left unlocked was when Mara stayed with us. (71)

The secluded sleeping arrangement in Luardo's private room left Mara vulnerable to his unwanted advances. By focusing on domestic violence and sexual abuse, Chávez challenges the mythology of the domestic sphere as a safe space.

At the same time that Chávez emphasizes the negative affects of domestic violence, she also shows how breaking the silence around the issue can lead to liberation. Soveida acknowledges that she grew up as “a woman in a long line of battered women”

and in a family where “abuse was rampant, and it was mental, emotional, physical, spiritual, and sexual” (318). Yet, because of the silence around the abuse, she does not realize this until she is an adult. Luardo's abuse of Mara like Profetario's abuse of Mamá Lupita, is left out of the Dosamantes' family history. But when Mara tells Soveida about what happened when they were young Soveida realizes, “I knew what Mara was talking about. We were a family without a real history. Ours was a history of lies. Someone's invention of what a family should be. And yet, Mara, I wanted to tell her, we are undoing the lies, you and I” (53). Chávez emphasizes how in the act of telling Soveida about the abuse Mara breaks the silence and undoes the lies of the past. Instead of adhering to their families' foundational fictions and clinging to idealized images of marriage and family, Soveida and Mara tell the truth about the history of abuse in their family thereby breaking the cycle.

Chávez further examines the complex affects of domestic violence and the cost of maintaining foundational fictions by examining how women reinforce the myth of male superiority and contribute to their own subjugation. Soveida explains, “women partake in the cycle, by looking the other way, in their obvious deferment to the male, assuming responsibility for both father and son, and in the seemingly loving act of ‘mothering’” (318). Both Mamá Lupita and Dolores look the other way and deny Luardo's abuse of Mara. Mamá Lupita refuses to talk about, much less believe, the fact that her son is abusing his niece. In response to Mamá Lupita's denial Mara implores, “Why can't you hear what I'm trying to say? Luardo hurt me. He hurts me still” (95). Mamá Lupita shouts, “Mara! We are not going to talk now. I said no. No. And you leave Luardo out of this, he's been nothing but kind to you” (95). By refusing to acknowledge Luardo's

despicable actions and instead arguing on his behalf and defending him, Mamá Lupita continues the cycle. She exacerbates the pain of Mara's abuse by denying it ever occurred. Afterwards while lying in bed crying, Mara tells Soveida, "Why doesn't anyone ever believe what I say? I hate everything: this house, this room, Lina [her mother] for dying, me for being born, your mother for giving me to Mamá. And you for sitting there like a dumb cluck while I'm crying" (96). This example illustrates how an abusive marriage, like that of Dolores and Luardo, also negatively affects the children within the family, like Mara. Chávez underscores the fallacy of the mythology of the happy family and the home as a source of love and safety. Typically if telenovelas present disturbing social issues, like sexual abuse, they are resolved, albeit with unrealistic solutions, and the shows end with the triumph of morality and justice, which Martín-Barbero refers to as the dynamics of provocation and pacification within the telenovela genre. But, Chávez refuses to pacify the reader with unrealistic solutions thereby drawing attention to the fact that many times due to the cloak of silence surrounding the issues of domestic violence and sexual abuse, perpetrators are rarely brought to justice in the real world.

In addition to questioning the image of the happily married couple and their loving family, Chávez also challenges other mythologies regarding gender, race, and class promoted within the telenovela. For example, in Mexican telenovelas, female characters are typically depicted as either "good," La Virgen, chaste and moral or "bad," La Malinche, promiscuous and immoral. In the shows good women are rewarded with love and financial security as symbolized by marriage to an eligible bachelor from a family of high social standing, while bad women are punished with loss of love and

social standing. While some telenovela heroines may suffer in love, ultimately, they regain love and at least one couple winds up happily married. In contrast, in the novel, Chávez challenges the simplistic female gender roles typically depicted in telenovelas to show that good, faithful women do not always end up happily married (as evident in the lives of Mamá Lupita and Dolores) and bad women do not always end up alone (as evident by Ivan's lover, La Virgie). Chávez shows complex female characters who are neither all good nor all bad, such as Soveida, who is faithful to her first two husbands Ivan and Veryl and yet cheats on her boyfriend J.V. with his married brother Tirzio.

Not only does Chávez challenge the polarizing virgin/whore dichotomy, she also questions the traditional representation of Mexican women as silent and suffering. This is particularly evident in the character of Lina, Mara's mother, who when her stitches become infected after childbirth is too embarrassed to seek treatment and as a result eventually contracts cancer and dies. Consequently Mara is left to be raised by Dolores (whose husband, Luardo, is a sexual predator) and Mamá Lupita (whose cruel treatment drives Mara to run away and get married). Incredulous, Soveida wonders why Lina never did anything to stop the bleeding and Mara explains, "That's the way the Loera women are, Soveida. They abuse their own bodies in the guise of shame. It just goes to show you how stupid women are, how eternally, confoundingly stupid. Stupid with love, stupid with grief. Just plain stupid" (340). Chávez underscores the danger of adhering to strict gender roles by showing that in Lina's case, her silent suffering and refusal to get help ultimately results in her death. Mara also criticizes Dolores and Mamá Lupita for remaining silent and standing by while her mother suffered. Chávez shows that although

initially Mara internalizes her mother's shame and self-hatred, ultimately she realizes that the consequence of obeying such traditional gender roles can be fatal.

In addition to gender, Chávez also exposes and questions many of the racial/ethnic, and class mythologies disseminated through the telenovela form. This is particularly evident when Dolores tells Soveida that Mexican men are inherently bad husbands. Dolores warns Soveida,

Whatever you do, don't marry a Mexican. I mean it, Soveida. I don't have anything against our own except that they don't make good husbands.

Most of them, now there are exceptions, are too macho. ¡Pendejos! [...]

Most Mexicans want the women to stay at home, thinking that's enough.

Let me tell you, that was all I ever had. (39)

Dolores expresses her disgust at the strict gender roles and expectations among Mexican men and women. Unfortunately, she universalizes her individual experience with Luardo, although she acknowledges there are exceptions, ultimately Dolores concludes that the majority of Mexican men are chauvinists who want women to stay at home. As an adult Soveida realizes the fallaciousness of this claim as she experiences first hand the fact that sexism is not exclusive to the Mexican culture. After all her first husband, Ivan Elroy, a Chicano, is as abusive as her second husband, Veryl Beron, “un güero, a blonde” (221). Even though Dolores warns her to avoid Mexican men specifically, Soveida acknowledges that “meanness has nothing to do with race” and men from all races and classes are capable of mistreating women (111). Chávez emphasizes that male superiority is pervasive in a patriarchal society and is not restricted to a specific race or class.

Furthermore, Chávez illustrates how men perpetuate their position of superiority by reinforcing traditional gender roles, which keep women financially dependent on them. While Dolores argues that all Mexican men are inherently macho and cautions Soveida not to marry a Mexican because she will be relegated to the domestic sphere, Luardo argues that they are all inherently poor as well and therefore Soveida should not marry a Mexican because he will be unable to provide for her financially. Luardo states, “Don’t date Mexicans, they’re low class, probably will never earn much money [...] the guy should be able to support you [...] get married, let him pay the bills, you have kids, stay at home and raise them” (38-9). Although it seems as if Luardo is looking out for Soveida's best interest by encouraging her to find a man who earns a good living, in doing so he re-inscribes traditional gender roles which restrict women to child rearing thereby making them financially dependent on men. Luardo conflates race and class so that Mexican ethnicity is equated to the lower class. Both of these examples are based on essentialized notions of gender, ethnicity/race and class. In contrast to her husband, Dolores warns Soveida not to seek financial support from a man. She states, “Don’t expect him to support you. Those days are gone. Always have your own money. Don’t depend on any man to ration it out to you” (40). Dolores believes that a woman should never depend on a man for money, and must have her independence. Working for years as a waitress at *El Farol* restaurant, Soveida realizes that financial independence, is desirable, not so much because of the material comforts it can provide, although these are nice ancillary benefits, but because it allows a woman the freedom to escape the confines of an unhappy marriage. Chávez underscores the importance of female financial independence to ending the cycle of domestic violence and abuse.

At the same time that Chávez deviates from the typical content of a telenovela by challenging the mythologies regarding gender roles and male/female coupling promoted within the shows, she also incorporates some of the formal characteristics of the genre. For example, Chávez includes formal elements such as melodramatic devices (the revelation of a hidden identity and return of a long lost family member), which she utilizes to further emphasize the far reaching negative affects of adhering to foundational fictions. This is evident when the true identity of Profetario's mistress María, is revealed to Soveida by Oralia, Mamá Lupita's, faithful servant. Oralia explains that

Doña María was the daughter of Papá Grande's ranch hand, Don Augustín Mejía. She worked in the kitchen. She and your grandfather Profe fell in love when he was forty years old, and they had a child they named Manuelito, after your great-grandfather [...] Profe set her and Manuelito up in a small house and everyone lived without talking about certain things. (134-5)

Not only does Profetario seduce a servant girl, he also has a child with her. As an adult their illegitimate son Manuel changes his name, gets married and has two sons of his own (J.V. and Tirzio), but he never gets over the shame of being a bastard. A drunken incident one evening taints the future of his sons' lives as well. Manuel returns home drunk and bangs on the door until his wife, Clarita lets him in: "An argument ensued and Manuel hit Clarita. His older son, Tirzio, tried to intervene, Manuel hit him as well. J. V. huddled in the corner, watching helplessly. Manuel screamed that he was a bastard and that so were they. He then fell down to the floor, crying. J.V. ran to his room and locked himself in" (324). Like Mara who suffers as a child at the hands of Luardo and internalizes her

mother's shame, J.V. also suffers at the hands of his abusive father Manuel and internalizes his deep sense of inferiority and shame. Chávez emphasizes that shame is one of the negative affects of domestic violence and shows how this is passed on through generations.

Chávez utilizes the story of J.V. to highlight how clinging to foundational fictions negatively affects both men and women. Soveida discovers that J.V. is Profetario's illegitimate grandson when he is the instructor for the Chicano Studies Course in which she enrolls and they start dating. From the first night of class Soveida can tell that J.V. is “a bit full of himself” (286). While taking a quiz on Chicano culture, Soveida looks up at J.V., “Mr. Perfectly Educated in his Perfectly Pressed White Linen Suit” and thinks to herself “you want to know about the Chicano culture? Well, here I am, smelling of hard work” (287-8). Soveida immediately senses J.V.'s egotism and believes that the source of his disdain for her is that she represents a working class Chicana. Chávez emphasizes that one of the legacies of abuse is that many abusers, having been shamed themselves, end up repeating the cycle and project their shame onto others. J.V. projects the shame he internalizes from his father onto Soveida and tries to make her feel embarrassed for showing up late to class smelling like the restaurant where she works. By including J.V.'s background in the story, Chávez illustrates the far reaching impact of Profetario's infidelity and abuse and shows how the cycle is perpetuated.

In keeping with the melodramatic, almost unbelievable, nature of a telenovela, Chávez pushes the story even further when Soveida cheats on J.V. with his brother Tizio, who is married and has two kids. The scene in which Soveida and Tizio

consummate their relationship mimics those favored in telenovelas, in which two lovers unable to resist their sexual desire, give way to their passion regardless of the consequences. It starts out innocently enough with Tirzio showing up at the restaurant where Soveida works to show her the new van he bought. They take a drive to the outskirts of town and wind up walking along the river. Predictably it starts raining, nature intervenes to force the two rain soaked lovers to seek shelter inside the van. Of course, as chance would have it, Soveida is wearing the same silky blouse, even more see through now that it's wet, she had on the first night they met. They give way to the desire that has been silently growing between them for months and make love in a fit of passion. Yet, unlike foundational fictions in which star crossed lovers overcome all obstacles to be together, Soveida and Tirzio are never formally united; Tirzio goes back to his wife and kids and Soveida, although she winds up pregnant, decides to raise the child on her own.

The exaggerated, melodramatic nature of Chávez's novel relates back to Cisneros' definition in the introduction in which she explains that a telenovela always has an aspect of unbelievability to it. Yet, ironically, Cisneros indicates real life is more bizarre and unbelievable than any fiction imaginable. Cisneros explains that a telenovela, like a good story, achieves a high level of verisimilitude by constructing situations, although seemingly improbable, which reflect the uncanny nature of real life. The act of telling stories and the question of believability is directly addressed in Chávez' novel in the following dialogue between Dolores and Soveida. Dolores states, "It's a good story. Somebody should write about it. But it won't be me [...] I could never tell all the stories even if I tried. And I don't want to try. Who would believe them? You just tell me who. And if I've gone on too long about all that stuff, Soveida, it's because I wanted you to

have a different life” (22). While Dolores recognizes that her personal history makes for a good story, she seems to have no interest in telling it, partly because she thinks no one will believe it. This passage of Chávez’ text resonates with Cisneros’ idea that while fictional stories like telenovelas seem over exaggerated, in fact, the seemingly ridiculous plot twists of a telenovela reflect the bizarre nature of real life. Chávez further emphasizes the importance of storytelling in the following dialogue between Oralia and Soveida. Oralia tells Soveida:

Most stories are sad when you get to telling them, but anyway, what is life but stories? Some just a little sadder than others [. . .] Promise me, Soveida that you’ll listen to the stories women tell you. They are the ones you should remember. Otherwise, how will you ever expect to understand the human heart? (135-7)

Oralia emphasizes that life itself is a series of stories and the act of storytelling is important because it allows people to learn from others. These passages highlight how Chávez addresses and incorporates the aspect of unbelievability, a central characteristic of the telenovela according to Cisneros’ definition, in the novel. More importantly, Chávez emphasizes the importance of telling family stories, like Mara and Soveida do, as a means of challenging their family’s foundational fiction and breaking the silence surrounding the abuse, thus finally stopping the cycle of domestic violence.

Although Chávez incorporates some hallmark characteristics of the telenovela genre in her novel- unbelievability, melodrama, revelations of hidden information, focus on love and the domestic sphere- she also deviates from the requisite happy ending of the telenovela genre. Instead of culminating with a marriage celebration and the union of the

happy couple, the novel concludes with the Dosamantes and Loera women relying upon each other, not men, to survive. As Soveida explains, “Grandmothers. Mothers. Daughters. All of us with a chain of absent men. Men who might have touched us. Instead, we eased each other’s discomfort as best we could, as much as we were able at the time” (399). This sense of female solidarity is exemplified in the relationship between Mamá Lupita and Oralia.

Oralia Milcantos (a thousand songs) worked for the Dosamantes family since the time of Soveida’s great grandfather Manuel, and then later for Profetario and Mamá Lupita. She never married or had kids of her own, but as Soveida explains, Oralia “was oftentimes more family than family. More than a servant, more than a maid, more committed than a housekeeper, she was a laundress, a scrubwoman, a cook, a nurse, a dishwasher, a nanny, but never a slave” (306-7). She dedicated her life to serving others, out of a sense of care and compassion, not forced slavery or compulsion. Soveida describes Oralia as “a woman for whom the ideals of loyalty, steadfastness, and unconditional commitment are not governed by personal gain” (306). This is particularly evident towards the end of her life, when she remains supportive and empathetic towards both Mamá Lupita and Profe’s mistress Doña María.

Oralia shares a particularly close bond with Mamá Lupita, nursing her to health after Luardo’s death. In the end, the roles are reversed and it is Mamá Lupita who tends to Oralia until her death. Soveida recalls the scene,

Often Oralia would call for Mamá in her sleep. They would hold hands for hours, while Mamá said endless rosaries. “Mamá is here. Don’t you worry, Oralita. I’m not going anywhere. Have I told you how much I love

you, preciosa? Te quiero mucho, mi viejita. Now sleep” [...] Mamá sat by Oralia’s side, holding her tepid hand, saying gently, “I love you, my viejita. It’s all right. Let go, let go.” (416-7)

This passage captures the tenderness between Mamá and Oralia. Compared to Mamá’s relationship with her husband, characterized by abuse and humiliation, Mamá’s relationship with Oralia is based on mutual caring and love. Instead of portraying the enduring bond between a man and a woman, typical of most telenovelas, Chávez offers an alternate story and highlights the companionship and solidarity between two women.<sup>15</sup>

Mamá’s emotional attachment to Oralia is further underscored in how she mourns her death. When Soveida announces that she will be traveling to visit her late husband’s mother, Mamá lectures her about the custom of not traveling for six months after a funeral. Mamá further explains the other traditions she is honoring in memory of Oralia,

I’ve already covered all the mirrors in my room, and asked your mamá to take out the portable color television she put in there when I was sick. It was nice to lie in bed and watch my novelas, but there’s no soap operas for me now. I’m in mourning until Christmas. It will be a cross to bear to miss my soap, *El amor y la perdición*, but keeping el luto, the tradition of mourning, is more important. (422)

The fact that Mamá is willing to sacrifice watching her telenovelas in honor of Oralia, not only illustrates her deep affection for Oralia, but also her attachment to this popular cultural form. As she admits, giving up her telenovelas is a cross to bear, yet it is important to keep “el luto.” Although this is the only direct reference to the telenovela genre throughout the novel, it underscores the importance of the genre within daily life.

The passage indicates that the sacrifice of not watching one's telenovelas is an acceptable way to honor the loss of a loved one; thus suggesting that the importance of the telenovela is comparable to that of a loved one. The title of the telenovela, *El amor y la perdición*, associates love with perdition, perhaps suggesting that love leads to perdition or rather that the type of love depicted in telenovelas is a sort of hell. This seems apt given Mamá's experiences, and those of the other women in the Dosamantes and Loera families, with men. Chávez obliquely alludes to the fact that adhering to foundational fictions leads to perdition. She emphasizes the need to move away from the predictable telenovela plot, which depicts torturous love affairs, and move toward female solidarity.

Female solidarity is explicitly emphasized in the final chapters of the book when Soveida tells Tirzio that she does not need money and is not expecting him to help raise their child. Instead Soveida returns to the female members of her family, Mamá Lupita and Dolores. In the final scene Mamá Lupita prepares Sunday lunch for Soveida, Dolores, and Chata, their cleaning lady, and all the women gather together to eat outside in the garden near Oralia's herbs and roses. Chávez' novel ends, not by reinforcing a foundational fiction with the reunion or marriage of the happy couple, but rather with the heroine turning away from a man to raise her child with the help of other women.

The conclusion of *Face of an Angel* suggests that Soveida may finally succeed in undoing the lies of the Dosamantes and Loera families. Although she and Mara are not able to avoid the same mistakes their mothers and grandmother made and suffer through abusive and humiliating relationships, they do start to break the cycle of abuse by exposing the truth. They talk about the hidden lies and painful family secrets. By the end, it seems that Soveida learns the wisdom of her mother's words, when Dolly states,

“The men in our lives, Soveida they were charming, intelligent pendejos. Womanizers to boot, and dependent like four-week-old kittens. All suck suck suck and nothing in return” (373). After surviving two failed marriages and a tumultuous affair, Soveida realizes what Dolly meant when she explained that she was only happy after her marriage to Luardo ended. As Dolly explains, “I haven’t loved myself for so long. All my love mistakenly went to someone else when it should have come to *me*. Nobody can love us the way we need to love ourselves. Especially for women like us” (373). In order to understand the wisdom of her mother’s words, Soveida has to experience the pain and disillusionment of love. Eventually she realizes the fallacy of the idealized romance narrative promoted within telenovelas. Ultimately, Chávez directly challenges the myth that a woman's happiness and fulfillment depends upon receiving a man's love and instead introduces the concept of self love. She indicates that instead of expending all their energy on others, women need to learn to love themselves.

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<sup>1</sup> For more on the serialized fiction of Balzac and Dickens in 19<sup>th</sup> century Europe, see Jesús Martín-Barbero, *Communication, Culture and Hegemony: From the Media to Mediations* (1993).

<sup>2</sup> As indicated in the introduction, research in media studies shows that interpretive communities or discursive networks form among viewers of telenovelas, as the act of watching the shows is a communal activity and family members and friends interpret the meaning of the shows together. It is within discursive networks that viewers can debate and contest the conservative values and traditions the telenovelas reinforce.

<sup>3</sup> Although *The Squatter and the Don* is the first literary text to be issued by a

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national project to reconstruct the literary history of Hispanics of the United States: *Recovering the U.S. Hispanic Literary Heritage*, María Amparo Ruiz de Burton's location within Mexican American literature is problematic. Ruiz de Burton was born into an old *criollo* family (of mixed Spanish and Mexican descent) in Baja California led by her grandfather Don José Manuel Ruiz, commander of the Mexican northern frontier in Baja California and later Governor of Baja California. Her family's prestige and political recognition afforded Ruiz de Burton the privilege of an education with a strong background in the classics, in English, Spanish, and American literature and in European and American history and positioned her to marry Captain Henry S. Burton, United States Army. Although officially a United States Citizen after 1848, when as part of the Treaty of Guadalupe-Hidalgo most of California became United States territory, Ruiz de Burton identified as Mexican. The novel is the first fictional narrative written and published in English from the perspective of the conquered Mexican population, but it does reflect Ruiz de Burton's privileged position as a well educated woman from an aristocratic *criollo* family. This distinguishes her text from other early Mexican American literature that is written from the perspective of impoverished Mexican nationals who came to the United States to work as farm laborers as part of the Bracero program in the later half of the twentieth century. See for example Tomás Rivera's ... *y no se tragó la tierra* (1971).

<sup>4</sup> For more on the influence of Spanish *costumbrista* novels (exemplified by the work of Juan Valera, José María de Pereda, and Benito Pérez Galdós) on Mexican authors, specifically, Ignacio M. Altamirano, see “Something to Celebrate: National

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Nuptials in Chile and Mexico,” chapter 7 of Sommer's *Foundational Fictions*.

<sup>5</sup> The traditional gender roles of 19<sup>th</sup> century America, reinforced in the romance narratives and *costumbrista* novels popular at that time, dictated that a young woman must be virginal, moral and obedient. While men held positions of power and were active in the political sphere, women occupied a subordinate, dependent position and were relegated to the domestic sphere. In the introduction, Sánchez and Pita explain that in 19<sup>th</sup> century California women were perceived “as things, as commodities to be acquired,” which is evident in the text “among the squatters who see the daughters of Alamar always in relation to the land and power” (46-7).

<sup>6</sup> The geopolitical border and questions of national identity are central to Mexican American literature. The physical and metaphorical borderlands is a prominent theme in Chicana/o writing, see Gloria Anzaldúa's *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza* (1992), José David Saldívar's *Border Matters: Remapping American Cultural Studies* (1997), Sonia Saldívar-Hulls' *Feminism on the Border: Chicana Gender Politics and Literature* (2001) and Ramon Saldívar's *The Borderlands of Culture: Américo Paredes and the Transnational Imaginary* (2008).

<sup>7</sup> See Sánchez and Pita's extended analysis of Frederick Jameson's application of Greimas' “semiotic rectangle” and the sets of antinomies and the mediating terms they generate in *The Squatter and the Don* (31-36).

<sup>8</sup> Some prominent examples of classic twentieth-century Chicano literature that foreground the localized national discourse of the Chicano National Movement include: Rodolfo Gonzalez's “I am Joaquin,” (1967), Luis Valdez's *Zoot Suit* (1978), and

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raúlsalinas' *Un Trip Through the Mind Jail y Otras Excursions* (1980).

<sup>9</sup> See the poetry of Angela de Hoyos *Chicano Poems: For the Barrio* (1975), Bernice Zamora, *Restless Serpents* (1976), *Releasing Serpents* (1994), Lucha Corpi, *Palabras de Mediodía=Noon Words: poetry* (1980), Lorna Dee Cervantes, *Emplumada* (1981), *From the Cables of Genocide: Poems on Love and Hunger* (1991), Pat Mora, *Chants* (1984), *Borders* (1986), Ana Castillo, *Otro Canto* (1977), *Women are Not Roses* (1984), *The Invitation* (1986), *My Father Was a Toltec: Poems* (1988), and Alicia Gaspar de Alba, Demetria Martínez, and Maria Herrera-Sobek, *Three Times a Woman: Chicana Poetry* (1989), and the following critical theory and essays: Martha Cotera, *The Chicana Feminist* (1977), *This Bridge Called My Back: Writings by Radical Women of Color* edited by Cherríe Moraga and Gloria Anzaldúa (1981), Cherríe Moraga, *Loving in the War Years* (1983), Gloria Anzaldúa, *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza* (1987), Carla Trujillo, *Chicana Lesbians: The girls our mothers warned us about* (1991), Pat Mora, *Nepantla: Essays from the Land in the Middle* (1993), Ana Castillo, *The Massacre of the Dreamers: Essays on Xicanisma* (1994), and Sonía Saldívar-Hull's *Feminism on the Border: Chicana Gender Politics and Literature* (2001). Critiques of sexism and homophobia within in the Chicano National Movement are also evident in early Chicana fiction, such as Lucha Corpi's novel *Delia's Song* (1989) and Castillo's *The Mixquiahuala Letters* (1986). Other early Chicana fiction features stories narrated from the perspective of young Chicanas, such as Helena Maria Viramontes's *The Moths and Other Stories* (1985), Denise Chávez' *The Last of the Menu Girls* (1986), and Sandra Cisneros' *The House on Mango Street* (1991). These texts serve as female counterparts to the Chicano

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male bildungsroman, such as Tomás Rivera's ... *y no se tragó la tierra* (1971) and Rudolfo Anaya's *Bless Me, Ultima* (1972).

<sup>10</sup> While the first wave feminist movement in the U.S. focused primarily on the issues of white, upper-class, bourgeois, heterosexual women, and failed to address the issues of race/ethnicity, class, and sexual orientation, the Chicano National Movement focused exclusively on racial or ethnic equality and elided the question of gender and/or sex. By not acknowledging the differences among their own members, feminist and minority rights movements fighting for equality perpetuated the same exclusionary, hegemonic practices of intolerance they sought to eradicate. Chicanas realized that remaining silent about one aspect of their oppression, for example focusing on ethnicity at the exclusion of gender or vice versa, would not allow them to move beyond a position of subordination and inequality. From Amara Graf's Master's Report, "Intersection of Theory and Poetics in the Literature of Pat Mora and Ana Castillo" (2003) pages 17-19. See Cherríe Moraga and Gloria Anzaldúa's introductions to the first edition of *This Bridge Called My Back* (1981), Norma Alarcon's "The Theoretical Subject(s) of *This Bridge Called My Back* and Anglo-American Feminism" (1990) and "Conjugating Subjects: The Heteroglossia of Essence and Resistance," (1994) and Chela Sandoval's *Methodology of the Oppressed* (2000).

<sup>11</sup> Examples of Chicana fiction that builds on the historical romance tradition include: Helena María Viramontes, *The Moths and Other Stories* (1985), Denise Chávez, *The Last of the Menu Girls* (1986), *Face of an Angel* (1994), *Loving Pedro Infante* (2001), Ana Castillo, *The Mixquiahuala Letters* (1986), *So Far From God* (1993),

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*Sapagonia: An Anti-Romance in 3/8 Meter* (1994), *Lover Boys: Stories* (1996), *Peel My Love Like an Onion: a novel* (1999), Sandra Cisneros, *Woman Hollering Creek* (1991), *Caramelo* (2003), and Demetria Martínez, *Mother Tongue* (1996).

<sup>12</sup> The romance genre rarely challenges gender inequalities overtly. For example, as previously noted, in *The Squatter and the Don*, the one woman that challenges traditional gender roles is white, Mary Darrell, and she does so in order to secure a romantic alliance between her son Clarence and Mercedes Alamar. The general aim or goal of marriage in the romance genre is to unify people across differences of race, class, and nationality, but usually at the cost of overlooking gender and sexual inequalities. This is exemplified in *Caballero* as Angela's marriage to Red helps forward his political and economic goals. In response Chicana authors challenge the historical romance tradition, as is evident in Ana Castillo's *Sapagonia* (1994), which she specifically describes as an anti-romance.

<sup>13</sup> Examples of articles that address these topics in Chávez' literature include: Tey Diana Rebolledo, "The Tools in the Tool Box: Representing Work in Chicana Writing" (1999), Maya Socolovsky "Narrative and Traumatic Memory in Denise Chávez' Face of an Angel" (2000), Amaia Ibarrarán Bigalondo, "The Power of Words in Denise Chávez' Face of an Angel" (2000), Francine K. Ramsey Richter, "Romantic Woman and La Lucha: Denise Chávez' Face of an Angel" (1999), and Euna Lee "Spiritual Revival: The Popular Sublime in Pat Mora, Demetria Martínez, and Denise Chávez" (2007).

<sup>14</sup> See Rosa Linda Fregoso's *meXicana Encounters: the Making of Social Identities on the Borderlands* (2003).

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<sup>15</sup> This aspect of the text is also reflective of when it was written. Chávez is very much in conversation with Chicana feminist fiction, which privileges female solidarity over traditional male/female romance.

## Chapter 2: The Making of a Chicana Literary Tradition, Ana Castillo's *So Far From God*

On the back of the Penguin paperback edition of Ana Castillo's *So Far From God* (1993), fellow Chicana author, Sandra Cisneros, declares,

Goddamn! Ana Castillo has gone and done what I always wanted to do—written a Chicana telenovela—a novel roaring down Interstate 25 at one hundred and fifteen miles an hour with an almanac of Chicanismo, saints, martyrs, T.V. mystics, home remedies, little miracles, dichos, myths, gossip, recipes—fluttering from the fender like a flag. Wacky, wild, y bien funny. Dale gas, girl!

In addition to the sense of envy evident in Cisneros' comment, there is also a sense of admiration for Castillo's ability to create a telenovela narrative. Castillo accomplished what Cisneros always wanted to do namely, translate the televisual form of the telenovela into a literary genre. Castillo effectively beats Cisneros to the punch. Whereas Chávez, whose novel *Face of an Angel* was published around the same time as Castillo's *So Far From God*, exposes the historical romance tradition of nineteenth-century Mexican-American fiction exemplified by *The Squatter and the Don* and *Caballero*, Castillo departs from the romance tradition completely. Castillo reformulates the telenovela into a legible, recognizable narrative form, thereby providing a model for other Chicana authors, specifically Cisneros and Nina Marie Martínez, to revise and expound on in their own telenovelaesque novels *Caramelo* (2002) and *Caramba* (2005), respectively.

In a work that co-mingles romantic entanglements, miraculous recoveries, folklore, and war, there are also many formal, stylistic aspects of Castillo's novel that allow readers, familiar with the telenovela, to recognize it as such. For example, as Mermann-Jozwiak notes, Barbara Kingsolver, in her 1993 review of the book, describes *So Far From God* as "the offspring of a union between *One Hundred Years of Solitude* and 'General Hospital,'" identifying elements of both magic realism and the soap opera in the novel (1). While literary critic Rita Cano Alcalá alludes to the telenovelaesque tone of the novel, she does not pursue this idea as a line of critical inquiry. Similarly, Elisabeth Mermann-Jozwiak states that Castillo "grafts the conventions of the telenovela onto the novel," yet she does not examine the conventions of the genre or its underlying assumptions and instead focuses on the post modern aspects of the text (90). Daniel Cooper Alarcón, in a limited way, addresses the form of the novel, defining it as a "family melodrama," without explicitly connecting it to the telenovela (145). In sum, the aforementioned theorists identify the formal ways in which Castillo's text is similar to a telenovela; they locate the novel within other popular literary traditions including hagiography, post modernism, and literary syncretism.<sup>1</sup> While I agree with many of these scholars' points, I argue that Castillo establishes a new literary tradition, the Chicana telenovela, and translates the telenovela genre into a narrative form in order to critique the national mythologies about race, class, gender, and sexual orientation it disseminates.

Love lost, love regained, tragedy, triumph, the underlying mechanism by which these unfold to an inevitable end is rooted in both national mythologies and what Elizabeth Lozano calls a "pedagogical and enculturating discourse" (207).<sup>2</sup> In her article "The Force of Myth on Popular Narratives: The Case of Melodramatic Serials," Lozano

explains that melodramatic serials “have a central function in maintaining social structures” (213). Stated in a different way, telenovelas uphold the existing social order by reinforcing traditional or conservative values specifically regarding marriage and the domestic sphere. While Castillo crafts a narrative that is stylistically like a telenovela she also topples the social order reinforced within the shows to deliver a scathing critique of the heterosexist, patriarchal and capitalist ideologies promoted within the genre, an objective best understood by analyzing the underlying assumptions on which the genre operates.

For even the casual reader, who merely thumbs through the first pages of the work, certain elements will undoubtedly stand out or even call to mind a telenovela, such as the long descriptive chapter titles filled with references to faith and the fantastical. As Merman-Jozwiak states *So Far From God*, “like a telenovela, has an episodic structure; each chapter/episode forms a coherent whole revolving around a major crisis; the plot is connected through coincidence; and there are multiple subplots, interludes, and detours” (90). And while overly descriptive chapter titles alone do not qualify a work as a literary translation of the telenovela, Castillo creates an explicit connection between her novel and a telenovela by using chapter titles that serve as episode summaries, delineating the action that occurs in each chapter, much like the synopsis of a capítulo (chapter) of a telenovela. Not only do the titles mimic the episodic nature of the telenovela, they also underscore the central themes of the genre, namely romance and a focus on the domestic sphere. This is evident in the title of the first chapter: “An Account of the First Astonishing Occurrence in the Lives of a Woman Named Sofia and Her Four Fated Daughters; and the Equally Astonishing Return of Her Wayward Husband.” The title also

establishes the melodramatic and exaggerated tone of the novel as it indicates that Chapter 1 describes the first of many “astonishing” or unbelievable occurrences in the lives of Sofia and her daughters.

In order for Castillo to level social and cultural critique through the telenovela, the reader must be fully entrenched in the genre; in other words, the form must be recognizable to the reader in order for Castillo to depart from or criticize it. This is why she makes an explicit connection between the novel and the telenovela from the outset by underscoring the stylistic similarities between the genres (long chapter titles, melodramatic tone) in the table of contents, as I indicate above. She goes to great lengths to translate the telenovela in order to critique the very assumptions on which the genre is built. For example, in the first chapter, she establishes the telenovelaesque nature of the text by crafting a melodramatic, fantastical scene in order to challenge the Catholic Church and the national mythology about God and faith disseminated through the form. The novel opens with the melodramatic line, “La Loca was only three years old when she died” (19). The scene moves from the melodramatic, with the tragic death of a small child to the unbelievable when La Loca wakes up in the midst of her own funeral, pushing back the lid to the coffin and sitting up, eliciting screams from the crowd, some of whom faint.

In response to the astonishing occurrence of La Loca's resurrection, the priest, Father Jerome, sprinkles her with holy water. As he moves towards La Loca, she “lifted herself up into the air and landed on the church roof” warning those around her “Don’t touch me, don’t touch me!” (23). Father Jerome wonders if La Loca’s miraculous recovery is “an act of God or of Satan” and whether she is the “devil’s messenger or a

winged angel,” at which point Sofia charges at the priest and while hitting him with her fists screams: “Don’t you dare start this about *my* baby! If our Lord in His heaven has sent my child back to me, don’t you dare start this backward thinking against her; the devil doesn’t produce miracles! And *this* is a miracle, an answer to the prayers of a brokenhearted mother, ¡hombre necio, pendejo . . . !” (23). Sofia’s response goes against the rules of society and the Church. As a woman, she should not be questioning or challenging a man’s authority, especially not a priest, who is a sanctified figure of the Church. Not only does Sofia attack the priest’s ideas, but she also attacks him physically. The crowd continues to look to Father Jerome to interpret what has happened for them. They are “crossing themselves” as Sofia has committed blasphemy by calling the priest a pendejo and await his verdict as to whether La Loca’s resurrection is “a true miracle or a mirage of the devil” (23-4). In this scene Castillo underscores the faithlessness of the religion and its representative, the priest. In the face of the unexplainable, La Loca’s resurrection, Father Jerome’s inclination is to doubt or suspect the work of the devil rather than to believe in the miraculous workings of God. If the Church is at the center of a national mythology about God and faith, then Castillo, via Sofi and La Loca, reveals that it is empty or at the very least suspicious, and weary of specious claims about God’s work that it cannot verify or control, a point made all the more problematic because it comes from two women.

Castillo depicts strong female characters that stand up to representatives of the Church, like Father Jerome, who oversee the continuation of heterosexuality and the moral authority of the Church, on which the ordered universe of the telenovela is based. For instance, like Sofia, La Loca, also directly contradicts Father Jerome’s words and

ideas. She accuses the priest of doubting the Lord's power and claims that his lack of faith will prevent him, and others like him, from seeing God in heaven. "You, and others who doubt just like you, will never see our Father in heaven!" she declares (24). When Father Jerome attempts to coax Loca down from the roof of the church by telling her that the congregation will pray for her, she corrects him saying, "No, Padre, remember it is *I* who am here to pray for you" (24). La Loca contradicts the priest and clarifies her purpose rather than deferring to Father Jerome's knowledge and authority, which in this case does not supersede her own despite her age or gender.

Traditionally in telenovelas the priest is the confessor or the keeper of secrets, and supports the good hearted characters while ensuring the evil characters are brought to justice. For example, in *Fuego en La Sangre* (2008), the priest, Padre Tadeo, learns that unbeknownst to Sofia her husband Fernando Escandón is the man who raped her years ago. Although the priest is bound not to reveal this information, as Fernando admitted it to him in confession, he watches out for Sofia, stands up to her strict mother, Gabriela, and eventually facilitates the annulment of her marriage to Fernando. In contrast, in the novel, the priest is a man of little faith who doubts the miraculous workings of God in the lives of the female characters, and instead of supporting them assumes they are aligned with the devil.

While I argue that Castillo uses the opening scene to undercut the national mythology about God and faith disseminated in telenovelas, Alarcón interprets it as an example of how Castillo draws on hagiographic legends to create a novel similar to the biographies of saints. In this case, he explains that La Loca "is modeled on the hagiographic legend of Saint Christina the Astonishing" who sat up in a coffin during a

Mass of requiem and levitated to the church rafters until the priest asked her to come down (148). Although, there are clear parallels between La Loca and the Christina legend, the novel does not entirely fit into the biographies-of-saints genre “that focused attention on the suffering endured by women and their subsequent salvation due to their religious faith and Christian virtues” (149).<sup>3</sup> I contend that rather than focusing on the female characters’ religious faith, Castillo highlights the ways female characters stand up to Church leaders. Rather than allow the Church to represent the unchallenged moral center of the novel, where the inevitable heterosexual union will be sanctified, Castillo’s criticisms of the Catholic Church, littered throughout the text, are one of the primary ways in which the novel diverges from the telenovela genre. Castillo does so in order to challenge the mythologies regarding gender and sexuality upheld by the church and reinforced in telenovelas.

One of the primary mythologies regarding gender and sexuality propagated by the Catholic Church and reinforced in telenovelas is the virgin/whore dichotomy that characterizes “good” women as pure, chaste, humble, and passive and “bad” women as sullied, sexual, confident, and active.<sup>4</sup> Within this framework, good women are those who work toward heterosexual union and the creation of a family, while bad women seek to undermine this national mythology with their rampant, out-of-control sexuality. Women who are sexually active outside the bonds of marriage are viewed as Eve-like traitors, who trap and ensnare men and act against the dominative social and religious orders. These rigid female gender roles are supported and propagated by members of the Catholic Church like, Francisco el Penitente, whose narrow view of women is completely uncompromising and derived from failed personal relationships.

Francisco, however, represents both himself and the absolute morality of the Church, as demonstrated in Chapter 5, “An Interlude: On Francisco el Penitente’s First Becoming a Santero and Thereby Sealing His Fate.” While Francisco’s rejection by his college girlfriend and abandonment by his mother upon her untimely death, inform his negative view of women, it is this view, coupled with his role as a santero that, as the chapter title suggests, “seals his fate” later in the novel as he struggles to come to terms with his role in prompting two women, Esmeralda and Caridad, to jump off a cliff. At the point in the story in which Castillo inserts this information, it initially seems to the reader that it is an interlude, an interruption in the development of the plot, which revolves around the lives of Sofia and her daughters. But, as becomes apparent in subsequent chapters, this is crucial information to understanding Francisco’s violent behavior as an adult and subsequent stalking of Caridad and her lover Esmeralda.

Through the character of Francisco, Castillo shows how as a result of his religious faith, which in the first chapter is proven to be an empty and fraught mythology, he comes to view women in polarized terms as either virgins or whores, in part due to his mother’s death. As a young boy Francisco suffers the loss of his mother due to smallpox and “as the years went on his mother ever ascending toward heaven became more remote as a former human being and more akin to a celestial entity. To Francisco, yes, his mother was no less than a saint” (97-8). He elevates his mother to the status of a saint and thinks of her as pure and chaste like the Virgin; a view he will also hold of Caridad, at least in the beginning. Although Francisco’s idealization of his mother seems to show his respect for her, in reality, it shows how he reduces the primary female figure in his life to an abstraction that lacks human qualities.

Francisco treats Caridad in a similar way, he “looked upon [Caridad] as one looked upon Mary. In Francisco’s eyes, Caridad had proven herself to be all that was chaste and humble with that year of self-imposed ascetic life in a cave” (192). But when Caridad evokes sexual feelings within him, Francisco starts to question her virginal saintly status. He falls back on his faith to combat his sexual desire, a faith that is both traditional and of his own making, one he carries out literally and symbolically through the making of the santos. In an effort to rid himself of his growing desire for Caridad, Francisco recites these verses from Ecclesiastes: “More bitter than death I find the woman who is a hunter’s trap, whose heart is a snare and whose hands are prison bonds [...] he who is pleasing to God will escape her, but the sinner will be entrapped by her” (192). The biblical verses reflect Francisco’s negative view (and that of the Catholic Church in general) of women as temptresses or whores who lure men to commit sexual sins. Castillo lays bare this national mythology regarding gender that is upheld by the Church and its representatives and reinforced in telenovelas.

When Francisco's attraction to Caridad becomes physical not just spiritual, he blames her and starts to view her as a whore, a view which is solidified when he discovers she is attracted to another woman. As a penitente, who wants to please God, Francisco tries to deny his love for Caridad, yet he “felt himself powerless to his desire” (198). Despite Francisco’s attempts to rid himself, body and soul, of Caridad, he continues to obsess about her, like most heroes in a telenovela narrative, though their efforts are not usually motivated by God. However, unlike a typical telenovela plot, this story does not end with the blossoming of a romantic relationship between a man and a woman. In fact the relationship between Francisco and Caridad ends in tragedy when

after discovering she has entered into a lesbian relationship with Esmeralda, he literally chases them both to their death. Castillo emphasizes the danger of rigid gender roles that label women as either good/virgins or bad/whores and can result in violence against women who do not yield to male authority or compulsory heterosexuality.

In addition to reinforcing the virgin/whore dichotomy, telenovelas also promote the mythology that sexual activity should be restricted to the confines of holy matrimony between a man and a woman and only engaged in for the purpose of procreation. As a result, female characters that exhibit sexual autonomy and are sexually active outside the bonds of marriage threaten the existing social order and are deemed immoral. Thus, they are punished in some way, either through social exclusion or rejection by the heterosexual romantic protagonist. Castillo uses the episode when Caridad is attacked by a malogra to illustrate how a sexually active woman is violently punished physically and sexually. After being cheated on and then abandoned by her husband Memo when he enters the Marines, Caridad engages in meaningless sexual encounters with men to whom she has no attachment. Caridad took to “loving anyone she met at the bars who vaguely resembled [him]” and would make “it in a pickup off a dark road with some guy whose name the next day would be as meaningless to her as yesterday’s headlines” (27). Her actions illustrate what happens to a woman for whom the romance myth has been shattered. Caridad bought into the mythology of marriage as the source of fulfillment and happiness and is devastated when this fails her and instead marriage leads to betrayal, rejection, and ultimately abandonment.

Although, Caridad was the one cheated on and abandoned, she is the one who is punished not her unfaithful husband. While strictly speaking, Caridad is not punished for

her husband's infidelity, she is almost killed for her promiscuity, which is a result of her acting out due to the intense pain and rejection she feels after her husband's betrayal. While sexually promiscuous behavior is sanctioned and often encouraged for men, it is condemned when engaged in by women. Caridad "came home one night mangled as a stray cat [... her] nipples had been bitten off. She had also been scourged with something, branded like cattle. Worst of all, a tracheotomy was performed because she had also been stabbed in the throat" (33). Her sexual behavior outside the bonds of marriage flies in the face of social and religious mores, ideas at the center of and reinforced through telenovelas. Thus Caridad's brutal attack that almost kills her leaves her permanently marked, a punishment for her sexual agency in heterosexual couplings.

Other critics provide different interpretations of Caridad's attack. Alcalá argues that it is one of various spiritual lessons in Castillo's text, which as an example of hagiographic literature, "serves a spiritually didactic and a materially propagandistic function" (4). Whereas Frederick Luis Aldama argues that the incident is evidence of a society of the spectacle that "brands, maims, and disfigures gendered bodily sites—and it silences" (80).<sup>5</sup> Although both critics acknowledge that Caridad's attack points to a pervasive misogynist attitude in our society, overall, Alcalá and Aldama attempt to fit the novel into the genres of hagiography and magicorealism respectively. I interpret the novel within the framework of a telenovela in order to show how the current popular cultural form reinforces the existing social order and the misogynistic attitude on which it is based. While I agree that "by attributing the attack to the malogra," as Alcalá explains, "Castillo avoids limiting blame to individual men" and instead points to how "mass media, cultural icons, and even religious discourse condones violence against women"

(5), ultimately I argue that Castillo's project is not only to critique the misogynistic attitude promoted within the mass media generally, but the mythologies about gender and sexuality condoned by the Church and promoted within the telenovela specifically.

Given that Caridad acts contrary to traditional gender roles, the men in power feel little sympathy for her when she suffers a nearly fatal attack by a malogra. The authorities seem much more interested in fetishizing the brutality of the attack than in investigating the crime. In fact, many blame Caridad:

There are still those for whom there is no kindness in their hearts for a young woman who has enjoyed life, so to speak. Among them were the sheriff's deputies and the local police department; therefore Caridad's attacker or attackers were never found. No one was even ever detained as a suspect. (33)

The male authorities fail to respond to Caridad's attack and bring the perpetrator(s) to justice; "she was left in the hands of her family, a nightmare incarnated" (33). Castillo illustrates the consequences for women who deviate from strict gender roles like those found in telenovelas, particularly how those behaviors incite male violence and/or encourage men to turn a blind eye to such attacks.

Castillo exposes the fallacy of the romance narrative that serves to centralize and reinforce the mythology of heterosexual couplings, which is based on the following assumptions about marriage: that it provides women with protection, both from the advances of other men and the judgments of other women who view single women as either non-sexual (an old maid) or hypersexual (a vixen) and a potential threat, and that marriage provides women with validation and social status. Castillo challenges these

assumptions about marriage and undercuts the mythology of heterosexual couplings by illustrating how, instead of turning to their husbands for protection, women look within themselves and to each other for help. For example, although Caridad spends three months in the hospital, she is only fully healed when she is brought home. One evening La Loca, her sister Esperanza, and Sofia all witness Caridad walk across the dining room “whole and once again beautiful,” although strangely, in Fe’s wedding gown (37). They huddled around the bedroom where Caridad was and “Sofi stepped back when she saw, not what had been left of her daughter, half repaired by modern technology, tubes through her throat, bandages over skin that was gone, surgery piecing together flesh that was once her daughter’s breasts, but Caridad as she was before” (38). This is another melodramatic episode in the text, marked by the unbelievable recovery of a woman left for dead. Caridad exhibits the miraculous ability to heal herself after being attacked by outside forces that punish and attempt to mark her permanently for being sexually active.

Instead of providing protection, Caridad’s marriage to Memo results in pain and violence thus forcing her to tap into her own healing power to protect herself. As Doña Felicia exclaims to Caridad, “Look what you did for yourself! All they did at the hospital was patch you up and send you home, more dead than alive. It was with the help of God [...] but *you* healed yourself by pure will” (55). Doña Felicia acknowledges God’s hand in miracles, but reinforces that it is Caridad’s own conviction that results in her healing. Caridad learns that she cannot turn to or depend upon a man, whether it is her husband Memo or a brother of the Church like Francisco, but must save herself. Castillo also represents this symbolically, when after Caridad’s “holy restoration,” she wears a wedding gown to walk across the dining room toward the women in her family instead of

to walk up the aisle in a church toward her future spouse, as displayed in the typical happy ending of a telenovela.

Castillo critiques the traditional gender roles disseminated in telenovelas that dictate that a woman's primary goal is to serve as a wife and mother, and unfetters women from heterosexual relationships to show that they can create and heal independent of men, particularly in the role of a *curandera* (healer), like Doña Felicia or Caridad. In telenovelas the *curandera* typically keeps the heroine's secrets or works with the villain(ess); at times she functions similarly to the priest, and, in others, in opposition to him.<sup>6</sup> In this case, Doña Felicia acts as an agent of God, and shares all her "wonderous healing secrets" with Caridad declaring it is God's will that she do so. When Caridad asks how she knows this, Doña Felicia responds by "putting out her goosefleshed arms as proof of God's approval of her plan" (56). Castillo contrasts one way of knowing and being, namely Doña Felicia's method of following her intuition, to western thought that is grounded in the rational process and practiced by doctors like those that tried to heal Caridad and failed.

Doña Felicia's faith is "based not on an institution but on the bits and pieces of the souls and knowledge of the wise teachers that she met along the way" (60). She trusts the wisdom passed down through generations and combines this knowledge along with a belief in God, ultimately reaching a compromise with "the religion of her people" and the Catholic Church (60). As a *curandera*, Doña Felicia utilizes Indigenous wisdom to heal others, yet realizes that her ability to cure them is only possible due to the power and will of God, a belief that she imparts to Caridad. Doña Felicia does not reject the Catholic Church outright, but seeks to change the Church from the inside out by challenging the

traditional gender roles it disseminates, which is similar to what Castillo does with the telenovela, not completely rejecting the genre but revising it in order to critique the national mythologies it disseminates. Through the character of Doña Felicia, Castillo illustrates that in addition to the being wives and mothers, women can also serve as *curanderas* and create and heal outside the bonds of marriage and independent of men.

Castillo also challenges the mythology of compulsory heterosexuality upheld by the Church and promoted within telenovelas, which forecloses the possibility of a homosexual or lesbian relationship. In the novel, Castillo shows how compulsory heterosexuality results in violent, even fatal attacks against lesbian characters. For example, as described in Chapter 8, a terrorist trucker literally runs Helena and Maria, two lesbians, out of town and almost off the road. In terms of formal structure, Chapter 8, “What Appears to Be a Deviation of Our Story but Wherein, with Some Patience, the Reader Will Discover That There Is Always More Than the Eye Can See to Any Account,” interrupts the linear narrative. Like Chapter 5, which provides the details of Francisco’s childhood to help explain his subsequent actions as an adult, Chapter 8, provides the back story for the character Maria whose connection to Sofia and her daughters is subsequently revealed in Chapter 12, “Of the Hideous Crime of Francisco el Penitente, and His Pathetic Calls Heard Throughout the Countryside as His Body Dangled from a Piñon like a Crow-Picked Pear; and the End of Caridad and Her Beloved Emerald, Which We Nevertheless Will Refrain from Calling Tragic.”

Although it initially seems like a digression, Chapter 8 details the break up of Helena and Maria and Maria’s subsequent move back to New Mexico, which provides an explanation as to how Maria winds up dating Esmeralda, who later accompanies Caridad

off of a cliff, while fleeing from Francisco. These narrative twists and melodramatic devices, returns from the past and the revelation of hidden identities, are common tropes in telenovelas. In this case, Castillo relies upon these formal characteristics of the telenovela to emphasize the danger of, what Fiona Mills terms, “heterosexist normativity” promoted within the genre (317). The violence enacted against Helena and Maria that the narrator describes in Chapter 8 foreshadows the subsequent violence toward Esmeralda and Caridad. By including two scenes of violent aggression towards lesbians, including one in which a couple is pursued by a rifle wielding mad man, Castillo underscores the perceived threat these relationships pose to traditional heterosexual romance narratives and the extent to which individuals will go to maintain the status quo. Moreover, she emphasizes that those who challenge national mythologies about heteronormativity or compulsory heterosexuality reinforced by the Church and promoted within telenovelas face severe and possibly fatal, repercussions.

Castillo uses the episode with Helena and Maria to illustrate that the traditional telenovela plot fails to accommodate characters that deviate from heteronormativity; a point emphasized by the fact that they receive a death threat and the other lesbian couple, Caridad and Esmeralda, are killed by the end of the novel. Yet, at the same time that Castillo underscores the limitations of the telenovela genre and the potentially life threatening danger of the mythology of compulsory heterosexuality it disseminates, she creates melodramatic scenes including a violent car chase, through which to render her critique. For example, Helena and Maria, come to New Mexico uninvited so to speak, on a road trip from California to visit “Maria’s ancestral village just northeast of Santa Fe” (122-3). Upon getting off the main highway in New Mexico, Helena realizes a pickup

truck is trailing them closely and “while there was no explanation for it, the larger one had become the predator of the small one” (124-5). This incident, like many violent acts towards lesbians and gay men, is unprovoked.<sup>7</sup> By using the word predator, Castillo indicates that Helena and Maria are being hunted. They become the prey of the larger truck, which “bumped their car with a meanness that meant to knock them off the road” and then “deliberately took aim at the VW bug and attempted to side-swipe it” (125). Seeing a gas station in the distance, Helena thinks they are saved, until she looks back and is “horrified to see that aside from his cynical grin [the driver] had a rifle pointed right at her,” which he uses to fire at them (126). The violence escalates from Helena and Maria being chased and having their car almost knocked off the road to having a gun pointed at them. Within seconds of arriving at the gas station, Helena and Maria see “the pickup-back-road terrorist” pull up on the other side of the pump. As he walked over to their car, the man “held his denim jacket open with a hand in his pants pocket to reveal a gun he had stuck inside the belt of his jeans” (126). Castillo describes a renegade cowboy who flashes his gun to threaten those around him and reinforce his power. The trucker shouts at Helena through the glass “what d’you want around here, bitch? Come to make some trouble?” (127). The man has no reason to assume that Helena and Maria are going to make trouble, but judging by his aggressive, angry response, he obviously feels threatened.

The incident demonstrates that in a patriarchal, heteronormative society, people feel threatened by women who do not conform to strict rules or expectations regarding gender and sexuality. The narrator underscores the irony of the fact that while Helena and Maria are the ones being physically threatened in this situation, the trucker acts like he is

the one facing a serious threat. As Helena notes, “the guy standing face to face with her with a gun in his belt was acting like it was she who was a threat to him” (127). The trucker feels threatened by the “two women with spiked hair and camping gear strapped to the top of their car [who] were probably not from around here” (127). Although the narrator provides other plausible explanations for the man's violence (perhaps he confused Helena or Maria with one of his ex-girlfriends, is high on drugs, or suspects they are narcs), the narrator also suggests that the man feels threatened simply because Helena and Maria are different. They do not fit the trucker's gender expectations either because of the way they style their hair or the type of equipment that is strapped to their car. Castillo emphasizes the highly destructive, potentially fatal consequences for women, like Helena and Maria, who deviate from rigid gender norms, as well as the violence that the man feels compelled to use to protect the heterosexual status quo, and, to an equal extent, male power.

In addition to critiquing the violence directed toward women who deviate from traditional gender roles, Castillo also provides an alternative to heterosexual romance by writing a queer romance into a form that showcases or actively promotes heterosexuality. In the article “Creating a Resistant Chicana Aesthetic: The Queer Performativity of Ana Castillo's *So Far From God*,” Fiona Mills states “that behind, alongside, or even within every heterosexist narrative there lies a related queer one” (325). In her novel, Castillo lays bare the queer romance narrative that exists alongside the heterosexual one, while also underscoring the tension between the two, which often results in the silencing and covering over of the queer romance. Castillo shows that heteronormativity is dangerous and potentially life threatening, while at the same time, according to Mills,

through her positive depiction of lesbianism, Castillo offers it as a possible alternative to destructive heterosexual relationships. Significantly, Caridad endures a failed marriage to a perpetual adulterer and three abortions before she finds happiness and love with Esmeralda. Lesbianism functions here as a way out of the restrictive heterosexist dichotomy of either one finds love in a heterosexual coupling or one does not find love at all. Thus, Castillo's privileging of lesbianism is also a core component of the queering work that her narrative performs. (322-3)

Although Castillo's positive depiction of lesbianism is, as Mills suggests, part of "queering" the novel, I argue that her specific privileging of lesbian over heterosexual romance is also one of the primary ways in which Castillo subverts and rewrites the traditional telenovela genre. Stated another way, Castillo formally undermines the heteronormative, sexist ideologies that characterize telenovelas by replacing compulsory heterosexuality found at the center of the genre with a lesbian relationship.

Instead of the typical male/female couple, Castillo describes two women who are star-crossed lovers. From the first moment that Caridad sees Esmeralda sitting on the wall at Chimayo, she feels drawn to her. The narrator describes the moment when Caridad approaches Esmeralda to say hello as "the most dramatic moment in Caridad's life thus far." But quickly clarifies and qualifies the observation: "Well, then again, perhaps 'dramatic' is not the best word here, considering who we are talking about, but to Caridad such events as her Holy Restoration, her clairvoyance, the Screaming Sister (as some unkind people back in Tome still referred to Fe), and such were just part of life. Falling in love ... now *that* was something else altogether!" (80). By having the narrator

directly address the reader in this passage, Castillo highlights the melodramatic, exaggerated nature of the novel. She acknowledges that from an outside perspective, the events of Caridad's life seem dramatic, but within the context of a telenovela involving various astonishing occurrences including a resurrection, a miraculous healing, and an attack by a malogra, falling in love is the most spectacular event, albeit one with a notable twist.

While the traditional telenovela plot depicts a man and woman pining for each other after an initial meeting, the novel shows Caridad's obsession with Esmeralda. As the narrator imparts, "Caridad disappeared right after she was bowled over by la Woman-on-the-wall-later-woman-on-a-hill" and during the entire year she spent living in a cave in the mountains "not a sleeping or waking moment went by when her heart did not long for Woman-on-the-wall in Chimayo" (89). Thus, when Caridad finally leaves the cave and goes to Ojo Caliente to take a mineral bath, she is stunned to find that the attendant at the spa is the woman from Chimayo "that had obsessed her to such an extreme that she had all but abandoned life itself" (92). When the attendant asks, Caridad denies that she is the woman who was at Chimayo the previous year. The attendant, knowing the whole time that Caridad is the woman from Chimayo, leads her to the bath and goes about her business. Afterwards the attendant talks to Caridad and explains that she confused her with someone else. Then she asks one last time if Caridad is sure she is not the woman from Chimayo and Caridad finally admits that she is. At this moment "a hot tear was escaping down her left eye, making its way to her ear when the Acoma-Mexican woman caught it with her finger and wiped it off. 'Shhh,' she told Caridad. 'You rest now. Just rest'" (93). Arguably, this is the most romantic scene in the entire novel. By highlighting

the caring, loving relationship between two women, Castillo rewrites the traditional romance narrative and presents another alternative to the traditional heterosexual relationship. As Esmeralda consoles Caridad, we as readers begin to understand, in part, the obstacles barring any potential relationship between the two women.

While the heterosexual couple at the center of a telenovela typically faces obstacles, such as differences of race and/or class, that initially prevent them from being together, Esmeralda and Caridad face significantly more difficult obstacles, specifically the mythology of compulsory heterosexuality upheld by the Church and carried out by its representatives, such as Francisco, whose homophobia drives him to attack the lesbian couple. Although Esmeralda “inadvertently had caught Caridad’s snarelike heart,” Caridad “barely let herself pronounce it, much less love Esmeralda openly for many reasons,” but primarily because “Esmeralda already loved someone and her name was Maria” (204). Castillo alludes to the fact that historically homosexuality is a topic that has not been talked about openly and many Chicana lesbians did not feel comfortable or safe to express their sexuality within their Mexican American communities.<sup>8</sup> However, Caridad could not control her feelings for Esmeralda who in return “had a natural love for Caridad, which grew immediately once she found out that Caridad was kind of a medicine woman” (205). Given the deep connection between Esmeralda and Caridad, it is not surprising that eventually, after Caridad keeps vigil for weeks outside the house Esmeralda shares with Maria, she and Esmeralda drive off to Acoma Pueblo together.<sup>9</sup> However, this is not a scene typical of romance novels, in which the happy couple rides off into the sunset; instead, Caridad and Esmeralda, much like Helena and Maria, drive off with an angry man, in this case Francisco, in pursuit.

While the traditional telenovela ends with the marriage of the happy couple, in the novel, instead of winding up happily married, the lesbian couple ends up dead. After arriving at the Acoma Pueblo, Caridad struggles to discern Francisco's motives and the insight she receives from her clairvoyant powers is so disturbing that she collapses in tears. As Esmeralda scoots down to the ground to try to comfort Caridad, she looks up and "recognized among the small group with the guide a tall, lean, lonely coyote trying to camouflage himself as a tourist" (210). By describing Francisco as a coyote, Castillo further underscores the threat he poses to Caridad and Esmeralda, who sensing the imminent danger take off running. With her family, the townspeople and tourists looking on, "Esmeralda was flying, flying off the mesa like a broken-winged moth and holding tight to her hand was Caridad" (211). Esmeralda and Caridad seek refuge from Francisco and the patriarchal, heterosexist views of the Catholic Church he represents.<sup>10</sup> The two women run away from Francisco and toward the female voice: "*Tsichtinako was calling!*" and Esmeralda's grandmother like the rest of "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" (211).

Castillo underscores and draws a connection between Esmeralda and Caridad and the first two humans, also both women, who were nourished by the divine feminine (the Invisible One). Francisco "watched paralyzed as together they leapt into the air" and along with the other tourists went to see the results down below out of curiosity. To their surprise:

There were no morbid remains of splintered bodies tossed to the ground,  
down, down, like bad pottery or glass or old bread. There weren't even

whole bodies lying peacefully. There was nothing. Just the spirit deity Tsichtinako calling loudly with a voice like wind, guiding the two women back, not out toward the sun's rays or up to the clouds but down, deep within the soft, moist dark earth where Esmeralda and Caridad would be safe and live forever. (211)

Tsichtinako guides the two women to safety deep within the earth, not upward to a Christian God or heaven, but into the moist, fertile, dark, womb-like earth.<sup>11</sup> Esmeralda and Caridad return to the divine feminine; they find eternal life within mother earth, which is why, as the chapter title indicates, the end of Esmeralda and Caridad is not considered tragic, but it does underscore the tragic violence that results from homophobia. Esmeralda and Caridad flee Francisco as an agent of the church and run from him to the voice of Tsichtinako, the Indigenous deity. They escape the homophobia, which is a result of the Church's morality, as represented by and through Francisco. As Mills states: "Castillo uses the deaths [of Caridad and Esmeralda] to illustrate the destructive homophobia that often accompanies heterosexist ideologies" (322). The Catholic Church reinforces these heterosexist ideologies, which is why Esmeralda and Caridad seek solace within an Indigenous belief system.

While the couple's flight is remarkable, it is not, as Aldama suggests, magical. In fact, when read within the context of the telenovela, their disappearance and Caridad's resurfacing, later in the novel, seems absolutely plausible. However, Aldama argues that Caridad "magically" reappears in the novel (after having lived as an ascetic in a cave for a year) "to undergo a shift into a lesbian sexuality that is soon followed by her magical ascendance into a pre-columbian spiritual matrix—the mythical realm of Tsichtinako"

(81-2). Aldama states that in an effort to escape from Francisco, Caridad and Esmeralda follow the voice of the god Tsichtinako and disappear into the earth to “magically return to an Indigenous- and feminist-empowered origin” (84). Aldama uses the word magical(ly) three times within four sentences to describe the act of Caridad and Esmeralda following Tsichtinako’s call (84). By describing this action as magical, Aldama forecloses the possibility that the act reflects a conscious choice made on behalf of the female characters to “enter an emancipatory, nongendered space” and prevents the reader from recuperating the positive aspects of a matrilineal Indigenous belief system that stands in direct opposition to the patriarchy of the Catholic Church (84-5). In reducing Caridad’s lesbianism to a spectacle, Aldama overlooks the powerful ways, as Mills notes, in which Castillo privileges and normalizes lesbian love over heterosexual love and shows that for women, specifically Caridad, lesbian love is safer and more gratifying than heterosexual romance. By focusing on how *So Far From God* is a critique of the society of the spectacle, Aldama does not consider the significance of the form in which Castillo presents her narrative—the telenovela—or how she intervenes in and significantly rewrites the genre that promotes heterosexual romance.

Ultimately, the episode challenges the authority of the Catholic Church and underscores Caridad's movement away from it, either through integration or ascendancy into the Indigenous spiritual matrix. Castillo suggests that women find eternal life not within the confines of the patriarchal institution of the Catholic Church but rather the Indigenous belief system of the Acoma. This is particularly significant in terms of the traditional telenovela genre that Castillo rewrites. While telenovelas typically end with the sacrament of marriage between a man and a woman, Castillo presents an alternate

possibility of a loving committed relationship between two women, one that transcends life and the laws of the Church. Although Esmeralda and Caridad do die, it is their choice to follow Tsichtinako's call and the scene can be interpreted as one of female empowerment, much like the conclusion of the film *Thelma and Louise*, in which two women find liberation in death versus living in a world run by men.<sup>12</sup> Although Caridad and Esmeralda represent merely one of several romantic relationships depicted in the novel, none of the female characters has a satisfying, loving marriage with a man. The only enduring romantic relationship is between two women. Thus in revising one of the central tenants of the telenovela, Castillo challenges the mythology of compulsory heterosexuality which lies at the core of the genre.

Additionally, Castillo undermines the moral authority of the Church and its homophobic agents who commit acts of violence by punishing them. As such, Francisco's violent pursuit of Esmeralda and Caridad results in a certain kind of justice—he ends up taking his own life. Having been abandoned by his mother and his first girlfriend, Francisco cannot accept the rejection when Caridad rebuffs his advances in favor of the love of a woman. His initial sense of awe and respect for Caridad turns into an intense hatred that is exacerbated by his homophobia, which is a result of his strong religious beliefs. All this prompts Francisco to aggressively pursue Caridad and Esmeralda, ultimately chasing them to their death. Afterwards Francisco feels so guilty for his role in their deaths that he takes his own life. His body is found “at the far end of his uncle's land, dangling sorrowful-like like a crow-picked pear from a tall piñon” (212). The last sound his family hears is “a tenor lament, resonating distinctly” across the cornfields; “‘Caridad!’ they hear Francisco's voice, low and mournful” followed only by

“the dissonant choir of the cicadas” (212). Castillo underscores that Francisco, a representative of the Church, feels remorse for the violent actions he commits as a result of homophobia, and for which he pays with his own life. Francisco dies in the exact same manner as Judas, both found hanging after their betrayals. If the comparison holds, then Caridad and Esmeralda are akin to Christ, which is a major revision to the institution of the Church, which upholds heterosexuality and presides over the unions that serve as the driving force for all conventional telenovelas.

Castillo challenges the dominative image upheld by the Church and promoted within the telenovela of heterosexual romance and the sacrament of marriage. While marriage is heralded as the ultimate achievement in telenovelas, in the novel marriage is lampooned, presented as at best a joke or a disappointment and at worst a relationship marked by betrayal, violence and loss. One by one, the narrator relates how Sofi and her daughters (Fe, Esperanza, Caridad, and Loca) are disillusioned by love. For example, when Fe’s fiancé Tom sends her a letter telling her he is not ready to get married she locks herself in the bathroom and ends up wrapped up in the shower curtain in the bathtub. Sofia and Loca “unwrap the plastic from around Fe, who in her ravings had inadvertently made herself into a human tamale—all the while letting out one loud continuous scream that could have woken the dead” (30). The narrator infuses the scene, which in the telenovela would be heartbreaking or nearly tragic, with comedy by describing Fe as a human tamale, wrapped in a shower curtain instead of a corn husk. The scene strikes the right balance of comedy and melodrama, a hallmark of the telenovela, particularly when the narrator describes how “Sofi shook her daughter hard, but when that didn’t silence Fe, she gave her a good slap as she had seen people do on T.V. lots of

times whenever anyone got like that. But Fe didn't quiet down" (30). Sofi's response calls to mind the dramatic displays of emotion seen in telenovelas, in which other characters literally try to slap someone, usually a woman, to her senses, but in this case, the tried and true method fails. Fe is so shocked and traumatized by the loss of love and the dissolution of her engagement to Tom that "nothing and no one could quiet Fe down. She wanted her Tom back" (31).

The negative effects of mythologizing romance narratives are further displayed in Castillo's description of Fe's inability to stop screaming even ten days later and her finance Tom's fear. For Fe who has invested absolutely in the idea of heterosexual romance, the broken engagement represents the collapse of her entire world, including her personal goals and social network, which is made up exclusively of other heterosexual couples. Unable to produce any other coherent response, Fe can only scream and her family is left to cope with her distraught state. Sofia confronts Tom's mother, who insists that her son is also greatly affected by the break-up but more so by Fe's reaction. Mrs. Torres goes so far as to declare that her son has "susto" (translated loosely as fright) to which Sofia replies, "*¿Susto? ¿Susto?* You think that cowardly son of yours without pelos on his maracas [hair on his balls] has *susto*? I'll show you *susto*! My daughter has been screaming at the top of her lungs for ten days and nights" (30). Castillo creates another hilarious melodramatic scene that epitomizes the telenovela genre. She utilizes Spanish and English to create a comical tone in which Sofia questions Tom's maturity and confronts Mrs. Torres about her son's disgraceful actions that have literally turned her daughter into La Gritona (the screamer).

Fe's devastation is made to seem funny in its extremity. Like a telenovela, the plot is exaggerated to the point of unbelievability, yet Castillo's description of the trauma and pain of a broken love affair is true to real life. Comparatively, while Tom's fear is laughable, we see the privilege that he has to simply walk, or in this case drive, away from the relationship with little consequence. He does not even have the courage to face what he has done, for although Tom reluctantly agrees to visit Fe in the hopes that it will quell her hysterical screaming, upon approaching the threshold of their house, he declares he cannot enter and "before Sofi could think of something to say to stop him, Tom was back in his car, smoking down the road" (31). La Loca concludes that for Tom, "like so many hispanos, nuevo mexicanos, whatever he wanted to call himself, something about giving himself over to a woman was worse than having lunch with the devil" (32). Castillo creates a tragi-comic scene to convey the depth of a young woman's devastation and to comment on Fe's realization about the fallacy of the romance narrative and the underlying misogyny on which it is based.

While it is clear that Fe will never have the marriage she dreamed of with Tom, she also faces the possibility of never having the home, appliances, and other material goods that she believes accompany marriage and define middle-class life. Similarly, the mythologies about gender and sexuality disseminated within the telenovela genre are also intricately tied to mythologies about class. Mermann-Jozwiak states that the telenovela "operates along a patriarchal capitalist logic: it displays a concern with social class, specifically with the preservation of the family's lineage, propriety, and decorum within the context of upper middle class values" (87). Telenovelas re-inscribe rigid divisions along the lines of social class by providing romanticized views of poverty, in which the

poor, working class characters are depicted as leading simpler yet ultimately happier lives and are represented as morally upstanding people with a strong faith and the wealthy, upper class characters are represented as unhappy, corrupt, and morally bankrupt. By depicting the wealthy as unhappy and showing how money corrupts, telenovelas may deter poor viewers from seeking to change the class system. In *Power and Television in Latin America*, Antonio V. Menéndez Alarcón states, “Progress and social change in these shows are limited to individual access to economic power and social position” (62). Overall the divisions between social classes are upheld in telenovelas, and if one or more character(s) do rise in social class it is through exceptionalism and marriage.

Of all the female characters, Fe is the most obsessed with achieving the American Dream (read financial freedom) and literally kills herself trying to obtain it by working with toxic waste at the ACME chemical plant. With this specific episode Castillo is critiquing the capitalist system in general and the institution of marriage specifically, which promotes traditional gender roles and restrains women from achieving financial independence by promoting their dependence on men, whether their fathers or husbands.<sup>13</sup> In this way, Castillo challenges the mythology promoted within telenovelas that marriage provides women with financial security and social status. Telenovelas often feature rags-to-riches, Cinderella stories, in which the heroine, who is from a humble background, falls in love with a man from a wealthy, upper class family, and thus marriage increases her social status and allows her to escape from poverty.<sup>14</sup> Alarcón reiterates that “telenovelas project the idea that women can best achieve success through marriage” (62). Aldama also links marriage with financial security for women. He interprets Fe’s failure to get married as “the first hurdle to realizing the American dream”

(80). His statement underscores the myth that without being married to a man, a woman's ability to achieve the American dream of financial success is significantly challenged, if not made impossible.

But Castillo challenges traditional gender roles that depict men as the primary breadwinners in a household by showing female characters, like Fe, Esperanza and Sofia who are economically self-sufficient. She also shows that instead of providing security, marriage can be financially draining for women like Esperanza and Sofia. Esperanza's relationship with Rubén is similar to Sofia's relationship with Domingo in that both men use the women in their lives for money. For example, Rubén gladly,

accepted Esperanza's gifts of groceries, the rides in *her* car with *her* gas, all up and down the Southwest to attend meetings, who called her collect the month he left on a "pilgrimage" to visit the Mayan ruins throughout southern Mexico, where she had not been invited to join him, who always let her pick up the tab whenever they stopped someplace for a few beers and burritos. (39).

Rubén uses Esperanza (physically, emotionally, and financially) to facilitate his own pleasure. He claims to be attending religious pilgrimages (more than likely vacations) and purposely does not invite her along to enjoy the travel or the experience. Even worse, Rubén criticizes Esperanza for working at "that job which he suspected her so much of selling out to white society for but which paid for all the food, gas, telephone calls, and even let's admit it, the tens and twenties she discreetly left on his bedroom dresser" (39). While Rubén gladly enjoys the fruits of Esperanza's labor (using the money she earns as a journalist to fund his own excursions), he simultaneously chides her for selling out to

the white world. Ironically he is the one who sold out to the white world when he initially left Esperanza for a middle-class white woman. By propagating the mythology that marriage provides financial security, telenovelas make women more dependent on men. Telenovelas create the false expectation within women that they will be taken care of economically in marriage and therefore do not need to learn to provide for themselves. Luardo expresses this to Soveida in *Face of an Angel*. Like Chávez, Castillo critiques this mythology by illustrating the opposite, that often men can be a financial burden for women, not a source of economic support or security.

Castillo's parody of the romance narrative and her critique of the mythology that the institution of marriage provides women with financial security and social status is most clearly illustrated in her depiction of the relationship between Sofia and Domingo. When the novel begins the primary couple, Sofia and Domingo, are separated, and despite Domingo's return and their renewed courtship, ultimately, he cannot overcome his gambling addiction and Sofia asks him to leave. Unlike the typical male hero in a telenovela, Domingo is a man marked by weakness who fails to protect and provide for his family. Domingo abandons Sofia with four young daughters and all she ever receives is "a letter from El Paso with five ten-dollar bills and a promise to send more whenever he could. No return address. And no more news from [him] ever again after that" (21). When Domingo returns after having been gone for years, Sofia is skeptical of his intentions and the stirring of her own emotions. She reminds herself of what he did in the past, including

the fact that he had little by little hocked all of Sofia's jewelry, the silver-and-green-turquoise necklace she had been given on her wedding day that

had been passed down to her from her great-grandmother, and the sapphire ring that her father had bought her for her fifteenth birthday. Worst of all, Domingo had sold the ten acres parceled out to them by Sofi's grandfather as a wedding present without even consulting her. (105)

Castillo emphasizes that for Sofia, her husband Domingo proves to be a financial liability and drain, not a helpful contributing partner or paternal provider.

Castillo also uses the relationship between Sofia and Domingo to expose the superficiality of romance narratives that equate infatuation with love. As a young woman, Sofia, like most telenovela heroines, believes in the illusion of romance and falls for Domingo based on his striking good looks as indicated in the title of Chapter 6, "The Renewed Courtship of Loca's Mom and Dad and How in '49 Sofia Got Swept Off Her Feet by Domingo's Clark Gable Mustache, Despite Her Familia's Opinion of the Charlatan Actor." Domingo remembered a time when he "had only to look at Sofia and she would go to him, dissolving in his embrace like liquid gold [...] but that was before the cockfights, the horses, the card games, the nickel-and-dime bets that turned into acres of land he bet away" (110). Domingo describes how Sofia used to be so in love with him that she could not resist the attraction and would instantly go to him and melt in his embrace. But after being abandoned by Domingo and struggling for twenty years on her own, Sofia cannot easily forgive him. When he shows up at her back door years later, Sofia asks dryly, "Did you forget something?" (110). She learns to be skeptical of the fairytale romance presented in telenovelas and is not taken in again by Domingo's sexy good looks.

More to the point, Sofi does not express gratitude for his returning to her life. Instead she openly expresses her anger:

Look at me, Domingo! While you were gone, doing who knows what—gambling your soul away, dancing with every loose . . . woman you ran across, and who knows what else—I have been hanging the rumps of pigs and lambs and getting arthritis from the freezer and praying to God to give me the strength to do the best by my girls alone and with the wits I had left after what I'd been through. (111)

Although he does apologize and Sofia is softened for a moment, she knows that “a man’s remorse must translate into a little more than a few tears and an apology on weak knees” (112). Sofia holds Domingo responsible for his choices and demands that he acknowledge the ways in which she has sacrificed to raise their daughters alone, while he has been off satisfying his selfish desires, gambling and sleeping with other women.

Castillo challenges the traditional telenovela plot in which characters overcome their moral shortcomings and flaws to find redemption and happiness in love. She explodes the mythology that true love is powerful enough to overcome any obstacle by showing how despite his good intentions and love for Sofia, Domingo is not able to overcome his gambling addiction. The habit of gambling is something Domingo developed as a young boy and as he grew older, “the increased cockfight fever” became a way to alleviate pain, such as the loss of his daughter Fe to cancer (213). Just like in the early days of their marriage when “Domingo was little by little betting away the land Sofia had inherited from her father,” as his “debts got bigger and bigger,” Domingo once again resorts to betting Sofia’s property, including the house in which she and her

daughters live. Sofi responds this time, not by merely sending him away as she had done previously, but by demanding a divorce. The dissolution of the marriage, for Sofi, produces a more favorable end than staying with a man who is reckless, has no self-control, and absolutely no respect for her or her personal property.

Sofi and Domingo's relationship also provides the vehicle for Castillo to challenge the mythology that the religious, legal, financial, and political institutions are equally available to and operate for the benefit and best interest of all citizens—including the lower class, women, and other minority groups. She shows that men have these institutions at their disposal or rather, that through access to these avenues and resources men are able to maintain their power. Castillo specifically illustrates the ways in which the legal system undercuts women's financial freedom. The law allows Domingo to waltz back into Sofia's life after twenty years and legally lay claim to her property, the property she has inherited and maintained. The day that Sofia decides to send Domingo out of her life for good, is the day she "was notified by the bank that her home, along with one measly acre next to her property which she had not given up to the Tome collective so as to keep Loca's horses, was being transferred over to a certain Judge *Julano*" (215). Realizing that Domingo has given up the deed to the house is more than Sofia can bear: the house, "which had been her mother's and father's and her grandparents', for that matter, and in which she and her sister had been born and raised—that house had belonged to *her*" (215). Sofia knows that Domingo would have given the butcher shop (Buena Carnecería) too if he could have, but "she had sold it already in shares to the community and it no longer belonged just to her" (215). Unfortunately, the law "based on 'community property,' states that the house also belongs to her legal husband who

remains, even after twenty years of being *la Abandonada*, Domingo” (215). The only way, then, for Sofi to take possession of her life is to legally sever her relationship with Domingo.

Through this episode Castillo shows that the patriarchy extends to a corrupt legal system, which Sofi must then rely upon to emancipate herself from an oppressive union. In the process, Sofia decries the hypocrisy of a legal system that allows a judge, supposedly “a servant to the people” to take a house that he won in a cockfight, which is illegal. When the judge states that he won the house “fair and square” and Sofia questions how that is the case if the “gallo fights are illegal,” he responds “but it’s no less fair than not putting your husband and the rest of those guys running that operation in jail, now is it?” (216). In essence the judge blackmails Sofia by arguing that if he obtained the house unfairly by participating in illegal activity (cockfighting), then the men, including Domingo, who also participated in and organized the cockfights must be punished by going to prison. Castillo illustrates how the legal system benefits those in power, namely men. In this case, the judge, supposedly the arbiter of justice, manages to protect his and Domingo’s interests by forcing Sofia to realize that if she presses charges against him for illegal gambling, she will also indict her husband for involvement in the same illegal activity. Thus, due to Sofia’s loyalty to and regard for Domingo as her husband and the father of her children, she decides not to take action against the judge in order to recuperate her property.

In addition to disseminating the mythology that women face a financial disadvantage by not getting married, which is clearly the opposite case concerning Sofia, telenovelas also promote the idea that an uncoupled woman (whether single or divorced)

is pitiful, someone to be ashamed of, and/or blamed for her current social standing. This is particularly evident in the character of Sofia who realizes that although she has been known as *la Abandonada* (the abandoned one), she was the one who gave Domingo “his walking papers” all those years ago after she discovered he was betting away the land she had inherited from her father. Just like that she had said, “Go, hombre, before you leave us all out on the street!” (214). She had forgotten this important detail, which “was pretty bad because there was almost nothing more pitiful to her than to be called an abandoned woman” (215). But in reality Sofia had not been abandoned, she was the one who demanded that Domingo leave. She is not a victim in this situation, a poor pitiful woman; rather, she is a strong woman who refuses to let a man drag her into ruin because of his gambling problems. Sofia’s parental duties and the economic demands made on her life, particularly after Domingo leaves, obscure important actual details about her own power, which she actualizes as the owner of the Buena Carnecería, founder of the Los Ganados y Lana Cooperative, and eventually the Mayor of Tome. The return of Domingo (Sunday), the traditional day of worship, back into Sofia’s life does not provide comfort; his presence actually causes more pain and suffering, not to mention financial loss, which again undermines the mythic function of the Church.

Through this example Castillo critiques the mythology that for women divorce, which can lead to excommunication from the Church, is worse than destitution. She shows how this mythology teaches women like Sofia that enduring a bad marriage with a man who slowly gambles away your property is preferable to being divorced or worse yet excommunicated. When Sofia first told Domingo to leave, divorce was out of the question:

back then, to be excommunicated was more fearful to Sofia than the thought of destitution; not to mention that her mother was still alive then, and her mother had been like the Church's conscience incarnated to her daughter. If anything ever brought the fear of God to Sofi even more than the thought of being excommunicated it was her mother's disapproval.

(219)

Here the power of the Catholic Church to restrict a woman's life is made evident. Sofia's mother, her strongest female role model, reinforces these social and religious values of the Church. In Sofi's mind, the Church and her mother, acting as its agent, become one and thus in an effort to avoid her mother's disapproval, Sofia does not initially divorce Domingo. Castillo shows how legal and religious institutions work against women, like Sofia, to prevent them from achieving emotional and financial freedom. She shows how mythologies regarding class and gender combined with religious values uphold the patriarchy, which keeps women in a subordinate position.

Despite upholding religious and moral values, Sofi is punished rather than rewarded for her model behavior. Castillo challenges the mythology that "good" women who follow social and religious mores in regards to romance and marriage live happy lives. In the end Sofia realizes that "she had devoted her life to being a good daughter, a good wife, and a good mother, or at least had given it all a hell of a good try, and now she asked herself—'¿Y pa' qué? ¡Chingao!' She said this aloud and then crossed herself" (218). After all these years, Sofia realizes the fallacy of living according to rules set down by someone else, rules dictated to her by the Church, the legal system, and her parents. For so long she lives dutifully following all the social, religious, and legal values set

down by a patriarchal society and in the end she is betrayed by this system, a system which does not protect her rights, as a single mother of four, a system designed to favor those in power: men.

In the end, by divorcing Domingo, Sofia takes control of her life and no longer has to fear that her husband's gambling addiction will drag her down with him into financial ruin. Castillo rewrites the romance narrative to present a woman empowered by divorce, a woman for whom divorce, is a symbol of resistance and a sign that she has thrown off the shackles of religious and social values that shame a woman for being alone without a man, shame her into staying in a destructive marital relationship in order to avoid excommunication. Sofia, no longer fears her mother's or the Church's disapproval and instead seeks her own emotional and financial freedom. This is the antithesis of a typical telenovela heroine who is obedient and conforms to social and religious rules, which is evident by the fact that the shows typically end with the heroine walking up the aisle in a church on her wedding day.

On the path to empowerment, Sofia refuses to remain a quiet victim and instead proves that she is capable of holding positions of power, as head of a household, a business cooperative, and the mayor of the town. As such, Castillo uses Sofia and her coming into personal, political, and social consciousness as a way to critique the traditional image of the silent, suffering Mexican woman found in telenovelas. Sofia's frustration at her husband's incompetence motivates her to take action in the world. She moves initially from deciding to kick Domingo out to deciding to run for Mayor of Tome in the same moment. While doing laundry one day Sofia thinks to herself, "If that Domingo doesn't fix the screen door this week, *I'm* gonna have to do it myself; then I'll

throw his butt out for sure; what do I want him for then anyhow?" (130). Just as she realizes she will have to take matters into her own hands instead of waiting for Domingo to help around the house, "the old wringer [in the porch door] went out with a big shake and clank" and "she said aloud, 'God damn!', quickly pulling out her scapular from inside her white blouse and kissing it to heaven" (130). She waited long enough for men to fix things and must act now or the world around her, just like the porch door, will surely fall apart due to lack of care. Castillo draws a connection between the failures of individual men, like Domingo, to provide for their families, and the failure of the patriarchy, and men in general, to run the rest of society. Sofia "decided she was going to run for la mayor of Tome and make some changes around here" (130). The action of kissing the scapular and holding it up to heaven signals that Sofia holds more faith in herself and God than men.

Through the novel's matriarch, Castillo critiques the mythologies about gender and class promoted within telenovelas, which relegate women to the confines of the domestic sphere while men hold positions of socio-political power. While men undoubtedly pose a major obstacle to the women in the novel, this is not their exclusive function, for other women also impede Sofia's empowerment. Castillo emphasizes how deeply entrenched gender roles make women question others who deviate from their traditional roles as wives and mothers. For example, when Sofia tells her comadre about her decision to run for mayor she is met with skepticism. But Sofia responds eagerly, "I have been living in Tome all my life and I have only seen it get worse and worse off and it's about time somebody goes out and tries to do something about it! And maybe I don't

know nothing about those kinds of things, but I'm sure willing to work for community improvement!" (138).

In the face of resistance from both men (Domingo) and women (her comadre), Sofia remains absolutely committed to her goal of becoming mayor and changing the community of Tome for the better. She states with conviction, "I am running for mayor of Tome, of course! And furthermore, *I* will be la mayor of Tome! I swear on my parents' grave—may they rest in peace—even if it's the last thing I ever do!" (142). Castillo depicts a female character that in addition to being a wife and mother is also a competent business woman and a savvy political leader thus defying traditional views of women, often depicted in telenovelas, as passive and resigned to accept their fate or powerless to change their situation.<sup>15</sup>

At the same time, though, Castillo also challenges the idea that the lower classes benefit from working for and supporting the economic gain of the upper class. She shows how, at Sofia's instigation, through grass roots organizing the poor members of the Tome community establish their own business cooperative and are no longer beholden to the wealthy outsiders buying up their land. While initially talking to her comadre about becoming mayor, Sofia launches into a diatribe against the sudden influx of outsiders, such as the peacock breeder from New York, who are buying up the land in and around Tome leaving the local people unable to earn a living through farming and ranching. The reality was,

There were a lot of outsiders moving in, buying up land that had belonged to original families, who were being forced to give it up because they just couldn't live off of it no more, and the taxes were too high, and the

children went off to Albuquerque or even farther away to work, or out of state to college, or out of the country with the Army, instead of staying home to work on the rancherías. (139)

Sofia explains to la comadre that given this bleak financial reality many families in Tome have to sell their land to outsiders “because we need the money and they got the money to buy it, and we end up without no livelihood to depend on no more” (140). In response to the seemingly inevitable decline of the town of Tome, Sofia comes up with an idea to allow the original landowning families to preserve their way of life. She exhibits a keen awareness and understanding of the local economy in an attempt to save it, an effort that will be undone in large part by her own no-good husband.

Castillo questions the hierarchical, autocratic rule typical of the patriarchy promoted within telenovelas and instead shows how as a female leader, Sofia promotes the ideas of cooperation and community. Through a series of community-based meetings and debates, in which Sofia and her neighbors discuss “what ideas would lend themselves best toward some form of economic self-sufficiency for their area,” they come up with a plan (146). Although “it would take YEARS of diligence and determination” they “embarked on an ambitious project, which was to start a sheep-grazing wool-weaving enterprise, ‘Los Ganados y Lana Cooperative,’” (146). Sofia’s leadership style, based on grassroots organizing, depends on input from community members and facilitates change from the bottom up. As the townspeople realize in their initial discussions and debates, “it became a debate of either everyone doing it all together or nobody doing anything at all” (146). The continued success of the cooperative depends upon everyone’s hard work and investment.

Furthermore, Castillo shows that one of the benefits of creating a cooperative in which the people of Tome are all personally invested and have part ownership of, is that they are no longer relegated to low-end hourly jobs that offer no future for advancement. A year after the start of the sheep-grazing enterprise,

a core group of twelve women began the wool-weaving cooperative. Eventually, the business created and sustained the livelihoods of more than two dozen women. As cooperative owners of their wool-weaving business they had paying jobs they could count on and were proud of [...] and no years of cleaning the houses of los ricos or serving tables in restaurants could ever get them that! (146)

Therefore, as a result of Sofia's efforts, the people of Tome develop a self-sustaining business cooperative and are no longer beholden to the upper class and forced to sell their land to wealthy outsiders or accept jobs cleaning their homes and serving them food. Sofia exemplifies the strength and ingenuity of a woman who refuses to remain a victim in her life and instead uses her skills to build a business that not only provides economic independence and a sense of satisfaction and pride in work for herself, but the rest of the townspeople as well.

Ultimately, however, there are no happy endings in the novel: Esperanza is tortured and killed while on assignment in the Gulf; Fe dies of toxic poisoning from the chemical plant, and Sofi's baby, La Loca, dies inexplicably from AIDS. Moreover, there is no central heterosexual romance worth idealizing. Most of the men in the text abandon and cheat on their wives or girlfriends: Sofia's husband, Domingo, disappears leaving her to raise their four daughters alone; Caridad's husband, Memo, cheats on her with his ex-

girlfriend Domitila and abandons them both to join the marines; Fe's fiancé, Tom, sends her a Dear John letter explaining that he loves her but is not ready to get married; and Esperanza's boyfriend, Rubén, dumps her to marry a middle-class white woman. Rather than celebrate heterosexual romance, Castillo critiques the heteronormativity of the telenovela and rewrites the narrative to accommodate and privilege a lesbian relationship.

Moving beyond the historical romance tradition to which Chávez responds, Castillo creates a text that is at once recognizable as a telenovela. She establishes the telenovela as a legible genre incorporating many of the formal and stylistic aspects of the form to create a narrative that is episodic, melodramatic, and unbelievable. She also diverges radically from the traditional telenovela plot, which ends with the marriage of the happy couple, and challenges many of the mythologies regarding race, class, gender, and sexual orientation disseminated within the form. Although the text focuses on the themes of the domestic sphere and romance, overall it shows that heterosexual romance is a joke, a site of violence, and ultimately, a failure. Not one marriage in the entire book endures or produces offspring. In fact, instead of having kids, female characters, like Caridad, have miscarriages or abortions. Instead of drawing on the traditional telenovela plot in which the innocent poor young woman is rescued by a valiant, wealthy man, Castillo shows that for women heterosexual romance is at best disappointing and unfulfilling and at worst potentially life threatening. Ultimately, Castillo translates the telenovela into a recognizable literary narrative form that re-imagines the genre by challenging many, or most, of its conventions in order to critique the various intertwining mythologies regarding race, class, gender, and sexual orientation it promotes.

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<sup>1</sup> See Rita Cano Alcalá's "A Chicana Hagiography for the Twenty-first Century: Ana Castillo's *Locas Santas*" (2003), Elisabeth Mermann-Jozwiak's "*Little Women Meets The Flintstones: Mixing Genres and Blending Cultures in Ana Castillo's So Far From God* and Sandra Cisneros's 'Little Miracles, Kept Promises'" in *Postmodern Vernaculars: Chicana Literature and Postmodern Rhetoric* (2005), and Daniel Cooper Alarcon's "Literary Syncretism in Ana Castillo's *So Far From God*" (2004).

<sup>2</sup> For further research on melodramatic serials as a source of social enculturation see R. M. Alfaro-Moreno. "Los usos populares de las telenovelas en el mundo urbano." *Estudios sobre las culturas contemporáneas*. 4/5. 1988. 223-259 and John Fiske. *Television Culture*. London: Methuen, 1987.

<sup>3</sup> Although three of Sofia's daughters are named after the Christian virtues outlined by Saint Paul, Fe (faith), Esperanza (hope), and Caridad (charity), they are not saved or relieved from their suffering because of their religious faith and devotion, as depicted in traditional hagiographic legends.

<sup>4</sup> The virgin/whore dichotomy is readily apparent in a recent telenovela, *Al Diablo Con Los Guapos*, (2008) in which, the heroine, Milagros, is a good hearted, virtuous woman, who loves Alejandro and Andrea, is an evil woman, who seeks to marry Alejandro for his money at the same time that she is engaged in an illicit love affair with his father, Constancio.

<sup>5</sup> See "Ana Castillo's (En)gendered Magicorealism" in Frederick Luis Aldama's *Postethnic Narrative Criticism* (2003).

<sup>6</sup> For example, in *Mariana de la Noche* (2003), the *curandera*, María Lola,

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rescues Mariana as a new born when her mother Vilma dies in childbirth and keeps the identity of Mariana's mother a secret, leaving her to be raised by Atilio, a man who claims to be her father, but in reality is attracted to her. Eventually, the truth comes out, as María Lola reveals the identity of Mariana's mother and Atilio reveals his more than paternal affection for Mariana.

<sup>7</sup> According to a new study by Gregory Herek, professor of psychology at the University of California, Davis, nearly four in ten gay men and about one in eight lesbians and bisexuals in the United States have been the target of violence or a property crime because of their sexual orientation. In a survey Herek conducted in the fall of 2005, with a nationally representative sample of 662 self-identified gay men, lesbians and bisexuals, 21 percent of the people reported being the victim of violence or a property crime (including physical assault, sexual assault, theft and vandalism) because of their sexual orientation. In addition, 49 percent said they had been verbally abused because of their sexual orientation, 23 percent reported being threatened with violence, 12.5 percent reported having objects thrown at them, and 11 percent reported housing or job discrimination. For more information see Herek's study, "Hate Crimes and Stigma-Related Experiences Among Sexual Minority Adults in the United States: Prevalence Estimates From a National Probability Sample." *Journal of Interpersonal Violence* (2008). See also *Hate Crimes: Confronting Violence Against Lesbians and Gay Men* Ed. Gregory M. Herek and Kevin T. Berrill (1992).

<sup>8</sup> See "Between the Lines: On Culture, Class, and Homophobia" in *This Bridge Called My Back: Writings by Radical Women of Color* (1981), Cherríe Moraga's *Loving*

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*in the War Years* (1983), Gloria Anzaldúa's "Fear of Going Home: Homophobia" in *Borderlands/La Frontera* (1987), *Chicana Lesbians: The Girls Our Mothers Warned Us About* Ed. Carla Trujillo (1991), and Catriona Rueda Esquibel's *With Her Machete In Her Hand: Reading Chicana Lesbians* (2006).

<sup>9</sup> Thanks to Dr. James Cox for bringing to my attention the need to consider the politics surrounding Castillo's use of and reference to Indigeneity throughout the text, but specifically her description of the Acoma Pueblo in Chapter 12. It is particularly important, as Dr. Cox's indicates, to account for the history of the Acoma Pueblo in New Mexico, which includes decades of exploitation and forced religious conversion to Catholicism at the hands of Spanish conquerors and the revolt of the Native people against the Spaniards in 1680. Castillo's depiction of the Acoma Pueblo is problematic because she fails to account for the complex religious practices of the Native people that include Catholicism as well as their traditional religion. Also, Castillo, like other Chicana/o authors, such as Gloria Anzaldúa in *Borderlands*, presents Indigeneity in an idealized way, betraying her desire to return to a mythic Indigenous homeland, or in this case, presenting it as an escape or haven from the Catholic Church and homophobic violence. Unfortunately, as Cox and others, such as Domino Perez have noted, such tendencies on behalf of Chicana/o authors to refer to and describe Indigeneity in this way, is not accurate and ends up fetishizing and idealizing this aspect of their racial/ethnic and cultural identities. Indigeneity is represented in a similarly problematic way in telenovelas, where Indigenous people are often presented as curandera/os, medicine wo(men) healers, and typically more morally upstanding and community oriented.

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<sup>10</sup> For more on how female characters in Castillo's novel, through a woman-centered, hybrid spirituality, resist domination by a patriarchal church see Theresa Delgadillo's "Forms of Chicana Feminist Resistance: Hybrid Spirituality in Ana Castillo's *So Far From God*" (1998).

<sup>11</sup> Tsichtinako is the female spirit of the Acoma Indian creation myth. See Matthew W. Stirling *Origin Myth of Acoma and Other Records*, Bureau of American Ethnology Bulletin 135 (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1942). Stirling obtained the myth in 1928 from a group of Acoma visiting Washington.

<sup>12</sup> *Thelma and Louise* (1991), directed by Ridley Scott, ends with the two women, who are being chased by the police because Louise killed a man who threatened to rape Thelma, driving off a cliff in a 1966 Thunderbird.

<sup>13</sup> Castillo critiques the capitalist system that is driven by large corporations that exploit workers, particularly women of color who make up a large percentage of the labor pool, in order to make a profit. For more on how the capitalist system negatively impacts women of color see Chapter 2, "The 1986 Watsonville Women's Strike: A Case of Mexicana Activism," in Castillo's *The Massacre of the Dreamers* (1993).

<sup>14</sup> See for example, *Destilando Amor* (2007) in which the heroine, Teresa, who works in the fields with her mother harvesting agave, falls in love with Rodrigo, the Hacienda owner's son and the two lovers end up getting married. See also *Peregrina* (2006) in which the heroine, a dancer in the circus, falls in love with Rodolfo, the son of a wealthy family, whom she later ends up marrying. Although in both cases, it turns out that each heroine's father is actually the patriarch of a wealthy family, this is not revealed

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until the end of the story, and up until that point, marriage is viewed as the only option for the heroine to achieve financial security and social status. Even, when her true family ties are revealed, it is still through the man, her father, that the heroine is able to rightfully claim her place in the upper class.

<sup>15</sup> For example, in *La Gata Salvaje* (2003) the heroine, Rosaura, is frequently shown crying in the second half of the show when she is held as a prisoner in her own home by her evil second husband, Patricio, who threatens to take her daughter away if she leaves to be with Luis Mario, her first husband, whom she still loves, and does not realize is the father of her child.

### **Chapter 3: Literary Translations of the Telenovela in Sandra Cisneros' *Woman Hollering Creek and Caramelo***

When Castillo published *So Far From God* in 1993, Sandra Cisneros immediately recognized it as a telenovela, as evident in her quote on the back of the Penguin paperback edition. Presumably, Cisneros readily identifies Castillo's text as a telenovela because of her preoccupation with the form in literature. Cisneros' initial engagement with the telenovela is evident in her short fiction *Woman Hollering Creek and Other Stories* (1991) published two years prior to Castillo's text as well as her collection of poetry *Loose Woman* (1994) published shortly thereafter.<sup>1</sup> Although Castillo effectively beat Cisneros to the punch in terms of translating the telenovela into a novel form, rather than discourage Cisneros, it ostensibly renews her resolve to write her own. Cisneros not only successfully writes a Chicana telenovela, like Castillo, she also provides a more extensive and critical examination of the popular cultural form in *Caramelo* (2002). By defining the telenovela genre and theorizing the importance of the form, within the Mexican culture specifically, Cisneros helps to shape the critical, academic conversation about the telenovela in Chicana literature. Her longtime engagement with and extensive focus on the telenovela form, demands close attention to Cisneros' work to see the way in which she works up to and through her own literary translation of the popular genre.

Her sustained treatment of the telenovela genre reveals Cisneros' attempts to work out in fiction issues surrounding the power of national mythology to determine gender politics. She critically examines the mythologies along the lines of race/ethnicity,

class, and gender that the telenovela promotes and revises the genre, challenging traditional female gender roles of wives and mothers, which foster female dependence, servitude and sacrifice, to imagine the possibility of independent, self-sufficient, and empowered women. Cisneros grapples with the positive and negative aspects of the telenovela genre to illustrate how an escapist form of entertainment that reinforces traditional gender roles, can also prompt women to reflect critically upon and resist or reject their subordinate roles within the patriarchy. She emphasizes the ways in which Chicanas, collectively through discursive networks, actively engage the popular cultural form, often encouraging each other to become resistant readers and reject the mythical romance narrative in favor of female solidarity and a reality in which women seek help in each other more than men.

Since the mid-eighties when Cisneros first began publishing, her work has become a mainstay in high school and college classrooms as she is recognized as a prominent voice within the field of Mexican American literature.<sup>2</sup> While Cisneros' work is often aligned with larger literary trends such as post-modernism, and associated with well-established genre categories such as the bildungsroman, it is more commonly associated with culturally specific literary movements, such as the borderlands narrative that deals with geographical and linguistic borders as well as ethnic identity.<sup>3</sup> Critics have written about Cisneros' work in relation to issues of history and memory, as well as home and space, in the formation of Mexican-American communal and individual identities.<sup>4</sup> Scholars also discuss Cisneros' depiction of female gender roles within a Mexican-American cultural context, specifically referencing prominent female archetypes, such as

La Virgen of Guadalupe or La Llorona, to explore issues of motherhood, infanticide, sexuality, eroticism and spirituality in her work.<sup>5</sup>

While other critics, as noted above, discuss Cisneros' fiction in relation to a hybrid, ethnic-American identity, the borderlands, and Mexican culture, I use the terms Cisneros sets in the footnote (melodrama, political power, unbelievability, divine providence, history), which are useful for considering how telenovelas function in her earlier collection of short stories *Woman Hollering Creek*. An analysis of this type reveals that her critical reflection on the form begins in her earlier work and comes to the fore in *Caramelo*. Overall, my analysis of Cisneros' work illustrates a resistance literature that critically engages with and challenges the stereotypes and assumptions presented in telenovelas. While I acknowledge, as Sonía Saldívar-Hull argues, that telenovelas can be used to reinscribe traditional gender roles and appeal to the lower classes by promoting the myth of the American dream, Cisneros' work illustrates how Chicanas actively resist the dominant values presented in telenovelas.<sup>6</sup>

In addition to Saldívar-Hull, critic Susan Griffin also argues that Cisneros' "Woman Hollering Creek" shows how Mexican popular culture, specifically the telenovela, is "oppressive because of the limited conception of appropriate behavior for women" it presents (85). Although I agree with Griffin that "Cisneros depicts a world in which television, along with movies and songs, is becoming our common mythology" and such popular cultural forms often reinforce limited roles for women, Griffin overlooks the fact that viewers can and often do read popular culture forms such as the telenovela resistantly, ultimately revising women's roles to allow for more options (85). Both Saldívar-Hull and Griffin fail to acknowledge the ways in which female

protagonists in Cisneros' stories refuse to capitulate to traditional gender roles, as wives and mothers, and establish their autonomy by living life on their own terms, independent of a husband or boyfriend.

Telenovelas figure prominently in two stories featured in the collection, "Woman Hollering Creek" and "Bien Pretty." In "Woman Hollering Creek," the protagonist Cleófilas rejects the idea of tormented love promoted in telenovelas and refuses to accept a life of suffering, eventually taking direct action (with the help of other women) to improve her situation. Whether formed of casual acquaintances or intimate friends, the discursive network that develops around a telenovela creates a connection, if even temporarily, among female viewers and reveals the communal aspect of interpreting the popular cultural form. While discursive networks can empower individuals and encourage them to challenge traditional gender roles as I will demonstrate, they can also serve as a forum through which viewers reinforce the traditional gender roles represented in novelas for each other, like the interactions between Cleófilas and her good friend Chela. For Cleófilas specifically, the discursive network reinforces idealistic notions of romantic love.

Telenovelas operate as the lens through which Cleófilas and Chela view the world and understand their place in it. As a young woman living in a small, remote Mexican village, Cleófilas would go to Chela's "house to watch the latest telenovela episode and try to copy the way the women comb their hair, wear their makeup" (44). They discuss the latest beauty tips and fashion trends presented in the novelas and help each other emulate them, as demonstrated in the following exchange: "Did you see Lucía Méndez on the Bayer aspirin commercials—wasn't she lovely? Does she dye her hair do you

think? Cleófilas is going to go to the farmacia and buy a hair rinse; her girlfriend Chela will apply it—it's not that difficult at all" (44). Chela affirms and reinforces the views conveyed in the telenovela for Cleófilas. Describing what she will wear to Cleófilas' wedding, Chela states, "the dress I want to wear just needs to be altered a teensy bit to bring it up to date. See, I saw a new style last night that I thought would suit me. Did you watch last night's episode of *The Rich Also Cry*? Well, did you notice the dress the mother was wearing?" (46).<sup>7</sup> The opening question, "did you see" that punctuates the conversations between Cleófilas and Chela indicates that although they may not watch the novelas together, they engage in the communal activity of making meaning out of the shows. The women reaffirm for each other the mythology promoted within the telenovela that beauty equals happiness and therefore if they transform themselves to look like the heroines, they will be as happy as the women appear.

Instead of the conventional telenovela script, which starts with the happy couple suspended in a state of bliss, Cisneros begins the story with Cleófilas in a state of blissful ignorance watching telenovelas with Chela in Mexico, dreaming of the day she will get married:

What Cleófilas has been waiting for, has been whispering and sighing and giggling for, has been anticipating since she was old enough to lean against the window displays of gauze and butterflies and lace, is passion [...] passion in its purest crystalline essence. The kind the books and songs and telenovelas describe when one finds, finally, the great love of one's life, and does whatever one can, must do, at whatever the cost. (44)

Cleófilas believes in the world of desire represented in telenovelas in which women are beautiful and happy in love, despite the suffering or hardships they must endure. This idea is illustrated by one of her favorite novelas, “Tú o Nadie. ‘You or No One’” in which “the beautiful Lucía Méndez is having to put up with all kinds of hardships of the heart, separation and betrayal, and loving, always loving no matter what, because that is the most important thing” (44). Suffering is normalized, even given value in a relationship in telenovelas where the heroine is expected to suffer for love no matter what the cost. As Cleófilas explains, in one episode

Lucía confessed she loved him more than anyone in her life. In her life!  
And she sings the song “You or No One” in the beginning and end of the show. *Tú o Nadie*. Somehow one ought to live one’s life like that, don’t you think? You or no one. Because to suffer for love is good. The pain all sweet somehow. In the end. (45)

Cleófilas falsely concludes that if she sacrifices herself and her own desires, all the pain associated with love will somehow be transformed into sweetness. Like Soveida in *Face of an Angel*, Cleófilas believes the mythology promoted within telenovelas that love equals suffering. Naively, Cleófilas thinks that romantic love is the primary source of meaning in one’s life and therefore must be preserved at all costs, even if it means enduring physical and emotional pain.

Cleófilas equates the world of desire represented in telenovelas in which wealth is associated with beauty, romance, and happiness, with living in the U.S. As she contemplates moving to Seguin Texas with her new husband Juan Pedro, Cleófilas imagines that “she would get to wear outfits like the women on the *tele*, like Lucía

Méndez. And have a lovely house, and wouldn't Chela be jealous" (45). Cleófilas believes the myth (perpetuated by images in popular culture) that everyone in America is rich. Just as Fe in *So Far From God* focuses on achieving the American Dream, Cleófilas also aspires to a comfortable life symbolized by nice clothes and a beautiful house. However, as opposed to Fe who literally works herself to death to achieve financial independence, Cleófilas believes the mythology promoted within telenovelas that marriage will provide financial security and is the key to achieving the American Dream.

To her surprise, though, Seguí is not as lovely as it sounds. Cleófilas has traded one "town of dust and despair," full of gossips for another. She feels trapped in Seguí with no transportation or means to get around:

TV repair shop, drugstore, hardware, dry cleaner's, chiropractor's, liquor store, bail bonds, empty storefront, and nothing, nothing, nothing of interest. Nothing one could walk to, at any rate. Because the towns here are built so that you have to depend on husbands. Or you stay home. Or you drive. If you're rich enough to own, allowed to drive, your own car.

(50)

As a woman from the other side of the border, married to a chauvinist, working class man, Cleófilas' dependence upon Juan Pedro is absolute. "There is no place to go," as Cleófilas explains, "Unless one counts the neighbor ladies. Soledad on one side, Dolores on the other" (51). She is literally stuck between two women whose names, when translated, mean "solitude" and "pain." Cisneros' choice in the characters' names is important because, like the simply drawn stock characters in telenovelas that are marked as either good or bad through the visual cues of clothing and physical appearance, the

archetypal characters in Cisneros' stories are often identified through their names, which convey an aspect of their personalities. Like the sad, lonely lives of her neighbors, Cleófilas' life does not reflect the happy, affluent lifestyles of the heroines in the telenovelas with beautiful homes and nice cars.

Similar to Sofia in *So Far From God* whose husband Domingo gambles away her money and property instead of providing for her and their daughters, Cleófilas' husband Juan Pedro also fails to provide her and their son with a comfortable, financially secure life. Both women realize the fallacy of the mythology telenovelas promote that being married provides women with financial security. Instead, as a married woman Cleófilas is living without a television set, unable to watch her novelas regularly like she did in Mexico. "Except" as she explains, "now and again when her husband was away and she could manage it, the few episodes glimpsed at the neighbor lady Soledad's house [...] Soledad was often kind enough to retell what had happened on what episode of *María de Nadie*" (52). Unlike the lives of the heroines in the telenovelas, Cleófilas' life in Seguí is not a fairytale "full of happily ever after" as she expected. She also no longer has regular access to the narratives or the same discursive network to help mediate the telenovelas or the reality of her miserable married life.

Not only does the town of Seguí fail to reflect the high-class world of the novelas, but also Cleófilas' marriage to Juan Pedro does not conform to notions of traditional romance. This is evident in Cleófilas' description of her husband, who differs in physical appearance from the typical suave, gentlemen on the telenovelas and in no way represents the same romantic, sophisticated tastes of the elite, upper class men:

He is not very tall, no, and he doesn't look like the men on the *telenovelas*. His face still scarred from acne. And he has a bit of a belly from all the beer he drinks [...] and he doesn't care at all for music or *telenovelas* or romance or roses or the moon floating pearly over the *arroyo*, or through the bedroom window for that matter, shut the blinds and go back to sleep, this man, this father, this rival, this keeper, this lord, this master, this husband till kingdom come. (49)

Cleófilas does not lovingly adore her husband; instead, she relates to him as an authority figure, someone whom she must obey, not necessarily love. As she watches him from across the table putting food in his mouth Cleófilas thinks, "And this is the man I have waited my whole life for" (49). She wonders why she spent years waiting for a man who complains about the "shitty house," the baby's howling, and having to work to feed her. When she is changing the baby's diapers or washing the bathroom floor, "She has to remind herself why she loves him" (49). Juan Pedro is not the loving husband who Cleófilas dreamed about marrying as a young woman.

Cleófilas does not know how to reconcile the disjunction between the world of desire depicted in *telenovelas* and the harsh reality of her life. She is shocked

when the moment came, and he slapped her once, and then again, and again; until the lip split and bled an orchid of blood, she didn't fight back, she didn't break into tears, she didn't run away as she imagined she might when she saw such things in the *telenovelas*. (47)

Cleófilas always thought that she would run away if anything like that ever happened to her, yet Juan Pedro's actions left her so stunned, "speechless, motionless, numb," she

could not respond (48). Despite all the ways in which her life differs from the idealistic world represented in the telenovelas, Cleófilas hopelessly believes that the reality of living with an abusive husband in a dead end town will be transformed into the image of a happily married couple living in luxury.

As a young woman, Cleófilas thought marriage would provide a safe haven from the difficulties of life, just like it does for the young heroines in the novelas. Instead, like Mamá Lupita, Dolores and Soveida in *Face of an Angel*, Cleófilas' marriage exposes her to violence and provides the greatest obstacle to her own happiness. One evening Cleófilas overhears Juan Pedro and other men at the local bar laughing as one man, Maximiliano, jokes about killing his wife; she had come at him with a mop and so he had to shoot because she was armed. Cleófilas shivers to think of all the other countless stories in the news about violent acts against women: “This woman found on the side of the interstate. This one pushed from a moving car. This one’s cadaver, this one’s unconscious, this one’s beaten blue” (52). As a victim of domestic violence, Cleófilas’ life more closely mirrors the grisly news stories than the telenovelas.

Cleófilas’ turning point, the moment when she begins to acknowledge the fallacy of the romance narrative, occurs when Juan Pedro uses her book of love stories as a weapon. Her romantic illusions are finally shattered when he throws her favorite book of love stories in her face:

He had thrown a book. Hers. From across the room. A hot welt across the cheek. She could forgive that. But what stung more was the fact it was *her* book, a love story by Corín Tellado, what she loved most now that she lived in the U.S., without a television set, without the *telenovelas*. (52)

It is easier for Cleófilas to forgive Juan Pedro for hitting her than for defacing her favorite book by Corín Tellado, a famous Spanish author of romance novels, whose work is popular throughout Latin America, and rejecting all that it represents by literally throwing her romantic desires, and all of its attendant foundational fictions, in her face. Ironically, a romance novel, the source of Cleófilas' idealized, romantic illusions becomes the object, which shakes her, literally smacks her into reality.

Echoing Chávez, Cisneros underscores that many women, like Cleófilas, model their lives after the women in the telenovelas and in the end are forced to acknowledge the discrepancy between the world of desire the narratives represent, and the sad reality of their own lives with marriages marked by violence and danger.

Cleófilas thought her life would have to be like that, like a *telenovela*, only now the episodes got sadder and sadder. And there were no commercials in between for comic relief. And no happy ending in sight. She thought this when she sat with the baby out by the creek behind the house. Cleófilas de . . . ? But somehow she would have to change her name to Topazio, or Yesenia, Cristal, Adriana, Stefania, Andrea, something more poetic than Cleófilas. Everything happened to women with names like jewels. But what happened to Cleófilas? Nothing. But a crack in the face.

(52-3)

Cleófilas realizes that unlike the heroines in the telenovelas with precious sounding names who live happily ever, she is relegated to a sad life of domestic abuse, an all too common existence for many women in the real world.

Telenovelas have the potential to be detrimental as Saldívar-Hull argues because they often sanction male dominance and female subordination, but I do not believe that the act of consuming telenovelas and the conservative ideology they promote, *necessarily* forces women, like Cleófilas, to accept a life of suffering as Saldívar-Hull contends.<sup>8</sup> Like Mara and Soveida in *Face of an Angel* who remain committed to breaking the cycle of domestic violence in their family, Cleófilas also refuses to sacrifice her own and her son's safety and well being for love. Instead, in the end, Cleófilas decides to leave Seguí with the help of two American women to return to her family in Mexico. Cleófilas learns from watching telenovelas that one “does whatever one can, must do, at whatever the cost” for the great love of one’s life, but she refuses to live by this maxim (44). Initially, Cleófilas puts up with all kinds of hardships and tries to continue loving Juan Pedro despite his abuse and betrayal. She once believed that suffering for love was good, but experience shows her that the pain is not sweet somehow in the end. Cleófilas wants to believe in the romantic idealism shown in the novelas, but ultimately she resists the traditional values they uphold. She refuses to remain “speechless, motionless, numb” in the face of Juan Pedro’s abuse, the way the women do in the novelas which, in some ways sanction the subjugation of women by promoting and romanticizing the image of the suffering woman (48). Like Sofi in *So Far From God* who challenges the gender stereotype promoted within telenovelas of the silent suffering woman by taking direct action to improve not only her own life, but her daughters' as well, Cleófilas also refuses to suffer in silence and takes action to provide a better life for herself and her son.

Cisneros, like Castillo, presents female characters as resistant readers who challenge the mythology promoted within telenovelas that love overcomes all obstacles

and leads to happiness. Cleófilas' experience of marriage disavows her of the illusion that romance and love will solve all of her problems. Instead of clinging to the illusions presented in the novelas, Cleófilas relies upon the kind help of other women to escape from Juan Pedro. While at a doctor's appointment, Cleófilas meets Graciela, the medical assistant who notices black and blue marks all over her body and makes arrangements to help Cleófilas leave her abusive husband. Graciela calls her friend Felice and asks her to give Cleófilas a ride to San Antonio where she can get on a Greyhound bus to travel back to Mexico. After telling Felice to write down the woman's name and spelling it out "C-L-E-O-F-I-L-A-S," Graciela explains that it refers to "one of those Mexican saints, I guess. A martyr or something" (54). Unlike the women in the telenovelas whose names sound shiny and pretty like gemstones, Cleófilas' name implies holiness and honor. Fittingly, Graciela and Felice, whose names translate to grace and happiness, help Cleófilas escape, in contrast to her neighbors, Soledad and Dolores, who exacerbate Cleófilas' pain and loneliness. Given the dramatic nature of the situation, Graciela admits to Felice as she's hanging up that yes, life is "a regular soap opera sometimes" (55). Cisneros intentionally uses the word, soap opera instead of telenovela to emphasize the difference between the two popular cultural forms; the telenovela has a defined happy ending whereas the soap opera, has no resolution or closure. Graciela and Felice help conclude the tragic, unending soap opera of Cleófilas' life in the U.S. by facilitating her trip back home to her family in Mexico.

Cisneros deviates from the traditional telenovela genre, which culminates with the happy couple united in marriage, to end the story with female solidarity, symbolized by the union of Felice and Cleófilas driving out of town in Felice's own pickup truck,

hollering and laughing as they cross the *arroyo*. Unlike Griffin who upholds Felice as the sole and primary example of female resistance in the story due to her “emotional and economic self-sufficiency,” I argue that while Felice facilitates Cleófilas’ empowerment, ultimately, Cleófilas herself must consent to leave Juan Pedro and actively resist male dominance by asserting her own power (91). Like Chávez and Castillo, in this final scene, Cisneros illustrates how women encourage each other to reject dominant values and gender roles. It is only with the help of Graciela and Felice that Cleófilas eventually gains the courage to make changes in her own life. She resists the role of the silent suffering woman and with Felice’s help leaves behind her abusive husband and her confined life in Seguin. The narrative is resolved and equilibrium reestablished with the dissolution of Cleófilas’ marriage and her return to her family in Mexico. Cisneros revises the telenovela form to present marriage as the source of, not the solution to, Cleófilas’ problems and provides an alternate ending, in which Cleófilas, like Lupe in “Bien Pretty” rejects traditional gender roles and embraces her own independence.

In “Bien Pretty,” Cisneros employs specific elements of the telenovela genre (cultural archetypes, conventionalization of place, obstacles to the union of the heterosexual couple at the center, etc.), but ultimately deviates from the telenovela script, by depicting a romantic relationship that fails to end with the marriage of the happy couple, and exposes the fallacy of the romance narrative. Instead Cisneros illustrates how the protagonist Lupe Arredondo, a young Chicana, revises the dominant Mexican cultural narrative surrounding the national Prince Popocatepetl/Princess Ixtaccíhuatl volcano myth and refuses to comply with traditional gender roles in which women are dependent upon men. As the story opens, Lupe, a struggling artist, has recently left California and

her cheating ex-boyfriend, who ran off with some blonde, to take a job as the coordinator of a community art's center in San Antonio, Texas. Cisneros identifies romance, specifically a failed relationship, as the driving force behind Lupe's decision to move across country. But Lupe seeks to escape from the failed romance of the past and move forward to establish her own life, as an artist. Cisneros foreshadows Lupe's eventual revision of traditional female gender roles as she moves beyond romance to focus on her art, like Soveida eventually moves beyond romance to focus on the art of serving others.

Cisneros uses archetypes and the conventionalization of place, both characteristics of the telenovela genre, to create a *mise en scène* that sets the stage for the Mexican drama to unfold. She fills the text with iconic images to evoke a sense of Mexican nationality, which, as critic Ana Lopez indicates in the article, "Our Welcomed Guest Telenovelas in Latin America," allows an imagined community (in this case Chicana/o readers) to rally around specific images of itself (262). Cisneros describes traditional Mexican cultural artifacts that serve as symbols, metonyms for Mexico and the large Mexican-American population in the Southwest of the U.S. For example, Lupe catalogues the items in the house she rents from a couple that is studying abroad in Nayarit, Mexico. She explains, "I was sharing residence with: (8) Oaxacan black pottery pieces, signed Diego Rivera monotype, star-shaped piñata, replica of the goddess Coatlicue, Frida Kahlo altar, punched tin Virgin de Guadalupe chandelier, death mask of Pancho Villa with mouth slightly open" among other things (139-40). These artifacts represent Mexican art, indigenous icons, religious symbols, and revolutionary characters, but also include Mexican female archetypes, from the Aztec goddess of creation

Coatlicue, to the Virgin of Guadalupe, and the renowned Mexican female artist, Frida Kahlo.<sup>9</sup>

The symbolic significance of these artifacts foreshadows or helps the reader to understand what is at stake in Lupe's narrative. For example, while archetypes such as la Virgen, as previously noted, represent traditional female virtues of piety and sacrifice, the goddess Coatlicue represents the intertwined forces of creation/birth and destruction/death. Coatlicue embraces the powerful aspects of destruction, violence, and resistance as necessary aspects of creation, birth, and life. Cisneros also refers to Frida Kahlo and her husband, Diego Rivera, of Mexican national acclaim, and conjures images of their tumultuous relationship replete with infidelity, divorce, remarriage, and a miscarriage.<sup>10</sup> Kahlo, an icon of female strength and artistic achievement, provides a source of encouragement for the protagonist Lupe, who also endures the ravages of a painful love affair and eventually establishes herself as an artist. Cisneros refers to female archetypes that symbolize female creative power, announcing Lupe's ultimate empowerment.

In addition to the use of archetypes and the conventionalization of place, telenovelas also revolve around a struggle for the happy couple to be reunited. Similarly, Cisneros' story also focuses on Lupe's love for and eventual loss of Flavio Munguía. After arriving in Texas, Lupe hires Flavio, as a pest controller, to rid the house she is renting of cucarachas (roaches). The infestation of roaches is the mechanism by which Cisneros introduces Flavio into the text and sets up a meeting between the two lovers. After Flavio sprays the house with insecticide, Lupe ends up asking him to pose for her painting of Popo and Ixta. As she watches him spraying baseboards, Lupe thinks, "you

might be just the Prince Popo I've been waiting for with that face of a sleeping Olmec, the heavy Oriental eyes, the thick lips and wide nose, that profile carved from onyx" (144). Initially, Lupe seems to admire Flavio objectively, as a perfect model for her portrait of prince Popo, but it becomes quickly apparent that she is physically attracted to him. Like Sofi's initial infatuation with Domingo in *So Far From God*, Lupe is also overcome by Flavio's beauty, which she describes with a sense of awe and reverence:

God made you from red clay, Flavio, with his hands. This face of yours like the clay heads they unearth in Teotihuacán. Pinched this cheekbone, then that. Used obsidian flints for the eyes, those eyes dark as the sacrificial wells they cast virgins into. Selected hair thick as cat whiskers. Thought for a long time before deciding on this nose, elegant and wide. And the mouth, ah! Everything silent and powerful and very proud kneaded into the mouth. And then he blessed you, Flavio, with skin sweet as burnt-milk candy, smooth as river water. He made you bien pretty.

(152)

Filled with more than just lust and desire, Lupe ends up falling in love with Flavio and the two soon have sex.

Similar to a telenovela, circumstance brings them together and their love grows to a passionate intensity. After Flavio makes love to her in Spanish, whispering things like "mi vida, mi preciosa, mi chiquitita," Lupe feels "incredible happiness" (154). She realizes her loss of control in regards to Flavio when she wonders, "What's happened to me? Flavio was just Flavio, a man I wouldn't've looked at twice before. But now anyone who reminds me of him [...] I find myself looking at, lingering over, appreciating" (154).

Images of Flavio invade Lupe's thoughts. Her passion for him becomes an obsession that consumes and distracts her from her art. As she explains,

I might be working on a charcoal sketch, chewing on a pinch of a kneaded rubber eraser I've absentmindedly put in my mouth, and then suddenly I'm thinking about the thickness of Flavio's earlobes between my teeth. Or a wisp of violet smoke might rise from someone's cigarette at the Bar America, and remind me of that twist of sinew from wrist to elbow in Flavio's pretty arms. Or say Danny and Craig from Tienda Guadalupe Folk Art & Gifts are demonstrating how South American rain sticks work, and boom—there's Flavio's voice. (155)

Yet, like most telenovela plots, as soon as Lupe becomes enamored with Flavio, obstacles appear to separate the happy couple.

Cisneros employs lost love, one of the central motives (in addition to unrequited or forbidden love) used to advance the narrative of a telenovela, as a pivotal point in the narrative. Just as unexpectedly as Lupe finds love on the pink circular for pest control that Flavio leaves in her front gate, she loses it over a plate of chilaquiles and breakfast tacos at the Taco Haven. Midway through breakfast on Sunday morning, Flavio announces, "My life, I have to go [...] I must go. To Mexico [...] I have family obligations" (156). While Flavio explains that he was previously married back in Mexico and has seven kids between two women, Lupe stares out the window at the mangy red dog that totters by the curb. "The dog was real sick. Big bald patches. Gummy eyes that bled like grapes" she says, "really it made you sick to look at the thing, hobbling about like that in jerky steps as if it were dancing backward and had only three legs" (156).

Lupe seems to identify with the dog's obvious pain and vulnerability, tottering and jerking back and forth, feeling sick to her stomach after Flavio's shocking blow. As he explains that his departure has nothing to do with her, Lupe watches "the dog eating something, jaws working in spasmodic gulps" and thinks "somebody must have felt sorry for it and tossed it a last meal, but the kind thing would've been to shoot it" (156). Lupe recognizes herself in the dog and realizes it is more humane to deliver a creature from its misery through death than prolong its suffering with the temporary solace of pity. Rather than listen to Flavio's empty words, "loving one person doesn't take away from loving another," Lupe would prefer that he put her out of her misery (156). Similar to Fe in *So Far From God*, who is so traumatized when her fiancé Tom breaks their engagement that she cannot stop screaming for weeks, Lupe is also so shocked and hurt by the loss of Flavio's love that she would prefer to be killed.

Cisneros disrupts the narrative convention of the telenovela, in which after its initial loss the desired object is recuperated and the happy couple reunites. Like Chávez and Castillo, she rewrites the narrative to present an empowered heroine, who survives the loss of love and whose happiness does not hinge on the return of a man. In the wake of Flavio's departure, Lupe finds herself,

watching the *telenovelas*. Avoiding board meetings, rushing home from work, stopping at Torres Taco Haven on the way and buying taquitos to go. Just so I could be seated in front of the screen in time to catch *Rosa Salvaje* with Verónica Castro as the savage Rose of the title. Or Daniela Romo in *Balada por un Amor*. Or Adela Noriega in *Dulce Desafío*. I watched them all. In the name of research. (161)

Watching telenovelas is a method of research that allows Lupe to critically reflect on her life. Lupe validates the consumption of this national form as a medium through which valuable information about male/female gender roles and expectations regarding love and romance is disseminated. Furthermore, Lupe sees herself reflected in the telenovelas; her life parallels the heroines who are often jilted by their lovers and made to feel that the suffering they endure for love is sweet, as the above title, *Dulce Desafío* (sweet struggle or challenge), indicates. Lupe immerses herself in watching novelas in order to understand the allure of the romance myth and get out of the cycle, to overcome her obsession with and dependence upon men.

Cisneros makes a decisive shift from the genre conventions to show how, as a result of her research, Lupe, like Soveida and Cleófilas, rejects the scripted romantic scenario presented in telenovelas, in which women are destined to suffer for love. As a resistant reader, Lupe refuses to comply with traditional gender roles upheld in telenovelas that present men as always in control and the women as either violent and bad or gentle and good. She states:

I started dreaming of these Rosas and Briandas and Luceros. And in my dreams I'm slapping the heroine to her senses, because I want them to be women who make things happen, not women who things happen to. Not loves that are *tormentosos*. Not men powerful and passionate versus women either volatile and evil, or sweet and resigned. But women. Real women. The one's I've loved all my life. *If you don't like it lárgate, honey*. Those women. The one's I've known everywhere except on TV, in books and magazines. *Las* girlfriends. *Las comadres*. Our mamas and *tías*.

Passionate *and* powerful, tender and volatile, brave. And, above all, fierce.

(161)

Lupe does not want to be passive like the heroines in the novelas, rather she wants to force them to wake up and realize that they are acquiescing to their own disempowerment. Like Sofi and Cleófilas, she rejects the image of the silent suffering woman promoted within telenovelas. Having experienced a torturous love affair with Flavio, she is no longer sucked in by the illusion that such an intense, unpredictable love is satisfying. Lupe identifies the inherent tension in telenovelas between the world of desire and the world of social convention. As a viewer she expects and demands that telenovelas achieve a level of verisimilitude, constructing situations and characters in accord with life where real women, the women we love (mothers, aunts and friends) are quite powerful and brave. Lupe acknowledges that in real life women often do stand up for themselves, boldly telling men that if they don't like it they can leave (*lárgate, honey*) as opposed to the weeping heroines in the telenovelas who beg men for love and acceptance.

Cisneros also illustrates the discursive network that develops among telenovela viewers and how it facilitates resistant readings of the popular cultural form. For example, while buying a copy of *Vanidades*, one of the most popular women's magazines throughout Latin America with content and readership similar to that of *Vogue* in the U.S. and Europe, Lupe strikes up a conversation with the store clerk, who notices the name of a famous telenovela actress on the cover of the magazine.<sup>11</sup> Immediately the two strangers strike up a conversation after finding common ground:

“Libertad Palomares,” she said looking at the cover.

“*Amar es Vivir*,” I answered automatically as if it were my motto. Libertad Palomares. A big Venezuelan *telenovela* star. Big on crying. Every episode she weeps like a Magdalene. Not me. I couldn’t cry if my life depended on it.

“Right she works her part real good?”

“I never miss an episode.” That was the truth.

“Me neither. *Si Dios quiere*. I’m going to get home in time today to watch it. It’s getting good.”

“Looks like it’s going to finish pretty soon.”

“Hope not. How much is this? I might buy one too. *Three-fifty! Bien* ‘sensive.” (162).

The telenovela *Amar es Vivir* (with its dramatic title equating love to life) creates an instantaneous connection between Lupe and the woman working at Centeno’s Mexican Supermarket. They go from being acquaintances to being united through a shared devotion. As novela fans who never miss an episode, the women discuss the actress’s talent for exaggerated displays of emotion, the development of the plot, and their hope that the novela will not end soon, an ending being one of the most distinct features of the form. Cisneros further underscores the cultural currency of the telenovela form by indicating how magazines like *Vanidades* are another popular medium used to promote and disseminate information about telenovelas. Realizing that she shares similar interests with Lupe, the clerk also considers buying a copy of *Vanidades*, but is deterred by the exorbitant price.

This supermarket interaction between the two women exemplifies critic Mary Ellen Brown's theory that within discursive networks novela viewers connect across class differences and, although many viewers watch soap operas at home alone, the solitary viewing experience is not the end of their involvement; they join in the communal activity of making meaning out of the cultural form.<sup>12</sup> In this case, Lupe and the woman at Centeno's watch the telenovela *Amar es Vivir* independently, but are joined in a discussion about the show at the local supermarket. The communal telenovela watching practices creates an instant solidarity between the two women. Although this discursive community ultimately cannot be sustained due to class differences, for a moment while standing at the checkout, the women are united. Thus, in a way, the virtual community of telenovela viewers is episodic, like the popular cultural form itself.

Lupe further exemplifies how fans can use discursive networks surrounding telenovelas to question rather than confirm their social status. Unlike Cleófilas' conversations with Chela, which reaffirm her belief in the romance narrative, the discussion that Lupe has with the woman at Centeno's inspires her to question the socially subordinated role they both occupy as Mexican-American women. Lupe is motivated to construct the world in her own terms, as an independent woman, not resigned to an unhappy life with a dead-end job. She openly interrogates the novela form and considers why she and other women watch telenovelas. According to Lupe,

*Amar es Vivir*. What it comes down to for that woman at Centeno's and for me. It was enough to keep us tuning in every day at six thirty, another episode, another thrill. To relive that living when the universe ran through the blood like river water. Alive. Not the weeks spent writing grant

proposals, not the forty hours standing behind a cash register shoving cans of refried beans into plastic sacks. Hell, no. This wasn't what we were put on the planet for. Not ever. (163)

Lupe articulates the sense of excitement and thrill that telenovelas create by providing a break from mundane repetitive jobs, in her case writing grant proposals and for the woman at Centeno's packing groceries, while simultaneously reinforcing their class differences. The telenovela allows them to live vicariously the intense, adventurous lives for which they are destined and becomes a space to imagine heroism through resistance.

Cisneros emphasizes that entertainment does not always mean a lack of critical engagement, and popular cultural forms, like the telenovela, can foster and invite self-reflection as in Lupe's case. Delivering her manifesto, Lupe declares:

Not Lola Beltrán sobbing "*Soy infeliz*" into her four *cervezas*. But Daniela Romo singing "*Ya no. Es verdad que te adoro, pero más me adoro yo.*" I love you, honey, but I love me more. One way or another. Even if it's only the lyrics to a stupid pop hit. We're going to right the world and live. I mean live our lives the way lives were meant to be lived. With the throat and wrists. With rage and desire, and joy and grief, and love till it hurts, maybe. But goddamn, girl. Live. (163)

Unlike the stereotypical heroines of the novelas, Lupe refuses to wallow in lovesick unhappiness pitifully crying into her beer. Instead, she declares confidently, that although she adores her lover, she loves herself more. Like Soveida, Lupe learns to love and respect herself and refuses to allow men, like Flavio, the power to make her feel unhappy. She declares that she and other viewers, like the woman at Centeno's will live life with

abandon the way it was meant to be lived. Whether it is through the lyrics to a pop song, or the latest episode of a telenovela, Lupe is determined to live with intention. She embodies a resistant reader, a woman who enjoys the vicarious pleasure novelas provide, while simultaneously rejecting the role of the passive woman presented in traditional romance. Cisneros deviates from the conventional resolution of the telenovela genre, in which equilibrium is typically reestablished with the unification of the happy couple, and revises the form to present a different resolution in which equilibrium is reestablished through female solidarity. Like Cleófilas and Felice in “Woman Hollering Creek,” Lupe and the woman at Centeno’s empower each other to reject traditional romance.

Cisneros illustrates how instead of serving as a vehicle to promote national mythologies, in this case telenovelas (and the discursive network that forms among fans) serve as a catalyst to empower Lupe. Researching telenovelas prompts Lupe to reflect on and later reject the traditional gender roles and expectations they depict, which do not conform to her experiences. Lupe returns to the painting of Popo and Ixta, for which Flavio initially posed, to revise the national mythology the two lovers represent. She describes this transformation:

Got a good idea and redid the whole thing. Prince Popo and Princess Ixta trade places. After all, who’s to say the sleeping mountain isn’t the prince, and the voyeur the princess, right? So I’ve done it my way. With Prince Popocatépetl lying on his back instead of the Princess. Of course, I had to make some anatomical adjustments in order to simulate the geographical silhouettes. I think I’m going to call it El Pipi del Popo. I kind of like it.

(163)

Lupe subverts the gender hierarchy by placing Popo in the submissive, supine position, traditionally occupied by the female, and puts Ixta in the dominant position gazing down at Popo, thus taking on the conventionally male role of the voyeur. Lupe is not a passive receptor of culturally produced values and images, but rather an active viewer who feels empowered to revise dominant cultural narratives to reflect her own particular, changing reality. With this episode Cisneros emphasizes that telenovelas can be used either to assimilate or accommodate viewers to dominative cultural/national mythologies or to contest and resist them. In the end, Lupe rejects the national mythology of Popo and Ixta, and refuses to sacrifice her own happiness to gain another's love, figuring that if a man doesn't like it, well *lárgate honey*, she does not need him.

Although Griffin states that Cleófilas' response to telenovelas is different than Lupe's and upholds Lupe as a more transgressive female character because she "realizes what the attraction of the telenovelas is" and grows frustrated with the limited female roles they present, I see Cleófilas and Lupe as equally caught up in the myth of idealized, heteronormative romance and both subsequently recognize its fallacy. Lupe is no more immune than Cleófilas to the alluring myth of true love presented in the telenovelas, evidenced by her all consuming love for Flavio. Lupe, like Sofi, Fe, and Caridad, only realizes that romance is an illusion after getting hurt and being abandoned by a man, in this case Flavio who leaves Lupe to return to Mexico. Cleófilas' act of defiance and survival, parallels Lupe's own in "*Bien Pretty*," exemplifying that women do not passively consume the dominant ideology promoted in novelas, but rather read them resistively, by rejecting the narratives of suffering they promote. Both women refuse to be compliant, obedient, or submissive to a man, whether a lover or a spouse. By reading

these two stories, as directly engaging the telenovela form, readers gain an appreciation of the valuable social information (mythologies about love, romance, class, race/ethnicity, and gender) disseminated within the novelas, as well as the powerful impact this popular cultural form has on viewers and how it influences views of gender and expectations of marriage on a national scale. Like Chávez and Castillo, Cisneros not only engages but, more importantly revises, the telenovela genre and challenges the dominative romance narratives by presenting women as resistant readers who actively defy the mythologies regarding race/ethnicity, class, and gender, promoted within the form.

While Cisneros incorporates and reflects upon the telenovela genre in *Woman Hollering Creek*, she engages the popular cultural form even more critically, as evident in the footnote, and extensively, given the text's scope and focus, in the novel *Caramelo*. Given that Cisneros builds up to *Caramelo* for quite some time, publishing the novel over ten years after initially flirting with the idea of the telenovela in *Woman Hollering Creek*, it seems suspect that she would feel compelled to add a footnote explaining and contextualizing the form. While clearly this move serves to make subtext, text, it also may hint at Cisneros' effort to bring the telenovela, and all of its attendant critical and cultural conversations, to a wider audience. So, while Cisneros follows Castillo's lead, creating a family saga every bit as melodramatic as a telenovela, she also explains her engagement with the form upfront, which Castillo sees no reason to do.

Described as “a riotous family fiesta,” “crowded with the souvenirs and memories of the dramas of everyday life,” *Caramelo* exhibits many of the formal characteristics of the telenovela genre (episodic, melodramatic, focus on domestic sphere, etc.).<sup>13</sup> Yet

Cisneros simultaneously revises the genre, challenging the mythologies about race/ethnicity, class, and gender it promotes, to illustrate that love does not always overcome social conventions, which prohibit the union of people from different racial or class backgrounds, or end in marriage. The novel captures and reflects the dramatic intrigue of real life thus further underscoring a point Cisneros makes in the footnote, that art imitates life. In this exaggerated, family saga, the primary narrator, Celaya, known affectionately as Lala, traces the convoluted history of the Reyes family. Like Soveida in *Face of an Angel*, Lala goes back to the lives of her grandparents (Narcisco and Soledad), the story of her own parents' relationship (Inocencio and Zoila), and her experiences growing up among extended family members, aunts, uncles, and cousins.

She moves back and forth in time narrating different episodes from the past. For example, the first section of the novel, "Recuerdo de Acapulco," (memory of Acapulco) begins with Lala's memory of her family's annual trip across country to visit their grandparents in Mexico City. The narrative then shifts to a time before Lala was born, in "When I was Dirt" as she narrates the story of her grandparents. In the third and final section, Lala segues to telling the stories of her own parents as the title indicates, "The Eagle and the Serpent: or My Mother and My Father," calling to mind the creation of Mexico and the image of the nation in the flag. The episodic nature of the text creates a sense of the passage of time, similar to that in real life, which allows readers to connect the world of the story with the world outside the text.<sup>14</sup> This narrative technique, also evident in Chávez's *Face of an Angel*, which is characteristic of the telenovela genre, blurs the line between fiction and reality to create a text with a high degree of verisimilitude. Cisneros creates narratively what telenovelas create visually.

The episodic nature of the text is particularly pronounced in the second section of the novel in which Lala dialogues with her grandparents as she attempts to tell their stories. The back and forth exchange between Lala and the Awful Grandmother is visually marked, as the Grandmother's comments which appear in bold face type are interspersed throughout the section.<sup>15</sup> By structuring the novel as a series of conversations between Lala and her other family members, Cisneros creates the sense of a dramatic performance, as if the narrator is telling the story to an audience. She mimics the logic of oral storytelling evident in most serial dramas, in which events unfold in whatever order the narrator chooses to reveal them and are not necessarily causally linked.<sup>16</sup> The connection between storytelling and telenovelas is made explicitly clear in the footnote, as previously noted, in which Cisneros states that the telenovela is “storytelling at its very best since it has the power of a true Scheherazade—it keeps you coming back for more” (409). Like Scheherazade captivating the Persian king night after night with her stories, telenovelas keep audience members tuning in night after night for the next episode.

Cisneros emphasizes the power of Lala's storytelling skills throughout the novel. Lala's consciousness of her role as the narrator is a rhetorical device Cisneros utilizes to call attention to the artifice of telling stories and emphasize that invention and exaggeration are integral to the process of narration, as in telenovelas. In their ongoing conversation, Lala and the Awful Grandmother argue about the role of the truth in storytelling. From the outset Lala states that she is relating the family stories “how I heard or didn't hear them;” and presents things “how I imagine the stories happened, then” (89). She underscores the fact that a good story is not one, which faithfully

represents the past, but rather one full of drama: “I have to exaggerate. It’s just for the sake of the story. I need details. And you never tell me anything” (92). Lala explains to the Awful Grandmother, “You don’t remember or you don’t want to remember the details, and for a story to be believable you have to have details” (124). In order to be considered believable, a narrative must have enough details to be life like, to seem real, and ironically whether or not these details are true or false is not relevant, as Lala indicates.

Cisneros wrestles with the question of whether telenovelas imitate life or life imitates telenovelas, and ultimately, she concludes that fictional narratives, like telenovelas, merely reflect and can never eclipse the drama inherent in real life. Chávez also touches on this paradox in *Face of an Angel* when Dolores tells Soveida, that no one would believe her life's story if she told it because it is more fantastical than fiction. Unlike Soveida, who is compelled by the women in her family to tell their stories, Lala is criticized by her grandmother for how she narrates the Reyes’ family history. While the Awful Grandmother complains that Lala's version of the story is “nothing but lies from beginning to end,” Lala states, “they’re not lies, they’re healthy lies. So as to fill in the gaps. You’re just going to have to trust me. It will turn out pretty in the end, I promise” (188). Lala indicates that in the context of telling stories, lies become “healthy,” a natural and perhaps even beneficial part of crafting a tale; arguably lies, exaggerations of the truth, enhance the story. Thus the ability to tell healthy lies is a form of artifice necessary to tell a good story and does not detract from the story’s believability but rather enhances it. Lala questions the Awful Grandmother, “What kind of story would this be with just facts?” to which Soledad declares, “The truth!” (156). Lala responds by stating that, “it

depends on whose truth you're talking about. The same story becomes a different story depending on who is telling it" (156). In this dialogue, Cisneros emphasizes that truth is relative and facts change depending on the narrator.

The way a narrator alters a story is a point Chávez also underscores in *Face of an Angel*, when Mara and Soveida challenge the truth of the "official" family record and attempt to undo the lies told by the men in their family. In this case, the Awful Grandmother is challenging the truth of Lala's version of the past. Yet just because the Awful Grandmother claims to be only stating the facts does not mean that her account is any more believable than Lala's. As the narrator, Lala is not concerned with seeking the truth or writing a historical account of the past, but rather with creating a narrative, telling a good story by weaving together exaggerated truths and healthy lies, which is the opposite of Mara and Soveida who focus on undoing lies. The different aims of the narrators in *Caramelo* and *Face of an Angel*, Lala and Soveida respectively, reflect the authors' different purposes in writing. While Chávez emphasizes the dangers of adhering to foundational fictions and historical romance narratives, Cisneros focuses on crafting, a good story, which, whether factually accurate or not, like a telenovela, achieves a high level of verisimilitude by blending exaggeration with truth.

Throughout the novel Cisneros illustrates how, as she indicates in the footnote, Mexicans conceptualize the dramatic and unexpected course of their lives in terms of the telenovela.<sup>17</sup> She describes characters' direct engagement with the popular cultural form and how it informs and influences their understanding of the vicissitudes of life. For example, the Awful Grandmother envisions the story of her life unfolding in a way similar to a telenovela. As Lala begins telling her Grandmother's story, (including her

mother's sudden death, her father's subsequent remarriage and his decision to give her away to a cousin in Mexico City), the Awful Grandmother interrupts her to say, "So this part of the story if it were a *fotonovela* or *telenovela* could be called *Solamente Soledad* [Only Loneliness] or *Sola en el mundo* [Alone in the world], or *I'm Not to Blame*, or *What an Historia I've Lived*" (95). Telenovelas are the means through which the Awful Grandmother understands and interprets her life and the world around her and Cisneros suggests, from the outset, that they should become so for the reader as well.

Cisneros further reinforces how telenovelas serve as a mirror through which viewers understand and see reflected the chaotic history of their own lives in the last chapter, "The Children and Grandchildren of Zoila and Inocencio Reyes Cordially Invite You to Celebrate Thirty Years of Marriage." In the midst of his anniversary party, Inocencio reflects on the unimaginable twists and turns of fate and tells Lala that life is like a telenovela:

Imagine the unimaginable, Father says, looking out into the dance floor at the bodies shaking and marching and prancing and strutting in a circus circle. —Imagine the unimaginable. Think of the most unbelievable thing that could happen and, believe me, Destiny will outdo you and come up with something even more unbelievable. Life's like that. My Got! What a *telenovela* our lives are! (428)

Looking at the guests, family members and friends, dancing at his anniversary party, Inocencio reflects upon his life, not only his marriage, but the family he has created and realizes that "life's never like you plan" (426). He revels in the amazing wonder of destiny- the creative power to weave a telenovela out of each life— interspersing lives

with more drama and intrigue, both pain and joy, than any person could plan herself. Lala concurs with her father's reflections:

It's true. La Divina Providencia is the most imaginative writer. Plotlines convolute and spiral, lives intertwine, coincidences collide, seemingly random happenings are laced with knots, figure eights, and double loops, designs more intricate than the fringe of a silk *rebozo*. No, I couldn't make this up. Nobody could make up our lives. (429)

Cisneros culminates the novel by reemphasizing that the convoluted episodes of a riveting telenovela, like the interwoven threads of a beautiful tapestry, reflect the exquisite, intricate patterns of our lives as created by La Divina Providencia.

Like a telenovela, Cisneros' novel hinges on the tension between reality/convention and fiction/desire. From the outset Cisneros announces that the text is an exaggeration as indicated by the subtitle "Puro Cuento" (Pure story) and the epigraph "Cuéntame algo, aunque sea una mentira" (Tell me a story, even if it's a lie). But she creates a sense of ambiguity about the novel by describing it in contradictory terms, as a pure (authentic or true) story (fiction or tale). This is an oxymoron, a combination of opposites: truth and fiction. She implies that the narrative, while a complete fabrication, also has a genuine, life like quality. The way Cisneros frames the story, by underscoring the narrator's ambiguous relationship with the "truth," draws the reader's attention to the exaggerated, unbelievable aspects of the text. Cisneros admits that she is a "hocicona" (bigmouth, talker) and the stories that follow in the novel "are nothing but story," but she declares that as a storyteller she is compelled to ask questions and create believable answers, not tell the truth.

She apologizes in advance if in the process of telling her story she has unknowingly revealed the truth. As she states,

I have invented what I do not know and exaggerated what I do to continue the family tradition of telling healthy lies. If, in the course of my inventing, I have inadvertently stumbled on the truth, *perdónenme*. To write is to ask questions. It doesn't matter if the answers are true or *puro cuento*. After all and everything only the story is remembered, and the truth fades away like the pale blue ink on a cheap embroidery pattern.

She dismisses the value of the truth by stating that it is ephemeral compared to a story, an exaggerated or fabricated version of the past, that endures. While sharing her story with Lala, the Awful Grandmother admits that “it was only later when she was near the end of her life that she began to doubt what she'd actually seen and what she'd embroidered over time, because after a while the embroidery seems real and the real seems embroidery” (135). Cisneros blurs the line between fact and fiction indicating that with the passage of time it becomes difficult to distinguish between invented stories of the past and what really happened. The tension between the world of desire and the world of social convention is evident in the novel where invented stories, which reflect one's projected desires, overcome and outlive real life, where people must conform to social convention and often do not get what they want.

In addition to highlighting the tension between the world of desire and the world of social convention at the core of the telenovela narrative, Cisneros also exposes mythologies relating to race/ethnicity and class, disseminated through the form. Like Cleófilas and Chela who prefer the fantastical world of the telenovelas to the reality of

their lives in Mexico, as a young girl Lala also perpetuates a false sense of reality by telling stories, a Reyes family talent, to cover up uncomfortable truths about her racial and class background,

like all chronic *mitoteros*, los Reyes invented a past, reminding everyone that their ancestors had been accustomed to eating oysters with mother-of-pearl forks on porcelain plates brought over on the Manila galleons. It was a pretty story and told with such fine attention to detail, neighbors who knew better said nothing, charmed by the rococo embroidery that came to be a Reyes talent. (163)

Lala depicts her ancestors as part of the upper class, embellishing her story with details that sound convincing even to listeners who know the truth. By exaggerating her family history, Lala, like all good storytellers, creates an imaginative world like that of a telenovela that is preferable to reality.

Cisneros illustrates how Lala is influenced by the mythologies about race/ethnicity and class perpetuated within telenovelas, which often present upper class, wealthy characters with pale skin and blonde hair and lower class characters with dark skin and brown hair. In an attempt to associate herself with the wealthy upper class families depicted in telenovelas, Lala brags about her family's royal ancestry to her classmates.

I come from a long line of royalty. On both sides. The Reyes have blue blood going back to Nefertiti, the Andalusian gypsies, the dancing-for-their-dowry tribes in the deserts of North Africa. And that's not even mentioning my mother's family, the Reynas, from Monte Albán,

Tenochtitlán, Uxmal, Chichén, Tzin Tzun Tzán. I could go on and on.

(353)

The other girls at school call Lala a bitch for acting like she is better than them and “pretending to be Spanish and shit,” not realizing the irony of the fact that Lala claims to be superior because of her relation to tribal people of Indigenous and African descent not white Europeans (354). It is her conviction that makes Lala’s classmates believe her.

The tactic of altering or omitting aspects of one’s personal and/or familial identity and projecting an air of superiority in an effort to overcome strict racial and class divisions, is central to the telenovela genre where characters are bound by social convention and lovers are often separated by race and class. For example, in the telenovela *Al Diablo Con Los Guapos* (2008), Alejandro, the fair skinned, blonde haired son of a wealthy patriarch, Constancio Belmonte, falls in love with Milagros, the dark haired servant girl, who his mother Luciana hates and does not think deserves her son. In the end Milagros' true identity, as Constancio's illegitimate daughter is revealed, thus establishing her as a member of a higher social class and therefore a viable candidate to win Alejandro's heart. From this example, it is clear to see why a young girl, like Lala, would downplay certain aspects of her racial and class background in order to live like the heroine of a telenovela, just like Cleófilas dreams of doing. Both Lala and Cleófilas prefer to live in the world of desire presented in the novelas versus the reality of their own lives, which are bound by social convention.

Cisneros further examines mythologies along the lines of race and class in relation to the story of Aunty Light-Skin, who, as her name indicates, is identified by the color of her skin. Like many telenovela heroines, Aunty Light-Skin falls in love with a man who

her family disapproves of for many reasons: he was previously married in a church, works as a tire salesman, is almost twenty years older than Aunty, and “much-too-much-too Indian for Mother to approve” (271). Their union is forbidden by her family because of his lower social standing due in large part to his race and class. This left the young lovers only one solution, as he explained to Aunty, “there’s only one way for us to marry; that’s for me to steal you” (271). And that, as Aunty concludes, is how they were finally married to which Lala responds excitedly, “—Stolen! Like kidnapped? All for love, that’s too cool, Aunty. Your life would make a terrific *telenovela*. Did you ever think about that?” (271). Like her grandmother and father, Lala interprets the drama of life in relation to a telenovela further underscoring the power of this popular cultural form to influence viewers’ perceptions of the world and their place in it. Romanticizing the excitement of Aunty’s marriage, Lala imagines it must have been like the passionate, forbidden love affairs represented in telenovelas.

Cisneros highlights the danger of over-identifying, as Lala does, with the idealized romance narratives presented in telenovelas. Aunty’s love affair does not end with a happy marriage; instead, she discovers her husband’s been unfaithful, evident in the big welts and scratches on his back. She warns Lala, “You be careful with love, Lalita. To love is a terrible, wonderful thing. The pleasure reminds you—I am alive! But the pain reminds you of the same thing—¡Ay! I am alive. You’re too young to know what I’m talking about, but one day you’ll say, ‘My Aunty Light-Skin, she knew about life’” (275). Aunty’s reversal of fortune, from being kidnapped for love to being cheated on by the same man, is a common device used in a telenovela narrative to increase the dramatic tension of the plot. But, in this case, there is no requisite happy ending. Aunty

suffers the agony of lost love and subsequently enters into a relationship with her boss, but never remarries.

Cisneros underscores the fallacy of the romance narrative in a conversation Lala overhears between her Mother and the other Aunties discussing her Aunty Light-Skin's marriage:

—Yeah, well, if you want my two cents there wasn't a divorce, because there wasn't a marriage, Mother says. —Know what I mean?

—How could there be a marriage? He was still legally married to two others, Aunty Ninfa whispers too loudly.

—*¡No me digas!* Aunty Licha says.

—One in Durango and one in Tampico. That's why she had to leave him, Ninfa continues. —That's the way I heard it.

—*¡A poco!* What a barbarity! Says Licha.

—I'm just telling you what I heard. (32)

The dialogue, with a gossipy, secretive tone similar to one in a telenovela, highlights for Lala, and readers, the risk of assuming that one's life will unfold like a telenovela and believing the mythology, promoted within the popular cultural form, that romantic relationships always end with a happily married couple.

In describing Aunty Light-Skin's subsequent relationship with her wealthy boss, Señor Vidaurri, Cisneros further illustrates the mythologies regarding race and class promoted within telenovelas, which frequently depict differences in race, class, and social position as insurmountable obstacles for couples. Aunty's relationship with Señor Vidaurri becomes a focus of attention within the family because of its ambiguous nature,

crossing the line from professional to romantic. Lala's mother Zoila, Aunty Licha and Ninfa note the elegant, expensive clothes from Carson Pirie Scott and Marshall Field's that Aunty Light-Skin wears to impress Señor Vidaurri, which she obviously cannot afford on a secretary's salary. Lala describes the image of this "very important man" for whom her aunt works:

Señor Vidaurri of the pearl-gray suits and pearl-gray hair. Señor Vidaurri of the handsome fedoras. Señor Vidaurri of the big black car. Señor Vidaurri who drives our pretty Aunty Light-Skin to his construction company every day and delivers her home each evening. Señor Vidaurri whose skin is as dark as my mother's. That Señor Vidaurri gives our cousin Antonieta Araceli her *domingo*, her Sunday allowance each week, he never forgets, even though he is not her grandfather. It's because he's Aunty's boss and has too much money. (32)

Even as a young girl, Lala is sensitive to markers of race and class between men and women. She identifies Señor Vidaurri as "important" because as the owner of a company, he is wealthy evidenced by his expensive clothes (suits, fedoras) and nice car. Cisneros indicates that Señor Vidaurri is able to court Aunty Light-Skin, in spite of his dark skin, because of his high-class status, implying that Aunty Light-Skin would not waste time on a darker skinned man of a lower class.

Their racial differences calls to mind the dualistic, highly moral world of telenovelas in which, characters are depicted in black and white terms as either bad or good. Although, Cisneros complicates this, as Señor Vidaurri, although dark skinned, is a good man given that he treats Aunty Light-Skin with respect and supports her financially,

and Aunty, although lighter skinned, is criticized by the women in her family for engaging in a personal relationship with her boss. Señor Vidaurri's relationship to Aunty Light-Skin is clearly more than professional, given that he takes care to chauffeur her to and from the office each day and even pays her daughter's weekly allowance. Although, Lala explains this as a result of the fact that he is Aunty's boss and has a surplus of cash, on some level she acknowledges that unlike a grandfather, or another senior male relative, who is expected to provide financially for his family, a boss has no obligation to provide for his employees' family members. Señor Vidaurri's actions indicate that he considers Aunty Light-Skin to be more important than simply an employee. However, despite their mutual affection for one another, Señor Vidaurri and Aunty Light-Skin do not end up married like the couples in telenovelas. Cisneros deviates from the typical romance narrative and presents a more realistic counter narrative in which the lovers are forced to compromise their desires in order to comply with social convention that prohibits the union of men and women from different economic/social classes and racial/ethnic groups.<sup>18</sup>

Cisneros also examines the mythology promoted within telenovelas that love offers women financial security and economic stability. For example, as a young girl, Lala finds herself enticed by the material goods Señor Coochi, an old family friend, offers her during her father's birthday fiesta in Mexico.<sup>19</sup> Although Lala initially refuses Señor Coochi's request to go home with him and be his little girl, despite his promises of wonderful toys (a room full of dolls, a windup monkey, a blue bicycle, little guitar, and a box of chocolates), she is eventually swayed by his pledge to give her a room of her own. In exchange for the orange Naugahyde La-Z-Boy that serves as Lala's bed at home,

Señor Coochi swears to buy her “a bed fit for a princess. With a canopy with lace curtains white-white like the veils for Holy Communion” (52). Although Lala is not romantically interested in Señor Coochi, the promise of material comfort and luxury is appealing to her. When Señor Coochi leaves her father’s birthday party without even looking at her, Lala thinks, “maybe he forgot. Maybe he has to get my princess room ready. Maybe he meant tomorrow” (62). She watches the cars go by outside the front gate and thinks each one might be Señor Coochi, but he doesn’t return, “not the next night. Nor the next. Nor the next next next” (62). Lala waits night after night for her fantasy to materialize, just like viewers tune in nightly to watch their fantasies played out in the telenovelas.

The interaction between Lala and Señor Coochi points to the fantasy that most little girls, and many women, have to live like a princess, and their belief in the mythology promoted in telenovelas that men, like father figures, will provide this comfortable lifestyle. Lala confirms this fantasy when her friend Candelaria asks her what she wants to be when she grows up, and she says, “I want to be . . . a queen” to which Candelaria responds, “I want to be an actress, like the ones that cry on the *tele*” (35). Like Cleófilas and Chela, Lala and Candelaria also form a discursive network and share with each other their dreams of living a luxurious lifestyle, either as royalty or like the women in the telenovelas. They assume that men, whether as lovers, husbands, or sugar-daddies, in Señor Coochi’s case, will provide this fairytale lifestyle for the girls and women they love. Cisneros emphasizes that telenovelas perpetuate mythologies about love and romance, as evident in Candelaria’s comment that she wishes to emulate the women on the T.V., thus revealing the source of such thinking.

Cisneros infuses the novel with the language of excess and hyperbole and fills it with melodramatic scenes to highlight the mythology, perpetuated within telenovelas, that Mexicans have an exaggerated, obsessive view of love and romance. For example, Cisneros concludes the epigraph at the beginning of the text with a list of Mexican piropos (compliments) often embroidered on pillows, “*Eres Mi Vida, Sueño Contigo Mi Amor, Suspiro Por Ti, Sólo Tú*” (You are my life, I dream with you my love, I breathe for you, Only you). But these sentiments, like the embroidery, fade. The piropos, which Cisneros describes as “sugary as any chuchuluco” (sweet pastry or caramel), epitomize the melodramatic tone of the text. Cisneros further explains that “there is no translation in English” for the Spanish word piropos, “except perhaps ‘harassment’ (in another age, these were called ‘gallantries’). —¡Ay! *Mamacita*, if I die who will kiss you? —How sad there isn’t a *tortilla* big enough to wrap you up in, you’re that *exquisite*. —Virgen de Guadalupe, here is your Juan Dieguito!” (156). Cisneros uses the overly sweet, exaggerated language of piropos to underscore the exaggerated obsessive way in which love and romance are depicted in telenovelas.

Cisneros also uses melodramatic language to reveal another mythology upon which telenovelas are based, namely that love must be torturous, a theme she visits literally in *Woman Hollering Creek*. She provides examples of the melodramatic dialogue characteristic of telenovelas: “Qué intentas ocultar? Por qué eres tan cruel conmigo? Te encanta hacerme sufrir. Por qué me mortificas?” (15).<sup>20</sup> “Say any of the above,” Cisneros explains, “or say anything twice, slower and more dramatic the second time ‘round, and it will sound like the dialogue of any telenovela” (15). She acknowledges the melodramatic style, characteristic of the telenovela genre and mimics this in order to emphasize how

the shows equate or associate love with pain and torture. For example, Cisneros' description of Aunt Licha's violent response to Uncle Fat-Face's infidelity is like a scene out of a telenovela:

Once Aunty almost tried to kill herself because of Uncle Fat-Face. —My own husband! What a barbarity! A prostitute's disease from my own husband. Imagine! Ay, get him out of here! I don't ever want to see you again. *Largate!* [Go Away!] You disgust me, *me das asco*, you *cochino!* [You make me sick, you pig!] You're not fit to be the father of my children. I'm going to kill myself! Kill myself!!! Which sounds much more dramatic in Spanish. —*Me mato! Me maaaaaaaatoooooo!!!* [I will kill myself!] The big kitchen knife, the one Aunty dips in a glass of water to cut the boy's birthday cakes, pointed toward her own sad heart. (11)

Cisneros conveys excessive emotion by interweaving dramatic phrases in Spanish, emphasized by multiple exclamation points and the elongated enunciation of the final word, that is visually and linguistically drawn out as if to symbolize Licha's slow, painful death. Echoing Chávez, Cisneros illustrates the mythology disseminated in telenovelas that a woman will willingly sacrifice her life for love and thus, allow her husband's foolish choices to determine her fatal end. But, like the women Lupita remembers in "Bien Pretty," Licha tells Uncle Fat Face, "Largate!"

Cisneros reveals the oppressive nature of the mythologies about gender and ethnicity disseminated through the telenovela form, for example, that Mexican women love with excessive passion and intensity. The Reyes' family women confirm this mythology, as is evident in Aunty Licha's threat to take her own life because of her

husband's adultery. Zoila, Lala's mom, explains to her daughter that

If a woman's crazy jealous like Licha [Uncle Fat-Face's wife] you can bet it's because someone's giving her reason to be, know what I mean? It's that she's from over there, Mother continues, meaning from the Mexican side, and not this side. —Mexican women are just like the Mexican songs, *locas* for love. (11)

Zoila makes an essentialist argument by attributing Aunty Licha's jealousy to her Mexican cultural heritage as much as if not more than to the fact that Uncle Fat-Face may be giving her good reason to be jealous by, for example, by having affairs with other women. She implies that the mythology that Mexican women are "locas" (crazy) for love is an established, irrefutable fact, as confirmed by popular songs and demonstrated by Aunty Licha's actions.

Aunty Light-Skin agrees, attributing the depth of her hatred for her daughter Antonieta's father, to the fact that she loved him so much, and you know how Mexican women love. As she states,

Only people you love drive you to hate, don't you know that yet, Lalita? [...] when someone you love does something cruel, *¡te mata!* It can kill you or drive you to kill, *¡te mato!* [...] That's how we are, we *mexicanas*, *puro coraje y pasión*. That's what we're made of, Lala, you and me. That's us. We love like we hate. Backward and forward, past, present, and future.

With our heart and soul and our *tripas*, too. (275)

Both her Mom and her Aunty reinforce for Lala the mythologies regarding gender and ethnicity, transmitted through telenovelas, that Mexican women are such passionate and

intense lovers that they would willingly sacrifice themselves or kill someone else for love.

Cisneros further emphasizes the mythology that love involves suffering and pain in her description of fotonovelas, a popular cultural form similar to the telenovela but more sexually explicit and violent. The sensationalist magazines claim to represent true stories (evident in the title of one popular fotonovela, *¡Casos reales!*, Real cases).<sup>21</sup> While telenovelas are sanitized romance narratives with a clear moral or religious message that present lovers transcending class boundaries to be together, fotonovelas are obscene narratives that glorify violence between men and women and present no escape for the characters who are relegated to low income, working class lives. Despite the distinctions between telenovelas and fotonovelas, they are both national forms that promote the mythology that love is violent. For example, the Awful Grandmother brings out a stack of her favorites fotonovelas with titles like “‘Virgen Santísima, You Killed Her!’ [...] ‘I Killed the Love of My Life,’ ‘Don’t Make Me Commit a Craziess’” (63). The first two titles include an accusation and admission of murder motivated by love, and the third implies that love may cause people to act irrationally.

The ways in which fotonovelas promote and normalize the idea that love is violent is further emphasized when Lala asks Aunty Light-Skin if loving with such passion is good and Aunty responds, “It isn’t good or bad, it just is. Look, when you don’t know how to use your emotions, your emotions use you. That’s why so many *pobres* wind up on the cover of *¡Alarma!* magazine” like that *pobrecita* “who made pozole out of her unfaithful husband’s head. *Qué coraje, ¿verdad?* Can you imagine how mad she must’ve been to make *pozole* out of his head?” (274-5). Instead of denouncing

the violence depicted by the gruesome act of a wife cooking her husband's head, Aunty is awestruck by the depth of the woman's anger and courage. Unlike Soveida in *Face of an Angel* and Cleófilas in "Woman Hollering Creek," for whom the domestic sphere is a source of violence, the woman in the fotonovela utilizes the confined space to literally cook up her revenge and liberation. Although Aunty speaks admiringly of the women who appear on the cover of *¡Alarma!*, she differentiates herself from them by explaining to Lala that she put her anger to good use, and made a life for herself and Antonieta. By describing the discursive network formed between Lala and her Aunty, Cisneros illustrates how the destructive mythologies about romance, such as love is obsessive and potentially violent, which are disseminated through national forms like telenovelas and fotonovelas, become normalized and accepted.

Cisneros also reexamines how the national myth of prince Popocatepetl and princess Iztaccíhuatl further emphasizes the assumption that love is violent. Like the telenovela, Cisneros revisits the twin volcano myth in her fiction because of what it reinforces about heterosexual romance; it teaches women the value of self-sacrifice and suffering. Grandfather describes the myth of Popo and Ixta as "a Mexican love story" thereby establishing the national icon as a telenovela narrative. He tells Lala that "once, under the sky and on the earth there was a prince and a princess" and they loved each other (57). However, like most couples in telenovelas there are obstacles that separate the two lovers, as Grandfather explains:

But because the families of Izta and Popo hated each other, they had to keep their love a secret. But then something happened, I forget what, except I know he killed her. And then as he watched her die, he was so

overcome with her beauty he knelt down and wept. And then they both turned into volcanoes. (57)

In response to Grandfather's insufficient explanation for Ixta's tragic demise, Lala questions why Popo violently killed the woman he loved. Like Lupe in "Bien Pretty," she questions the male dominance and aggression depicted in traditional images of and myths surrounding the story of Popo and Ixta; she demands to know the source of such violence against women. She asks, "But if he loved her so much, Abuelito, why did he kill her?" to which Grandfather replies, "Well, I don't know. I don't know. That's a good question. I don't know. I suppose that's how Mexicans love, I suppose" (57). While Grandfather interprets the national myth surrounding the volcanoes as an act of male aggression and violence against women, in the original version of the myth, Popo goes off to war and delays in returning thereby leading Ixta to conclude that he died in battle and thus succumb to her own death due to grief.

Even when Lala presses him for more information, Grandfather admits he does not know why Popo killed Ixta but never questions his assumption that Ixta's death was the result of an act of male violence. Grandfather's comments reveal the fact that he does not consider an unprovoked act of violence against a woman a surprising event within the context of a romantic relationship. His only explanation for male violence in this context is that such violence is characteristic of the way Mexicans love, implying that there is something inherently violent about Mexican men or the way that they demonstrate their love to Mexican women. In this scene, Cisneros shows that the men, as well as the women in the Reyes family, believe the mythology promoted within national forms like the telenovela and upheld by icon national images, like Popo and Ixta, that love involves

suffering, violence, and even death. This idea leads young women like Lala to conclude, as Cleófilas does, that to suffer for love is good.

The way Grandfather describes Popo's reaction to his supposed murder of Ixta follows a pattern similar to the cycle of domestic violence, in which the man is overcome with grief and regret after physically abusing his female partner. Yet perhaps it is even worse in this case because Grandfather explains that Popo is moved to tears by Ixta's beauty and not by the fact that he killed her. But it is still the same pattern of the man, in this case Popo, depicted in the active role, gazing at the woman with a combination of admiration for her beauty and sadness at the recognition of the violence he has wrecked upon her body. This image echoes the scene in "Woman Hollering Creek," when Juan Pedro is crying with his head in Cleófilas' lap after beating her.

Cisneros examines how popular romance narratives collude with national icons and mythology to promote the assumption that love and pleasure are linked to suffering and violence. This is particularly evident in Lala's description of the picture, "El rapto" from a 1965 Mexican calendar in which she questions the etymological and linguistic associations in Spanish of the words rapture and rape. "A white horse, a handsome *charro*, and in his rapturous arms, a swooning beauty, her silk *rebozo* and blouse sliding off one sexy shoulder. The horse raising one hoof in the air, proud as any bronze statue. *El rapto*. I wonder if that means "The Rape." And I wonder if "rapture" and "rape" come from the same word" (312-3). Cisneros implies that like Lala, young women are often seduced by the romantic image of the handsome *charro* (traditional Mexican cowboy) with a suit like the one mariachis wear and the beautiful woman wearing a *rebozo* (Mexican shawl) and overlook the potential danger to which one is exposed in intimacy

as the title of the piece suggests. Lala gazes at the

*charro* carrying off his true love, a woman as limp as if she's sleeping, a sky-blue *rebozo* draped around her shoulders, the *charro* wearing a beautiful woolen red sarape, the horse golden, the light glowing from behind his *sombrero* as if he's a holy man. If you look close, you can see the silver trim on his trousers, hear the creak of the tooled-leather saddle. The night sky cold and clear. Behind them a dark town they're running away from, maybe. The moment before a kiss or just after, his face hovering above hers. *El rapto*. The Rapture. And for a moment, I'm carried out of here on the back of that horse, in the arms of that *charro*. (363)

Lala envisions love as an escape and imagines riding off in the *charro*'s arms. There is a sacred aura about the image, the *charro*'s head glows with light like a holy man, while he holds his true love, a woman draped in a light-blue shawl reminiscent of the Virgin Mary. This suggests the sacred and naturalness of the image of man as savior. Yet a sinister element remains. The light glows behind the *charro*'s head "as if" he were holy, implying that it is an illusion of holiness that does not actually exist. And the woman in his arms is limp, as if sleeping, or perhaps dead. Furthermore, they are running away from, perhaps evading the troubling past, of a dark town. Despite these dark details or hints of distress, Lala, like Cleófilas and Lupe, initially clings to the romanticized depictions of love reinforced in popular culture and national mythology.

Believing in the mythology of the idealized romance narrative, Lala decides to run off to Mexico City with Ernesto Calderón, one of her brothers' friends. Like the love sick heroine of a telenovela, Lala believes destiny purposely put Ernesto in her life, as

she explains, “Just like that picture on the Mexican calendar, El rapto, Ernesto arrives in my life to rescue me” (368). Cisneros shows explicitly how national iconography in calendar art influences Lala’s expectations and understanding of romance in her own life. Not long after they start dating, Lala convinces Ernesto to “steal” her (just like Antonieta Araceli’s father stole Aunty Light-Skin). While lying in bed in the Hotel Majestic in Mexico City, remembering Viva’s admonishments to help one’s destiny along. She thinks, “Viva’s right, about destiny I mean. About helping it along sometimes. I feel like I’m in a movie, my arm against the pillow, Ernesto’s shoulder against the sheet. Me living my life, and me watching me live my life. Like some great movie. Better than a cheesy movie, because I’m in it” (382). As a naïve young girl, Lala believes in the mythologies of heterosexual romance promoted in popular cultural forms, like movies and telenovelas. She fantasizes about being carried off by her handsome prince like the woman in the Mexican Calendar and is shocked when Ernesto shatters this dream.

After spending a rapturous night making love to him, Lala wakes up alone. Hours later Ernesto returns to explain that in a fit of religious zealotry and excessive guilt he realized he cannot marry her and abandons Lala with a broken heart in the hotel in Mexico City. Lala cries all day and night, but just like Aunty Light-Skin said, “sometimes that’s the only way you know you’re alive” (389). Ironically enough it is Señor Coochi, who wanted to “steal” Lala as a child and coaxed her with promises of a room fit for a princess who comes to her rescue as an adult. Señor Coochi and his wife take Lala to their home in the capitol city before her father and brother arrive to take her back home.

In describing Lala's process of disillusionment, Cisneros underscores the danger

of living one's life like a telenovela. Although Aunty Light-Skin tried to warn her about the dangers of love, Lala had to experience it for herself. After her “abduction,” Lala realizes that “the square on the kitchen door where that old Mexican calendar once stood” is empty; “someone tore it down before I got back. But that rectangle, a paler shade than the rest of the door, just shouts, *What’s missing here?*” (399). The picture has been taken away, along with her virginity and her idealized visions of love. She is as empty and vacant as the pale rectangle on the kitchen door. And later when she discovers Ernesto “knocked up some little católica” and got married, Lala thinks, “it’s just like the story of the volcanoes my Little Grandfather told me when I was a kid. That’s just the way Mexicans love. They’re not happy till they kill you” (399). Based on her experience, Lala, like Cleófilas, learns that romantic relationships do not always end with the marriage of the happy couple.

Cisneros provides an alternative version of the romance narrative as she shows the painful process by which a young naïve woman matures to realize the fallacy of her romantic fantasies. Lala also learns that she cannot alter the plan divine providence has destined for her. She explains, “You’re the author of the *telenovela* of your life right. Comedy or tragedy? Choose. Ernesto. He was my destiny, but not my destination. That’s what I’m thinking” (399). After her painful breakup with Ernesto, Lala realizes that her friend Viva’s concept of being the author of the telenovela of her life does not mean that she can alter its course, but rather that she can decide how she will respond to what happens. Like Cleófilas who decides to leave her abusive husband instead of resigning herself to a life of suffering, Lala also decides that although the heartbreak may have been tragic, she will not allow one event to determine the rest of her life. She may have

been destined to run away with Ernesto, but she does not have to let that be the end of the story. Like Chávez and Castillo, Cisneros also revises the telenovela genre by depicting empowered women, who although initially convinced by the mythology of the romance narrative, end up taking action to avoid making the same mistakes in the future.

Cisneros further revises the telenovela genre by presenting an example of a young female protagonist, Lala's friend Viva Ozuna, who rejects the traditional romance narrative outright, purposely choosing not to get married to pursue her education instead. Lala meets Viva, another one of the poor girls at Immaculate Conception, during work after-school while straightening desks in the study hall (327). Fittingly, Viva, whose name translated literally in English means alive, exhibits a level of independence and confidence that surprises and inspires Lala. With her make-up (layers of mascara, sparkling blush, gobs of lip gloss) and her provocative clothing (uniform blouse knotted at the midriff and skirt rolled up high), Viva commands attention, particularly that of Mr. Zoran Darko, the new algebra teacher. As his name suggests, Mr. Darko ultimately proves to be a shadow hanging over Viva's life. Lala is impressed with Viva's bold behavior, from hanging on the door of Mr. Darko's red Corvette convertible to stealing gold lamé gloves from the *Vogue*, a ritzy store in downtown San Antonio.

But when Viva shows up in the school lunchroom to announce that she's engaged to "Zorro" (her nickname for Mr. Darko), Lala's shock is only paralleled by her anger at being abandoned by her friend. After listening to Lala complain that their plan of moving to San Francisco together after graduation is ruined, Viva explains,

Listen, sweets, it's simple. You're the author of the *telenovela* of your life.

You want a comedy or a tragedy? If the episode's a tearjerker, you can

hang yourself or hang in there. Choose. I believe in destiny as much as you do, but sometimes you've gotta help your destiny along. (345)

Viva neither feels bound to her fate nor allows herself to become a victim of circumstance. Through their conversations, Viva teaches Lala not to accept a life of suffering, which illustrates how through discursive networks women can encourage and empower each other to reject traditional gender roles.

Like Lupe and Cleófilas, Viva realizes that she is the agent of her own life. Ironically although she describes her life as a telenovela, she acts unlike the typical telenovela heroine, by taking control of her life and making decisions about how it will unfold instead of letting things happen to her. Viva acknowledges that sometimes parts of life, like episodes in a telenovela, are painful, but one still has the power to decide how to react— with resigned despair or renewed conviction to endure. She tells Lala that while she believes in destiny, she also believes in *echando una mano* (giving a hand) to urge or influence a particular outcome. For example, although Viva initially agrees to get engaged to Mr. Darko, in the end she decides not to marry him. As Lala states,

Viva's smart. Broke up with Darko after she started college. She finally figured out she didn't want to *marry* Darko, she wanted to *be* him. Isn't that funny? He's the one who got her thinking about going to school and helped her figure out financial aid. Everybody who comes into your life affecting the pattern. Darko got her unknotted and moving and all. But you sure don't have to marry him as a thank-you, right? (399)

Viva exemplifies a woman who takes responsibility for and exercises agency over the course of her life and refuses to conform to traditional gender roles. Cisneros rejects the

mythologies regarding gender and romance reinforced within telenovelas and presents a female protagonist who instead of wanting to marry a man, wants to be a man and live with the same level of freedom and autonomy that a man enjoys.

Instead of concluding the narrative with Lala's marriage to Ernesto or another young man, Cisneros, echoing Chávez and Castillo, emphasizes the importance of female solidarity and concludes the novel *The Awful Grandmother* encouraging Lala to prioritize her needs and allow herself time to mature before getting married and starting a family. *The Awful Grandmother* returns after her death, to counsel Lala about love:

There's no sin in falling in love with your heart and with your body, but wait till you're old enough to love yourself first [...] Ay, Celaya, don't wind up like me, settling with the first man who paid me a compliment. You're not even a whole person yet, you're still growing into who you are [...] You'll find someone who's brave enough to love you. Some day. One day. Not today. (407)

*The Awful Grandmother* emphasizes the need for Lala to learn to love herself and become a whole person, as an individual, instead of seeking completion in someone else, or running off with the first man who gives her attention. Cisneros critiques the telenovela format through the lives of her characters to show that in reality not all romantic encounters end in marriage, marriage is not always blissful, and is not the only goal in a young woman's life. Cisneros' choice to deviate from the genre convention of ending the narrative with the marriage of the happy couple reveals her strong critique of the mythologies regarding gender and heterosexual romance promoted within the telenovela form.

But, at the same time that Cisneros critiques the romance narrative, she simultaneously incorporates aspects of the popular cultural form in the novel. She adheres to certain conventions of the telenovela genre, utilizing melodramatic devices, such as returns from the past, to create a compelling narrative for the reader. Like Lala, Cisneros herself wants to tell a good story and in the process she emphasizes that entertainment and/or escapism does not mean a lack of critical reflection. For example, Cisneros, like Chávez, reveals hidden information towards the end of the novel to heighten the dramatic tension before resolving the conflict and concluding the story. She uses this narrative device to reveal the source of the problems in the relationship between Inocencio and Zoila and the tension between Zoila and her mother-in-law. While waiting to visit her father in the Intensive Care unit, Lala finds out from her Mother that Candelaria, the washerwoman's daughter, whom she played with as a child in Mexico, is actually her half sister. Zoila explains, "before me and him got married . . . he already had a kid. Out of wedlock I mean. I didn't know about this before I married, and even after, nobody told me nothing. For the longest. His family kept it quiet. I didn't find out till after I had all you kids" (403). She tells Lala that it was during their family vacation in Acapulco that the Awful Grandmother revealed the truth:

Your grandma was the big-mouth. She acted like I knew all along, but she was just taking her time, a fat spider waiting in her web. That was her, your grandmother, nothing but a troublemaker. If there was a way for her to tie knots in other people's lives, believe me, she'd find it. She was shameless. For crying out loud, she had both the mother and daughter working for her right under her own roof. Even when we were there visiting! If that don't

beat all! That's what kills me when I think about it. Right under my own nose she did this. (405)

In this passage, Cisneros artfully crafts a scene right out of a telenovela, full of dramatic irony and intrigue.

Upon hearing her mother's news, Lala recalls their vacation in Acapulco, "I think about Candelaria bobbing in the sea at Acapulco. The sun sparkling in the gold flecks all around her. Her face squinting that squint that I make, that Father makes. Her face suddenly Father's face" (404). Lala suddenly understands the cause of the terrible fight between her mother and the Awful Grandmother on the way home from Acapulco. This episode also explains the grandmother's nickname and confirms that she can indeed be awful. Now that Lala knows that she and Candelaria share the same father, the resemblance between their faces is obvious. In response to this information, Lala contemplates hiring a detective or placing an ad in the paper to discover Candelaria's current whereabouts. She imagines, "how maybe a thousand washerwomen's daughters would appear, a long long line of daughters claiming to be my sister, telling stories more melodramatic than any telenovela" (427). The irony is that, the real life events in the Reyes' family are as melodramatic as a telenovela, full of hidden identities, a child out of wedlock, and a long lost half sister.

Not only is Candelaria's true identity revealed to Lala at the end of the novel, but she also learns that the Awful Grandmother got pregnant before she was married. Inocencio explains to Lala,

When she was very young, just your age in fact, she conceived a child. Me.

And she did this from love, before she was married, I mean to say. When

my father found out she was expecting, he wanted to run away, but it was great-grandfather who reminded him we are Reyes, we are not dogs [...] thank God your great-grandfather had the wisdom of years to remind his son of his obligation. And I tell you this so you'll listen to me. I'm older, I've made lots of mistakes, Lala. Don't throw your life away, don't waste even a day. Don't do reckless things that will leave you angry and bitter and sad later when you're old. (427)

Just like the Awful Grandmother does not confess this part of her past to Lala, neither does her father admit to having Candelaria out of wedlock. While he emphasizes that the Reyes men conduct themselves with respect and fulfill their obligations, Inocencio does not admit that he himself failed to do so. Although his name translates in English as innocent, Inocencio is not entirely without fault or flaws. However, his cryptic comments to Lala about avoiding mistakes and reckless things that may lead to bitter sadness later in life, do suggest a sense of remorse or regret about his previous wrongdoing. Although he confides in Lala in hopes of preventing her from making the same mistakes, Inocencio also counsels her not to shamelessly reveal these dirty family secrets. As he says, "Promise your papa you won't talk these things, Lalita. Ever. Promise" (430). Inocencio pleads with Lala to keep the past a secret, perhaps thinking this will prevent him from having to face the truth. Ultimately, Cisneros creates a telenovela narrative that provokes readers with the narration of dramatic events (infidelity, illegitimate children, loss of love), while pacifying readers by divulging the hidden details behind these family stories.

Although Cisneros does not provide a perfectly tidy ending typical of most telenovelas in which good and evil characters are rewarded and punished accordingly,

she does show complex characters with positive and negative traits, like Inocencio and the Awful Grandmother, who allude to and on some level acknowledge their past mistakes. Cisneros relies on a characteristic of the telenovela genre, the revelation of hidden information, to reveal the source of and resolve the conflict between Inocencio, the Awful Grandmother and Zoila. Cisneros incorporates aspects of the telenovela genre, while also critiquing the mythologies about race/ethnicity, class, and gender promoted within the popular cultural form. She addresses issues, like infidelity, in a real and honest way, showing the destruction it can cause in the family unit, while at the same time satisfying readers with a happy resolution by showing how one couple overcomes marital difficulties to celebrate their thirtieth wedding anniversary.

Cisneros engages the telenovela genre, as well as the twin volcano myth about Popo and Ixta, repeatedly throughout her fiction, to draw attention to the fact that the popular cultural form is a national, in this case Mexican, medium through which mythologies about heterosexual romance are disseminated. Her level of engagement evolved from a focus on obsessive love in poetry, to direct references to the form in short fiction, and a more substantive and critical analysis of the genre in *Caramelo*. Cisneros incorporates key formal, stylistic, and thematic characteristics of the genre (from episodic narrative development to a focus on love and the domestic sphere, a melodramatic tone, and tension between the world of desire and the world of social convention) into the novel. She saturates *Caramelo* with references to the form and emphasizes how life is like a telenovela, only to reject its conventions in the end. However, she does not reject the form out right, but rather the mythologies disseminated within it. She succeeds in writing a literary translation of the telenovela, while simultaneously critiquing the

national form and guiding readers to see its oppressive aspects, thus showing that entertainment does not mean a lack of critical reflection. She interrupts the narrative to guide readers' attention to the oppressive aspects of the stories, such as domestic violence, told through the telenovela genre.

While theorists, such as Saldívar-Hull, argue that telenovelas reinscribe traditional gender roles, Cisneros illustrates how female viewers read the popular cultural form resistively and challenge mythologies about gender and romance, such as that women are inherently unstable and obsessive in relationships and love involves suffering and violence, inscribed therein. As such, the female protagonists Lupe, Cleófilas, and Lala, exemplify resistant readers who realize the myth of traditional romance and refuse to comply with strict female gender roles. Lupe literally redraws and reconceptualizes the national cultural myth of *Popo/Ixta*, placing the woman in a more active role, while Cleófilas rejects the traditional role of a silent, suffering woman and removes herself from an abusive relationship. Lala also realizes the illusion of love and romance promoted in popular cultural forms, such as the telenovela, fotonovela, and national icons (*Popo/Ixta*). She acknowledges and comes to accept the inherent tension between one's desires and reality; which requires one to face uncomfortable truths and accept that life, like love, is not always sweet somehow in the end. Although, as Lala learns from her friend Viva, one can determine how one will respond to life's unexpected twists instead of blindly accepting one's fate.

Cisneros succeeds in creating, as Castillo does before her, a Chicana telenovela, which rejects the traditional romance narrative in favor of female independence and solidarity. Yet, she also surpasses Castillo's achievement by engaging in a meta-

conversation in the paratext (the extensive footnote) about the telenovela and directs the critical discussion surrounding the popular cultural form, specifically in relation to Chicana literature. Cisneros outlines the specific cultural work the telenovela does, disseminating mythologies along the lines of race/ethnicity, class, gender, and sexuality, and explains how the form serves as a lens through which Mexicans understand and interpret the world. Thus, Cisneros' ultimate achievement is that she establishes the telenovela as a culturally derived critical form through which to interpret Chicana literature.

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<sup>1</sup> For example, the poems in Cisneros' collection, *Loose Woman* (New York: Vintage, 1994), focus primarily on romantic love with melodramatic titles such as "I am so in Love I Grow a New Hymen," "I am so Depressed I Feel Like Jumping in the River Behind my House but Won't Because I am Thirty-Eight and not Eighteen" and "I am on My Way to Oklahoma to Bury the Man I Nearly Left My Husband For."

<sup>2</sup> Although Cisneros published her first book *The House on Mango Street* in 1984, it was not until Random House reprinted *Mango Street* and offered to publish her second work of fiction, *Women Hollering Creek and Other Stories* in 1991, that Cisneros gained notoriety among a mainstream American audience. She was the first Chicana to receive a major publishing contract for a work about Chicanas. Vintage, a division of Random House, subsequently published Cisneros' book of poems *Loose Woman* (1994) and her novel *Caramelo* (2002). Both of which were well received by critics and readers alike.

<sup>3</sup> Examples of articles that address these topics in Cisneros' literature include: Ellen McCracken, "Postmodern Ethnicity in Sandra Cisneros' *Caramelo*: Hybridity,

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Spectacle, and Memory in the Nomadic Text” (2000); Juan Antonio Perles Rochel, “Sandra Cisneros' *The House on Mango Street* as a 'Bildungsroman’” (1998); Maria Karafilis, “Crossing the Borders of Genre: Revisions of the Bindungsroman in Sandra Cisneros's *The House on Mango Street* and Jamaica Kincaid's *Annie John*” (1998); Katherine Payant, “Borderland Themes in Sandra Cisneros's *Woman Hollering Creek*,” *The Immigrant Experience in North American Literature: Carving Out a Niche* (Westport, CT: Greenwood, 1999); and Maria Antonia Alvarez, “Chicana Deconstruction of Cultural and Linguistic Borders” (2005). See bibliography for full citations.

<sup>4</sup> Examples of articles that address these topics in Cisneros' literature include: Brenda E Watts, “Historical Transgressions: The Creation of a Transnational Female Political Subject in Works by Chicana Writers” (2001); Elyse Terry Crystall, “Refracted Histories: Gender and the Politics of Perspective in Three 'Border' Narratives” (2000); Stella Bolaki, “'The Bridge We Call Home': Crossing and Bridging Spaces in Sandra Cisneros's *The House on Mango Street*” (2005); Inés Salazar, “Can You Go Home Again? Transgression and Transformation in African-American Women's and Chicana Literary Practice,” *Postcolonial Theory and the United States: Race, Ethnicity, and Literature* (Jackson, MS: U of Mississippi P, 2000); Julián, Olivares, “Sandra Cisneros' *The House on Mango Street*, and the Poetics of Space,” *Chicana Creativity and Criticism: New Frontiers in American Literature* (Albuquerque: U of New Mexico P, 1996); Ellen C. Mayock, “The Bicultural Construction of Self in Cisneros, Alvarez, and Santiago” (1998); and Maria Elena de Valdés, “In Search of Identity in Cisneros' *The House on Mango Street*” (1992). See bibliography for full citations.

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<sup>5</sup> Examples of articles that address these topics in Cisneros' literature include: Alexandra Fitts, "Sandra Cisneros's Modern Malinche: A Reconsideration of Feminine Archetypes in *Woman Hollering Creek*" (2002); Ana María Carbonell, "From Llorona to Gritona: Coatlicue in Feminist Tales by Viramontes and Cisneros" (1999); Jacqueline Doyle, "Faces of the Virgin in Sandra Cisneros's *Woman Hollering Creek*," *Things of the Spirit: Women Writers Constructing Spirituality* (Notre Dame, IN: U of Notre Dame P, 2004); Maythee G. Rojas, "Cisneros's 'Terrible' Women: Recuperating the Erotic as a Feminist Source in 'Never Marry a Mexican' and 'Eyes of Zapata'" (1999); and Suzanne Chávez-Silverman, "Chicanas in Love: Sandra Cisneros Talking Back and Alicia Gaspar de Alba 'Giving Back the Wor(l)d'" (1998). See bibliography for full citations.

<sup>6</sup> See Saldívar-Hull's analysis of telenovelas and fotonovelas in "Mujeres en Lucha/Mujeres de Fuerza: Women in Struggle/Women of Strength in Sandra Cisneros's Border Narratives," *Feminism on the Border: Chicana Gender Politics and Literature* (Berkeley: U of California P, 2000): 106-9.

<sup>7</sup> By referring to the famous Mexican telenovela *Los Ricos Tambien Lloran* (The Rich also Cry), produced in 1979, Cisneros underscores her extensive familiarity with and awareness of the history of the telenovela genre, specifically within Mexico.

<sup>8</sup> See Saldívar-Hull's discussion of the negative impact of Corín Tellado's romance novels in *Feminism on the Border: Chicana Gender Politics and Literature* (Berkeley: U of California P, 2000): 115-6.

<sup>9</sup> Thanks to Dr. Lisa Moore for calling my attention to the sarcastic tone of this passage in Cisneros' text and the way in which the list of artifacts in the home of the

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bourgeois, intellectual couple for whom Lupe is house sitting, is meant as a joke. As Moore explained, the couple collected these artifacts in a failed attempt to represent their understanding or knowledge of Mexican culture and in a sense gain a level of authenticity or credibility as cultural insiders, which is laughable. Cisneros is poking fun at and ridiculing, spoofing the idea of using stereotypical artifacts or markers to represent a certain culture, which is common in telenovelas. Cisneros is also drawing on the humorous tone of the telenovela genre, specifically the farcical novelas that border on camp and parody.

<sup>10</sup> See Hayden Herrera's *Frida: A Biography of Frida Kahlo* (2002) for more details about Kahlo's life, including her tumultuous relationship with Diego Rivera. See also Kahlo's personal diaries *The Diary of Frida Kahlo: An Intimate Self-Portrait* (2005).

<sup>11</sup> According to a Readership Study conducted by Simmons Custom Research in August 2006, *Vanidades* is the number one Spanish-language women's beauty, fashion, and lifestyle magazine in the U.S. Hispanic Market with a circulation of 145,000. *Vanidades* is one of 17 Spanish-language magazines published in the U.S. by Editorial Televisa, which is headquartered in Mexico City but has a base of operations in Miami, FL. See The Reader Profile Demographics in the U.S. Hispanic 2007 Media Kit produced by Editorial Televisa at [www.usportfolioeditorialtelevisa.com/pdf/vanidades.pdf](http://www.usportfolioeditorialtelevisa.com/pdf/vanidades.pdf). See also Caitlin Kelly's article "A Spanish 'sleeping giant' Looks Northward" (1997). In *Latinos Inc.: The Marketing and Making of a People*, Arlene Dávila notes that in her autobiography Cristina Saralegui (the Cuban American journalist well-known for hosting the Spanish-language eponymous show *Cristina*, who interned at *Vanidades* as a college

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student in 1973) indicates that the magazine started as a U.S.-made product for the Latin America market and continues to be one of the most popular magazines throughout the region. See Dávila's note number 12 on page 246.

<sup>12</sup> See Mary Ellen Brown's description of the discursive network that forms among telenovela viewers in her book *Soap Opera and Women's Talk: The Pleasure of Resistance* (1994).

<sup>13</sup> The first quotation, from *The Washington Post*, is the blurb on the front cover of the paperback edition of *Caramelo* (New York: Vintage, 2002) and the second quotation, from *The Philadelphia Inquirer*, is the blurb on the back cover of this same edition.

<sup>14</sup> As indicated previously, the serial drama “involves the mechanisms of *recognition*,” which allows readers to associate the world of the story with their own and thereby enter into the narrative and identify themselves with the action. See Jesús Martín-Barbero, *Communication, Culture and Hegemony: From the Media to Mediations* (London: SAGE, 1993): 138.

<sup>15</sup> The character of the Awful Grandmother makes her initial appearance in “Mericans” one of the stories in the *Woman Hollering Creek* collection. Cisneros revisits characters and names, such as Uncle Fat Face, from previous work just as she revisits the telenovela genre. Interestingly, the return of characters in fiction also reflects the way in which actors and actresses reappear in new telenovelas. For example, Sebastián Rulli, the Argentine-Mexican actor who played Héctor in *Rubí* (2004), also played Sebastián in *Contra viento y marea* (2005), Juan in *Mundo de Fieras* (2006), Santiago in *Pasión* and most recently Mauricio in *Un Gancho el Corazon* (2008). The reappearance of actors and

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actresses also occurs in soap operas, for example, Tamara Braun, the actress who used to play the character, Carly, in *General Hospital*, subsequently played Ava in *Days of Our Lives* and now is most recently playing Eden in *All My Children*.

<sup>16</sup> As indicated previously, the oral narrative on which the serial drama is based, “is a story telling constructed on the basis of the ‘and then’ instead of the ‘in consequence’ based logical continuity,” meaning that the scenes are not causally linked, one does not necessarily logically lead to the next in the sequence. See Jesús Martín-Barbero *Communication, Culture and Hegemony: From the Media to Mediations* (London: SAGE, 1993): 138.

<sup>17</sup> While Cisneros directs readers’ attention to the importance of the telenovela in the novel, other critics examine *Caramelo* in relation to language: Lisa Wagner, “Ni aquí, ni allá: Lenguaje e identidad en *Caramelo*”(2007), Gabriella Gutiérrez y Muhs, “Sandra Cisneros and Her Trade of the Free Word”(2006), and Bill Johnson González, “The Politics of Translation in Sandra Cisneros's *Caramelo*” (2006); gender: Traci Jo Roberts, “Representations of the Female Body: Four Contemporary Mexican and Chicana Women Novelists: Elena Garro, Cristina Rivera Garza, Elena Poniatowska, and Sandra Cisneros” (2005); and memory: Esra Satiyanci Öztarhan, “Rememory and the Challenge of Histories in Cisneros' *Caramelo*”(2004).

<sup>18</sup> As I indicate in the introduction, this social convention is reflected in telenovelas, which perpetuate the myth of social mobility (see Estill) by depicting happy couples that overcome differences of race and class to be together, but the shows’ resolutions only temporarily pacify viewers with wished-for solutions (see Podalsky and

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Martín-Barbero) that are often not possible in the real world, where racial and class divisions are deeply entrenched. Ultimately, within the morally ordered universe of telenovelas existing social classes and divisions are cemented.

<sup>19</sup> While in Spanish *coochi* is used as a term of endearment, in English the word is slang for female genitalia; both connotations are relevant here. Like many of the characters in “Woman Hollering Creek,” whose names correspond to their personalities, Señor Coochi’s name also seems appropriate given his personality as a seemingly endearing older man who takes more than a friendly interest in Lala.

<sup>20</sup> The English translation of these lines is: What do you intend to hide? Why are you so cruel to me? You enjoy making me suffer. Why do you mortify me?

<sup>21</sup> See Saldívar-Hull’s analysis of the fotonovela genre in relation to Cisneros’ “Woman Hollering Creek” in *Feminism on the Border* (Berkeley: U of California P, 2000): 109-114. See also Jean Franco’s analysis of fotonovelas, which she refers to as “comic strip novels” in “The Incorporation of Women: A Comparison of North American and Mexican Popular Culture,” *Studies in Entertainment: Critical Approaches to Mass Culture* (1986).

## Chapter 4: Foto-Meets Tele-novela in Nina Marie Martínez's *¡Caramba!*

Although new to the literary world, Nina Marie Martínez has received rave reviews since the publication of *¡Caramba!* by Knopf in 2004. The novel was selected as a Barnes & Noble Discover Great New Writers selection, a Borders Original Voices title, a Southwest Book of the Year, and also made the San Francisco Chronicle's Finest Books of 2004 list. The cover illustration won an American Institute of Graphic Arts award for design as one of the best of the year. In addition, Martínez won a Whiting Writer's Award recognizing "emerging writers with exceptional talent and potential" in 2006.<sup>1</sup> She has been compared to the likes of Henry James and Mark Twain for her creative use of language and William Faulkner and Ray Bradbury for the imaginary setting of the novel, as well as Julio Cortázar for its playful structure.<sup>2</sup> Like Castillo's *So Far From God*, *¡Caramba!* is often identified as magic realism, although Martínez does not like this term, parts of the novel might be classified as such. As a review in the *San Jose Metro* states, "the literary charms of *¡Caramba!* lie in large part in a blurring between the fantastic and the could-be real."<sup>3</sup> A thought echoed in a review in the *San Francisco Chronicle* in which *¡Caramba!* is described as "a triumph of whimsy and imagination – Monty Python meets *One Hundred Years of Solitude*."

While some critics identify the novel as part of the tradition of magic realism, others classify *¡Caramba!* as a telenovela. For example, in a review for *El Tiempo Latino*, Alberto Avendaño describes the novel as "a kind of unbridled and twisted telenovela," and in a review for *Tiempos del Mundo*, Antonio Orlando Rodríguez states

that Martínez “creates eccentric characters, with a strong predisposition to get into all sorts of trouble, whose lives intersect and interlock by chance (or destiny), like in the worst Mexican telenovelas.”<sup>4</sup> On the back of the hard cover edition of *¡Caramba!*, Sandra Cisneros states that the novel is “zanyer than a telenovela.”<sup>5</sup> Indeed, Martínez creates a novel that is even more telenovelaesque than those written by Castillo and Cisneros because she incorporates images of cultural artifacts (lotería cards, paper dolls, maps of Mexico, shopping lists, letters, etc.), thus emphasizing the powerful visual aspect of the form, and, in effect, joining the foto and tele-novela genres.

In the preface Martínez states that the artifacts are “companions to the novel proper, featuring letters for the archivist, maps for the armchair traveler, and paper dolls for the little girls, boys, and cross-dressers in us all” (xi). Visual imagery in the form of archetypal characters and places is one of the primary ways telenovelas transmit cultural knowledge, as critics like Barrera and Bielby and Aprea and Mendoza indicate. These images create what Lopez refers to as “a televisual ‘national’” and symbolize or represent the specific cultural, ethnic group, and nation in which they are produced. Therefore, Mexican telenovelas, as Podalsky notes, frequently feature mariachi and ranchera music and include locations like the rancho, cabaret, and vecindad (neighborhood). Martínez’s novel is littered with images of and references to Mexican culture and nationality. For example, one of the main characters, Javier, is the leader of a born Again Christian Mariachi band and there are various references throughout the novel to the Baile Grande (an annual event at the local fairgrounds), El Aguantador nightclub, which hosts the weekly show transvestis, and The Big Five-Four bar (with a diagram of the songs on the juke box, such as Lola Beltrán’s “Paloma Negra” and José Alfredo Jiménez’s “Que Se

Me Acabe La Vida”). Martínez includes textual references and visual artifacts that represent Mexican culture, not only to highlight the visual aspect of the telenovela genre, but also to emphasize that cultural artifacts and forms, like the telenovela, can be revised and adapted for individual use in the formation of gender and national identities.

One of the main cultural artifacts in the novel is la lotería, which as Martínez explains in the preface is, “a game of chance, not unlike bingo, only the cards come with images as well as numbers and dichos (brief but poignant sayings and plays on words) to make the wise wiser.”<sup>6</sup> *¡Caramba!* is structured like a game of lotería, as the subtitle indicates, it “is a tale told in turns of the card.” The book is divided into sections that mirror the sequential plays of the game, “An Introduction to the Players, The Deck is Shuffled, etc.” and each chapter is prefaced with a lotería card. While the majority of the cards are based on images from the original deck fashioned by Don Clemente, a few of them are designed by Martínez.<sup>7</sup> She implicitly subverts Don Clementes’ deck thereby underscoring its limited representation of Mexican culture and thus her need to revise and adapt the original deck to reflect a contemporary Mexican-American community.

While Clementes’ deck depicts traditional gender roles, such as the image of La Dama (The Lady) and El Valiente (The Brave or Macho Man), Martínez’s deck includes images that suggest alternate gender identities, like La Peluca Blonde Bouffant/The Blonde Bouffant Wig, with the corresponding dicho, Lo Que Usa La Castaña Y a Todo El Mundo Engaña (What the Brunette Uses to Fool the World), which prefaces a chapter about the transvestite character True-Dee and alludes to the performative nature of gender identity (a concept I explore later in this chapter). Ultimately, Martínez’s revisions of the original lotería deck represent visually what she does textually, in other words, she

challenges and revises the traditional gender roles and sexualities that are represented on lotería cards and reinforced in telenovela narratives.

In addition to the lotería cards, the other primary visual image that Martínez incorporates in the novel is the national iconography in calendar art, as evident by the cover illustration of *La Pajarera*, one of the time-honored female images featured in Mexican calendars. Like Cisneros, Martínez emphasizes how national icons featured in Mexican calendar art influence and often set the parameters of the range of gender roles possible. Furthermore, Martínez shows how Lulabell, like Lala in Cisneros' *Caramelo*, identifies with and negotiates her gender identity in relation to the images of womanhood depicted in old Mexican calendars: "The women depicted were so beautiful that Lulabell could never bring herself to get rid of the calendars once they expired. There was the Aztec princess, market mistress, girl in waiting, woman serenaded, la revolucionaria, the loving mother, or La Malinche, the unknowing traitoress being carried off on horseback to start a new race" (78). Not only does Lulabell appreciate the aesthetic beauty of the calendar art, but she also models herself after these images of femininity: "Lulabell particularly loved La Pajarera, a brunette in braids with her peasant top seductively sliding off her shoulder, with a red bird in her hand. Lulabell had once felt as if she held her whole world in her hands as if it were that little bird. Not the world itself, but Lulabell's world, her children, her husband, her beauty, her God" (78). Lulabell understands the world and her role in it based upon the women in the calendar scenes. She forms a gendered identity based upon these cultural female archetypes; thereby emphasizing the strong impact of national iconography on gender performance.

Based on her 'understanding' of gendered performance, Lulabell casts herself in

different roles as the circumstances of her life change. After the abandonment of her husband and the death of her son, Lulabell no longer feels like she holds her world in the palm of her hand, like La Pajarera. She relates more to the image of the woman in agony and plays that role. “But now everything was either gone or fleeing and La Lulabell was more apt to cast herself in the calendar scene ‘La Cruz de Palenque.’ Just a woman y su agonía leaning up against a wooden cross with the bones of the past at her feet, eyes closed, hands clasped casually (¿in prayer?), her braids shamelessly undone” (78). Lulabell can change depending on the circumstance; she can act as La Pajarera, La Cruz de Palenque, or any female archetype she chooses: “Dressed as she was, [Lulabell] looked then more than ever as if she had just walked off of a Mexican calendar, as if she had been painted by the famosísimo Jesús Helguera. With a bird in the palm of her hand, Lulabell would be La Pajarera. Put her on a horse and let her hair hang loose and long and she could pass for La Adelita” (107).<sup>8</sup> Although national iconography and cultural values dictate the types of female archetypes upon which Lulabell constructs a gendered identity, she still chooses which female gender roles to perform.

While telenovelas represent a Manichean world view, in which good women are depicted as pure, chaste, and moral, and bad women are depicted as impure, sexually active, and immoral, the novel blurs the line between good and evil and shows female characters questioning the religious values that are usually reinforced in the shows. Lulabell unabashedly expresses her sexuality and utilizes her physical attraction to satisfy her own needs and desires. Unlike Caridad in *So Far From God*, who is severely punished, and almost killed for her sexual activity outside the confines of marriage, Lulabell is not punished for openly flouting social and religious mores by seducing men

and paying them to have sex.

Although “For the vast majority of her life, Lulabell had laid her immense powers [of witchcraft] dormant in favor of devout pursuit of the teachings of her once Lord and Savior Jesus Christ,” after losing her husband and one of her sons she “eventually gave up on the Lord, His ways and teachings, and pursued what she had been born with: a natural knack for witchcraft,” which she uses to lure men and capture their hearts (38). She frequents the parking lot of the Lava Landing Lumberyard, offering a day's work, the type of work which “didn't require any verbal exchange,” to any interested man in the labor pool (39). Lulabell pays the men to have sex and repair things, such as “a clogged garbage disposal or a stubborn washing machine” around her home (40). Through *brujería*, sneaking secret spices into their food, she ensures the men will be available for further services. Given Lulabell's connections at the lumberyard, “she got most of the labor and a good portion of the materials for free,” which helps given the meager salary she earns working part-time as a waitress at the Lava Landing Bowling Alley Café (40). Capitalizing on her seduction and witchcraft skills, Lulabell uses the men to meet her physical and material needs, instead of the other way around.

Martínez challenges the mythology promoted within telenovelas that a beautiful woman pines for one man and remains chaste until their wedding night when she gives herself to him completely, body and soul. Instead, she exposes the fallacy of the happily-ever-after romance narrative by showing how Lulabell, like Sofia in *So Far From God*, is abandoned by her husband and as a result ends up selling her soul and gives her body to whomever she wants whenever she wants. While stereotypical gender roles depict men as the ones who conquest women, in the novel, female characters, such as Lulabell, engage

in various sexual conquests. In fact, Lulabell “wanted to get to know a man from cada estado dentro La República Mexicana” and was “in the process of coloring in her own map” according to the different types of men she slept with and the states they were from in Mexico (106). Sexual conquest is a process of critical inquiry and investigation for her, an “anthropological pursuit” (106). When men, like Gilberto, fall in love with her, Lulabell is the one to declare that their union cannot continue. In fact, she “was responsible for the departure of more young ranch hands and day laborers than even the migra” (106). Martínez utilizes a comedic tone to parody the romance narrative, suggesting that Lulabell gives more men their walking papers than immigration officials. Instead of showing a woman drunk with the possibility of romance and desperate to be married, Martínez portrays a female protagonist who is not only “used to the archaic ritual” of romance, but “perhaps a bit tired of it” (107).

Martínez highlights the process through which women negotiate their gender and national identities, sometimes challenging or rejecting socio-cultural expectations and other times accepting or conforming to them, but always *choosing* how to perform their own identities. Like Cisneros, Martínez emphasizes how women choose to engage popular cultural forms, such as Mexican calendar art, alternately contesting or assimilating to traditional gender roles in their own lives. At the same time that Martínez complicates the Manichean worldview represented in telenovelas by depicting Lulabell as neither entirely good nor bad, she also shows how Lulabell operates within this paradigm as she places an ad in the newspaper auctioning off her soul and waits to see whether Jesus or the Devil will be the highest bidder. Lulabell shifts her loyalties back and forth between Jesus and the Devil, good and bad, throughout the novel.

Although initially having given up on God and monogamy, Lulabell abandons sexual variety when she decides to commit herself to Alberto (Beto), the man who has loved her for over forty years since they danced the Mexican hat dance together in second grade. Lulabell chooses to transform herself from a middle-aged bruja seductress to a committed wife; and literally empowers Beto, teaching him the wiles of witchcraft to win her heart, a process which, in her review of the book, Edith M. Vásquez aptly describes as, “self-determination through self-enchantment” (26). Lulabell gives Beto her fingernails and a lock of her hair, both of which are “necessary for the spell she was helping him put on her” (146). Afterwards, Lulabell is “more than a little afraid [...] To love one man and only one man for the rest of her life, was a concept she had heard of, tried once, failed at, and had since given up on” (154). But the spell works and after making love to Lulabell, instead of falling asleep and leaving her lying there awake feeling sad and lonely like other men, Beto holds Lulabell in his arms as he tells her about growing up in Guanajuato. In the morning Lulabell tells Beto she wants him to stay.

Martínez uses the character of Lulabell to show how women actively engage (alternately challenging and assimilating to) traditional female gender roles. When she decides to be with Beto, Lulabell tries to fit the idealized image of womanhood depicted within popular culture, “she was really trying to be a good *mujer*. She got up every day to make two home-cooked meals—one for Beto and one for Javier—since she knew that good motherhood was a sign of decent womanhood” (290). She struggles to conform to the cultural, gender mythology that decent women are not only good mothers, but are good wives as well. As a traditional Mexicano, Beto demands that Lulabell “learn how to

act like a Señora, una Señora de respeto” (290). He represents a more stereotypical male, as evident by his list of concerns about Lulabell which include “too much ex-novio, muy desobediente, gone all day in the street, too much high heel, no trust, too much mini falda, too much ex-novio” (259). Martínez again uses humor to emphasize how strict gender roles judge women based on the number of ex-boyfriends they have, how they dress, and comport themselves. She refers to the gender mythologies reinforced in telenovelas that a good woman, is obedient, does not spend a lot of time in the street (which implies she is not a promiscuous woman), and does not dress in an overly flirtatious way. Beto sees Lulabell “not just as some stray mamacita, but as [his] wife” (138). While Lulabell may have initially conducted herself as a stray mamacita, she transforms herself into a decent woman in order to be with Beto. Through the character of Lulabell Martínez illustrates how a woman negotiates her gender and national identities in light of the strong influence of national iconography and popular culture.

Although Martínez emphasizes that it is Lulabell's choice to be with Beto, she also shows the potential danger of capitulating to traditional gender roles. When Beto yells at Lulabell to dress decently or he will hit her, Lulabell finds the threat of physical violence a “novel if not appealing” thought (289). She “threw herself to the floor and wrapped her arms around Beto's knees” begging him “Don't leave, mi amor. I will be good. Te lo prometo” (290). Lulabell even asks Beto to hit her, “pégame, pégame, pero no me dejes” (290). She prefers to suffer physical abuse than abandonment. Beto asks in disbelief how she thinks he could ever raise a hand to her, to which Lulabell responds that “she didn't know, but had merely muttered the refrain she had heard a dozen times on the Mexican radio station as a last-ditch attempt to keep her Beto” (291). The lyrics

Lulabell repeats from a song she hears on the radio betray her sense of desperation at the thought of losing Beto and the depth of her emotional attachment to him. Although Beto reiterates traditional notions of male/female gender roles and exhibits his jealousy, luckily he is not violent. Yet by including the reference to violence in the song, Martínez illustrates the potentially dangerous impact of the mythologies regarding gender disseminated through popular culture. While Lulabell chooses to be with Beto and genuinely loves him, many women, like Mamá Lupita in Chávez's *Face of an Angel*, are not so lucky.

Even though Lulabell and Beto are united in the end, like a pair of star-crossed lovers in a telenovela, the trajectory of their courtship is very distinct from that of a typical couple in a telenovela. While initially Lulabell uses men to satisfy her needs and is not afraid to openly express her sexuality, in the end she chooses to change her ways in order to enter into a committed and loving relationship with Beto. Although Lulabell ends up conforming to the stereotypical image of a woman, similar to those depicted in Mexican calendar art, she does so on her own terms and because she wants to, not because she is forced to do so. Ironically, it is precisely when Lulabell realizes the fallacy of the romance narrative that she decides to commit to Beto. In describing her transformation from a “stray mamacita” to a committed wife, Lulabell tells her son Javier, “I used to think that love was just gettin dressed up, stayin out all night dancin, feelin like you're on top of the world. But that's not it at all. Love is a lot of hard work and sufferin, and it don't never end” (319). Martínez challenges the mythology of the perfect romantic union promoted in telenovelas, which always end with the lovers entering into a state of marital bliss. Instead, Martínez shows a woman who has felt the

initial intoxication of courtship, the excitement and promise of finding someone new, but has also experienced the emptiness of repeatedly engaging in purely physical, sexual encounters.

Yet unlike most telenovela heroines, Lulabell has no illusions about marriage, having been abandoned by her first husband, she knows the risks of surrendering one's heart. This is what makes Lulabell's choice to enter into a relationship with Beto so powerful. She willingly enters into a monogamous relationship, knowing the challenges, but also the rewards. With this example, Martínez underscores female agency and a woman's power to choose which intimate relationships she will enter into, but also the fact that a woman may see through the fallacy of the romance narrative, and instead of giving up on love all together, risk offering her heart once again.

Although Lulabell and Beto wind up happily married in the end, like a traditional telenovela plot, throughout the rest of the novel, Martínez parodies the romance narrative and the traditional gender roles on which it is based. All the other heterosexual couplings in the novel rupture; Lucha rejects her half brother Javier and leaves with her cousin Fabiola, and Cal McDaniels, the man courting Consuelo dies, leaving her and Natalie free to take off on a road trip. While a traditional telenovela revolves around one primary relationship between a man and a woman, Martínez centers the novel on the friendship between Natalie and Consuelo (Nat and Sway). Chapter 1 "Like-Minded Individuals" describes how they met:

Natalie and Consuelo were best friends since the second grade when the latter stuck a piece of ABC gum in the former's hair while they were engaged in a fistfight over a boy whose name neither of them could

remember. When Natalie had to cut her then waist-length hair up to a chin-length bob, Consuelo followed suit. Both girls realized at the early age of eight, a man is the last thing that ought to come between friends. (3)

Although the young girls initially meet fighting over a boy, years later neither of them can remember his name, and the disagreement turns into a bonding moment, as Sway decides to cut her hair short to be in solidarity with Nat. More importantly, the girls realize that their friendship with each other is more important than any relationship either of them will have with a man.

Instead of focusing on the transformation of the happy couple, Martínez highlights the transformative power of female friendship and shows how Nat helps Sway overcome her fear of travel, which involves going to Mexico to release the soul of Sway's dead father, Don Pancho, from Purgatory. One of the most melodramatic plot lines in the novel involves Don Pancho whose traumatic death (he fell asleep drunk at the wheel of his Chevy pickup after it stalled on the train tracks, and was swept away by the midnight train from Guanajuato) leaves Sway afraid to travel more than thirty miles from her house. Don Pancho appears to Sway in her dreams imploring her to return to Mexico and lead the people to the train tracks where he was killed to pray for his release from Purgatory. Given her “insurmountable fear of public transportation” Sway is unable to help her father and so he turns to her best friend Nat (9). When Nat asks Don Pancho about Sway's unreasonable fear he replies that “it serves her well by keeping her in one place and out of trouble” (85). She responds to “his male chauvinism with this proposition: ‘And, what if I cure her, then what?’ ‘She cannot be cured,’ said DP, just as sure of himself as ever. ‘That remains to be seen,’ Nat said. Then in defiance not just of

Don Pancho, but of all men who try to keep a girl down, Natalie woke up, leaving Don Pancho” in doubt as to whether or not she would help him (85).

Eventually, Natalie does come to Don Pancho’s aid, but more out of a desire to release Sway from her fear of travel than to release her father from Purgatory. In this exchange, Martínez emphasizes Don Pancho's power as a father to restrict his daughter's movements. Although Don Pancho causes or imposes Sway's fear of travel out of a desire to protect her, his actions limit her mobility and thus, independence. Nat, refuses to allow any man, not even Sway's father, to keep her imprisoned by fear. With this example Martínez underscores female defiance of the patriarchy, which seeks to control women by restricting their freedom. While the traditional telenovela plot shows a valiant man rescuing a defenseless woman and protecting her from the dangers of the world, the novel illustrates the threat men pose to women, particularly those men closest to women including, often times, their fathers. Martínez's defiance of the patriarchy is also evident, as Vásquez points out, in the way that she abbreviates Don Pancho's name to DP thereby “giving short shrift to Mexican customs of formality and paternal hierarchy” (26). More than just disregarding traditional customs of formality, which demand addressing the family patriarch with respect, Martínez challenges the rules established by the patriarchy, in this case DP’s desire to restrict Sway's travel.

Martínez highlights the fact that it is her female friend Nat who empowers Sway to overcome her fear of travel instilled in her by her over protective father, not a man. When Nat flies to Mexico for a week to help Don Pancho, “it seemed like an eternity to Natalie and Consuelo, who hadn't been apart for more than twenty-four hours in nearly twenty years” (134). Martínez describes the two friends like an old married couple, two

people who have been together so long it feels strange to be apart. Sway tells Nat “the most important thing is that you take care of yourself because I don't know what I'd do without you” and with that she “reached around and took off her chain with the medallion of María de Lourdes; Natalie did the same. It did not matter that the medallions were identical and that the girls had both received them during their First Communion twenty years before. They exchanged necklaces, hugs, kisses, and a few tears” (134). Like wedding bands that symbolize the union of a man and wife, the twin medallions symbolize the union of Nat and Sway, also joined in a holy sacrament, albeit a First Communion not a wedding. The intensity of their bond is obvious.

When Nat calls from Mexico to tell Sway that not only is her Dad released from Purgatory, but as the new Patron Saint of Drunks and Prostitutes he is already performing miracles, the first of which is to set Natalie up with a man, Sway says, “last thing I need is for you to go fallin for some vato over there and the next thing I know I never see you again” (178). Sway warns Natalie about falling in love with a man, she instructs her “to come back in one piece, by that I mean your heart too. ¿Okay, corazón? Don't be leavin even a little piece of it behind [...] I love you baby, and see you soon” (178). Not only does Sway want to prevent Nat from getting hurt, she wants to make sure she returns to the U.S. and more importantly, to her, with her heart in one piece. Sway wants Nat's heart and her love and friendship all to herself. When Nat returns from Mexico and hands her a framed picture of Don Pancho, Sway says, “You brought me my daddy, a girl can't ask for more than that” (204). Martínez emphasizes that Natalie has given Consuelo everything she ever wanted, much like the charming prince promises to do for his

princess, suggesting that the friendship between two women is more satisfying than a romantic relationship between a man and a woman.

Martínez completely undercuts the mythology promoted within telenovelas that a woman's happiness depends upon her marriage to a man. Sway prefers Nat's love to everyone else's, including that of Cal McDaniel's, their boss and the owner of The Big Cheese Plant and The Big Five-Four bar. Although Sway goes out on a date with Cal and occasionally dances with him at the El Aguantador night club, she does not reciprocate his love. Her heart belongs to Natalie. The depth of Sway's feelings for Nat is evident when she gets jealous of Javier kissing her. Consuelo stood with "her hands on her hips. How dare he barge in and sweep Natalie off her feet like that. Consuelo grabs Natalie by an elbow with undue force, as if she is in trouble, and she drags her to the kitchen table where she pulls out a chair, then forces her to have a seat. Once Consuelo is certain she has put a safe amount of distance between Natalie and Javier," she asks him how he feels about Natalie (343). Based on her reaction, it is obvious that Sway feels threatened by Javier and is concerned about his feelings for Nat, as well as her feelings for him, evident by Sway's actions toward Nat, which appear to be a punishment for allowing Javier to kiss her. Sway admits, "when it comes to Natalie, jealousy has always been an issue for [her]. It's one thing to watch Nat kickin up her heels dancin the night away with some stray cute thang on a Saturday night, but to have a young man standin in her very own livin room declarin long-felt feelins for her best friend is another thing entirely" (343-4). Sway does not mind if Nat enjoys dancing and flirting with men on a Saturday night because these brief encounters do not entail a serious emotional commitment. But she is overwhelmed when Javier shows up at her house, takes Natalie in his arms, kisses her,

and admits he has had strong feelings for her for years. Javier clarifies that he loves Natalie like he loves Consuelo, as a friend, and promises that they will all be “friends to the end” (344). Martínez underscores that the two women will be friends with Javier until the end, not each other, because it is obvious, that Nat and Sway are more than friends.

Instead of ending the novel with Nat and Sway each settling down with a man and starting a family, Martínez concludes with a description of the two women riding off into the sunset together. With Natalie's help, Sway overcomes her fear of travel and they both head to the coast to disperse the ashes of Cal McDaniel, who suffers a heart attack. Sway asks Nat if she will teach her how to drive and Nat responds, “Course I can. You know. I'd do anything in this big, old, wide, crazy, world for you, Sway,” to which Sway replies, “I know. You've already proved that to me more than once” (355). Martínez emphasizes the undying devotion between Nat and Sway and illustrates how one woman empowers the other to freedom.

As Consuelo pops the top of the urn and scatters Cal's ashes saying, “You are free,” she thinks to herself, “Free. What a word. After all of these years, it actually means something to her” (357). Consuelo is free from an insurmountable fear imposed on her by her father out of a false sense of protection; she is free to venture beyond a thirty-mile radius from her house, free to exert her independence, which is exactly what she does: “Consuelo slides into the driver's seat for the very first time in her entire life [...] she puts the transmission in drive and without further instruction she pulls out into traffic. In no time she is in the fast lane. They are in the fast lane” (360). Consuelo is in the driver's seat literally and metaphorically; she has taken control of her life and proven herself very capable at the wheel, guiding herself and Natalie into the fast lane, moving quickly

toward their future. Martínez begins and ends the novel with Natalie and Consuelo and shows that they are closer to each other than any man. Unlike the typical telenovela which ends with the transformation of the happy couple, *¡Caramba!* ends with the transformation of close female friends, whose love for each other leads them to freedom.

Martínez deviates from the telenovela plot not only by foregrounding the relationship between two women instead of between a woman and a man, but also by parodying the rules of courtship, specifically as symbolized in the serenade. She illustrates how the rules of traditional courtship within the Mexican-American heterosexual community inscribe limiting gender roles:

In old Mexican movies, there is the beautiful girl and the handsome man. They can both sing remarkably well and use this talent throughout the film to express their innermost sentiments. The handsome man loves the beautiful girl, so he gathers men, who gather instruments, and place themselves beneath her window. This is the serenade, (26)

Conventional movies only represent romance between attractive men and women. In such depictions, women generally play the passive role of a helpless victim who eagerly awaits a valiant man to rescue her from the imprisonment of an over protective father:

The beautiful girl is really, really beautiful. Because of this, her father has placed bars across her window. Also, he has not yet realized that she is a woman. The beautiful girl places her hands on these bars while the man and his mariachis serenade her. She holds these bars so as not to fall over from flattery or love, which, in certain manifestations, are the same thing anyway. (26)

Martínez underscores how popular culture reinforces the mythology that a beautiful, young woman must be protected (in some cases literally encaged) by her father because she is too naïve to distinguish between sycophancy and love.

Martínez parodies the conventional serenade (and implicitly traditional gender roles) through the character of Lucha. The scene in which Javier and the Mariachi de Dos Nacimientos, the Born again Christian mariachi group, serenade the inmates at the Lava County Women's Correctional Facility is more farcical than romantic. As the mariachi sang, "the ladies took to dancing with one another. Cheek to cheek the women swayed. The music acted as an aphrodisiac and kissing prisoners could be seen through the facility" (27). Instead of remaining passive objects of male desire, the women actively satisfy their desires by dancing and kissing each other. Except for Lucha, who "clung to her bars making ojitos at Javier" and "batted her eyelids and licked her lips" (28). Lucha pretends to be "sweet and sentimental," and suddenly switches to "perky and practical" asking Javier if he will sign for her release from prison (30). Even though Lucha plays the victim waiting to be rescued, ultimately, she manipulates Javier for her own ends. In other words, she subverts the traditional female gender role, which is promoted within popular culture.

Lucha performs the role of the helpless, naïve female, in order to take advantage of Javier. Only five days after her release from prison, she manages to "hook up with a new vato" and is in the process of making love to him when Javier arrives to serenade her (94). As Javier sings to her, "Lucha rolled out from under Joaquín" who "got down on all fours" below the window (94). This scene exposes romance as a ridiculous game between a patsy and a rebellious woman. During Javier's serenade, Lucha looks down at Joaquín

telling him, “You look just like a dog down there, you pig. ¡Get up!” (95). Martínez successfully undercuts the traditional image of the serenade that is central to courtship and often depicted in telenovelas. She shows the woman as the one in control while the men are completely dis-empowered, represented either as the butt of a joke, like Javier, or an animal, like Joaquin.

Martínez challenges the mythology implicitly promoted in telenovelas that women exist primarily as sexual objects for men to enjoy. Instead, Martínez illustrates how Lucha uses her sexuality and her feminine wiles to gain the upper hand and get what she wants from men, like Javier.

When Lucha was a little girl, she was always having her hand slapped for sneaking into the candy jar. As adolescence set in, Lucha began to feel like the candy jar—everywhere she went, men were reaching out for her as if she were filled with orange slices and marshmallow circus peanuts, Lucha’s favorites. It was during this trying time that Lucha solved both problems with the implementation of a single sudden insight. Lucha learned how to get what was inside the candy jar, by posing as the candy jar. (33)

By posing as the sexual object men want, Lucha is able to move from the passive role of an object to the active role of a subject who manipulates men to satisfy her own desires, a role typically reserved for men. Upon Lucha's release from prison, Javier takes her to church and in the car on the way she strokes his hair, stares into his eyes, caresses his leg, and even puts her head in his lap. Lucha is accustomed to using sex to get what she wants. Yet, when Javier rebuffs her advances, Lucha adjusts her strategy and plays the

role of a repentant spiritual woman, which she figures, that he, as a Born again Christian, wants. During the church service, “Lucha threw herself to the floor, then crawled to the large crucifix at the head of the church. She begged the Lord to accept her as one of His children and to forgive her sins, which were many and varied” (56). Lucha performs, not only for Javier, but for the entire congregation, she “took the podium and delivered [an] extemporaneous, yet moving speech” (56). In the same manner as Lulabell, Lucha quickly adapts and adjusts as the circumstances of her life change. By playing the role of a repentant sinner, Lucha tricks Javier into believing that his plan of conversion is working, while in reality she wields power and control over him.

Generally female characters in telenovelas are depicted as love sick, over-emotional, and obsessed with men, Lucha, on the other hand, is depicted as cool and calculating, a woman who is obsessed with men only to the extent that they are able to satisfy her needs (sexual or otherwise). She craftily appeals to Javier’s sexual desire, the man behind the missionary, while simultaneously pretending to be a good Christian woman. After their roller-skating date, Javier is surprised to find out that Lucha went out dancing. She “headed out to El Aguantador looking for someone to finish what Javier had started” (240). In other words, she exhibits no moral qualms about finding a sexual surrogate and exhibits power and agency by acting on her own behalf to satisfy her wants and desires. When Javier discovers Lucha at the club she offers a pathetic cry for help. “‘Hermanito, save me,’ pleaded Lucha feigning tears. ‘The Devil came unto me, and temptation He did bring’” (240). Javier projects onto Lucha his need for a weak, woman who he can lead back to the path of righteousness. Even after their engagement, when Javier finds Lucha at a club with another man, he refuses to accept her fraudulent

character. Javier points out that not only is Lucha not wearing her engagement ring but she is also violating probation. She tells Javier, “‘I gave the ring to my brother. You see, our uncle is a jeweler and I wanted to have it cleaned,’ sad Lucha. She squeezed Joaquín’s forearm and smiled up at him. ‘¿He’s your brother?’ said Javier pointing at Joaquín. ‘Yes, but you are my favorite one.’ She cocked her head convincingly to the side” (276). Martínez challenges the mythology of the virgin/whore dichotomy disseminated within telenovelas, by showing a woman, cunning enough to act chaste and pure in some circumstances, while at the same time unafraid to express her sexuality and seek her own physical pleasure in others.

Not only does Martínez reverse traditional gender roles by depicting a woman who is neither ashamed nor scared to exhibit sexual agency, but she also shows a woman willing to engage in illegal activity in order to protect herself and others and secure a future. Living up to her name, Lucha (which translates as the struggle or fight) uses whatever means necessary and whatever options are at her disposal to achieve her goals and meet her needs. For example, after falling in love with Ezequiel (Cheque), she starts working for him in the Lonchera (lunch truck) he owns and discovers that he is using it as a front to sell tamales stuffed with cocaine and marijuana. Yet Lucha is not scared of getting involved in Cheque's drug trafficking business, what she fears more is “that part deep inside her that was excited about the gun that lurked in the tortilla cabinet” (35). Ironically, Lucha feels safer at Cheque's side than she ever had before, even as they are “trying to outrun the feds in his trusty catering truck” (35). After being arrested and doing time for serving as Cheque's accomplice, Lucha decides to return to selling drugs in order to make money. She “was gonna free herself from the throes of poverty into which she'd

been born” (120). Lucha gives in to her excitement and desire to wield a gun and has no concern about breaking gender/societal norms or laws.

Within a Mexicano/Chicano context, Lucha is a *macha*, a woman who exhibits what are stereotypically considered to be male characteristics. As Vásquez states, “Lucha embodies an unremitting female dominance and firebrand amorality with violent implications” (26). This is particularly evident in the drug deal scene when Lucha and her cousin Fabiola pull polished .45’s out of their handbags and approach two men in *trajes de charro*.

“Get your hands in the air,” said Lucha. “I’m gonna grab at your belt, but don’t get the wrong idea, boys.” She licked her lips for emphasis and Fabiola did the same. Lucha unbuckled their belts, and their pistols et al. came tumbling down. She kicked them out of the way. “They’re fake,” insisted El Huracán, his hands still raised high in the air. “So’s your act,” said Lucha. The men frowned, reminding Lucha of any one of a half dozen dumb sidekicks in any one of a hundred old Mexican cowboy movies. (122)

Lucha takes on a stereotypically masculine role, addressing the men condescendingly as boys, and treating them as sex objects making suggestive comments while removing their guns. Well-versed in the art of evasion, Lucha can see right through the men’s weak acting. Unlike the typical telenovela heroine who fawns all over men, Lucha reduces them to a joke. In the same way she does with Javier and Joaquin, she compares the men to dumb sidekicks in old Mexican movies.

Martínez rejects the mythology of the romance narrative depicted in telenovelas,

by presenting a female character who prefers her independent life as a drug dealer to getting married.

“Last night I told my vato I got a gun under the seat of my truck, and he believes me. Rule number one,” said Lucha holding up that many fingers, “never bring your cuete unless you’re doin business, and last night I wasn’t. Besides, este vato gots no idea what’s goin on. He thinks he’s my only one. Like he’s my pan de Michoacán, mi piel de miel, mi mero mero pistolero. Pero así no es la cosa. He calls me all the time and tells me mamacita, chiquitita. He says I’m his luna, his estrella, his cielo. ¿Can you believe that shit?” (118)

Lucha demonstrates a rough and tough attitude, bragging about scaring a man with a gun and denouncing his overly romantic drivel, the same overly sweet language used in telenovelas to which Cisneros refers in *Caramelo*. As Javier eventually learns, “[Lucha] was not the type of woman that took to courtship” (328). In response to Javier’s disclosure of his desire to live with her forever, Lucha callously rejects the notion of marriage.

Lucha pulled the cigarette she had discreetly stashed behind her ear, then reached into her cowboy boots for her Zippo®. She ran the lighter south-bound along the length of her thigh, then held the ensuing flame up to the Marlboro® Red that dangled from the corner of her mouth. She closed her eyes as she inhaled deeply. “¿What do I want with happily ever after? It’s Saturday night and I am going to the Baile Grande. By myself,” she declared. (297)

Lucha is the anti-thesis of a typical telenovela heroine; instead of pining for marriage and happily ever after, she claims her independence thus underscoring the fallacy of the mythology that being a wife and mother necessarily makes a woman happy. Martínez further parodies the myth of the romance narrative by indicating that not only does Lucha reject Javier because she does not believe in marriage and courtship, but also because it turns out he may actually be her half brother! Lulabell explains to Lucha that she was involved with her father, who is also likely Javier's father. By including this crazy plot twist and revealing the hidden connection between Lucha and Javier, Martínez creates a truly telenovelaesque novel at the same time that she pokes fun at the very notion of romance on which the genre is based.

Martínez utilizes the relationship between Lucha and Fabiola (Favy) to further underscore the importance of female friendship over and above male/female romance. Similar to Natalie and Consuelo, Lucha and Favy are closer to each other than any man. Just as Natalie empowers Consuelo to overcome her fear of travel, Lucha helps her cousin Favy “get her voice back” (120). While everyone thinks Favy is *sordamuda* (deaf and dumb) because she does not speak, they do not realize that Favy's silence is in response to the trauma she suffered as a child. Her mother, La Lupe, worked as a prostitute and one of her clients raped Favy when she was a young girl; “from that moment on, Favy hadn't said a word, not even to Lucha, the person she loved more than anyone in the world. Favy stuck by Lucha because she knew that Lucha would always take care of her, and what's more, that she could, no matter what the circumstances” (119). This is exactly what Lucha does.

Taking on the typically masculine role of the hero who rides to the rescue of a

vulnerable woman, Lucha rescues her cousin and takes Favy to a spiritual counselor, La Señora Linda, to get her voice back. After examining Favy, La Señora says, “You suffered a trauma. Un buen susto. Something very bad happened to you many years ago, something you want to forget, but can't, something you had no control over. Something you could not fight off” (128). Lucha explains that “Un hombre maldito se abusó de ella” at which point “Fabiola looked at Lucha for a long time. Her gaze was so steady she didn't even so much as blink, and when she finally did a single tear rolled down each of her cheeks. Then she did something she hadn't done in so many years. She spoke. ‘You know,’ she said. Lucha grabbed her by the shoulders. ‘Yes I know. I have always known’” (128). By acknowledging the source of Favy's deepest pain, Lucha is able to break through the shame and silence that surrounds her. When La Señora announces that she is unable to help Favy, tears form in Lucha's eyes. Taking Lucha by the hands, La Señora says, “You love her and you protect her [...] and you always will,” and with that she advises Lucha to take Favy back to Mexico, “In these cases, I find the only thing that really works is venganza” (128-9). Interestingly, like Natalie and Consuelo who take to the open road and must travel in order to release Sway from her fear, Lucha and Favy must also travel as part of Favy's healing process. Martínez challenges the mythologies regarding gender promoted within telenovelas, in which women are presented as helpless, vulnerable, and passive, while men are presented as powerful, strong, and active. Instead, she presents female characters who exhibit agency and take action to help themselves and each other achieve freedom and happiness.

Martínez's rejection of the romance tradition and the mythologies regarding gender re-inscribed therein is dramatically symbolized when Favy and Lucha smash the

Miss Magma crown at the conclusion of the novel. While the Miss Magma pageant is well underway, Lucha and Favy are waiting to deliver the final kilo of cocaine. As the reigning queen, April-May, prepares to showcase her skating talents, Lucha pays the nearby Mariachi to play a song and Fabiola walks up to the microphone, takes “a big, big breath, as if trying to make up for more than just lost time” and “sings slowly and surely, but moreover inevitably, so that by the second verse her voice is loud and sure of itself” (359). Favy’s voice gathers in “momentum and volume” growing “as enormous as Natalie and Consuelo's ever growing fascination with the wideness of the world” (358).

Martínez makes an explicit connection between the two pairs of female friends, Lucha and Favy, and Nat and Sway, both of whom achieve freedom by breaking barriers; Favy breaks the barrier of silence and Sway breaks the perimeter of her travel zone. When Favy's song is finished, the judges, oblivious to April-May's skate-dance routine and having mistaken Favy for a contestant, crown her the new Miss Magma. In that moment,

Fabiola takes the volcano tiara from her head, takes one look at it, and throws it to the ground. Rhinestones. ¿What does she want with rhinestones when she has the means to get the real thing? And besides, Favy has unfinished business to take care of in Metzico. She hasn't the time to don the sashes and tiaras, to give the grade-school pep talks, to smile and wave for the crowd. (360)

Martínez emphasizes Favy's disdain for the Miss Magma pageant and what it symbolizes, a superficial beauty contest. Favy does not need someone else to give her rhinestones, especially when she can afford to buy them herself. Martínez directly challenges the

mythology that a woman must depend upon, someone or something outside herself to give her validation and meet her needs. She shows a female character who is not interested in nor has time to play the passive role of the fairytale princess, instead Favy is out to seek revenge against the man that abused her. After Favy throws the tiara to the ground, the judges run to rescue it, but are too late, Lucha “has already come down hard on it with her platform huaraches” (360). Lucha's smashing of the crown symbolizes the rejection of female gender roles promoted within the romance tradition.

Not only does Martínez challenge traditional gender roles and assumptions about romance disseminated through popular cultural forms, she also emphasizes the constructed, performative nature of gender and sexuality, particularly through the transvestite character, True-Dee and the gender ambiguous, April-May. Cecilia Rosales’ reading of Judith Butler in her article, “Chueco Sexualities: Kaleidoscopic I’s and Shattered Mirrors” is particularly helpful to understand gender performance within a specifically Mexicano-Chicano context. Rosales juxtaposes queer theory, specifically Butler, with Mary Ellen Wolf’s photo essay “Out of Frame: Border(line) Images” that documents transvestites’ lives on the Mexico-United States border. She explores the concept of the Spanish word *chueco* meaning crook or crooked and further explains that it also

refers to that which is not straight or aligned; that is, anything bent, curved, angular, twisted, or distorted; or to any act or person who is false, tricky, dishonest, fraudulent, or deceptive. In Mexican slang, *chueco* also refers to the practice of a transvestite passing as a woman, be it on stage,

on the sheets, or in bed, which represents the ultimate *chueco* achievement. (27)

Having set the cultural context, Rosales quotes Wolf, “*Chueco* highlights that moment in image making and image viewing when you want to believe, when you act as if what you see is what you get. Yet you really can’t be sure” (28). Relating Wolf’s ideas about image making and viewing to Butler’s idea of performativity, Rosales highlights the distorted and deceptive aspects of image and performance, thereby emphasizing the constructed nature of gender.

Yet Rosales moves beyond Butler making an important connection between gender and national identity. She looks at the ways national identities and sexualities are crafted specifically at the United States-Mexican border. Rosales quoting Butler’s “Imitation and Gender Insubordination,”

If gender [national identity] is drag, and if it is an imitation that regularly produces the idea it attempts to approximate, then gender [national identity] is a performance that produces the *illusion* of an inner sex or essence or psychic gender core; it produces on the skin, through the gesture, the move, the gait (the array of corporeal theatrics understood as gender [national identity] presentation) the illusion of an inner depth. In effect, one way that gender [national identity] gets naturalized is through being constructed as an inner psychic or physical *necessity*. And yet, it is always a surface sign, a signification on and with the public body that produces this illusion of an inner depth, necessity or essence that is somehow magically, causally expressed. (46)

Incorporating the concept of national identity, Rosales offers a perceptive interpretation of Butler's theories. By highlighting the performative nature of gender and national identities, Martínez exposes the fallacy that these are substantive, essential qualities and instead shows that gender and national identities are constitutive and constructed through repetitive or ritualized performance.

Martínez challenges the limited representations of gender and sexuality in popular cultural forms, like the telenovela and emphasizes the varied and complex nature of the performance of gender and national identities. This is particularly evident in her description of the nightlife in Lava Landing, characterized by nightclubs such as El Aguantador or El Zarape,

The women were on their way to El Aguantador—the Mexican dance club/bar/taquería in town with the mechanical bull, smiles that yielded gold- and silver-capped teeth, beer posters with dark-skinned beauties, men with cowboy boots and hats, fancy belts, jeans and gold jewelry, women with rayon dresses, long curly hair, or las chicas vaqueros with their pantalones Wrangler®, fancy belts and boots, just like their male counterparts, except for the frilly blouses, a banda, a conjunto norteño, a grupo, mariachis that sometimes showed up and sometimes didn't, video screens showing cockfights and rodeos, un show transvestis, y un bikini show. The bar served beer in bottles with lime slices stuffed into their lips, tequila, and margaritas, Nescafé® if you drank too much of the former, and Squirt® if you drank none. Nothing else. At El Aguantador you could

win the cumbia, quebradita, hombre más sexy, or the Million Dollar Legs contest, depending on the day of the week, or where your talents lay. (69)

Like in telenovelas, Martínez utilizes language and conventional locations to reflect and evoke a specific ethnic and cultural identity, in this case a Chicano bodertown. She refers to specifically ethnic gendered identities with phrases like “dark-skinned beauties” and “chicas vaqueros.” Other gendered identities and sexualities are represented through the types of contests and shows, hombre más sexy, Million Dollar Legs, un show transvestis and bikini show. The mixture of Spanish and English emphasizes the overlapping cultures and ethnicities and how this also influences sexuality/gender. In addition to language, the Mexicano/Chicano ethnicity and the working class of the border is also referenced by the combination of Southwestern and Mexican cultural style (cowboy boots, conjunto norteño, cockfights, beer with limes). Martínez emphasizes that the construction and performance of gender and sexuality is inextricably linked to culture and nationality.

By revealing the extensive, private preparation behind the public performance of gender, Martínez further highlights its constructed not essential nature:

The women were all older than he thought they would be. More than old, they looked tired, as if their lives had been one big perpetual parranda from which they never fully recovered. The women were likely there every night, or at some similar establishment, so used to the routine of putting on the mini-falda, the high-heel vinyl pumps they'd bought years before, the low-cut blouse and the push-up bra from La Family Bargain, sprinkling the dime store glitter glaze across their cleavage, making

themselves up with Wet ‘n’ Wild® cosmetics, then curling and teasing their over-processed hair [...] standing on the toilet, trying to get some semblance of a full-length mirror view, thinking you should have splurged for that \$9.99 door mirror [...] spritzing yourself with perfume—expensive or cheap just so long as it smells purty [...] squeezing into the clothes on the premise that they might land you a decent dancer on the grounds of what might come after the dancing is done, looking in the mirror, telling yourself not to worry—it’s dark in there. (272)

Martínez focuses on the performance of female gender from putting on a mini-falda, vinyl pumps, and push-up bra to accentuate sexy, curvaceous body parts to curling and teasing hair and dousing perfume and glitter everywhere, for the purpose of attracting a good dancer and hopefully obtaining sex. The mirrors symbolize the process of image making and viewing (a la Wolf and Rosales).

Martínez also highlights the impact of ethnicity and class on the performance of gender and national identities. The references to lower class are various including, shopping at La Family Bargain, wearing pumps purchased years ago, using cheap, dime store cosmetics, over-processed hair, probably the result of do-it-yourself perm and hair dye kits, and categorizing a \$10 full-length mirror as a splurge item. Perhaps the most incisive statement about class is the description of the women as looking tired, a result not so much of age, as the fatigue and stress associated with poverty and the lower class. This is further reiterated by Lulabell who tells Javier that “hard work and sufferin are the enemies of youth and physical beauty” (319). She continues,

¿Do you ever watch the women comin out of the cannery or comin home from the fields? ¿Do they look young to you? ¿Any of them? No they don't They never do. I used to look at them and say, "Now there's a woman who hasn't taken care of herself, who has let the years get the best of her." But it's not like that at all. Try lookin lovely if you've been workin out in the sun all day, or if you've been up all night cryin. (319)

Martínez illustrates the impact of class on gender performance. She suggests that getting dolled up to attract a man is less of a priority for women who are working ten to twelve hour days doing manual labor. Furthermore, she alludes to the judgment that working class women face from other women, like Lulabell, who assume they have let themselves go and do not take the time to look attractive. Yet, Lulabell realizes that it is not a lack of interest or desire, but rather a lack of energy and resources, that prevents working class women from focusing on their physical appearance. Martínez challenges the mythology disseminated within telenovelas that upper class women deserve a man's love because they take care of themselves and cultivate their physical beauty. She suggests that romance and courtship, the sole preoccupation of most telenovela heroines, are not an immediate and pressing concern for all women. Martínez also exposes the fact that one's financial resources can limit the performance of gender.

By describing a variety of gendered identities in her portrayal of the Baile Grande, Martínez subverts the rigid male/female binary:

The one-dress ladies, wearing the same taffeta dress with the shoes dyed to match that they wore to Magda's quinceañera, Leti's wedding, uncle Pato's retirement party. The girls with the shirts so short they show their

ombligos, who will empty out to the parking lot upon invitation to show the boys other things as well. The girls that came with boys, the ones that didn't. Las muchachas recién llegadas de México, much shyer than the rest of the bunch and with their hair still so long, it's past their nalgas. The transvestis, stuffed into their outfits, sparkling from head to toe, trying to make up for what nature didn't give them. (303)

There are different performances of female gender depending on national identity (from Mexico or the US), class (one-dress ladies), and sexuality (transvestites creating the illusion of a physical body they were born without). By including tranvestites in her description of the women at the baile, Martínez challenges the rigid male/female binary reinforced within popular culture that defines womanhood narrowly as a person whose external appearance of femininity reflects their physical biological sex. She emphasizes that in addition to people for whom their biological sex does correspond to their gender identity, there are also people who perform a gender identity that does not reflect the biological sex with which they were born, or, in the case of True-Dee, who opt to undergo surgery to alter their biological sex in order to reflect their gender identity.

Within Martínez's text the transvestite and gender ambiguous characters expose the fallacy of conceptualizing gender/sex in narrow either/or categories and challenge the mythology of compulsory heterosexuality on which the telenovela is based. According to Rosales, "transvestism, drag, cross-dressing, transsexualism, bisexuality until recently had been 'bastard' practices within the array of 'identified' sexualities. These practices and the individuals identified with them could hardly fit into the established—either/or—binarisms of homosexual/heterosexual, female/male" (34). Transvestism has been a

silenced subculture that remains on the margins of queer theory. Rosales states that transvestites' "self-representations and practices on the United States-Mexico border become the margin on which the ever-evolving script of queer theory is questioned and corrected" (27). Not all transvestites share the same experience due to differences of class, race and ethnicity. A Chicana/o transvestite living on the border, like the character True-Dee in Martínez's novel, identifies with a marginalized race/ethnicity, class, and sexual orientation. The multiple oppressions that Chicana/o transvestites suffer, is made explicit in the terminology used to categorize their individual identities. Rosales states that hyphenated terms such as "Mexican-American, cross-dressing and border-crossing" usually represent the conjoining of "'coequal' terms" (27). But "here, clearly, the hyphen is used to indicate an antinomy, as the nouns in hyphenated national identities known to us have nothing that is 'coequal.' Metaphorically, the hyphen in itself constitutes a border separating two concepts that together convey one meaning, but separately embrace a series of dissimilarities" (27). The inequalities of ethnicity, sexual orientation, and class are emphasized through the hyphenated terms, which ultimately, as Rosales argues, render the borders intelligible. Such borders or divisions along the lines of nationality, race, ethnicity, class, and gender, are clearly legible and upheld within telenovelas.

Martínez explores the complexities of a hyphenated identity (multiple subjectivity) primarily through the character True-Dee. Within the Mexicano/Chicano community, True-Dee is known as a "mamápa [...] part mamacita, part papacito" (211). She refers to herself as "a woman under construction" (189). Although born anatomically male, True-Dee takes hormones to appear more feminine and is considering reconstructive surgery, which will render her incapable of "achieving complete sexual

gratification” (189). Although Judith Halberstam argues that on a theoretical level cosmetic surgery can help undermine rigid categories of race, class, and gender, practically, some types of reconstructive surgery are destructive to individual pleasure.<sup>9</sup> Thus, the importance, as Vivian Namaste admonishes, of examining the routine details, the material reality of a transvestite’s life.<sup>10</sup> Martínez attempts to capture the reality of True-Dee’s life as a transvestite living on the border and her concerns about undergoing reconstructive surgery.

Through the character of True-Dee Martínez challenges various mythologies about gender and sexuality disseminated through popular culture. True-Dee bemoans the fact that there is no femininity left in the world: “[Her] crusade [is] to save the female species from what she considered a conspiracy of the highest order designed to deprive women of their most volatile asset: their femininity. As True-Dee figured it, this conspiracy was planned, plotted, and enacted by none other than the leaders of the feminist movement” (98). Martínez attempts to expose the mythology that feminists are generally assumed not to represent femininity (with a lady-like, dainty demeanor) but rather to be butch, man-hating lesbians, but even True-Dee seems to fall into such stereotypical thinking, blaming the feminists for not upholding the virtues of being a lady. Martínez obliquely alludes to the division within the feminist movement that fails to address differences of class, race/ethnicity, and sexual orientation among women. True-Dee’s criticism and dismissal of feminists can be understood as a defensive response to rejection from feminists who deny their transvestite, transgendered sisters.

By using True-Dee to exemplify femininity, Martínez emphasizes the performative and constructed nature of gender. The fact that True-Dee, although

anatomically male is the most “feminine” character in the entire novel, emphasizes Rosales’ point that there is not a stable, unilateral relationship between biological sex, sexual desire, and gender. For True-Dee external accoutrements (a decent handbag and quality shoes) and gestures (good manners) signify womanhood, which accentuates that gender is something that can be purchased and created. True-Dee epitomizes the performativity of gender, not simply because she is a transvestite but also because she is the heart of the show *transvestis* in Lava Landing. While watching True-Dee perform as Thalía, “Mexico’s most beloved telenovela star,” lip-synching and wiggling her nalgas to “Amor a la Mexicana,” Natalie and Consuelo ponder the gender dynamics of the show *transvestis* (71).

Mexican men are amongst the most macho, ¿qué no? The girls had concluded that the only way a woman could be that sexy, i.e., as sexy as the transvestites, and not be called a slut or worse, was either by having her own telenovela, or by being a man. And when the men all went out to see the sex-spectacular show that was *el show transvestis*, they didn’t feel the need to stuff dollar bills in the performer’s panties, or even make up excuses for their wives or girlfriends whom they always left conveniently waiting at home. They were, after all, going out to watch a bunch of men perform, at least chromosomically speaking. (70)

Martínez reiterates the gender stereotype held within the Mexicano/Chicano ethnic community, that a good decent woman cannot be overly sexy. Nat and Sway articulate what Beto implies to Lulabell, that sexy women are whores, unless they have their own telenovelas. Martínez implies that a woman is only allowed to be overtly sexual within

the safe confines of a television show or if she is a man. The Mexican men in the audience at the show transvestis do not pay the performers or offer excuses for watching their provocative shows, because in their minds, and those of their girlfriends and wives, the transvestites are not “real” women because they are anatomically male, and therefore pose no threat. In other words, Martínez alludes to heterosexual women's lack of concern (whether warranted or not) that transvestites will run off with their husbands or boyfriends who watch the shows.

Martínez illustrates the challenges of pursuing romantic and sexual relationships for transvestites and transgender people, who are rarely, if ever, depicted in telenovelas or traditional romance narratives. True-Dee tells her friends that she has decided to get the sex change operation she has been contemplating for a long time; “I'm plannin on getting the transformation. Thought about it for a long time and one thing I know is, nothin good ever happens in limbo” (102). Interestingly, True-Dee echoes Don Pancho who, in reference to being stuck in Purgatory, also said nothing good ever happens in limbo. This is not a coincidence given that True-Dee serves as the male medium through which Don Pancho communicates to Sway at Maestro Salomé's house; another scene in which Martínez emphasizes the distinction between a person's gender identity and her/his physical biological sex. In this case, in order to channel a male spirit, Maestro Salomé explains that he needs a male medium. He is surprised when True-Dee offers to help out because she appears to be a woman, but she explains, “I have the physical attributes which allow me to be classified as a man” (91). Part of the reason True-Dee decides to have reconstructive surgery is to avoid such surprise and confusion in the future, particularly in her intimate relationships.

Given that transvestites and transgendered people have historically been erased from traditional romance narratives, by including True-Dee and her romantic entanglements as a prominent part of the story, Martínez deviates from the typical telenovela plot. She challenges the mythology of the rigid male/female binary by attempting to give voice to a transgendered character. True-Dee writes a letter to Querida Claudia, an advice columnist, expressing her struggle to get and keep a man. She tells Claudia that while “hormones have given me what nature didn't, they haven't taken away what nature did give me, and by that I don't mean facial hair; for that we have wax!!!” (186). Martínez uses humor to capture the depth of True-Dee's discomfort at having male genitalia and yet feeling like a woman. True-Dee reveals her reservations about reconstructive surgery explaining that not only is it costly and painful, but if she goes through with it, she “will no longer be capable of achieving complete sexual gratification” (188). Martínez uses True-Dee to articulate the internal struggle transgender people face, feeling as if they are trapped in the wrong body and faced with the option of undergoing a painful operation which may help them achieve the physical body they think nature intended, but will render them incapable of achieving orgasm. Even more than not being able to enjoy the physical satisfaction of orgasm, True-Dee fears she will never “know what love is really like” because, as she explains to Claudia, when she is with a man “as soon as he discovers nature's mistake, he's always promptly on his way” (187). Martínez further highlights True-Dee's fear of never experiencing love when she describes her sexual encounter with Juan.

In the scene with True-Dee and Juan, Martínez relates the performance of gender identity to the melodramatic, performative aspect of the telenovela genre. True-Dee and

Juan spend the first part of their night together watching recorded episodes of the telenovela, *Amor y Pecado* (love and sin): “They were face-to-face, eye-to-eye, moving toward one another just like in any given episode of any given telenovela and Juan couldn't help but think, 'No lo puedo believe’” (220). Juan continually repeats this phrase because he cannot believe he has the good fortune to be with someone as beautiful and talented (she cooks him up a delicious plate of chorizo con huevos) as True-Dee: “True-Dee was far too lovely. As Juan saw it, she could have her pick of starring roles in the telenovela of her choice” (221). But True-Dee performs regularly as a telenovela star in the show *transvestis*, and she wants a chance at true love. Juan remains mesmerized even after removing True-Dee's blonde bouffant wig to reveal her real shiny, long black hair. As he peels off True-Dee's tight pants, Juan “was on the verge of finding out what happens after the telenovela is over” and shocked by what he finds beneath her panties, “just like in the telenovelas, he rolled over sideways and fainted” (222-3).

In this scene Martínez makes an explicit connection between True-Dee's life as a transgender person and a telenovela, which whether intended or not, reduces her struggles to a joke. Yet, at the same time, Martínez highlights the fallacy of a coherent sex/gender identity that is at the core of the heterosexual romance narratives presented in telenovelas. She relates Juan discovering that True-Dee has male genitalia to finding out what happens when the telenovela is over, meaning when the façade is pulled away and the fallacy exposed for what it truly is. In this case, the end of the telenovela, means the end of the performance, when the truth about True-Dee's biological sex is revealed beneath her quite convincing external expression of femininity. In the wake of such personal rejection, True-Dee finds consolation in her response from Claudia, who tells her that,

“you will know love when you find a man who accepts you as you are” (225). Despite Martínez’s inclusion of a transgender character and her careful consideration of the challenges a transgender person faces in negotiating a gender identity and cultivating personal sexual relationships, she offers the reader no satisfying resolution for True-Dee in her personal life.

Although Martínez challenges many of the mythologies about gender and sexuality disseminated through popular cultural forms, ultimately she ends up undermining, literally in True-Dee's case, the transvestite and gender ambiguous characters in the novel. The advice columnist Claudia, ironically, is a man named Larry who convinces True-Dee to join The Sons and Daughters of San Narciso, a cult that believes the volcano in Lava Landing, which has been dormant for over 150 years, is on the verge of another eruption. Initially in her letter, True-Dee tells Claudia that she does not believe the volcano is waiting to explode, that she “can recognize a petty lie for attention” when she sees one and “as an educated type she knows better than to fall for that!” (188). But, when Larry tells True-Dee that the people in the cult are “forward-thinking” and that she is “sure to meet the one that will love you as you are,” he convinces her to go underground with them, which ultimately results in the destruction of her beauty salon. True-Dee explains the disaster to Natalie and Sway:

Like I was sayin, the Sons and Daughters of San Narciso are a cult. They are not a club or a cause, but a cult that takes advantage of well-intentioned individuals who want to make a bona fide difference in the world such as myself. They believe in sacred somethin or other.

Apparently my salon runs right through the volcano's line of fire, so they had to dig a tunnel so as to let some pressure off and save the world. (351)

Martínez presents True-Dee as a naïve person, so desperate to be loved and accepted that she agrees to go underground with a group of people afraid of a volcano. "I thought they wanted me for me, but they just used me for my salon" True-Dee tells Nat and Sway (349). Although Martínez literally undermines True-Dee, as her salon is ruined by the cult digging beneath its foundation, Nat and Sway, having recently inherited money upon Cal McDaniel's death, offer to finance True-Dee's new Hair Growth Accelerators project. In the end, Martínez shows that with the help of her girlfriends, True-Dee is able to, not only remake herself, but her salon as well. As she says to Nat and Sway, "Us girls got to stick together" (46). Martínez emphasizes the power of solidarity among women (whether natural born or self made).

While Martínez at least provides a solution to the fact that True-Dee's hair salon is literally uprooted, she includes no happy ending for April-May, the gender ambiguous character. Despite her fiery red hair (that curiously resembles lava), her prowess on the skating rink, and nine years reigning, April-May is dethroned as Miss Magma. Even more than True-Dee who is in the process of transitioning from a biological male to a female, April-May embodies the state of limbo. Like True-Dee, April-May's hyphenated name indicates her ambiguous, in-between nature. She "had stuck her head out into the world at 11:59 p.m. one April thirtieth, but it wasn't until 12:00 a.m. May the first that she had fully exited the birth canal" (48). Martínez conveys April-May's ambiguous gender identity by alluding to the large size of her feet, which at the age of twenty-six "had never stopped growing," (48) and her Adam's apple, which both Nat and Sway had long held

was the feature that “was the best indicator of the size of a man's sexual organ” (114). During the final Miss Magma competition the judges are more captivated by Lucha and Favy, “who look like two Aztec princesses waiting to be saved from the volcano” than April-May who they think “might represent our volcano, but does not represent us” (358-9). Martínez explicitly endorses traditional notions of female beauty by rejecting the gender ambiguous character in favor of more Indigenous looking beautiful women. April-May's reign comes literally crashing to a halt when she suffers a dramatic fall on the skating rink, her size 13 feet fold under her and “she throws her head back. Her large Adam's apple sticking out like a goiter” and screams with such ferocity that the earth begins to shake (360). Martínez ends the novel, with the downfall of April-May, which leads to the earthquake and the eventual down fall of the whole town.

In addition, Martínez concludes the novel with the twisted connotation that the earthquake, which contributed to and precipitated the uprooting of True-Dee's hair salon and April-May's fall, is a result of God's wrath. On the last page of the book in a news report about the earthquake that shakes Lava Landing, a representative of the San Narciso cult states, “This is just the beginning. Too often people think of the Lord's forgiveness and they forget all about His wrath” (361). This suggests that the earthquake is a response to or punishment of transvestite and transgender people for their aberrant sexual behavior. Perhaps this is a cynical interpretation of the conclusion of Martínez' novel, but, regardless, Martínez fails to provide a satisfying ending for True-Dee or April-May. Unlike the other characters (Nat/Sway, Lucha/Favy, and Lulabell/Beto) who are transformed and empowered by the end of the novel, True-Dee and April-May do not receive such positive treatment in the text. Yet, by including a transvestite and gender

ambiguous character, Martínez does undermine the rigid male/female binary and highlights the absence of such characters from the traditional heterosexual couplings at the heart of the telenovela genre; she emphasizes the limitations of traditional romance narratives, which do not allow for the expression of alternate gender identities and sexualities. By not providing a happy-ending for True-Dee and April-May by pairing them off, either with a friend or a lover, like most of the other characters, Martínez deviates from the standard telenovela plot and underscores the negative affects of the mythologies regarding gender and sexuality promoted within popular culture.

Overall, Martínez challenges various mythologies regarding gender, sexuality, and romance disseminated through national iconography, including *lotería* cards and calendar art and popular cultural forms, such as telenovelas, to create a text that results “in a hilarious meltdown of gender, culture, and tradition” (Vásquez 26). Through the character Lucha, Martínez subverts cultural gender roles by challenging the *virgen/puta* dichotomy and parodies traditional romance via the serenade. Instead of centering the narrative around heterosexual couplings like a telenovela, Martínez focuses on what Vásquez refers to as “woman-centered conviviality” (26). She showcases two pairs of female friends (Nat/Sway and Lucha/Favy) who prefer each other's company to that of men and empower each other to live freely. While Martínez transforms Lulabell to conform to a more traditional female gender role, she emphasizes female autonomy and a woman's freedom to choose how to express her gender and sexuality.

Martínez also highlights the complex ways in which race/ethnicity and class influence the negotiation and performance of national and gender identities. She attempts to give voice to the material reality of transvestism within the Mexicano/Chicano

community, but it is problematic that Martínez undermines both characters that transgress traditional gender boundaries. Unfortunately, Martínez seems to do exactly what Namaste criticizes which is to use transvestites as theoretically interesting rhetorical devices (and in this context as melodramatic flourishes in a telenovelaesque novel) while disregarding their humanity. Yet by including a transvestite and gender ambiguous character Martínez does rupture the mythology of a unified sex/gender system and emphasizes the constructed nature of gender identity. At the same time that Martínez deviates from the standard telenovela plot and questions mythologies regarding gender and sexuality disseminated within the form, she also fully entrenches the reader in the telenovela genre. Like Castillo and Cisneros, Martínez creates an episodic, melodramatic narrative focused on love and romance that includes returns from the dead, and the revelation of hidden identities. But even more than incorporating these formal aspects of the telenovela, by also littering the text with visual cultural artifacts, Martínez blends the tele- and foto-novela genres, creating a whimsical text that defies categorization.

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<sup>1</sup> See Martínez's MySpace page for a list of the various literary awards she has received as well as links to different reviews of and articles about *¡Caramba!* <<http://www.myspace.com/ninamariemartinez>>. Note also her profile picture in which she is wearing braids, a hairdo similar to the image of *La Pajarera* on the front of the hard cover edition.

<sup>2</sup> See the review of *¡Caramba!* in the *San Francisco Chronicle* (2006) and Antonio Orlando Rodríguez's review, "Libros: Una Mirada Inusual al Universo de los Mexicoamericanos" in *Tiempos del Mundo* (2006), in which he compares Martínez's

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novel, to William Faulkner's *The Sound and Fury* (1929) and Ray Bradbury's *The Dandelion Wine* (1969), both of which are set in non-existent made-up places, like Lava Landing the imaginary town in which *¡Caramba!* is set. According to Martínez, Lava Landing is a composite of various small towns in California, like Hollister, where she grew up as the only child of a Mexican-American prune picker/carpenter/contractor and a German-American housewife. See also Alberto Avendaño's review, "De un impulso surge una novela loca y feliz: Nina Marie Martínez debuta con *¡Caramba!* y pone a jugar al lector y al mundo patas arriba," in *El Tiempo Latino* (2006), in which he compares the novel's playful structure to Julio Cortázar's *Rayuela* (1991). For complete citations see the bibliography.

<sup>3</sup> See the review "Ay, *¡Caramba!* Nina Marie Martínez answered her own identity questions by creating a rollicking work of fiction" in the *San Jose Metro* (2006). See bibliography for complete citation.

<sup>4</sup> I translated both quotations from Spanish. The original text is as follows: Avendaño: "una especie de telenovela desenfrenada y retorcida" and Rodríguez: "personajes estafalarios, con una marcada predisposición a meterse en todo tipo de líos, cuyas vidas se cruzan y entrelazan por obra del azar (¿o del destino?), como en las peores telenovelas mexicanas."

<sup>5</sup> This is similar to Cisneros' quote on the back of Castillo's *So Far From God*, in which she identifies the novel as a Chicana telenovela. It is no coincidence that Cisneros also classifies Martínez's novel as a telenovela given both her own preoccupation with the form, as I discuss in the previous chapter, as well as the fact that all three Chicana

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authors are represented by the same literary agent.

<sup>6</sup> For more information about la lotería see Ilan Stavans' introduction, "Lotería!, or, The Ritual of Chance," to the book he co-authored with Teresa Villegas *¡Lotería!* (2004).

<sup>7</sup> The original lotería deck was fashioned by the French entrepreneur Don Clemente Jacques in 1887. In the author's note Martínez states, "just as Don Clemente was moved to fashion a deck specific to the place and time in which he lived, [I] was also inspired to create a few cards as part of the Lava Landing Loteria," the fictional town in which the novel is set. Martínez provides a list of all the lotería cards included in the novel indicating which ones she has added to Don Clemente's deck.

<sup>8</sup> Jesús Helguera is an iconic Mexican artist known for his calendar artwork, which reflects his interest in Mexican landscapes, Catholicism, and Aztec Mythology, such as his famous painting, *La Leyenda de los Volcanes*, based on the legend of Popo and Ixta. See Elia Espinosa's *Jesús Helguera y su pintura, una reflexión* (2004).

<sup>9</sup> See Judith Halberstam's article "F2M: The Making of Female Masculinity."

<sup>10</sup> See Namaste's introduction, "Tragic Misreadings: Queer Theory's Erasure of Transgender Subjectivity," to her book *Invisible Lives: The Erasure of Transsexual and Transgendered People* (2000).

## **Conclusion: From Foundational Fictions to *Ugly Betty* and Beyond**

In the initial incarnation of this project, I envisioned using the telenovela as a culturally derived, critical lens to examine the literature of other contemporary Latina/o authors (Puerto-Rican American, Cuban-American, etc.) and analyze how the genre (both structurally and thematically) is mapped onto other media forms, including films and television programs, such as, *Real Women Have Curves*, *Selena* the TV shows *Mi Familia* and *Lost* respectively. Much work remains to be done in order to consider how viewing texts such as these and others through the critical lens of the telenovela provides a culturally-based reading that reveals alternate possibilities and new stories both within and beyond the boundaries of the American cultural mainstream. Additionally, although I focus in this study on Mexican telenovelas in relationship to Chicana literature, I do not assume or mean to suggest that Mexico is the singular national referent for Chicanas. I would like to look at other national versions of the popular form (Cuban, Venezuelan, Brazilian, etc.) and explore how the telenovela functions in distinct national contexts. Moreover, I would like to analyze how differences in authors' ethnicities and genders influence their engagement with and translations of this form in their fiction.

In the previous chapters, I show how Chicana authors engage critically with the telenovela form, demystifying romantic notions behind the foundational fictions and familiar plots. Looking at these novels as literary translations blurs the boundaries between genres and takes the telenovela, ironically, back to its literary origins. It is in the "retranslating," if you will, that we see the emergence of what, to date, is a uniquely Chicana literary endeavor. In future considerations, however, I would like to analyze

Chicano authors' engagement with the telenovela form and how it compares to that of their female counterparts. More importantly, I am curious as to why not nearly as many male authors engage with this popular cultural form. What is it about the form that may be more appealing to female authors? Or what is at stake in these national narratives that Chicanas feel compelled to respond to in their literature? I am also interested in how other Latina/os engage with the telenovela in their literature. How are these literary translations similar to or distinct from those written by Chicanas?

What I have found in this initial study, is that, rather than demonstrating ambivalence about the telenovela, these Chicana authors re-imagine and challenge the national mythologies (specifically regarding gender, race, class) found therein without abandoning the convention altogether. In other words, because the telenovela is such a cultural touchstone, it becomes a practical and effective means of critiquing the ideas at the center of the narrative tradition and their effect beyond the fictional world of television.

We are already beginning to see the influence of the telenovela beyond its primary cultural consumers. Just as Cisneros attempts to reach a wider audience, as her extensive footnote about the telenovela in *Caramelo* suggests, ABC is now translating and making the telenovela legible for a more general (English-speaking) audience with the airing of *Ugly Betty*. On September 28, 2006 *Ugly Betty* premiered on ABC, seven years after the original telenovela aired in Colombia. Originally slated to air on Fridays at 8 p.m. with an initial order of 13 episodes, at the last minute, due to growing interest in the show, *Ugly Betty* was moved to Thursdays at 7 p.m. and in October, due to its premiere ratings, ABC ordered a full season pick-up for the series increasing the number

of episodes to 23. During sweeps week in February 2007 Univisión outperformed ABC, CBS, NBC, or FOX, on 11 out of 27 nights, or 41 percent of the time, among adults 18-34 including all viewers, not just Hispanics, cementing its position amongst the Big 5 broadcast networks.<sup>1</sup> It is no surprise that a month later ABC renewed *Ugly Betty* for a second season and, almost a year later in February 2008, picked up the series for a third season.

The show's success illustrates the global popularity of telenovelas. It also underscores the cultural currency of the form, which appeals to people across generations, nationalities, class, and gender differences. A discursive network, however temporary or informal, forms across national borders among viewers who collectively engage in making meaning out of telenovelas. Producers, aware of the discursive networks that form among viewers (particularly audience members in the U.S. and Mexico), create connections between the shows airing in the two countries. For example, while ABC ran *Ugly Betty*, Univisión simultaneously aired the Mexican counterpart *La fea más bella* during the same time slot, Thursdays at 7 p.m. Furthermore, the star of the Mexican version, Angelica Vale, made a cameo appearance, playing an orthodontist's assistant, in the season one finale of *Ugly Betty*. This allows viewers, on both sides of the U.S./Mexico border who are familiar with the shows, to make connections between the two distinct national incarnations of this popular telenovela narrative. According to recent ratings from Nielson, from September to November 2008, *Ugly Betty* has consistently ranked among the top ten primetime telecasts on broadcast TV, rising as high as number three with 9,810,000 million viewers the week of September 25, 2008 and landing at number five with 8,917,000 million viewers the week of November 6, 2008.<sup>2</sup>

The influence telenovelas exert on American popular cultural forms is further evident by the fact that *General Hospital* abandoned the typical open-ended writing style of daytime dramas in a spin-off, *Port Charles* (1997-2003), which in its last three years aired as “books,” thirteen-week story arcs within the over-arching narrative of the show. Recently, *General Hospital* has begun airing a seasonal show, *Night Shift*, a hybrid of a Spanish-language telenovela and an American serial soap opera, which airs at night on the cable channel SOAPnet.<sup>3</sup> The show’s story arc airs over a three-month period, with one new episode a week, thus allowing viewers a taste of the soap experience, with both new and familiar characters, without the time commitment. At the end of the arc, viewers are given resolution to *Night Shift*’s story line, the outcome and consequences of which are folded back into the parent show, *General Hospital*. In other words, occasional or new viewers can watch *Night Shift* independent of *General Hospital*, or should they choose, follow characters back to the sprawling landscape and mythology of the show.

Using the telenovela as a critical lens to examine U.S. television serials, such as *Night Shift*, reveals how popular cultural forms function transnationally and are deployed and translated in distinct national contexts. Such an analysis sheds light on how a popular cultural form can reinforce specific mythologies, along the lines of gender for instance, in one national context, while contesting similar mythologies or assumptions in another. While Mexican telenovelas typically reinscribe tradition gender roles and rarely if ever represent transgender or gay characters, U.S. translations of the telenovela genre, such as *Ugly Betty*, openly question assumptions about gender and sexual orientation. The producers of *Ugly Betty* challenge dominative images of heterosexuality reinforced in the U.S. media by presenting homosexual characters, like Marc, Wilhelmina’s assistant at

*MODE* magazine, and gender queer characters like Justin, Betty's young nephew, who does not conform to conventional expectations of masculine performance. In Season Two the show includes a storyline about Marc's relationship with Cliff and Season Three depicts Justin's budding friendship with Randy. In addition, *Ugly Betty* also includes a transgender character Alex/Alexis Meade who serves as the head of Meade publications, along with her brother, Daniel, after their father, Bradford's death. While *Ugly Betty* questions traditional gender roles, it also reinforces certain mythologies about the cut-throat New York fashion industry and the acquisitive commodity culture of the U.S. that are not apparent in Mexican telenovelas.

While the telenovela is a useful lens to examine literature because of what it reveals about the underlying assumptions of the specific nation/culture in which it is produced as well as how authors use the popular cultural form to critique the very assumptions the shows promote, it also has some limitations. One of the most obvious limitations of the telenovela genre is its strict adherence to a narrative formula focused on heterosexual romance, the institution of marriage and the creation of a nuclear family. By reinforcing heterosexual coupling, the telenovela reinforces the image of the traditional family at the heart of the existing social order. The telenovela fails to account for and does not easily accommodate alternate conceptions or expressions of gender, sexuality, and/or family, thus as a source of critical interrogation the popular form is limited in its ability to illuminate aspects of queer and transgender sexualities in a text, other than to underscore the ways in which the form must be revised and transformed to include new stories into this set formula romance.

Given the limited range of stories depicted in telenovelas why do I, along with millions of others (men and women, young and old, recent immigrants, U.S.-born Hispanics, and Anglos), continue to tune in night after night? What is it about the shows that continue to appeal to viewers, even those outside the cultures, ethnicities, classes, and/or genders represented? To the uninitiated, the appeal of the telenovela and the dependency it creates among viewers can seem baffling. The plot is always the same, the storylines are implausible, and the characters are often depicted as cartoonish, but the endings are always, invariably happy. As Patricio Wills, head of development at *Telemundo*, said, “In the first three minutes of the first episode the viewer already knows the novela will end with that same couple kissing each other. A telenovela is all about a couple who wants to kiss and a scriptwriter who stands in their way for 150 episodes” (Clemens). For me, that is part of the answer. I love a happy ending. I derive vicarious pleasure from seeing details ironed out, conflicts resolved, and lovers reunited. As Univisión senior vice president of research Ceril Shagrin states, “It is just the kind of story that captures the heart” (Clemens).<sup>4</sup> At a time when our country is waging a war on two fronts in Iraq and Afghanistan, in addition to facing the worst economic crisis since the Great Depression at home, most Americans could use a little escapist entertainment, if even for a brief hour every night. Nothing pulls at our heart strings more than seeing two lovers united again, especially after they have overcome great odds to be together.

I cannot help but think of the famous black and white photographs of soldiers in uniform recently returned from WWII kissing young women, such as Albert Eisentadt’s photo of the sailor kissing the nurse in Times Square in 1945, which appeared in *LIFE* Magazine. I am reminded also of my grandmother’s story about looking out the window

of her dorm room in LeMann Hall at Saint Mary's College, Notre Dame, IN to see my grandfather step out of the cab in his Navy uniform, having just returned from the war. After spending four years attending daily mass at 6 a.m. to pray for her future husband, my grandmother was at last united with my grandfather. Such, romantic stories pull us in as viewers and give us reason to go on living. Just this past spring, I was so engrossed watching *Fuego en la Sangre* (Fire in the Blood), that until I muted the TV during an ad I did not realize there was a fire in the building next door to my apartment complex. As I was watching the fiery love between Sofia Elizondo and Juan Reyes heat up, just below my balcony, there was a hook and ladder trying to contain the smoldering fire in the Austin Ballet Company!

But in addition to serving as a form of escapist entertainment that whisks me away to a world of romance, telenovelas provide an opportunity to enter into a critical discussion with other viewers about the depictions of race, gender, sexuality, in popular culture. Whether it was laughing with my older female friends in Chile about the ridiculousness of the latest novela episode or joking with my friends here in Austin about the silliness of *Ugly Betty*, I find the discursive networks that form around the shows serve as a useful site from which to examine and explore my own engagement with and relationship to the popular cultural form. I have come to realize, for example, that I am less interested in campy, farcical telenovelas and prefer those that are more dramatic and achieve a high level of verisimilitude, because I can more easily identify with the heroine. Like Lupe Arredondo in Cisneros' "Bien Pretty," I will continue to watch telenovelas, as a source of knowledge as well as entertainment, as I seek to understand the vicissitudes of love and romance in my own life through the shows.

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<sup>1</sup> See “Univision Beats ABC, CBS, NBC, or FOX on One Out of Every Three Nights among All Adults 18-34,” *Business Wire* (2007).

<sup>2</sup> See Primetime Broadcast Ratings for the week of November 6, 2008 published by Nielson Wire at <<http://blog.nielsen.com/nielsenwire/tag/ugly-betty/>>.

<sup>3</sup> For more on this new spin-off see Ed Martin’s article, “*General Hospital: Night Shift* – The Future of Soap Operas?” (2008).

<sup>4</sup> See Luis Clemens, “Plot Twists for Genre: Novelas Make English-Language Inroads, But Will Appeal Get Lost in Translation?” *Multichannel News* (2006).

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## **Vita**

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