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“It Was NEVER Fiction:” The Decolonized Voice of Michele Serros

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in Chicana and Chicano Studies

by

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ABSTRACT

"It Was NEVER Fiction:" The Decolonized Voice of Michele Serros

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Clare Hemmings' *Why Stories Matter: The Political Grammar of Feminist Theory* (2011) posits three types of narratives—progress, loss, and return. She argues that all stories fall into one of these categories, with the most desired ones existing as return narratives. I argue that Hemmings does not account for decolonial stories and that an additional type of narrative is needed. As a decolonized voice, Chicana author Michele Serros embodies an ambiguous and transformative form of storytelling. I liken it to a DNA helix with multiple layers and threads that connect in a continuum of space and time. I critically analyze Serros' writing conventions, such as her confessional and often autobiographical undertones, as techniques that illuminate new ways of understanding race, ethnicity, class, gender, and sexuality. Her most well-known books, *How to Be a Chicana Role Model* (2000) and *Chicana Falsa and Other Stories of Death, Identity, and Oxnard* (1997), offer poems, essays, and short stories that exemplify a decolonized voice. I critically analyze major themes from these books, such as the term "role model," and show how a decolonized voice expands one's understandings about ideologies. I utilize Anzaldúa's theory from *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza* (2007) and essays from *This Bridge Called My Back: Writings by Radical Women of Color, 1981-2001* (2002) as a form of archeological reading for literature that is "theory in the flesh"—the lived reality of a person's life

presented as fiction. I supplement the notions of embodied literature with somatic theory to demonstrate how Serros' mind and body offer counter stories to hegemonic ones. A decolonized voice is a significant contribution to academic theory because it is a new way of writing, reading, and analyzing stories. This work combines theoretical analyses, oral histories derived from several interviews with the author, and interdisciplinary methodologies used to create a dynamic approach to understanding Chicanx and Latinx literature. A diverse methodological approach creates the space for a decolonial analysis that is untethered and nonconformist, which illuminates a new way of understanding literature and society.

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"When I was in grade school, I really disliked the idea of being Mexican."[1]

Born on February 10, 1966, Michele Serros was a Chicana author who grew up in the town of Oxnard, in Southern California. At eleven years old, her parents divorced. She reached out to her favorite childhood author Judy Blume for support. She received more than emotional understanding; Blume encouraged her to write her feelings down in a journal, which provided a strong foundation for her writing career. As she struggled to find her identity and place within the culture and community that she loved, she told stories. Her craft gave her the ability "to create a different outcome," (Serros, *Personal Interview* 26 Apr. 2012). She often stressed how important it was that she wrote these outcomes for herself.

In 1993, she published a collection of poetry and prose titled *Chicana Falsa: And Other Stories of Death, Identity, & Oxnard*. Her insightful and hilarious perspective impacted many readers and critics. As her recognition grew, she published a new and larger collection of stories in 2000 titled *How to Be a Chicana Role Model*. Comedian George Lopez noticed her unique humor, and she was hired to write for his self-titled ABC television sitcom. After a year, she left to pursue her own writing again. In 2006 and 2007, Serros published two young adult fiction novels, *Honey Blonde Chica* and its sequel *¡Scandalosa!*

[1] Each chapter begins with a quote from one of my personal interviews with Michele Serros.

In 2008, I began my research on Michele Serros because I was fascinated by her voice and how it contributes to an understanding of identity and the Chicanx experience. I built a Master's project around her first novel, *Chicana Falsa*. As my theoretical understanding of Chicanx literature deepened, Serros agreed to be the subject of an oral history project for my research. During our interviews, I started to develop the ideas of a decolonized voice and storytelling narrative structure. We worked throughout 2012 until she was diagnosed with a rare form of cancer, adenoid cystic carcinoma of the salivary gland, in 2013. She died from her illness on January 4, 2015. I, and many in our community, deeply grieve her loss. Yet, the unique contributions that she made as an author continues to inspire and impact our field of study.

As I worked closely with Michele Serros, I realized that her life stories did not follow a traditional and chronological storytelling model because her author's voice was distinct. It was more than who she was and how she expressed herself. There was something about her that was different and fresh, and no scholar had produced extensive research about her. Her lived experiences do not flow from a beginning, middle, and eventual end as many Western biographies. Instead, memories beget more memories, which lead to new expressions of understanding. I visualize Serros' life story like multiple strands of a DNA helix.[2] They exist in an ambiguous space where they connect across the numerous strands of helixes to create an infinity type progression—a matrix of helixes. The stories layer over,

[2] A DNA double-helix elucidates base pairings for how genetic information is stored and copied in living organisms. Although DNA is typically rigid in its worm-like chain, it has three significant degrees of freedom that include bending, twisting, and compression. DNA contains the instructions needed for an organism to develop, survive, and reproduce. It is essential to life. Thus, I felt it made an apt metaphor for storytelling, which is also essential to life. See Figure 1, Decolonial Storytelling DNA Helixes.

across, and between the original because all types exist at any given moment whether one chooses to acknowledge them or not. There is no beginning, middle, or end in sight because they represent the continuous histories of life. I locate Serros' storytelling along this axis, and it is a distinct approach to literature. Her narrative techniques add a new tapestry to Chicanx authors like Norma Cantú, Emma Pérez, and Ana Castillo. Cantú focuses on the U.S./Mexico border in much of her writing, Pérez analyzes through a historical lens, and Castillo genre jumps in many of her works. They all have distinct traits that identify who they are as Chicanx. Although in a similar family, Serros does something different that involves a specific focus on humor and wit that identifies her transgenreic texts. I inadvertently stumbled upon a discovery that added to the postmodern conceptualization of the novel at the same time it countered traditional narratives and storytelling—decolonial storytelling.

Decolonial storytelling is a theoretical approach to writing, telling, and listening to all types of knowledge through narratives. It requires a certain type of voice that I designate a "decolonized voice." Such individuals use their ability to share more complex knowledges about themselves and their histories to connect to a larger audience. I use decolonial storytelling as a tool for analyzing literature because it allows for an intricate study of works, authors, and readers. Specifically, it undermines colonial discourses and ways of telling truths by providing an alternative space for people of color to write and express their complex realities and identities. I use the term "people of color" to refer to non-white individuals who experience systemic racism. In the *Encyclopedia of Multicultural Psychology* (2006), Yo Jackson describes the term as it relates to racial identity: "…the person of color (POC) racial identity model describes racial identity development for people

of color, according to their experiences with racial oppression and the capacity to relinquish external, generally negative views of people of color in favor of internal, more positive standards" (77). I use this identifier because it relates to a social justice movement in which racially oppressed individuals reject a hegemonic, colonial identification model. Within my research, when I use "people of color" or add "of color" as a description to a noun, it represents empowerment for personal identity.

Up until this point, I felt that Clare Hemmings' *Why Stories Matter: The Political Grammar of Feminist Theory* (2011) had the best book to explain narrative practices in a distinct and diverse fashion. She has three specific categories for story types, and no matter how distinct a narrative is, it can find a place in her theoretical frame. I used her analysis and theoretical points on other authors. Yet, when it came to Michele Serros' works, the connection was broken. I could not reconcile what Hemmings proposed with what Serros talked about in our interviews nor with what I read in her books. There was something missing, a very important element for writers of color. Hemmings asserts that there are three main forms of storytelling to classify histories, authors, and their writings. She categorizes them as progress, loss, and return narratives. She urges for a universal approach for narratives:

> As with progress and loss narratives, return narratives reassure us that we can all share a single perspective of what we think has happened in Western feminist theory in the last few decades. But the tone of certainty is stronger in return narratives because of their role in bringing together different feminist subjects in the present…. Return narratives, in contrast, offer the opportunity for real synthesis. Subjects of

> both progress and loss narratives can both become subjects of return narratives if they concede a little ground." (97)

Hemmings encourages the same destructive messages that were first used to conquer the indigenous peoples of the Americas—that everyone must share a single perspective. For her, return narratives act as the bridge to bring subjects together, if they are willing to "concede a little ground." People of color are tired of conceding ground, and Serros simply did not belong in any of these categorizations. If her poems and stories were not progress, loss, or return narratives, where was she located? Why did she not fit in any of the categories already supplied? I propose that she fits in another mold or category of storytelling—a decolonial one.

Ellie D. Hernández asserts a similar ideology in her research on the dislocations of U.S. Mexican American culture. In *Postnationalism in Chicana/o Literature and Culture* (2009), she states: "Throughout the book, I enumerate the processes by which Chicanas/os gain entry into transnational cultural formations. No single social, political, or disciplinary process provides a thorough answer to all facets of transnational identity" (Kindle Location 35). Hernández iterates that there is no single process for transnational identity. Chicanx are complicated and do not easily fit into one categorization. She uses this type of examination because it creates a new space: "The transnational frame of analysis is useful because it encompasses not just a border zone but also an unmapped terrain and space for a new frontier that extends beyond the traditional geographies, whether geopolitical, cultural, social, or even physical" (Kindle Location 48). The existing framework does not fit for people of color's experiences. It lacks an alternative space, "an unmapped terrain," that extends past traditional categorization. Like Hemmings' approach, there is an important

element missing. This inability to fit within the existing storytelling groupings highlight how relevant my research is.

Serros set herself apart through her identification as a Chicana. She was a woman of color, and she lived and wrote in a different space because of colonial and hegemonic discourses. Though Hemmings addresses some of these points in her theory, she does so through a postmodern analysis. Postmodernism does not fully encompass the missing elements that I identified in this writing. After all, a postmodern approach is vastly different from a decolonial one. Postmodernism, like a postcolonial theoretical lens, limits the type of literary analysis for a couple of reasons. First, these frameworks were developed in primarily white academic settings. When academic persons of color participated in constructing these approaches, the starting point was from a place of privilege, often at the center of a narrative. Even the use of the prefix "post" implies a progression timewise, as if society is past the effects of colonialism. The reality is not so simple or mainstreamed. In fact, many of these "new" ideas about deconstruction are not necessarily original. People of color existed, and continue to exist, with fragmented identities. As described by Emma Pérez in *The Decolonial Imaginary: Writing Chicanas into History* (1999), histories and identities reside in a decolonial lag, neither here nor there but in a newly imagined reality that was always expressed in creative and academic communities simultaneously (6). Serros' writing prompts the reader to address a theoretical gap in literature using decolonial theory

Decolonial theory is a framework often associated with Latin American and Ethnic Studies. There are various theorists that work within this model. In "Introduction: Coloniality of Power and De-Colonial Thinking" (2007), Walter D. Mignolo states that de-

colonial thinking is a "particular kind of critical theory" (155). He further explains what this statement means:

> [It is] not the norm or the master paradigm against which all other projects should be compared, measured, evaluated and judged. And I am assuming also that 'history'[3] is not only linear; and that 'historical awards' are only endowed to those who get there first, in the unilinear chronology of events. There are several histories, all simultaneous histories, inter-connected by imperial and colonial powers, by imperial and colonial differences. (155-56)

Mignolo identifies the framework as nonlinear. There is an emphasis on simultaneous events that occur in numerous histories. He connects it all through imperial and colonial powers. In "Coloniality and Modernity/Rationality" (2007), Aníbal Quijano explains the trajectory of a decolonial mentality through the repressions conquered peoples endured:

> The repression fell, above all, over the modes of knowing, of producing knowledge, of producing perspectives, images and systems of images, symbols, modes of signification, over the resources, patterns, and instruments of formalized and objectivized expression, intellectual or visual. It was followed by the imposition of the use of the rulers' own patterns of expression, and of their beliefs and images…At first, they placed these patterns far out of reach of the dominated. Later, they taught them in a partial and selective way, in order to co-opt some of the dominated into their own power institutions. Then European culture was made seductive: it gave

[3] Mignolo uses single quotation marks in his writing, so I retained the practice when referencing his work.

> access to power. After all, beyond repression, the main instrument of all power is its seduction. (169)

Quijano identifies the coloniality of power as a force that controls knowledge production. At first, the European model denies the indigenous peoples access to it, but, eventually, they integrate a form of partial knowledge—a mirage of power. Decoloniality is a response to that control and co-option. People of color take back their agency in an ambiguous space that is both separate and part of the colonial history. My use of the term "decolonial" reflects Emma Pérez' approach in *The Decolonial Imaginary*. She stresses race, ethnicity, class, gender, and sexuality as components that influence the way one understands history. Her work traverses an interdisciplinary framework: "Breaking out of the borders is like choosing to go outside, into the margins, to argue or expose that which no one will risk…It means traversing new territories and disciplines, mapping fresh terrains such as cultural studies, women's studies, ethnic studies, and of course, Chicana/o studies" (xiii). She breaks historiographic borders through the overlapping of disciplines in a seemingly chaotic space, with many fields that traditionally do not overlap. She writes Chicanas into history not because they were ever missing from it but because their stories were at a register that was unheard. As a scholar, she finds new ways to tell the silenced stories that contradicts the colonial models that are often still taught in history classes. In Chapter 1, I model Pérez' approach through multi-discipline theoretical conversations, which create the core foundation for decolonial storytelling in a nontraditional space.

In a similar vein as Pérez, Serros' literatures document a Chicana story. Her writing detours from other decolonial scholars, though, by using humor, genre bending, and creative narrative structures. She does not give the reader one story in place of others. She does not

present “The Truth.” Instead, she mocks the notion of a singular way of thinking or identifying oneself. She uses humor as a subversive tool that allows her to act in unconventional and unorthodox ways. She breaks free from the social conditioning of what a Chicana should be or act like. Her emphasis on genre bending, like Ana Castillo’s genre jumping, are her attempts to stay in motion, in a constant state of “becoming.” The use of a variety of narrative styles all in one collection underlie her multiplicity of self. Through a decolonial storytelling process, Serros provides an ambiguous writing space where she negotiates her baggage as a colonized woman of color, someone whose race, ethnicity, class, gender, and sexuality deeply impact how she views herself and relates to others. A decolonized voice is the product. It is what readers find when they open one of her books. It is the culmination of her complex identities and histories that she presents in poems, short stories, and essays. I argue that Serros and many other people of color writers utilize concepts posed by Gloria Anzaldúa in *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza* (2007), such as mestiza consciousness, to express their state of existing in multiple spaces at one time. Some of the writing techniques include humor, nonchronological time progressions, layering stories within stories, and deconstructions of binary or universal identities and themes to demonstrate the complicated lived and fictional spaces that these authors inhabit. These conventions are more uncommon in mainstream writers because they belong to hegemonic society. A colonial history is felt within the very body of Chicanas and other women of color. The act of expelling that destructive past manifests through a willingness to bend normalized self-governing rules as an act of rebellion and agency, reclaiming an existence that is often denied.

Decolonial storytelling presents an alternate category to those defined by Clare Hemmings because it is less restrictive. She is concerned with presenting a unified, easy to follow narrative that resolves contradictions in historical pasts. This action opposes everything that decoloniality stands for, which is the shattering of a unilateral way of thinking. The new category I propose is one that is more inclusive for marginalized and silenced histories. It creates bridges between canon literatures, almost as a spiderweb of interwoven threads. The overlap of the threads, a blurring, between the fact and fiction of such pieces, is what makes them stand out as an empowering political and personal statement. Michele Serros embeds political statements about class, race, ethnicity, gender, and sexuality in the stories about her identity and her family. Humor is her tool of choice as she criticizes the lack of Chicanx representation in media while she mocks popular media icons, such as Oprah Winfrey. Her writings are far from unified because she contradicts many of the points that she makes. They represent the conflicting ideological messages that people of color navigate in the United States. In the following chapters, I not only analyze two of Michele Serros' core narratives, *How to Be a Chicana Role Model* and *Chicana Falsa: And Other Stories of Death, Identity, and Oxnard*, but I also more fully explore my theoretical contribution to literary theory.

In Chapter 1, "Identity and Politics in a Decolonized Voice," I argue that decolonial storytelling is an essential tool for analyzing women of color literatures because of the emphasis on mestiza consciousness and theory in the flesh ideologies as described by Gloria Anzaldúa and Cherríe Moraga. In this chapter, I fully explore my theoretical contribution to academia and develop the notion of a decolonized voice as a strong foundational access point for Serros' stories. The personal is political, and women of color express this not only

in their writing but through their very bodies. Body and creative expression are intertwined like threads from a rope. The more overlap and interlaying the stronger the rope. Likewise, the stories themselves are strengthened by the interstices, the in-between spaces of ambiguity—not knowing where the factual or fictional aspects of a narrative begins and ends. In this manner, decolonial storytelling allows for women of color writing to undermine traditional hegemonic narratives in favor of egalitarian ones. A decolonized voice creates the bridges that Hemmings seeks but without negating difference. Rather than replacing narratives or unifying them, they are layered and in constant conversations with each other. In a traditional framework, some are centered over others, but, with my reimagining, they exist at the same time in all spaces. They intertwine, bend, and overlap at different points along storytelling DNA helixes, which I explicate in Chapter 2.

I examine how writers achieve this possibility in Chapter 2, "Bend Narrative Genres and Surf the Waves of Writing." I concentrate on how Michele Serros' books *How to be a Chicana Role* and *Chicana Falsa: And Other Stories of Death, Identity, and Oxnard* play with genre through decolonial writing techniques. I argue that these texts are an amalgam of personal essays, poems, and short stories that are not easily categorized into one genre, which I identify as "genre bending." Within a complete text, Serros genre bends and includes different narrative styles in one compilation. This differs from what Ana Castillo calls "genre jumping" because she literally jumps between them for over thirty years of her writing career. She started with poetry and then self-taught herself to write others including novels, plays, autobiographies, and academic essays. She wrote different books that are categorized as distinct genres. On the other hand, Serros compiled these genres into one text within a much shorter writing span. Her body of work represents a trans-generic

composition, which I attribute to chaotic and overlapping DNA helixes as a creative representation of decolonial storytelling.

In *How to be a Chicana Role Model*, the book embodies a story structure similar to Ana Castillo's *The Mixquiahuala Letters* (1986), yet I see it as very different. Ana Castillo organizes her text in a manner that allows for certain types of readings. Although a reader can jump around with any book, essentially reading it out of order, the cohesion is usually lost, and important points are missed. One can read Serros from cover to cover, but such a traditional reading deemphasizes her decolonial points and loses the cohesion and strength of her writing. The rules are meant to be read out of order. This format is significant because it highlights the complicated genre crossings that Serros engages with in all her writing. She blurs fact and fiction in her narratives. The ambiguity in her books reflects the power associated with decolonial storytelling. This flexibility in how a reader engages with a text allows for a mestiza consciousness to develop. It embodies a theory in the flesh approach because of its fractured nature. In *This Bridge Called My Back: Writings by Radical Women of Color* (2002), Cherríe Moraga states that it is an essential aspect for theory in the flesh:

> The theme echoing throughout most of these stories is our refusal of the *easy*[4] explanation to the conditions we live in…. Closer to home, we are still trying to separate the fibers of experience we have had as daughters of a struggling people. Daily, we feel the pull and tug of having to choose between which parts of our

[4] Italics are in the original text.

> mothers' heritage we want to claim and wear and which parts have served to cloak us from the knowledge of ourselves. (21)

Decolonial writers refuse the easy explanations. The uniform presentation of stories that Hemmings desires will never be a reality for those writing theories in the flesh. Serros' texts give her the space to choose parts of herself "to claim and wear" and parts of herself to discard. The choice is not easy, and the knowledge is constantly shifting. Additionally, I analyze narrative writing techniques she uses, such as diario or testimonio presentations, using an unreliable narrator to tell her stories, her sarcastic and witty humor, "what-if" scenarios where she layers stories upon stories, and finally repeat characters that simultaneously disrupts and connects poems and stories to each other. These strategies are significant because they mimic the ambiguous and chaotic space that these stories inhabit with a decolonized voice. It forces the reader to approach the texts differently. Reading them in a nontraditional fashion sits uncomfortably in one's mind. There are no simple truths, no "how to" guide to make life easier, despite what the title of *How to Be a Chicana Role Model* suggests. The process is messy but also a simultaneously freeing experience. In my personal interviews, Serros equated her practice to riding the waves of the ocean, all at once powerful, freeing, and dangerous.

Chapter 3 "Make and Break the Rules of a Chicana Role Model" is a critical analysis of *How to be a Chicana Role Model*. I argue that Serros' rules deconstruct universal and hegemonic essentializing notions of how one becomes a role model. The very label "role model" is problematic, and the author is aware of this and explores it through the creation of arbitrary rules that have no influence on how others perceive her. She spends most of the stories breaking them rather than constructing them. She breaks them because it is through

the fractures that she can start to understand herself in relation to the people in her community. She admits that she does not see herself as an example for others. At the end of the book, a cafeteria worker makes her feel like a role model for the first time. She is only able to enter this frame of mind when she finally stops trying to be someone else. She embraces her own contradictions as part of her complex lived experiences. Through her humor and nontraditional writing techniques, I underscore how decolonial storytelling creates a space for the author to analyze the idea of a perfect representation of a Chicanx or Latinx. At the end of *How to Be a Chicana Role Model*, Serros includes an "About the Author" section that "credits her parents, Beatrice and George, as the primary role models in her life" (223). Her admission is significant because she believes people need role models. Yet, she is critical of who receives such a status. She explores all types in her writing, from Hollywood representations to friends and family members. She uses these examples to mirror some of her experiences in the precarious position of a paradigm. She questions notions about success and failure because she does not see them as contributing factors to whether someone is a role model. The author's decolonized voice simultaneously grounds and unsettles the reader and their assumptions about race, ethnicity, class, gender, and sexuality are called into question through the author's carefully crafted vignettes.

Chapter 4 "Dislocated Body and Mind of a Chicana Falsa" is a critical study of Michele Serros' first book *Chicana Falsa and Other Stories of Death, Identity, and Oxnard*. I claim that this text represents her first attempts at developing a decolonized voice. She writes about binaries, such as a Chicana *verdadera* versus a Chicana *falsa*, to deconstruct hegemonic and dualistic worldviews. She slowly breaks down the barriers of her own thinking to enter an unorthodox space that complicate her notions about identity. Her

mother, Beatrice Serros, contributes to her daughter's eventual transmutation as a decolonial author because of the strength and faith she embodies. These are characteristics that Serros personifies as she grows up. Essentially, her mother gives her the most important gift that helps her become a writer—the gift of time to do her work. I contend that many of the poems, essays, and short stories encased in this collection are critical commentaries on race, ethnicity, class, gender, and sexuality. A colonial history and mentality is one that contemporary neo-liberal society encourages with its notions of universalism and sameness. She refuses these restrictions. She destroys chains that fetter her to a self-loathing and destructive mindset with which many people of color struggle. Instead, she demonstrates how power and agency are gained through living in the in-between spaces. Her writing encourages readers to reexamine their own notions about categorization that will hopefully create new bridges that strengthen communities rather than tearing them apart.

My conclusion "Define the Undefinable with Decolonial Storytelling" ties all my theoretical points from the previous chapters. I argue that Michele Serros is a significant Chicanx scholar to study because of her unique approach to decolonial storytelling. The use of her humor and narrative techniques is unparalleled to other authors within the same community. Analyzing her work provides new ways of representing race, ethnicity, class, gender, and sexuality. Her decolonized voice revolutionizes literature with stronger ways to read and examine people of color authors that are not easily categorized. The fact that these spaces are ambiguous does not detract from the power and agency that develops within them.

My methodology crystalized when I interviewed Michele Serros for multiple years before her premature death in 2015. It became a type of ethnographic work as I learned

about her childhood and family home, growing into adulthood, and her eventual role as a Chicanx author. I attended lectures that she delivered at local conferences and schools to study how she presented herself and her books to different audiences. I witnessed firsthand how she interacted with her fans at autograph sessions. This data is relevant because it allows me to understand her writing culture and all the elements that influence her life's body of knowledge. For this dissertation, I utilize portions of our interviews in every chapter as part of my analysis. Each chapter also has a subheading, which is a direct quote from our interviews. The quotes and figures that I include throughout my dissertation provide the reader with another lens through which one can view Serros' decolonized voice in the context of my dissertation.

Chapter 1: Identity and Politics in a Decolonized Voice

"Afterwards, I get a little emotional…We may never have that again…I get a little melancholy."

When I interviewed Michele Serros for an oral history project, she stated that she "wrote from the stomachache" (Serros, *Personal Interview* 26 Apr. 2012). She was very adamant. She did not write from her soul or her heart. It was always from the stomach. Her assertions echoed the words of Gloria Anzaldúa in *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza* (2007):

> Because writing invokes images from my unconscious, and because some of the images are residues of trauma which I then have to reconstruct, I sometimes get sick when I do write. I can't stomach it, become nauseous, or burn with fever, worsen. But, in reconstructing the traumas behind the images, I make "sense" of them, and once they have "meaning" they are changed, transformed. It is then that writing heals me, brings me great joy. (92)

Writing is a painful process for Anzaldúa. It invokes not only conscious traumas from her own life, which she reconstructs in a narrative form, but she also resurrects traumatic unconscious memories through her storytelling. She describes the experience viscerally with word choices that echo a physical, embodied experience— "stomach," "nauseous," and "burn[ing] with fever." Her storytelling is literally and figuratively embodied. She explains that the process of reconstructing the traumatic images and events from her life gives them new meanings that changes not only the storyteller but the story itself. In this manner, writing can bring her "great joy" and heal "the stomachache" that she spoke about.

Similar to Anzaldúa, Serros uses traumatic events from her own life as inspiration for her poems, short stories, essays, and young adult novels. If she does not write, it hurts. When she writes, it still hurts. Yet, writing and storytelling is a major avenue for transformation. She said it best in an NPR interview from 2001: "It was never fiction" (Serros). For many Chicana author, there is something corporeal about the body and expression. The two are intertwined with one aspect strengthening the other. Thus, fictional stories are now indistinguishable from factual stories. That is where the strength of decolonial storytelling lies—the in-between spaces, the not knowing, a strength that is born from ambiguity. A decolonial author uses her very body to tell stories that undermine traditional hegemonic ones.

Traditional story archetypes identified by feminist scholar Clare Hemmings in *Why Stories Matter: The Political Grammar of Feminist Theory* (2011) do not acknowledge the transformative power that decolonial authors, such as Michele Serros, have. In the introduction, Hemmings states that the "book is on how feminists tell stories about Western feminist theory's recent past, why these stories matter, and what we can do to transform them" (10). She situates herself in the recent past with a Western framework. She not only needs to explain why these stories still matter for feminists today, but she seeks to transform them somehow. This historical context and framing leaves out women of color's narratives. Additionally, it ignores that the decolonial story itself is transformative from its very creation. Ramón Grosfoguel, Nelson Maldonado-Torres, and José David Saldívar explore what this means in their introduction of *Latin@s in the World-System: Decolonization Struggles in the 21st Century U.S. Empire* (2005):

> If Latin@s affirm only their European culture or adapt a Eurocentric attitude, they will be part of the problem rather than part of the solution. However, if Latin@s affirm in a critical and decolonial way their diverse European and non-European epistemic and cultural backgrounds (we should not limit ourselves to whatever virtues a culture can have), they could become a positive bridge between different groups and help to provide nonracist ideas needed for consistent emancipation and for decolonization. (21)

Grosfoguel, Maldonado-Torres, and Saldívar assert that a decolonial story does not affirm nor adapt a solely European/Eurocentric/Western attitude. Instead, they call for a reconceptualization of self, space, and knowledge through the decolonial diversity of European and non-European epistemic and cultural backgrounds—highlighting the spectrum of cultural attitudes (not just the virtuous or "good" cultural histories). Through this mixing and blending, storytelling creates a bridge between different groups of people that will lead to nonracist and emancipatory ideas and actions for the decolonization of our communities. Other decolonial theorists claim a similar framework for situating knowledge. In *Postnationalism in Chicana/o Literature and Culture* (2009), Ellie D. Hernández stresses the need for a reconceptualization of space that goes beyond identity creation. She argues:

> I ask that we imagine ourselves beyond the nation, beyond geographic locations, and beyond identity. We, too, are part of the global movement of capital exchange, except that even as the fastest-growing demographic group in the U.S. population, we still are cast at the lowest range of the economy and not among the nation's strongest intellectuals, poets, and writers. We are also that. (Kindle Location 121-25)

She complicates the way Chicanx and Latinx are viewed in a global, capitalist society. She calls for a wider spectrum that sees the community in different social groups and demographic capacities. A decolonial space makes such a recognition more self-evident because it breaks open the narrow categorizations that people cling to as the standard for viewing certain groups.

One reason Anzaldúa's and Serros' writings, along with many other women of color's writings, are traumatic and painful is the focus of their stories that deny and rebel against a hegemonic standard for understanding peoples and cultures. Anzaldúa writes about "cultural tyranny" in *Borderlands/La Frontera*: "Culture forms our beliefs. We perceive the version of reality that it communicates. Dominant paradigms, predefined concepts that exist as unquestionable, unchallengeable, are transmitted to us through the culture. Culture is made by those in power—men. Males make the rules and laws; women transmit them" (38). As she highlights the good, the bad, and the ugly of society, she asserts that culture is the core of our belief systems. This fact can be dangerous in and of itself because culture becomes reality and limits people to one way of thinking. She explains how it dominates society and becomes "unquestionable" and "unchallengeable." Who creates culture, and who upholds culture? Men make the rules while women transmit them and carry the traditions from generations to generations. She criticizes all cultures and is perhaps the harshest with her own Mexican background:

> In my culture, selfishness is condemned, especially in women; humility and selflessness, the absences of selfishness, is considered a virtue…. If you get above yourself, you're an *envidiosa*. If you don't behave like everyone else, *la gente* will

say that you think you're better than others, *que te crees grande*. With ambition (condemned in the Mexican culture and valued in the Anglo) comes envy. (40)

She situates her Mexican culture and heritage and relates it to her writing framework. She understands that historically there are certain traditions and values that were privileged over others. She explains the sensation of being stuck between multiple worlds/ways of life, yet she does not see it as an opportunity to transform the past or reiterate why stories matter. It is simply a matter of being in multiple spaces and frames of mind simultaneously and navigating the contradictions that arise from the grating of these borders.

Clare Hemmings identifies three types of storytelling as interlocking narratives rather than a multiplicity of spaces that blend into each other. Progress highlights that the field of feminism shifts with time and even the category "woman" changes drastically, especially if one considers the shift into postmodern feminism that destabilizes the category of woman. Loss stories focus on what is lost with the destabilization of feminism because of postmodernism. Finally, return narratives stress that even though the subject is lost and fragmented, due in large part to postmodernism, the subject can return by reviewing the historical stories of feminism from the past to learn something new that can be taught to future generations. Hemmings describes this as follows: "[W]e can combine the lessons of postmodern feminism with the materiality of embodiment and structural inequalities to move on from the current theoretical and political impasse" (12). Her assertions claim that there is an opposition that exists between fragmentation and unity. A reconciliation is needed between the body and lived experiences/stories and the disillusionment of reality, time, and history that is a result of postmodernism—the death of the subject so to speak. She fails to acknowledge the role that decolonial stories play in the relationship of the body and

fragmentation and the possibilities associated with these permutations—a phenomena that women of color experienced long before the theory of postmodernism was developed in academic circles.

I argue that the subject does not disappear nor die in Serros' works. She elevates it to a different level with her decolonial storytelling. Ellie D. Hernández explains how such stories develop:

> Stories, approaches, and the organization of knowledge no longer appeal to the emancipated male heroism or innocence in coming-of-age representation. Realistic images of plight and self-discovery have been replaced by representations of anomalous states, the marginal figures of culture, the displaced, the lost or forgotten, the dead, and the survival epics of new worldism, each of which characterizes the arduous journey into the new age. (Kindle Location 188-91)

The subject matter is decidedly different in decolonial stories. There is a visible shift on who or what plays a central role. Hernández emphasizes the ambiguous topic, those often in the margins as displaced survivors. The body plays a pivotal role in decolonial stories, especially with the themes that Michele Serros focuses on. Anzaldúa describes the significance of the "body" in storytelling as follows: "For only through the body, through the pulling of flesh, can the human soul be transformed. And for images, words, stories to have this transformative power, they must arise from the human body—flesh and bone—and from the Earth's body—stone, sky, liquid, soil" (*Borderlands* 97). A key component of decolonial storytelling is their ability to transform the reader while destabilizing hegemonic power structures, which include racism, capitalism, and other institutions of power that privilege one group at the expense of another. Transformation can only occur through the

lived experiences of the storyteller. Specifically, Anzaldúa notes that the images and the words themselves not only arise from "flesh and bone" but the "Earth's body" as well. She connects the human self with the Earth's body because one is not a separate entity uninfluenced by the past, present, or future. She roots the individual in the land as this is where memories and stories are carried and nurtured.

Hemmings pulls the body out of the storytelling as she searches for a different approach in *Why Stories Matters*. Early on, she admits that progress, loss, and return narratives all have flaws and are not the ideal manner to tell stories. Hence, she is left with some very pertinent questions to answer: "To correct the story which writers should we choose? How would this happen without reification? Who will tell the story? What methods might be proposed for fullness?" (21). She explains that these questions arise because stories about the past can never be fully represented. Corrective approaches are inherent in the storyteller; thus, the conditions of the construction are left unexplored, and there is the possibility of reifying it as the final word. On the surface, her questions appear logical. However, with a deeper understanding of decolonial narratives, one can easily see the flaws in her approach. She answers her own questions and explains that the best form of storytelling is the kind that critically examines "the politics that produce and sustain one version of history as more true than another" (24). This appears as a steady approach to storytelling because it examines the multiplicity of feminist theory, while at the same time she analyzes the history that shapes the stories. Still, the role of the storyteller herself is undervalued in such a methodology because she values citation politics more. Even her final conclusions about how she seeks "to flesh out the substance of Western feminist stories and to intervene by experimenting with how we might tell stories differently rather than telling

different stories" uses the word "flesh" while simultaneously underplaying the role of the storyteller herself. The story does not matter. How it is told matters. Is this because Hemmings sees that the biases of the author flaw the multiplicity of storytelling? Or does she think that all stories repeat similar ideas told in different ways based on the politics of the telling? She fails to see that the body itself is political.

In *This Bridge Called My Back* (2002), Cherríe Moraga critically explores a type of body storytelling that is theory in the flesh. She explains that "a theory in the flesh means one where the physical realities of our lives – our skin color, the land or concrete we grew up on, our sexual longings – all fuse to create a politic born out of necessity" (21). The experiences of the reader will frame how she or he relates to the text just as the authors' own lived experiences changes what they write about and how they write it. This "politic born out of necessity" is born from the very body of the storyteller. Thus, one cannot purely examine the aesthetics of storytelling or how stories are told differently as Hemmings asserts with citation practices because it undermines and devalues the body politics of the storyteller. The differences in the stories told does matter, especially with women of color writers and decolonial storytelling. In devaluing this core aspect of decolonial stories, by rejecting the value of bodies and lived experience, she devalues people of color's experiences in lieu of a cleaner and perhaps less racially charged approach. Her argument attempts to clean up the "messier" stories because Western society does not want to be hailed as racist and hegemonic regarding which ones are centralized or marginalized. Decolonial stories, and arguably all Chicana literature, is inherently political and activist work. It comes from the body of the speaker, the storyteller, and connects people across imagined cultural borders that separates one from the other.

This form of scholarship is prevalent among many subaltern writers in the Americas, especially Chicanx. Grosfoguel asserts a similar point: "Another possible scenario is that the subaltern groups around the globe—those to whom Fanon referred as the *condemned of the earth*—effectively mobilize and help to create a new and/or diverse historical system better than the one in which we live now" (*Latin@s* 4). The "condemned" can speak. They use their agency to mobilize and inspire others to create change to systems of power. Empires are fallible. Decolonial writing offers new ways of thinking about space, culture, tradition, and even time itself, often contrary to the chronological narrative progression outlined by Hemmings (progress, loss, and return). Decolonial theory and storytelling is explored in depth by many theorists, including Walter D. Mignolo and Emma Pérez. In his article "Huntington's Fears: 'Latinidad' in the Horizon of the Modern/Colonial World" (2005), Mignolo asserts that a "telling of an altogether different story—another story"—is needed (69). He emphasizes the fact that the story is nontraditional. It is not captured within a modern paradigm of European structures, whether that is within the far right or left spectrum. A decolonial story cuts this umbilical cord and refuses to "play in the post-Renaissance imperial and Christian logic as well as in their new secular, post-Enlightenment versions, once again, on the left and right" (69). He stresses that this type of story does not play into any popular Western or Christian logic. Historically, it was situated in a Protestant religious frame. As society becomes more secular, the pendulum swings to the left, into a postmodern manner of thinking. This begs the question of what sort of space decolonial storytelling takes place in, or at least what iteration. His emphasis that the story is neither found in the far left or right political spectrum suggests a couple of points: 1) There is no binary as to where a story can or should fall. Though Hemmings proposes three locations,

progress, loss, and return, it is a binary in disguise because the return brings the storyteller back to the progress space. So, the iterations are broken down only to progress and loss. 2) Second, Mignolo's claim implies that a new space, one that falls outside the binary, must exist for decolonial stories. So, where does this storytelling space lie? How can storytellers access it? What are its strengths and weaknesses? Emma Pérez posits answers to these questions in *The Decolonial Imaginary: Writing Chicanas into History* (1999).

Emma Pérez theorizes that the space for decolonial storytelling occurs within a rupture of the hegemonic chronological state of history. She describes "a decolonial imaginary as a rupturing space, the alternative to that which is written in history" (6). The decolonial imaginary offers an alternative to the "official" history that many believe as a single truth of events. The rupturing space mirrors Anzaldúa's own Coatlicue state, which also states that a rupture occurs before new stories of transformation are created. The rupture presents a new avenue or path for the story to take. Pérez identifies the space as "the time lag between the colonial and postcolonial [that is] conceptualized as the decolonial imaginary" (6). The decolonial imaginary is in a chaotic site where theory in the flesh and the mixing of cultures creates an ambiguous site that promotes societal change. Binaries are broken down along with borders, which are transparent enough to cross. She continues: "Bhabha names that interstitial gap between the modern and postmodern, the colonial and postcolonial, a time lag. This is precisely where Chicano/a history finds itself today, in a time lag between the colonial and the postcolonial" (6). This time lag is the same space where stories are created and told, where the histories and the fictions are uncovered and recovered. A decolonial narrative creates a culture bridge for readers to engage with Anzaldúa's mestiza way and theory in the flesh. The act of crossing, of movement,

demonstrates that they are not static creations. They are constantly changing, shifting to fill spaces and needs. The fluidity of decolonial stories unsettles Hemmings as it makes it more difficult to pinpoint the aesthetics and politics of storytelling on which she focuses her research. Storytelling politics are easier to quantify, and it gets rid of the uncertainty of a *travesía*, a crossing that will lead the story and reader to unknown paths.

Decolonial stories and the mestiza way are the epitome of movement, of crossing, of never standing still and always being ready for change. Anzaldúa describes a *travesía* as follows: "Every increment of consciousness, every step forward is a travesía, a crossing. I am again an alien in new territory. And again, and again" (*Borderlands*, 70). This narrative constantly shifts and moves with knowledge. It does not follow a chronological progression. It is not about progress, loss, or return. It is deeper than a standard hegemonic approach to storytelling. Decolonial stories focus on inner journeys into the depths of the self—transformations that occur in ambiguous space where binaries are broken down and meanings are elucidated. In Maureen Murdock's *The Heroine's Journey* (1990), she describes the descent into the self: "It may take weeks, months, or years, and for many it may involve a time of voluntary isolation—a period of darkness and silence and of learning the art of deeply listening once again to self, of being instead of doing" (8). The journey of the self requires time, patience, and often isolation. It involves listening to the stories of the self, a reflection of simply being, which provides the necessary moments to break from old ways of thinking. A distinguishing point that Murdock makes that challenges hegemonic stories is the act of "being" instead of "doing." The traditional storytelling is about movement, oftentimes seen as a chronological progression that propels the reader forward. For example, Hemmings describes the progress narrative in feminist studies as follows: "We

have moved from a time when we knew no better, a time when we thought 'woman' could be the subject and object of liberation, to a more knowing time in which we attend to the complexity of local and transnational formations of gender and its intersections with other vectors of power" (38). She is concerned about the historical context of a time when "woman" meant one thing before it progressed to mean something more complex and transnational as one's understanding of gender and power expanded. The focus is on the shift forward, the progression of the story of womanhood. Contrasting this, decolonial stories provide an alternative space for the progression or constant movement to stop, temporarily, in an undefined space where the story can unpack itself by its telling and the unique relationship between the storyteller herself and the listener/reader.

Pérez asserts her focus on the act of writing itself—the relationship between the writer and the story—not necessarily where the story will go. She agrees with Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak in her article "Subaltern Studies: Deconstructing Historiography" (1988). Theorists need to turn away from a traditional approach of history to confront it differently. Pérez accomplishes this through the types of questions that she poses in her research:

> How is Chicano/a history being written? By whom is Chicana/o history written? For whom is the history written? What space is created for Chicana/o history? Do subjugated histories only replicate, copy, and duplicate dominant first world methods and tools, or is Chicana/o history written as something new coming into being, or both at once? How do we know? How do we identify a decolonizing, postcolonial, or oppositional method? (4)

Immediately, one can recognize how these questions starkly contrast with Hemmings. Whereas she ascribes new histories and stories into an already well-established timeline or progression of history and stories in general, Pérez questions the very foundation of that dominant narrative that implies they fit into one general flow. She asks who writes Chicana stories, who are they written for, what space is there to write Chicana stories in, and, perhaps the most important question, whether the stories "replicate, copy, and duplicate dominant first world methods and tools?" This question is significant because it presumes that there is more to storytelling than copying other stories that are already either well established or well known. The entire line of questioning demonstrates that the relationships between the storyteller and the listener makes a big difference on what is told. In fact, one must examine all parts simultaneously—who is writing, what is being written, and for whom it is being written—to understand decolonial narratives. She asserts that Chicana history is something new that comes into being all at once. Thus, her assumptions hearken back to Murdock's point about the descent into the self in *The Heroine's Journey*. The author's "being" or self-reflective mindset is a key component for a decolonial story. Michele Serros' narratives focus on identity and the hybridity of cultures—breaking away from a colonial mindset. She does not write about her progress, loss, or return/successes. She self-reflectively writes about community and various manifestations of identities, which is why they are decolonial stories, poems, essays, and young adult novels.

No matter what culture or part of the world you come from, storytelling is a timeless way to share and remember histories of each other. Whether spoken orally or written down, "telling stories is one of the ways that we can begin the process of building community, whether inside or outside the classroom…. A powerful way we connect with a diverse world

is by listening to the different stories we are told. These stories are a way of knowing. Therefore, they contain both power and the art of possibility. We need more stories" (hooks 49-53). bell hooks' views on stories as teaching and community activism emphasize the influences of literature, which far exceeds the boundaries of the covers of the book itself. Serros even stresses this fact in her many interviews where she explains how the stories are inspired from her life, writing from "the stomachache." Stories inspire movements—personal, political, historical, social, and cultural. To fully understand the impact that stories have not only on individuals but on a community at large, it is important to know the history of stories, specifically the novel. It is an important starting point because the novel changed how and why people read books and collections of works.

Wolfgang Iser explains the history of the novel and its impact on everyday people and their lives in his book *The Implied Reader* (1974). He begins with the history of the English novel as a genre, which started in the 18th century[5]. For the first time, "what was presented in the novel led to a specific effect: namely, to involve the reader in the world of the novel and so help him to understand it—and ultimately his own world—more clearly" (xi). The novel allowed readers to reflect not only on the fiction that they were reading but on how the literature impacted or related to personal experiences. The connections made between the personal and the printed allowed the reader to understand and confront not only what was "truth" for that reader but other forms of reality—what could be or had never been explored before was suddenly a possibility presented through the form of the novel. Now, it

[5] In the English language tradition, the novel as a genre came about in the 18th century. However, Harold Bloom, among other academics, argue that Miguel de Cervantes invented the modern novel much earlier in the 17th century with *Don Quixote*.

provided the necessary catalyst "to provoke the reader into establishing for himself the connections between perception and thought" (xiv). So, what one perceives as the sole reality is not necessarily the only reality or unitary manner to view a topic. What one thinks might differ from what a novel visualizes. Similarly, another person's perception of the same novel will differ based on their own unique experiences and relationship to the imagined reality. Iser concludes with the statement that

> The reader is forced to discover the hitherto unconscious expectations that underlie all his perceptions, and also the whole process of consistency-building as a prerequisite for understanding. In this way he may be given the chance of discovering himself, both in and through his constant involvement in 'home-made' illusions and fictions. (xiv)

Although Iser speaks specifically about the novel as a genre of fiction, the questions he provokes and the thoughts he explores influence many of the themes explored in the different pieces that Michele Serros writes. She uncovers her own "unconscious expectations" that underlie the why and how she wrote her poems, short stories, essays, and even her young adult novels, best expressed in the oral interviews that I have with the author.[6] She explores her "self" and home in her writing. A new question arises, though: How does the author access points of self-reflexivity, and how do those points come across when analyzing her writings?

[6] The oral interviews are from April and June 2012. They are cited in my Works Cited page and are part of my personal research collection on Michele Serros.

Michel Foucault identifies numerous access points for self-reflection in *The Hermeneutics of the Subject* (2005). He analyzes three major devices of reflexivity. Through meditation, memory, and method, "forms of experience" are identified as "experience[s] that tie together the subject and truth" (xxii). This is not to claim that there is only one truth per subject, but to create spaces for transformation, the subject must understand her or his particular truth at any given moment. Once the individual grasps their own perspective, then spaces are created to connect with others. A significant question that pertains to this situation is: "How do individual or collective experiences depend on singular forms of thought, that is, on that which constitutes the subject in its relations to truth, to the rule, to itself?" (xxii). Reflexive techniques of meditation, memory, and method allows the individual to understand their subject position to the collective. These processes not only work for the reader who analyzes a piece of literature but with an author's writing practice as well. Through the interdependency of people in both spaces, the reader and the writer, new interpretations of literature are created.

Still, Foucault's forms of reflexivity limit the interpretations of the literature. There is another avenue for exploring the self in relation to what one reads. Through the actual act of reading, a literary text can produce significant responses from readers. Iser explores this idea in *The Act of Reading: A Theory of Aesthetic Response* (1980). He explains that a reader's "object should therefore be, not to explain a work, but to reveal the conditions that bring about its various possible effects" (18). Thus, a reader should analyze why a text created a certain response or revelation to what was read. It is not about having the correct analysis of a text. Iser emphasizes that the role of the reader is to communicate not only with the text but with others who are also reading it. He further explains that "[i]f [the reader]

clarifies the potential of a text, he will no longer fall into the fatal trap of trying to impose one meaning on his reader, as if that were the right, or at least the best, interpretation" (18). The act of reading is not to get the right answer or analysis of the text, the coveted title of "expert" on any given literary analysis. Instead, the dialog, the multiplicity of interpretations and the variety of responses, are the significant components of decolonial stories that transform relationships between readers, writers, and literatures. When decolonial and reader response theoretical approaches interlock with each other, a mestiza consciousness develops for storytelling. A reader can understand themselves differently through multiple points of examination. Thus, analyzing the way I read Serros' works is one way to create a form of communication between the author, her books, her readership, and my own mestizaje identity.

Serros' books are more than just escapist literature for those looking for a release from everyday life. She is an author that many turn to as first-time readers or fans who seek re-readings. Adrienne Rich describes this act of reading aptly in her article "We Dead Awaken: Writing as Re-Vision" (2015). She states that "re-vision—the act of looking back, of seeing with fresh eyes, of entering an old text from a new critical direction—is for us more than a chapter in cultural history; it is an act of survival" (18). Although Serros is not an old text in terms of the traditional historical trajectory of literature, she is a diverse and unique one, a type of author that is still new or unknown for mainstream readers. Reading is a drive for self-knowledge, identity, and community. What we read affects us, and learning to read a new type of text or to re-vision it with mestiza consciousness becomes a political act that changes not only the individual's consciousness but the need to connect with others. Quite simply, "literature is political" (Fetterley xi). What does this mean exactly? It means

that literature that wants to achieve something—make the reader think differently about themselves, communities, or certain social, economic, gender, and classist topics, will inherently be political. Because reading is a political act, it is important to understand the context in which a piece was written in. For example, Serros wrote *Chicana Falsa* to explore her outsider feelings within a community. In "Ethnicity, Ideology, and Academia" (2006), Rosaura Sánchez critiques this idea of outsider versus insider in terms of borders: "The notion of boundaries is thus contradictory. One can be within but at a subordinate level, to the point where those within feel as if they were outside" (382). Serros self-reflects on this very idea in many of her writings and in the interviews that I conducted. She was consciously aware of her simultaneous role of insider and outsider in her community. As Judith Fetterley explains in *The Resisting Reader: A Feminist Approach to American Fiction* (1978): "Consciousness is power. To create a new understanding of literature is to make possible a new effect of that literature on us. And to make possible a new effect is in turn to provide the conditions for changing the culture that the literature reflects" (xix-xx). Serros' writing is best understood and analyzed with this concept in mind. It is an aspect of decolonial stories that I will explore in the following chapters. By interpreting these works with a theory in the flesh and mestiza consciousness lens, deeper understandings are formed. Both Iser and Fetterley inadvertently express similar points in their respective texts but not to the depth nor degree of Anzaldúa. Although their works are independent, they lack key components in their arguments, such as race, gender, and sexuality for Iser and race for Fetterley. Their lived experiences are still distanced from their research, which contradicts decolonial theory and the approaches Anzaldúa assumes as a queer Chicanx woman of color.

Contrasting Iser's and Fetterley's perspectives on the role that the reader and the reader's interpretations of a piece of literature plays in the creation and interpretation of it is Pierre Macherey's *A Theory of Literary Production* (2006). He presents a new way to explore and analyze literature that is contrary from the humanist's approach:

> The literary text is not to be thought of as an "expression" of the human subject or as a "reflection" of reality. It has no depth, centre, unity or singular point of origin. It is the product not of an authorial intention but of a process of production, which like the production of a shirt or a scooter operates by procedures quite independent of what the producer has in mind. An author is "the first reader of his own work." (Kindle Location 106)

According to Macherey, reading and writing are not an expression of the human spirit or a reflection of realities. Instead, it is a work of art that is created like any other work of art. The production of a text operates on a separate level from its analysis. Even the author cannot control where the literature takes her or him as what is written does not always live up to the intended vision or the intended interpretation. Thus, criticism becomes a work upon the work, displacing it into another space altogether. This means that the author's interpretation or understanding of what they wrote in conjunction with what readers think merely provides additional layers of unconscious or hidden interpretations, as much of Macherey's theory is based on psychoanalysis. Historical truths and personal reactions to the literature are deemphasized. The fact that literature often provides pleasure makes it more difficult for deeper interpretations to be garnered.

All three theorists ask questions about the unconscious reading of a text. Iser reiterates that historical norms influence the reader's interpretation of a text even if it is

unconscious. Fetterley digresses from both theorists as she stresses that a piece of literature is political, which gives literature power. This is when Gloria Anzaldúa's theory creates a bridge between Iser, Fetterley, and Macherey's criticisms. Using her to analyze decolonial literature exposes biases, both conscious and unconscious, and creates a space to transform the self. In *Wealth of Selves: Multiple Identities, Mestiza Consciousness, and the Subject of Politics* (2008), Edwina Barvosa explains the space for the transformation of the self as "selfcraft." She states that "if people choose to engage in selfcraft the resources for doing so exist in the potential conflict among their multiple identities" (175). This same space exists in literature, such as Serros' books. The multiple interpretations and the discussions that ensure from reading one of her titles, and potential conflicts of these interpretations, provide a space for selfcraft to occur. Developing the idea from Gloria Anzaldúa's "the mestiza way," it offers a framework "for integrating multiple identities that includes three steps: inventory, discernment and revisionary living" (176). This three-step process of identity building can be translated directly to an archeological literary reading experience. I not only use her interpretation to strengthen my own decolonial theoretical approach, but I go back to Anzaldúa's original text to reread it and reinterpret it on my own terms. Reading Serros through a decolonial and mestiza consciousness approach deepens the analysis of the complicated themes and topics that the author presents about race, ethnicity, class, gender, and sexuality.

Archeological literary reading—digging into one's self to better understand and relate to others through literature, is one way to maintain a relationship with a text. There is a constant give-and-take rather than only applying one interpretation of a text then disregarding it after the insight is uncovered, never to re-read for a new analysis. Reading a

text one time privileges the first analysis and the space one inhabited during the initial reading. It falsely assumes that there is only one interpretation and point of contact with a piece of literature. It ignores the fact that each time a person picks up a book, who they are as a person is different and thus changes the reading of the text. Terry Eagleton elaborates this point in *Literary Theory: An Introduction* (2008):

> All literary works…are "rewritten" if only unconsciously, by the societies which read them; indeed there is no reading of a work which is not also a "re-writing." No work, and no current evaluation of it, can simply be extended to new groups of people without being changed, perhaps almost unrecognizably, in the process; and this is one reason why what counts as literature is a notably unstable affair. (11)

Eagleton explains that re-reading a text, or perhaps even reading it for the first time, is another form of re-writing the text. This point undermines the significance that an author has on the creation of their literary venture, which is a precarious position to place authors of color because hegemonic society already devalues their works. The author ceases to be the creator once the book finds its way into a reader's hands because then the reader rewrites the story through her or his interpretations to fit a certain perception of what they think it should be. This understanding relates back to postmodernism; reading and writing is an unstable affair where the subject and author are essentially dead. Can readers discover ways to let go of their preconceived notions to discover new interpretations of a text without completely disregarding the author? Even Iser talks about the importance of "the 'willing suspension of disbelief,' [but that] ridding oneself of such prejudices—even if only temporarily—is no simple a task" (*The Act of Reading*, 8). Anzaldúa and other decolonial scholars are significant contributions to this line of questioning and the tasks that Iser expects of all

readers. She asks them to forget about a temporary suspension. She demands an actual transformation that occurs first with the self in relation to an "other." Each reading of a text should push an individual, stretching the boundaries of what is considered the hegemonic norm. To create a more socially and consciously just person, one must move outside what is comfortable, crossing borders between different experiences and realities, and this journey is not accomplished through the death of the subject or the author.

Hernández further explains the significant role of both the author and subject matter in the cultural productions of people of color. They need to expand outside traditional tropes associated as solely their concerns or areas of expertise because these categorizations prevent them from existing in a new and more powerful state. She argues:

> In museums, comic books, novels, and scholarly writing, the reordering of power is both contested and illustrated. While the tendency to locate Chicanas/os within a global perspective still falls on the topics of immigration, drug policy, social welfare, and bilingual education, I conclude that we have at least moved out of the corner in which nationalism had us trapped. Less stylized as an organizing theme, postnationality is a series of sentiments that have altered the direction in Chicana/o production. Postnational devices are an entry point to newer ideas and are indicative of the cultural and literary influence of contemporary and social movements. These are fluid and can go anywhere. (Kindle Location 206-10)

She examines the ordering of power structures and how certain types of productions are valued over others. She acknowledges that the global topics are important to recognize because they are a new historical present that removes Chicanxs from the marginal corners of research and scholarship. Yet, she sees the topics as entry points. The goal is still to find

more fluid spaces to "go anywhere," to express one's agency that will lead to social justice movements. Serros accomplishes such a feat with her own works. She removes the Chicanx from the traditional topics that Hernández presents and relocates her in a more middle-class white American setting, one that is still deeply impacted by the author's race, ethnicity, gender, and sexuality. As a decolonial voice, the author is the bridge to the new space of cultural production. Thus, her identity is extremely relevant and is not just a postmodern fractured sentiment.

In Gloria Anzaldúa's *Borderlands/La Frontera*, she develops mestiza consciousness as an inclusive act that acknowledges mixed races and cultures as strengths of society. The mixing of races, "rather than resulting in an inferior being, provides hybrid progeny, a mutable, more malleable species…a new mestiza consciousness, una conciencia de mujer. It is a consciousness of the Borderlands" (99). What does mestiza consciousness have to do with reading a text? Analyzing literature using theory in the flesh and mestiza consciousness allows for a deeper understanding of a decolonial story. The ability to critically read themes of identity and home, among others, with a decolonial lens allows for a more complex understanding of cultures and categories of difference. Ellen McCracken describes this phenomenon as the politics of signification in *New Latina Narrative: The Feminine Space of Postmodern Ethnicity* (1999): "[Theorists] began to understand culture as a site of contestation for meaning, a process rather than a fixed purveyor of misunderstanding or truth" (41). Culture is transmutable and changing because of the ideological structures that influence how a person identifies herself or himself. With this understanding, culture is no longer considered in a binary fashion where one practice is privileged over another. Instead, the intersections between these spectrums of ideological notions of race, class, ethnicity,

gender, or sex are not transmutable, which complicates decolonial analyses of stories and how they are understood. One cannot enter a decolonial text to receive a single truth. That is not its purpose. Instead, the reading becomes a process of many truths and untruths concerning numerous factors that affect people of color and their cultural productions. The layering of contested sites of meaning is a powerful way to displace the reader into the same space the author occupies.

Edwina Barvosa's selfcraft is one way that the politics of signification in literature is illuminated. First, the reader should take inventory of what ideas and preconceptions they inherited from others in their lives or other reading experiences. Anzaldúa describes it as a type of archeological experience: "She decides to go down, digging her way along the roots of a tree. Sifting through the bones, she shakes them to see if there is any marrow in them" (104). Likewise, a reader should go digging, shifting through the bones that would prevent a connection with a text—unfamiliarity/disliking a genre, the cover art, previous experience with an author, criticisms/reviews of a book, length, etc. Rethinking and analyzing the personal and historical baggage that one brings to a reading of a text does not mean forgetting all one knows. Instead, it asks a reader to take stock, to choose what perceptions to keep, as one starts the journey into the novel. Her analogy continues: "…touching the dirt to her forehead, to her tongue, she takes a few bones, leaves the rest in their burial place" (104). This second phase is called discernment. It means knowing how to sift through information and knowledge to keep only what is necessary. The rest of one's knowledges or perceptions are discarded as they hinder the reader from interpreting a text. For example, if a reader only thinks that romance novels are trash, whether from personal experience or from what others say about the genre, they will never be open enough to read a romance novel to

learn from it. As any literary scholar knows, there are romantic genre novels that are great pieces of literature. They have the potential to teach a reader something new about themselves or the world around them, such as *Like Water for Chocolate* by Laura Esquivel or *Pride and Prejudice* by Jane Austin. However, the potential means nothing if the risk is never taken, as for some reading a romance novel is literary recklessness. The final phase in Anzaldúa's process is revisionary living. This means what was read and critically examined changed someone's life—the transformative power of reading. She describes it like a rupture:

> This step is a conscious rupture with all oppressive traditions of all cultures and religions. She communicates that rupture, documents the struggle. She reinterprets history and, using new symbols, she shapes new myths. She adopts new perspectives toward the darkskinned, women and queers. She strengthens her tolerance (and intolerance) for ambiguity. She is willing to share, to make herself vulnerable to foreign ways of seeing and thinking. She surrenders all notions of safety, of the familiar. Deconstruct, construct. She becomes a nahual, able to transform herself into a tree, a coyote, into another person. She learns to transform the small 'I' into the total Self. Se hace moldeadora de su alma. Según la concepción que tienes de sí misma, así será (104-05).

The power of revisionary reading and thinking is the ability to move through and within ambiguous notions. Simple binaries have no bearing or merit in the space of in-between. Good books versus bad books, hate versus like—everything is questioned and revisited. The initial impression one has of a book from the cover alone is deconstructed and reconstructed

for multiple meanings. Decolonial stories work within a multiplicity of truths and lived realities, theory in the flesh, to undermine the hegemonic forms of storytelling.

All three of these phases take shape in Serros' writing. Her unique genre approaches, which I address in Chapter 2, are examples of inventory, discernment, and revisionary living. She plays with specific stylistic choices, such as humor, genre bending, stories within stories, and other techniques as a manner of cataloging her place within different communities. She has moments of discernment, where she relieves herself of baggage that hinders her from embracing her multiplicity of selves, especially in the conclusion of *How to Be a Chicana Role Model*, in which she finally accepts what the term "role model" means. She negotiates the space as a give and take on her road to a revisionary understanding of her place in the world. Serros continuously supplies mini conclusions, but often there are no definitive answers. The significance is her process to enter an ambiguous state and the types of agency that she enacts while in such a decolonial mindset.

Theory in the flesh and the mestiza way is a decolonial method of critically reading a piece of literature. Edwina Barvosa asks critical questions about how decentered subjects are able to contend with their fragmented self, which relies rather heavily on the type of reading experience one gains from Serros' writings. The first question to consider is "if identity contradictions are intellectually valuable but also fragmentary, can identity contradictions be compatible with the wholeness of a decentered subject?" (110). In other words, can a reader who has a fragmented identity discover some type of "whole" meaning in a piece of literature even as a decentered subject? Barvosa contends that, yes, this is possible through the very nature of a fragmented self, which creates an individual's unique personal identity. In general, a person's subjectivity develops through complex self-systems, which is how one

interacts with ideological constructions, within themselves and others, such as literature, religion, government, philosophy, etc. This leads to the second question—how can one have positive intersections and integrations among all the multiple identities and other self-constructs that makes up one's subjectivity? Theory in the flesh and mestiza consciousness analysis provides one avenue of accessing the points of contradiction to create a wholeness of a decentered subject, such as how one approaches Serros' decolonial writings.

Reading the mestiza way provides three different levels to connect the individual, the community, and the book. It forms a bridge that transcends differences. The metaphor of a bridge is particularly important because "bridges are thresholds to other realities, archetypal, primal symbols of shifting consciousness. They are passageways, conduits, and connectors that connote transitioning, crossing borders, and changing perspectives" (Anzaldúa, *This Bridge*, 1). The fact that mestiza consciousness reading places the reader in this space of in-between is important because there suddenly is no right way to analyze a piece of literature. Instead, there are constant new meanings and changing perspectives, which allows for growth. The reader enters a space that Anzaldúa calls "nepantla, a Náhuatl[7] word meaning tierra entre medio" (1). Entering a space of nepantla and becoming a nepantler means that you can cross into other spaces of being and thinking. The reader transforms as the bridges between all the connectors change. Rather than reading as a comfortable or escapist situation, either affirming held beliefs or escaping the daily trials of life, mestiza consciousness reading puts the reader in an uncomfortable space, to step into perhaps worlds

[7] The original text does not have an accent.

or situations that do not offer escape but instead offers alternative and often harsh realities of life. Serros accomplishes much of this in her writing. As an author of color, she pushes boundaries to navigate between comfortable and uncomfortable topics, often using humor as the bridge between the two spaces.

The idea that reading is not a space for escapism contradicts the only major reading group study conducted by Janice Radway in *Reading the Romance: Women, Patriarchy, and Popular Literature* (1990). Her study focuses on a group of middle-age women who read romance novels. She interviews one woman named Dot who explains that she started reading romance novels at her doctor's insistence:

> He was concerned about her physical and mental exhaustion, apparently brought on by her conscientious and diligent efforts to care for her husband, three small children, and her home. When he asked her what she did for herself all day and she could list only the tasks she performed for others, he insisted that she learn to spend some time on herself if she did not want to land in a hospital. (51)

Dot needed to escape her everyday duties and responsibilities. Reading is that avenue. It was something that she did solely for herself and her own pleasures. This relates to Serros because she receives pressure from her family to conform to a standard career that they can understand. They see writing as a selfish act, and Serros admits this fact, both in her pieces and in her interviews. Jessica Langlois asserts a similar claim about the author in her article "Memories of a Chicana Falsa" (2015): "Michele believed her stories deserved to be told — little everyday stories about one life, hers. But she also believed everyone else's story deserved to be told, too. It is a notion that still feels audacious, radical, maybe even revolutionary." Serros' writing craft is about her life and emotions. She believes the stories

must be told but not because she feels that they are more important than anyone else's. All stories matter to her, even if they appear inconsequential, because the everyday tales of one's life are the most revolutionary.

Radway's study elaborates on a similar conclusion because the romance genre is often devalued in terms of other types of literature. This study is significant to understanding Serros because of Dot's reasons for eventually settling on the romance novel for her alone time activity. Other women that were interviewed in Radway's study indicate that "romance reading is very often squeezed into busy daily schedules" (57). The fact that the reading is squeezed in between other duties, such as taking care of the children or doing household chores, indicates that it offers an escape from everyday responsibilities. Perhaps romances are the most common choice for women because it is the easiest type to pick up for a few minutes and come back to later without getting confused about the storyline. The women who read the romances "read religiously every day…[and] do not like to return to reality without experiencing the resolution of the narrative" (59). With this type of a mindset, the act of reading does not challenge the reader to become a nepantler or a border crosser. It does not encourage pushing boundaries or the uncomfortableness that mestiza consciousness reading can offer the reader—a chance at a transformation. Radway's study demonstrated that the average reader of a certain age and gender, located in a region of the United States, uses reading as a pleasurable escape. In her study, she specifically researched those who said they read romance novels. Unfortunately, no one has attempted another study of this magnitude nor one that focuses on a broader range of people. Still, her research implies a significant question for a decolonial theorist: How do you change the reading experience for people if they use reading to escape everyday responsibilities? A decolonized voice offers

one such avenue, especially in terms of Serros' style. Her books are easy to access. Her poetry and prose are pieces that can be read in between one's busy schedule. Her wit and humor, along with other nontraditional narrative structures, provide the escape many readers demand. They can laugh at serious topics at the same time the author cleverly subverts them. She engages the readers in new ways to understand race, ethnicity, class, gender, and sexuality without them even knowing. For example, in "Dead Pig's Revenge" from *Chicana Falsa*, the reader can laugh at the speaker's audacity to constantly eat chicharrones, even though they almost kill her, while topics of race, gender, and invisible labor exist as subtext to the poem. As a decolonial voice, Serros is a bridge. She brings unsuspecting readers into a new space to understand hegemony and the inequalities of a contemporary U.S. society.

When you have overworked and tired readers, in Radway's study mainly stay at home white middle-class mothers, the idea to read something different that critically transforms one's sense of self is probably the furthest thought from one's mind. Yet, she remarks that it is still important to acknowledge the patterns that result from regional locations and the cultural competencies of the readers:

> There are patterns or regularities to what viewers and readers bring to texts in large part because they acquire specific cultural competencies as a consequence of their particular social location. Similar readings are produced…because similarly located readers learn a similar set of reading strategies and interpretive codes that they bring to bear upon the texts they encounter. (8)

Can these similar sets of reading strategies and interpretative codes be questioned and changed in a specific type of reading setting? One way that her study differs from my own is that she did not self-reflect on her own reading patterns in relation to the participants in her

reading group. She situates herself as an outsider and remains as objective as she can from her own study. Perhaps the biggest flaw with her study is that she does not challenge the environment that produced the similarities amongst the women, mainly white, middle-class house wives. She did not do enough to demonstrate the importance of analyzing literature from the varied perspectives of an insider and outsider. I use Radway's research as an example of why it is important to consider multiple perspectives on literature. For example, region alone does not dictate how a reader understands the cultural components presented in a text. Serros' writings have access points for all types of people, even those unfamiliar with the identifier "Chicana." She utilizes a specific style of writing that provides the cultural access points for those unfamiliar with her terms. Thus, I suggest that there is a need for a newer reading group research project that will consider the impact a decolonized voice has on one's reading experiences.

My study straddles borders. I will simultaneously be an insider and outsider with my approach to analyzing Serros' writings. The author and I started as colleagues, but our relationship developed into one of friendship, in which I discovered how similar our backgrounds were. The oral history I conducted with Michele offers a glimpse into a deeper insight about how and why she wrote, which influences my analysis of her pieces. In fact, the extreme variety of her genre approaches is just one critical aspect of understanding her as a decolonial Chicana voice. In *The Chican@ Literary Imagination: A Collection of Critical Studies* (2012), Francisco A. Lomelí explains that this hybridity is more common with Chicanx authors than others:

> A proliferation of perspectives has become a stamp of originality in the recent writings, thus exploring every possible social and individualized experience. The

> variety of trans-generic writings is particularly noteworthy, thereby underscoring hybridities, cross-fertilizations and remapping of literary impulses. It is more common than not that works transcend a single generic construction as is well evinced by the proliferation of memoirs, (auto)biographies, cuasi-diaries or journals, testimonios, ethnographies, mystery novels, detective narratives and many others. (28)

Serros' work is not original just because she transcends genre borders. She does more with her remapping of poetry, short stories, (auto)biographical essays, and young adult literature. To understand the different layers that the author brings to her writings, one must read her as a decolonial voice in Chicana literature with a focus on theory in the flesh and mestiza consciousness analysis.

In the following chapters of this dissertation, I will analyze two of her major works with a decolonial analysis that focuses on her decolonized voice as a tool for writing about race, ethnicity, class, gender, and sexuality. It offers a unique access point for all types of readers to enter chaotic spaces of knowledge where ambiguity is a strength of her identity and writing agency. Chapter 2 focuses on how she genre bends within her poetry and prose. These narrative techniques are manifestations of her decolonized voice and offer access points for readers to identify with the themes and topics of her pieces. Humor is one of her defining features along with structuring her works as journal entries, diarios, and even testimonios. I thoroughly investigate these methods because they form the core of a decolonized voice and storytelling approach to Chicanx literature. Chapter 3 examines *How to be a Chicana Role Model* (2000) and the concept of a role model in terms of a positive representation for a diverse community of people. Chapter 4 reflects on binary ideas

presented in *Chicana Falsa: And Other Stories of Death, Identity, and Oxnard* (1993). Specifically, I deconstruct the ideology of an authentic Chicana and focus on Michele's relationship with her mother as it influences her poems, short stories, essays, and narratives. The personal is political. More than that, the personal is factual, fictional, and an amalgam of both. Through her decolonized voice and unusual narrative techniques, Serros creates bridges that allows more people to access decolonial sites of knowledge.

Chapter 2: Bend Narrative Genres and Surf the Waves of Writing

"I'm going to jot that down right now—surfing versus writing."

Two of Michele Serros' most well-known books, *Chicana Falsa and Other Stories of Death, Identity, and Oxnard* (1993) and *How to be a Chicana Role Model* (2000) exemplify decolonial storytelling through their narrative strategies. Their nontraditional formats create spaces of ambiguity for understanding Chicana themes and motifs explored by the author. This chapter argues that her writing resides in multiple genres that make it difficult to categorize her writing, such as diario entries or testimonios. The multiplicity of genres provides different forums for readers to connect with her decolonized voice. An intimate exchange exists in this presentation that creates bridges between people's experiences. The author humorously plays with the reader through her dynamic emphasis on the narrator's questions about race, ethnicity, identity, class, gender, sex, and sexuality. Is she reliable? Why does she feel like a Chicana falsa? Are they autobiographical? The answers reside in some of the writing techniques that Serros explores in her books, such as an unreliable narrator, what-if scenarios where she imagines a different story within a story, and focusing on repeat characters that span the course of an entire book. She relies on the corporeal body of both the writer's stories and the reader's connections to the storyteller. If there is no connection between the two, she uses her humor to forge one. She asks them to ride the waves of her writing because it opens a new space for understanding the decolonized voice of Michele Serros.

Seven years after the publication of *Chicana Falsa*, she published *How to Be a Chicana Role Model*, seemingly a blend between a "how to" book and an autobiography. Unlike *Chicana Falsa*, which had an introductory essay to the compilation of poetry and

short stories, *How to Be a Chicana Role Model* contains only vignettes and short stories. It pretends to be a "how to" self-help book for Chicanas that find themselves in the precarious situation of acting as a role model for an underrepresented community. The chapters are structured around rules, almost as if it is a Chicanx version of a comportment advice column offered by a *Dear Abby* character. The similarities to this type of genre ends there, though, because her writing is transformed by her unique humorous flair. *How to Be a Chicana Role Model* is all about breaking the rules, in certain ways as a "counter text." Her book transgresses boundaries of writing, storytelling, and the eternal quest to find one's place in a community amid a sea of endless solicited and unsolicited advice.

How to Be a Chicana Role Model has a narrative structure very similar to an iconic Latinx novel: "…*Y no se lo tragó la tierra*" / *And the Earth Did Not Devour Him* by Tomás Rivera (1971). In a similar manner to his book, Serros' divides her text into thirteen interstice chapters. Rivera's thirteen vignettes staples his book together. I argue that Serros' rules disrupt the flow of her vignettes providing moments to pause, reflect, and reconnect them in an unconventional fashion. All the stories in her collection are interwoven with similar characters, themes, and ideas, but the trajectory of the narrative is not chronological. *How to Be a Chicana Role Model* begins with a character named Michele Serros as a youth in high school. As the book progresses, she ages and shares role model rules, which are based on the vignettes encased in each chapter. They are hard learned, though notably she does not take them as serious comportment rules because she incessantly breaks them or contradicts them. The stories jump around timewise, which can jar the reader. Like Emma Pérez in *The Decolonial Imaginary: Writing Chicanas into History* (1999), Serros does not "ascribe to a linear temporality as the only means for speaking and writing

history…fragments coexist" (xix). Decolonial history mirrors decolonial storytelling because it offers an alternative space for sharing knowledge that creates agency through a nonlinear narrative structure. The order of the role model rules present fragmentation as strength. The author speaks of multiple truths, albeit with many gaps and incongruities. Yet, these gaps do not detract from the creation of new realities and ways of thinking.

The new realities and ways of thinking that she writes in her fiction cannot exist in a traditional "how-to" or self-help genre nor a testimonio. They limit her creativity. For example, a self-help genre succeeds by its very nature of step-by-step instructions. Readers can uncover the secret to a better version of themselves by following the chronology prescribed in the book. Serros is the antithesis to this quick-fix approach. She disrupts it by refusing to progress in a linear fashion. Although postmodernism validated a nonlinear narrative, it is different from a decolonial one. The subject is not dead, and the goal is to displace the narrative into a different space where agency and voice elucidate new understandings about race, ethnicity, class, gender, and sexuality. In *How to Be a Chicana Role Model*, each story does not always concede with the one that precedes it. Each section of the book begins with a role model rule, then, a vignette associated with the rule. Finally, there is another interstice before she introduces the next section. Her narrative jumps around with various references that connect in a weave of threads that create a dynamic pattern. Instead, it forces the reader to recall earlier stories or even suggests that they skip ahead to an unread rule to understand the narrative. The tales do not always have a beginning, middle, or end. They are snapshots into the speaker's life, almost like a decentralized text, as she searches for a positive Chicana role model at the same time she grapples with the realization that many people now consider her one.

The genre bending is indicative of the decolonial writing style and mirrors Ana Castillo's *The Mixquiahuala Letters* (1985), what she terms "genre jumping." In this book, Castillo also writes her letters with a confessional or diario format, an autobiographical meditation of life. She later explains her process in a speech, "How I Became a Genre Jumper," from 2006 given at the University of California, Santa Barbara. She elucidates: "Perhaps, I think now, by jumping from one way of storytelling to another throughout the last thirty years, all I've been trying to do too is to figure out how to explain myself right with hopes that we'll all try to do something about it, together." She explains the process as distinct with each book she writes. The book itself is a specific genre. She writes in that narrative structure, and then she genre jumps to a new style. This is how Castillo draws new readers in to care about the topics specific to her own community.

However, Serros creates something different with *How to Be a Chicana Role Model* and *Chicana Falsa and Other Stories of Death, Identity, and Oxnard*. She offers a certain poetica. Her writing is not limited to one genre because within each specific text she "genre jumps," or "genre bends," indicative of a shorter span of time because the bending occurs in one book rather than as a lifelong progression of the author's craft. Thus, her books are more than just about the stories that she tells. She weaves poetry within the narratives but with a theoretical paradigm that undermines them through her explorations of words or terms that carry a certain weight to them, such as "Chicana" and "role model." She uses a diary or journal entry to draw other types of readers in. She offers self-help advice for others in the community that struggle with similar issues, and then she presents short fiction encased within longer narrative. In general, she presents a chaotic approach to genre bending because it represents the chaos of her own life, as the author simultaneously works out what it means

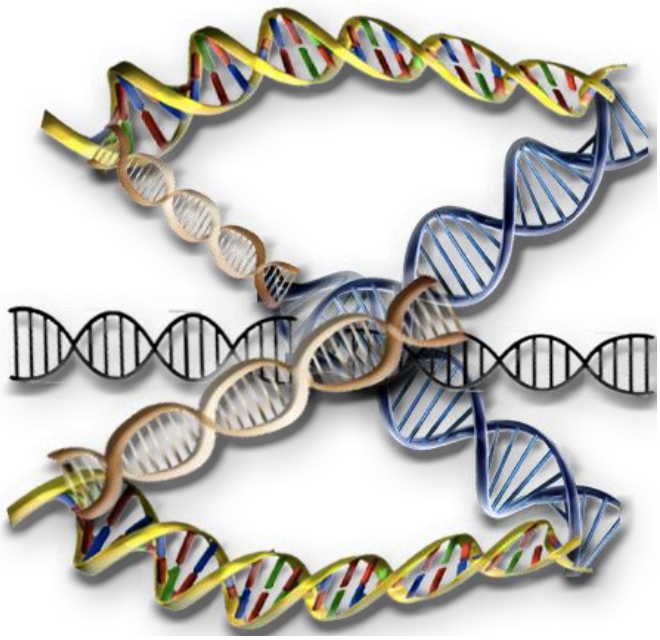
to be a Chicanx through her protagonist. These books are her own personal ethos. The themes are political, and the stories are embodied in a type of somatic theory embedded in decolonial storytelling.

Somatic theory is about how one's emotional processes influence embodied experiences. In *Volatile Bodies: Toward a Corporeal Feminism* (1994), Elizabeth Grosz argues that the body and subjectivity are interrelated: "This book is a refiguring of the body so that it moves from the periphery to the center of analysis, so that it can now be understood as the very 'stuff' of subjectivity" (ix). Many Western philosophers separate the mind and body as a dual split, that the two do not actually influence each other. Grosz argues the opposite point and demands that the body be recognized as a significant component to one's subjectivity. Grosz' assertions mirror the points that women of color theorists like Anzaldúa and Moraga make with their own writings. Similarly, Serros connects her mind and body in unusual ways in her own decolonized writing. The mind and body can fragment and break: "…human bodies have the wonderful ability, while striving for integration and cohesion, organic and psychic wholeness, to also provide for and indeed produce fragmentation, fracturings, dislocations that orient bodies and body parts toward other bodies and body parts" (13). Through fracturing and dislocations, new *travesías* connect people on multiple levels. Now, the minds and bodies couple together in unique shapes and patterns that strengthen the understanding of the self in relation to a larger community.

Grosz draws upon the designs of a mobius strip whereas I envision interlocking strands of numerous DNA helixes to indicate the complex layering that occurs with decolonial storytelling. As the storyteller, authors create worlds and histories, indicative of

the fact that DNAs hold the blueprint for how living organisms are built. Similarly, a decolonial voice holds the blueprint for how ambiguous narratives are written. Serros' books do not supply the readers with any answers. Instead, she encourages them to step outside of their own knowledge base to enter unorthodox spaces that can lead to new understandings about ideological terms, such as Chicana falsa and Chicana role model. Figure 1 depicts decolonial storytelling DNA helixes. Serros' narratives overlap on the helixes because they layer, bend, shift, and transform through their interconnections with each other as well as other authors' works. Stories exist on multiple strands at one time and are not constrained by time or space. Instead, they are in a constant conversation with other narratives that are located on the various helixes. These points of contact are key because they allow a decolonized voice to emerge. The focus is less on who's story is the best and more on how each narrative elucidates new understanding for all who encounter it.

Figure 1 - Decolonial Storytelling DNA Helixes



Michele Serros understands the interconnections between stories and finds herself frustrated by the fact that one cannot always control how others perceive you. She emphasizes this point with two quotes that frame her book *How to Be a Chicana Role Model*, one by Esmeralda Santiago from *Sí* magazine and the other from Kathleen Hanna from *BUST* magazine. The quotes act as a foreword that sets an important tone for the book: frustration, anger, and indignation. Santiago describes the burden of representing something greater than oneself: "It's a strange phenomenon. A Latino or Latina gains a bit of attention, and the next thing he or she knows, the words spokesperson or role model become attached to their names. It's as if who you are and what you've done is not important on its own. You must stand for something greater than yourself; otherwise your accomplishments are meaningless" (x). The words "spokesperson" and "role model" are names that someone else attaches to the Latinx in the spotlight. She never asked to be a role model. She wrote as a catharsis to the deep emotions she felt about her parent's divorce and later the death of her mother. Writing was a form of healing and recovery. An early role model, children's author Judy Blume, told Serros to keep a journal of everything that she felt about her parent's divorce. Writing helped her deal with difficult periods in her life. Yet, her accomplishments as a writer mean nothing unless she represents a larger community, such as Latinxs, and what they can achieve. She can no longer selfishly write for herself because she is a Chicana role model. Ironically, she also fights against this status with her writing.

Role models fall into a troupe that reinforces the American Dream lie—that anyone can become great, be a success, if they only work hard enough. At the beginning of *How to Be a Chicana Role Model*, Hanna from *BUST* magazine labels it as a capitalist ploy to get the consumer to buy into impossible images of oneself: "I think role models are stupid; it's

just another hierarchy, just another way for capitalism to keep us looking at impossible images, instead of looking at ourselves, our neighbors, or our friends" (x). Hanna feels they offer unrealistic goals that one cannot reach. As a system, Capitalism works because it creates users that always want. If there is a better item, then you work toward purchasing it. When the upgrade is ready, then you purchase that. You are never quite satisfied with what you have or who you are. Hence, role models function with the same principles. The emphasis is away from one's immediate community, such as family, friends, and neighbors, and instead on an almost imagined idea of success garnered through comparisons of the "haves" and the "have nots." Serros' decolonial genre bending complicates this binary of social comparison. The quotes from Santiago and Hanna are meant to frame the discussions of role models, and how to become one, as wrought with many contradictions and potential complications.

These ideas help construct one's social identity through social comparisons. In "'Lifting as We Climb:' Educated Chicanas' Social Identities and Commitment to Social Action" (2009), Aída Hurtado explains that "a group's status, degree of affluence, or other characteristic achieves significance in relation to perceived differences, and their value connotations, from other social formations" (113). The social comparisons can lead one to feel shame for familial groups. Thus, if your grandmother or mother stayed at home making tortillas and dresses, her value is underrepresented when compared to a working business woman. The social comparisons reinforce hierarchies and ideas about success that privileges a white, capitalist, Western ideology. Thus, Serros internalizes that a struggling writer is more valuable than a janitor, her father's occupation. Social comparisons teach her that working class or blue-collar jobs are not considered a successful profession.

Genre bending in *How to Be a Chicana Role Model* offers a resistance to negative assumptions and hierarchies promoted by mainstream society, which the narrator internalizes as a child. With education, she breaks free from lateral comparisons that privilege one ideology over another. With a decolonial narrative structure, Serros features herself both as the author and the narrator in many of her pieces. She utilizes multiple levels of her own voice to present storytelling differently, such as outside a traditional chronology or as a mixing of genres. In *Decolonizing Methodologies: Research and Indigenous Peoples* (1999), Linda Tuhiwai Smith states: "Indigenous peoples across the world have other stories to tell which…serve to tell an alternative story…. [T]hese counter-stories are powerful forms of resistance which are repeated and shared across indigenous communities" (2). Refusing to let other storytellers speak for her voice or her truths, she creates new avenues of expressions and grapples with the questions that comprise a decolonial life and identity. She tells alternative counter-stories to struggle against role model ideology. A decolonial storytelling space is not an easy place to inhabit because of the contradictions and ambiguities one encounters in this position. Emma Pérez furthers this idea in *The Decolonial Imaginary: Writing Chicanas into History* (1999): "By fusing the words 'decolonial' and 'imaginary,' each term riddled with meaning, I locate the decolonial within that which is intangible" (6). This intangibility is essential because it is one avenue toward constructing new meanings and truths. If the writer does not have an answer, the reader is forced to construct new knowledge alongside the author. This writing expresses thoughts that Gloria Anzaldúa explores in *Borderlands/La Frontera* (2007). The authors speak about existence and preoccupation "with the inner life of the Self, and with the struggle of that Self amidst adversity and violation… [with an] almost intuitive urge to communicate, to speak, to write

about life on the borders, life in the shadows" (19). Serros' borders are multiply figurative. She is a Chicana, but she is also denied this positionality because she does not fit the standard of what a Chicana looks or acts like. She refuses to let binaries rule her conceptions of self nor the way she constructs her stories and memories. Her writing is an attempt to understand emotional and physical traumas in her life. The narrative and genre structures mirror the messy nature of trauma through their creation. Though the presentation and the way one reads her texts does not necessarily follow a cover to end model, *How to Be a Chicana Role Model* and *Chicana Falsa* begin and finish with Michele Serros because the narrative journey is the author's. She is the grounding point in the ambiguous space for the fortunate reader lucky enough to become part of the process through their readings.

The process of reading her work is uncertain and unsettling because many narratives contain an unreliable speaker. In "Special Assembly" from *How to Be a Chicana Role Model*, there are no easy answers to the questions of identity and self-worth that the author raises because the reader never receives an insight to the subject's mind. The story is about Puerto Rican actor Anthony Rivera, but his thoughts are a mystery because of the filter from the unreliable narrator. Even though she builds his story up as a fantastic underachiever success tale, we read it as less inspirational than all the average people's stories. Rivera talks about dropping out from school, dating, and sleeping with people as he tried to meet Michael Jackson to get hired as a backup dancer. He shares many male antics of someone who is desperate to succeed. Basically, he was a loser who received a lucky break. Now, he is a successful role model for his community. The narrator reveals this contradiction without understanding how it complicates the notion of gender and identity. His responses during the Q & A session indicates a disregard for the female body: "Then someone asked if he had

any children and Anthony just shrugged his shoulders and said, 'Not that I know of!' Funny, huh?" (3). Rivera pokes fun and plays with the young girls who ask if he has a girlfriend or if they can kiss him. The young girls are sexualized as he reifies gender normativity through his reactions. With a decolonial reading, one understands the gender power dynamics at play with this little exchange. In *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (1990), Judith Butler explains: "…within the inherited discourse of the metaphysics of substance, gender proves to be performative—that is, constituting the identity it is purported to be. In this sense, gender is always a doing, though not a doing by a subject who might be said to preexist the deed" (24-25). In this situation, Rivera plays the part of a heterosexual and extremely virile male. He performs gender and conforms to what society expects of him. He treats women's bodies as possessions to conquer because this is behavior portrayed by many Hollywood heartthrobs. Likewise, the young girls fall into the tropes of star-struck hormonal teens. Butler continues when she quotes Nietzsche: "…'the doer' is merely a fiction added to the deed—the deed is everything'" (25). The "doer," in this case Rivera, is merely fiction. The deed is what matters—both the performance and the actual reality of the story. As a mainstream actor, Rivera performs the "bad boy" or "Latin lover" persona. He acts fast and loose with the ladies, not even concerned if he got a girl pregnant from unprotected sex. His masculine gender performance does not detract from his role model status but adds to it, at least in the eyes of the impressionable teenagers.

The speaker's unreliable traits culminate when she ends her free write assignment, which is the narrative presentation of the speaker's story—a school homework activity. Rivera taught her that "if you're Mexican, or even Puerto Rican, like Anthony Rivera, and you've dropped out of school and lived on the streets of New York City, you can still make

it. You can still be a great role model and be in a music video and someday have someone look over your shoulder to correct all your spelling" (Serros 3). The narrator is naïve because she is more concerned with all the spelling errors that she makes in her writing than with the problematic message that Rivera's presentation promotes. Rivera praises Cinco de Mayo, and, because the book uses the word "Chicana," one assumes that he identifies as such. Yet, the young speaker casually mentions at the end of the story that he is Puerto Rican. There is no indication of his ethnicity other than the fact that he is a successful brown body in the entertainment field. The emphasis on Rivera's identity in her conclusion reveals a prejudice that many hold—a brown body equates a Mexican. Even the title of Serros' book, *How to Be a Chicana Role Model*, plays with identity issues, just as her first book *Chicana Falsa* did. Identity is a major theme because it is a key component of decolonial storytelling. Emma Pérez explains the emphasis in *The Decolonial Imaginary* in this manner: "…I am, in a sense, exposing how historians have participated in a politics of historical writing in which erasure—the erasure of race, gender, sexualities, and especially differences—was not intentional, but rather a symptom of the type of narrative employment unconsciously chosen by historians" (27). When history erases identity, it is imperative to reclaim it again through decolonial storytelling. Thus, Serros and many authors of color focus on self/community identity in their writing. In "Special Assembly," the author uses an unreliable narrator's free write assignment to highlight the complexity of these points. The genre bending of the story as a homework assignment, coupled with a naïve and young speaker, creates a new narrative structure that counters erasure and assimilation.

Historical erasure is intentional. It is a weapon that colonizes and destroys groups of people in the name of civilization and progress. In *Why Stories Matter* (2011), Clare Hemmings explains progress narratives:

> They describe shifts in critical investments and methodologies that transform what we mean by the key terms—and related terms such as power, subjectivity, and agency—as well. In effect, in charting moves from sameness to difference, and singularity to multiplicity, Western feminist progress narratives also chart a move from one set of schools of thought—radical or socialist—to another—poststructuralist or postcolonial. As an attempt to represent the complicated relationship between sameness and difference and other related textual pairs, I often denote this as sameness→difference. I do so to highlight the epistemological and temporal direction of the comparison, in which the latter term critically transforms rather than merely comes after the former. (42)

Initially, her chronological progression appears logical, especially in terms of a Western academic trajectory. Upon closer inspection, the chart from sameness to difference, from singularity to multiplicity, is just another form of charting a white epistemology. The attempt at a complicated relationship between sameness and difference is a white issue. Even the way she highlights the progression from sameness to difference as "sameness→difference" demonstrates the limited understanding of time and space many Eurocentric scholars have. She further explains that the arrow denotes a transformation, not a chronological progression. If this was the case, why not have multiple arrows moving in multiple directions? My contention is that sameness never preceded difference except in terms of Eurocentric scholarship. People of color and decolonial theorists understand that

differences existed long before white colonizers and conquerors forced assimilation on indigenous peoples. It is lived theory, "theory in the flesh,"[8] and the breaking of these binaries play out in Serros' writings. After reading "Special Assembly," readers are left with many questions about the title and content of the book. Which role models are mainstream ones—the speakers from the community or the famous Anthony Rivera? What is it about fame and popularity that automatically makes someone an example of success? Do these types of role models occur because of their fame, and how does it affect the way we see others who are not mainstream? The narrator of "General Assembly" concludes that she wants to be like Rivera, famous and rich enough to pay for someone to correct her spelling, rather than face the issues of race, ethnicity, class, gender, and sexuality that influences her identity. It is easier to submit and assimilate than fight the status-quo.

How to Be a Chicana Role Model and *Chicana Falsa* similarly present a female narrator at different ages as part of the decolonial narrative structure and genre bending theme. Despite the speaker's youth, there are some poems or stories where she finds deep insights about who she is as an individual. These pieces starkly contrast others with an unsure or unreliable narrator. The author has different types of voices to destabilize the reading, which marks it as nonconformist. One piece, "Senior Picture Day," depicts a girl

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[8] Moraga, Cherríe. "A Theory in the Flesh." *This Bridge Called My Back: Writings by Radical Women of Color, 1981-2001*. Eds. Cherríe Moraga and Gloria E. Anzaldúa. Berkeley: Third Woman Press, 2002. 21. Print.

telling a story from when she was seventeen years old. The narrative structure itself is more traditional as it reads as a vignette. What contributes to the genre bending attributes is the juxtaposition of it next to the free write assignment. They are both interconnected because the younger speaker first started squeezing her nose at the same age when she wrote about Anthony Rivera. She explains: "My nose has actually become smaller, narrower. It looks less Indian. *I*[9] look less Indian and you can bet that's the main goal here. Today, when I take my graduation pictures, my nose will look just like Terri's and then I'll have the best picture in the yearbook" (Serros 14). After Rivera's assembly speech in the previous story, the protagonist starts a tradition of policing her looks. She censors herself as an attempt to appear less Indian and, thus, become a mainstream role model. Her actions to rid herself of any indigenous features of her body is a colonial project where the young are taught to acculturate and despise their roots and heritage. Her "Indian nose" classifies her as different, and the young narrator desperately wants to fit in. Anzaldúa explores how this colonial project is furthered by the hatred of la india: "The worst kind of betrayal lies in making us believe that the Indian woman in us is the betrayer. We, indias y mestizas, police the Indian in us, brutalize and condemn her" (*Borderlands,* 44). Her historical musings reflect the attitude of the narrator. The disgust she feels for her Indian nose is connected to the hatred and history of La Malinche. Her physical characteristics mark her as different. People look at her, and they "other" her. The narrator wants to "fit in," which is important for any teenager. A small, narrow nose is a white person's nose. "Senior Picture Day" illustrates

[9] Italics present in the original text to add emphasis to the "I" of the narrator.

how time moves in and out of notions of the past, present, and future as the speaker exists in a chaotic state. She stands ready to take her senior photo, but the decolonial time lag transitions to when she was in seventh grade. The memories occur simultaneously because her self-hatred and actions are not relegated solely to the past. The multifaceted view of time allows the author to play with her narrative structures. She bends the stories to present numerous "what-if" scenarios. She layers stories upon stories upon stories to demonstrate the complexities of her decolonial voice.

In "Seek Support from Sistas," Serros fabricates a scenario within the middle of her story where her character is suddenly a successful writer who copes with her feelings of isolation through writing. In her alternate reality, it is fifteen years later. The narrator treats Jennifer, the now former fly girl, the same way she was treated when she was a lowly page. The relationship between the women, both in the daydream story and the present-day story, mirrors a time in Serros' youth when she was embarrassed of her association with other Mexican children in grade school. In a personal interview, she explains:

> When I was in grade school, I really disliked the idea of being Mexican, and I know I was just saying "oh, I didn't feel that Mexican," but in school we would have some kids that didn't speak English and seemed to be there as farmworkers. You know, children who worked with their families in the fields. And they were teased a lot, and I remember not wanting any association with them. And I recall my friends and I, my girlfriends and I in the fourth grade, making fun of one little boy, and it was really our own self-loathing, our own embarrassment, like he was teased so much, we did not want to be in that same place. (Personal Interview, April 26, 2012)

The emotions that stand out are "self-loathing" and "embarrassment." Serros' character from "Seek Support from Sistas," Jennifer, is embarrassed by her relationship with the speaker. She does not want to be near her because of the association people will make between their brown bodies. Similarly, the author does not want people to mistake her for a farmworker child. Both the author and her characters ostracize the very idea they fear. They do not acknowledge that the idea is tied to the physical body of a person who feels the pain and disgust. Even in her revenge story within "Seek Support from Sistas," the speaker cannot see how she perpetuates the same dominant hegemonic attitude from her youth. As the author's decolonial voice layers the stories in the piece to complicate racial and ethnic identities, the narrator remains limited in her understanding.

Some of the "what-if" scenarios in *How to Be a Chicana Role Model* have a magical realism quality to them. In *A Luis Leal Reader* (2007), Leal iterates that this narrative structure has a specific purpose when used in literature, which has nothing to do with distorting reality. He explains that its purpose "is to express emotions, not to evoke them…. In magical realism, the writer confronts reality and tries to untangle it, to discover what is mysterious in things, in life, in human acts" (324). Magical realism is an involved process that depends on the attitude toward a reality that seems magical but is considered "normal" by the characters in a work. The reader might identify a magical element, but the creations in the story do not. He continues to explain:

> Let us keep in mind that in these magic realist works, the author does not need to justify the mystery of events, as the fantastic writer has to. In fantastic literature, the supernatural invades a world ruled by reason. In magic realism, 'the mystery does not descend to the represented world but rather hides and palpitates behind it.' In

> order to seize reality's mysteries, the magic realist writer heightens his senses until he reaches an extreme state (*estado límite*) that allows him to intuit the imperceptible subtleties of the external world, the multifarious world in which we live. (326-27)

He argues that the purpose of magical realism is to heighten the senses present in the story. Through an extreme state, new realities are revealed that deepen the multiple ways of viewing society. Serros confronts it through her decolonized voice. She layers her vignettes, the role model rules, with mini-stories to express an *estado límite* in her writings. She knows that they are not one-dimensional but complicated and, thus, difficult to understand. "Role Model Rule 4: Discard Discontinued Text" uses magical realism to describe the multifaceted emotions she encounters while her mother, Beatrice, lays dying in a hospital bed. The speaker has her usual twenty-minute visit, but this time it is a little different. She forgets her sunglasses in the room, and she returns to retrieve them. Suddenly, her mother awakens to say: "'You're always forgetting something'" (54). What follows is a detailed conversation between Michele, the character in the story, and Beatrice. They discuss their plans to go to Italy when her mother is out of the hospital. Their relationship reverts to what it was before her mother's health failed. This is a magical realist moment because the narrator reaches a heightened sense of reality. In her world, this is normal. Her mother was sick, and now she is better. Life continues but with a deeper understanding of how important their relationship is. Decolonial storytelling allows the author to confront her tangled emotions in a rather bleak reality through the fictional characters she creates in her narratives. She can look at them from different perspectives. In *The Chican@ Literary Imagination: A Collection of Critical Studies by Francisco A. Lomelí* (2012), Julio Cañero describes experimentation with narrative storytelling: "A proliferation of perspectives has become a stamp of

originality…exploring every possible social and individualized experience…it is now more common than not that works transcend a single generic construction" (Cañero 28). Serros transcends the constrictions of a single genre because her writing is original. Her insights into personal and community identities and emotions is stamped by her decolonized voice. By the end of the short story, the mother lapses back into her coma. She never awakens. The reader sees the entire conversation as an invention of the author's desire to have just one more mother-daughter experience. Yet, for the narrator, the exchange really takes place. It is a moment where the author expresses her feelings as a sign of strength rather than weakness at the same time she discovers deeper truths about her life in relation to others.

There are additional "what-if" stories that appear as merely fun ways to reconnect with people in her family. For example, Serros and her sister Yvonne[10] had a strained relationship. They fought a lot, and there were periods where they barely spoke with each other. In *Chicana Falsa and Other Stories of Death, Identity, and Oxnard,* there is a short story "The Day My Sister Was on Television" where the author playfully explores her complicated emotions about Yvonne and their family. She rewrites what happens when her sister appears on *The Price is Right*. In our interview sessions, Serros explained that she was at school and missed the entire episode. She wanted to transform the real story by changing the day and inserting herself into the memory. Readers do not have this knowledge about the piece. It is a result of her fictional musing, a party that simultaneously celebrates and reproaches Yvonne, akin to Serros' own feelings about her.

[10] See Figure 2.

Figure 2 - Michele and Yvonne (Sister)

In the story, Yvonne's role on the show becomes a joke to all the neighbors who are at her house watching because she always bids $1,000 on each item. Serros reveals why: "We went to the Laundromat…and she guessed one thousand dollars 'cause Mama always said as she'd carry her load up the steps to Laundryland, 'God, I'd give a thousand bucks to have a washing machine right now.' And now my sister had bid a thousand dollars" (36). The offhand comment that Beatrice makes women's gendered labor visible. Mother and daughters are the ones that drive to the laundromat. It is exhausting work because of the heavy baskets and steps that lead into the facility. The offhand comment about the amount of money their mom would pay for a washing machine is a reflection on the value of her time and labor. The machine is not worth the money, but the time it saves Beatrice is. The comedy of the story is layered with deeper points about their social class. Serros admits that

her sister's consolation prize, a Beta Max video cassette recorder, elevated them to a higher social standing: "We were the first one on the block to have one…We felt wonderful knowing that Beta Max would be around for a long time. We felt somewhat like cutting edge pioneers in that mid '70's video technology revolution…we bragged and bragged to neighbors and friends about the day my sister was on television" (38). The Beta Max becomes a status symbol. They receive notoriety in the neighborhood and exemplifies that the protagonist sees her family as more than a working-class people. They have hopes, dreams, and desires for a better life. The Beta Max is an indicator of both failure and success. Yvonne did not win on the show, but the neighborhood treats them as winners when she returns with a fancy technological gadget. The feeling of success is fleeting, though, because their machine eventually gets replaced with the VCR. This playful retelling of history gives the author a forum to criticize notions of labor and success at the same time she makes the reader laugh over the ridiculous choices her sister makes. Her decolonial voice allows the author to blur and shift "the truth." Decolonial storytelling offers new ways of viewing one's history that are not constrained by time and historical facts.

Serros' stories and poems are inspired by her life and her family's life. Her inspiration is from the "real," but she fictionalizes it into an ambiguous decolonial narrative. In "Role Model Rule 7: Buy American" from *How to Be a Chicana Role Model*, she reveals the strategies that she uses to make time to write, which she associates with a sometimes-fabricated lie of illness:

> Yes, to my family, writing was not important. Writing was selfish. Writing was just plain rude.

> Therefore, sickness became an integral part of my professional writing career. Sickness was something my family understood…Taking care of oneself when ill was very important, 'cause if you didn't, you could get a relapse and miss lots of work or worse, you could die and miss lots and lots of work. Being Mexican, I grew up to understand that missing work is bad. Very bad. A Mexican without a strong work ethic? *Come on*. (94)

She stresses that writing is a type of labor, but its form is one that her family cannot understand. They see it as a luxurious pastime. They cannot afford to write when there are bills to pay and mouths to feed. Thus, her decolonial voice is devalued. Ever aware of her audience, she uses this space to play with the rhetoric associated with Mexicans; they are simultaneously lazy and hard workers (consider the stereotype of the lazy Mexican sleeping under a cactus). Linda Tuhiwai Smith explains: "Representations of 'native life' as being devoid of work habits, and of native people being lazy, indolent, with low attention spans, is part of a colonial discourse that continues to this day" (53-54). Serros is very aware of the significance representation poses for groups of people. The fact that the stereotype of a "lazy Mexican" endures the testament of time is a troubling realization. As a writer, she takes it upon herself to create decolonized examples of her community within her stories.

The author's decolonized voice is the strongest when she pulls inspiration from her own life rather than from arbitrary stories of injustice. For example, she reads an article about Dinky, the Taco Bell Chihuahua, and reflects on how Mexican entertainment types are angry because they learned that his dubbed voice was Argentinean and not Mexican: "*'Sure the actor doing the voice-over is Latino, but when does a Mexican actor get his opportunity to portray a Mexican lead?' 'Well, actually, this 'Mexican lead' originated from China.*

Chihuahuas were first bred in China' 'See what I mean? Another low blow to la raza"[11] (97). The community's complaints are ironic because the dog was originally bred in China. Media entertainment appropriated chihuahuas from another culture, and, eventually, they act as a misrepresentation for Mexicans. The incident reminds her that cultures and traditions are mutable as they cross borders, nationalities, and ethnicities. The narrator cannot use the article for a story, though, because it is too far removed from her life. It is not her decolonized voice. Aunt Tura reminds her that she needs to write from within when she compares Serros' stomachaches with Aunt Chaya's afflictions: "'…what Chaya wanted, what she really needed, was in her own backyard, and with you, well, I think you don't bother to look in your own backyard…Mi'ja, if you want a real story, you need to look in your own backyard more often'" (100). The title of the rule implies that the author or inspiring role model should "buy American" to be authentic. What is more American than Taco Bell, a faux synthesis of Mexican and American food? Yet, the protagonist in the story quickly realizes how unauthentic the mascot is. The chihuahua dog represents a turning away from her decolonized voice, from the knowledges that she holds about her life and family. To write, the protagonist does whatever possible to get out of family work and functions. She believes isolation is a key to her process, like Virginia Wolfe's *A Room of One's Own*. In her efforts to isolate herself, she misses the family stories that identify her as American. She does not see the inspirations "in her backyard." Aunt Tura's incomplete

[11] Italics are in the original text to indicate Serros' private thoughts.

family story about Auntie Chaya becomes the narrator's inspiration for the very story that she now stars in. Use what you know. Write what you know.

Even the most embarrassing anecdotes can transform into a decolonized story. In "Role Model Rule 11: Honor Thy Late-Night Phone Calls from Abuelita," the protagonist "hooks up" with her biggest fan because her abuelita gives a stranger her telephone number without her permission. Gabriel Morales, fondly nicknamed Gabby Mi'jo by his mother, is a sexual fling turned potential muse. She seduces him with her writing, yet, when he asks to see her poem about him, she finds herself uninspired. The affair ends disastrously, and she reflects on her selfishness:

> And while I was sad and all, I couldn't help but think what a selfish idiot I had been. I mean Gabby Mi'jo was a person. A lover of literature, a boy who helped his dad in the garage, a fan of my poetry, and here I just used him for my own hormonal needs and to pump my flagging self-esteem. Do you think Maya Angelou uses poetry to lure potential play? Does Robert Pinsky have a Rolodex of sexual conquests? Do Pulitzer Prize winners hand out copies of their hotel keys at book signings? Most positively not. I was a horrible, horrible poet person. (186-87)

This "genre creation" reflects a playful side. She uses humor to contemplate serious issues, such as her personal identity, while she makes readers laugh over absurd situations. Honestly, she wants someone that she can share her life with, and, at this moment in time, she chooses Gabby Mi'jo because he is younger than her, a flattering situation for an older woman. The fact that he is Mexican and enjoys her creativity adds icing to her cake. As a new and obscure author, the narrator wants fans that admire her writing. It is a matter of pride and principle. Similarly, Gabby is in the relationship for selfish reasons. For a man,

dating an older woman, a cougar, is a marker of manliness. If the woman is a writer, it gives him the opportunity to becomes famous as her muse. Eventually, he becomes one, as indicated by this narrative, but perhaps not exactly the way he envisioned. A decolonial analysis of the story presents multiple positionalities that complicate how the reader views the characters. They are selfish in similar ways that adds humor to the "tragic" end of their relationship. The piece does not read like a short story, and the narrative jumps around to show a quick progression of time. By the end of the genre creation, the narrator is back at the beginning of the text about to receive another boy's telephone number from her abuelita. Time stops in a repeating destructive yet humorous loop. This Role Model Rule provides an opportunity to playfully reflect on the follies of one's youth.

Serros explores more genre bending writing techniques when her stories take on a diario or testimonio format. In "Role Model Rule 12: Mind Your Table Manners" she attends a book signing. Her narrative reads as a testimonio to how she fails her fans. She admits that she acts fake because she dislikes Los Angeles: "*You like to get out of this fake-ass town as much as possible and now you're being fake just by claiming it's great to be back*[12]" (Serros 197). For the protagonist, book readings are a type of performance. It is not genuine, and she admits that in her narrative. There is only one real goal for a book signing: "This is about sales. Profit. Percentage. Will you ever sell enough books to pay all your late fees at Hollywood Video? Enough royalties to get Sallie Mae off your back?" (197). The writer needs to earn a living. She has bills to pay, and, honestly, the goal of any author is to

[12] Italics are in the original text to indicate the narrator's thoughts.

sell their books. Yet, the signing spirals out of control like a bad soap opera. The people who stop by her table are caricatures of stereotypes both within and outside of her community. The author presents one-dimensional creations, of herself and of her fans, to complicate the binaries or prejudices that exist about her community. In *Borderlands,* Anzaldúa states her vision for Chicanx: "I am possessed by a vision: that we Chicanas and Chicanos have taken back or uncovered our true faces, our dignity and self-respect. It's a validation vision" (109). Using her witty humor and banter, Serros undermines stereotypes. She pokes fun at them at the same time she demands respect as a writer. There is the woman who claims Edward James Olmos would make a perfect father for Serros in a film version of her book, like *American Me*. There is the daughter with the Nahuatl name that she cannot pronounce nor spell, Ixotchltiquelta. It is an especially hilarious encounter when she accidentally sneezes out a booger on the girl's book. She wonders if she should say something or pretend it was all her imagination. She decides to remain quiet, but the words of the mother and daughter trail back to her as they leave the book signing: "'But, Mom…Her *booger's* in it. I don't want her ol' snot in my book!' The mother grabs the girl's arm. 'Shhhh! It'll be worth more when she dies'" (202). This statement is both funny and sad because Michele Serros passed away in 2015. What happened to the infamous booger is still a mystery. The final person, Xavier, gushes over her as if he is her biggest fan. Unfortunately, he thinks she is someone else: "'Oh, by the way,' he said, 'I just loved your first book.' 'My first book?' I asked, confused. 'Yeah, *The House on Mango Street*'" (204). After all these antics, she is unrecognized. They do not know who she is as a writer just like she does not know who they are outside of the caricatures that she creates. There is a disconnect between the peoples in her community, and the author continues to flesh out her ideas and assumptions through a

testimonio about herself that distinguishes her from other women of color authors. The abrupt ending to the piece signals the extreme uncertainty and dislocation the narrator experiences.

The stories transition from a testimonio structure to simply including letters from fans. In "Role Model Rule 13: Answer All Fan Mail," she highlights characters from previous stories. She jars her readers with this nontraditional narrative approach and forces them to either remember the characters or re-read *How to Be a Chicana Role Model*, scrolling through the pages out of order until one can connect the references. Cecile Pineda discusses genre bending with Francisco A. Lomelí at the end of her novel *Face* (2013): "The artist must be willing to part with everything, including all her/his certainties. It is for this reason especially I resist wanting to be categorized. The work is like itself. The task of an artist is to become more and more who and what she/he is, to find one's very own particular voice(s)" (161). Serros also resists categorization in the way she plays with genre creations in her books. The work is like the author. She finds her unique decolonial voice through her writing. For example, the first fan letter is from an English teacher in Connecticut who takes it upon herself to argue that her writing is not universal enough. Students do not understand what a chicharrone[13] is. This letter references the poem "Dead Pig's Revenge" from *Chicana Falsa*. She connects stories between both of her books because it embodies the layering effect of her decolonial voice. It is surprising that the teacher complains about the food reference because these snacks are very popular in every gas station or grocery store,

[13] Misspelled because this is how Serros spells it in her poem "Dead Pig's Revenge" in *Chicana Falsa*.

usually under the Americanized guise of "pork rinds." The fact that she does not complain about the very title of a Chicana is unusual because it is not a term commonly used on the east coast. All the "fan" mail is humorously written. They praise her for her success as a role model while they insult her writing abilities at the same time.

The author then combines two narrative genre bending techniques in "Breaking the Major Rule." This piece includes journal entries and a "what-if" story within her story. The major rule is a simple one: "You do not read other people's private journals. You just don't do it" (89). Unfortunately, the reader immediately breaks this rule just from reading *How to Be a Chicana Role Model*. Meanwhile, the narrator accidentally reads the end of her roommate Angela's journal entry: "'*Sometimes Michele can be so…* '"[14] (89). That is all she sees, but it is enough to cause a moral debate for her. She uses her imagination to create alternate scenarios of what the diario says next. She layers her storytelling and includes how she will react depending upon which version is the real one. Yet, the "what if" scenarios are not enough to appease her. Is it ethical to turn the page to see how Angela's thoughts concluded? She ventures forward and justifies her decision because "[e]verybody knows that the positive evolution of any artist depends on honest criticism. It was obvious I had to read the rest of her diary entry, for the sake of *art*"[15] (91). Since reading will help her art, she continues. She turns the page to discover—nothing. The entry ends exactly as it started, with five little words. Rather than feeling relief, she is angry. She feels cheated and decides to

[14] Italics are included in the original text.
[15] Italics are included in the original text.

assume that the original thought was a negative one about her. She attempts to understand how Angela feels at the same time she plots her revenge:

> I looked at the spiral. I knew inside were Angela's personal thoughts, opinions, and innermost secrets. I knew she felt comfortable leaving it around her room like that, 'cause after all, her roommate was a writer and I, more than anyone, would respect what someone puts on paper--words that can be written in the heat of passion, words that can be easily taken out of context by a second reader, or incorrectly interpreted by a third party. Keeping a journal is one of the most courageous acts a person, a woman, can do. It documents and validates, gives an outlet to dialogue we normally may not feel comfortable ever voicing. It allows us an opportunity to express that inner hesitation that challenges us every waking day. You should never judge anyone for what they write in a diary. (92)

The narrator recognizes how brave journal writing is. It is a private and freeing activity. Emotions surface, whether they are true or not, because journals are sacred. It is especially important for women to have this outlet because they were denied access to writing in many other spaces. *In Decolonizing Methodologies*, Linda Tuhiwai Smith mentions that indigenous research has four processes: "decolonization, healing, transformation, and mobilization…. They are not goals or ends themselves. They are processes which connect, inform, and clarify the tensions between the local, the regional, and the global. They are processes which can be incorporated into practices and methodologies" (116). Angela's private journal is a decolonial writing space. She uses it to inform herself, connect herself to others, and clarify her emotional state. Yet, the protagonist does not respect Angela's decolonial voice because it interferes with her own.

The narrator refuses to regret her actions. Instead, she owns her choices, Meanwhile, the author uses "Breaking the Major Rule" as a forum where she can layer the different stories and decolonial voices to present a matrix of conflicting or ambiguous outcomes. As it concludes, the protagonist holds a very important note in her hand for Angela's audition. She debates whether she should give it to her friend: "Hmmm. I clenched the paper in my hand. I knew exactly what I should do with it. Sometimes I can be so…" (Serros 92, *How to Be*). The story ends as abruptly as the original journal entry. She does not reveal whether Angela receives the note, and the reader is left rather unsettled. How well do you know the narrator? How well do you know the author? How would you end the story? The conclusion suggests a couple of points. First, the narrator equates her writing to a diary. She expresses some of her deepest emotions on paper, which force readers to break the major rule. Second, it shows that she wants the reader to feel her emotions, the frustration. Finally, she invites the reader to share in the creative experience. Both must use their imaginations to create an ending to the story. The decolonial genre bending opens the writing space to some new collaborations between fictional and real characters.

Some of Serros' most personal pieces are structured in a diario or journal presentation because it gives her an unconstrained forum to express her emotional vulnerability. In "How I Became a Genre Jumper" (2006), Ana Castillo explains that journal writing was a way to explore and self-teach herself about other genre styles. She explicates: "So, I now had to teach myself how to go from left to right margin to fill in all the blanks, to not just allude to meanings with symbols and metaphors but to offer up concrete details to the reader. My practice method, then, became a journal…. The journal was used…to serve artists, writers, travelers, and serious thinkers." Journaling is an unimpeded exercise. It is its

own narrative style that also lends itself as a space to practice and create other genre practices. Both Chicanx authors recognize this and utilized it to strengthen their writing crafts. Serros invites the reader into her mind and writing process, so they can experience the intensity and sincerity of her decolonial storytelling. In "Role Model Rule 8: I Know What You Did Last Summer," she is twenty-seven years old and traveling with Lollapalooza as a Chicana Road Poet.[16] The diary entries reveal that the tour is difficult. She misses home, and she does not earn enough cash to sustain herself (she takes a side-job making burritos). The poet's corner, where she spends most of her time, is a demoralizing space: "It's sorta demeaning to be reading in a place called 'the corner.' I mean, why can't it be called 'the stage,' or 'the arena,' or even 'the space?' 'Corner' sounds so infantile and unprofessional" (132). The name of their poetry space demeans their creative work. The narrator equates "the corner" to a childhood experience when she was asked to stand in a corner by a teacher. The act of "standing in the corner" is associated with punishment for talking too much. Yet, it is ironic that poets, who make a living through their words, are asked to remain in a space where one is not supposed to speak. As described by Anzaldúa in *Borderlands*: "'I've never seen anything as strong or as stubborn…' And I think, how do you tame a wild tongue, train it to be quiet, how do you bridle and saddle it? How do you make it lie down?" (75). A person of color's tongue is dangerous because it speaks new knowledges, truths, and powerful stories, many of which are indigenous histories. Once you control a people's language, you not only control them but can destroy them. Teachers control her tongue.

[16] See Figures 3 and 4 from Lollapalooza.

Now, at Lollapalooza, she finds her voice confined again. It is only in these private journal entries that she finds a decolonized space where she can share her stories.

Figure 3 - Reading at Lollapalooza

Figure 4 - Beastie Boys Concert

Figure 5 - Taxco de Alarcón

The final narrative that reads like a journal is "Let's Go Mexico!"[17] A travel magazine inspires the title, and the narrator's voice presents itself as a tourist. She plays with

[17] See Figure 5.

a brochure writing style to poke fun at how foreigners view the exotic countries they visit. She lives the experience depicted by the travel advertisement: In Mexico, white people learn Spanish while brown bodies serve them as laborers. The speaker finds herself thrust in the position of fielding questions about what it was like growing up in Mexico even though she was born in California. Through the program, white people read her differently. Eventually, she discards the advice from the magazines, and writes her own version of a travel story. She moves out of the home where she was placed for her language immersion and travels to Cuernavaca by herself[18]. In Cuernavaca, there is an IHOP. It was the one place that she can get closer to "el otro lado:" "The aroma from the kitchen, even the piped in Muzak, made me think of all the Sunday mornings, the weekends, I spent surrounded by—double-dare me to say it—*Mexican-American* memories" (110). The speaker seeks a place where her mixed-race belongs. Her experiences in Mexico remind her about the in-between space she inhabits. She does not need to be authentic. She can have her Rooty Tooty Fresh 'n Fruity pancakes with salchicha because it reflects her own cultures and traditions. For the speaker, that is her authentic self. In the story, her decolonized voice is one that accepts all the cultural contradictions that merge into her persona rather than grating against each other.

A final genre bending narrative technique in Serros' writing is repetitive characters, themes, and even stories. Her writing is like a tangled spider web. She weaves layers upon

[18] In Mexico, traveling alone is discouraged by the magazine *Let's Go Mexico!*

layers of stories with distinct decolonized voices at the same time she connects them across space and time. There are so many discrete references that one can physically create a visible map of this phenomenon. To demonstrate an example of her cleverness, the most obvious pieces to analyze are the ones about Dr. Ernesto Chavez, Ph.D.[19] There are six separate stories in *How to Be a Chicana Role Model* where the speaker historicizes the tumultuous escapades she endures to receive an honorarium worth $25. From "First Call" to "Twentieth-Something Call," she chases Ernie to the point where they are at a fictional trial in "The Plaintiff: The Poet." These vignettes emphasize the contradictions communities of color uphold at the same time it allows the author a forum to express the emotional frustrations associated with having one's labor devalued. She takes her revenge by presenting a case to a fictional court that will allow her to describe the transgressions that occurred to her at the same time as offering a space where compensation can be paid.

In "First Call," the author characterizes the type of person Ernesto is before he receives his Ph.D. At this point, he is one month late paying her. He focuses on how great the night was: "'I just love it when I can give back to the community. So many people…. You know, not many successful Latinos like myself remember their roots. But me, I remember where I'm from" (33). He detracts from the monetary aspects of hosting such an event and shifts the focus to the community. He deemphasizes the capital costs and stresses that the event is about giving back to a disenfranchised community, not about the money. By "Second Call," Ernie is a Doctor of Philosophy, having received his Ph.D. He changes the

[19] Serros does not include an accent for his name, so I honor her choice by not including one either.

way he says his name, denying the informal nickname, and stresses the "Dr." part. Weeks past, and Serros finds herself trapped in an ethnic version of *Waiting for Godot* by Samuel Beckett (1953). Since his graduation, he is extremely difficult to reach. From "Third Call" to "Tenth Call," the narrator's phone messages disrupt the flow of the entire book. They are ruptures that contradict the respect and awe that role models usually receive when they attend events as guest speakers. She shamefully tells Louie, Angela's boyfriend, that it is over eight months since she spoke at the event. She is going to give up trying to get paid, and he convinces her to keep at it:

> "I mean everyone wants their artist to add spice to their event, but they don't wanna acknowledge their worth…
>
> This dude's white?'
>
> 'No, brown.'
>
> 'Oh shit, good luck! They're the worst!'
>
> 'Don't say that.'
>
> 'They always pay their own people last, if at all.'
>
> 'Oh, that's not true. This guy, he's like Mr. Community and everything. He's just busy and stuff. Really, he's down for brown!'
>
> 'No, listen. It's not about brown, black, or white, it's all about green." (86)

Louie reminds the protagonist that she needs to have confidence in her self-worth as an author. If they do not acknowledge her worth, she must act as a voice for her own self-interests. Just because Ernie is a member of their community does not mean he will honor her fee. Free labor is free labor, and community members use the excuse of insufficient resources to perpetuate injustices enacted upon them. In *Borderlands*, Anzaldúa explains

that it is a matter of culture: "Culture forms our beliefs. We perceive the version of reality that it communicates. Dominant paradigms, predefined concepts that exist as unquestionable, unchallengeable, are transmitted to us through the culture. Culture is made by those in power—men. Males make the rules and laws; women transmit them" (38). In this situation, Ernie creates the prevalent culture—that the speaker needs to work for free to support her community that has little funding. Subsequently, she acts like a deviant by challenging this supposedly unquestionable practice. As a male, the doctor holds the creative power. However, she can counter his power with her own decolonized voice, so that she will finally be heard.

The final calls are met with the most resistance. In "Twelfth Call," she speaks with Ernie who claims that he never received any of her messages. Unfortunately, he has no funds left to pay her honorarium. He is "in the middle of organizing the Hispanic Literature series" and reminds her that "'…*I* don't do any of this for the money'" (160). The Hispanic Literature series is more important than her payment. He attempts to soften the blow of his unexpected news by addressing her as "mi'ja," a term usually used by family members as a form of endearment. Yet, the word also represents the inequalities of their gender dynamics because those in positions of power use it as a patronizing tactic. He insults the speaker by addressing her as such. They are not related or even close friends, and the implication is that she acts like a little girl. She needs to understand her place, and he will make sure she does not forget. By the time the reader gets to "Twentieth-Something Call," he is again unattainable. The protagonist realizes that she sets herself up to continue a cycle of a cat and mouse game where she incessantly stalks him to no positive end results. If she wants to change the situation, she must take matters into her own hands. As a writer, she creates a

story where she can change the narrative to represent a new reality where she receives the justice she seeks.

"The Plaintiff, the Poet" is an unexpected conclusion to the litters of phone calls that sprinkled the pages of *How to Be a Chicana Role Model*. The story reads like "The Trail" by Franz Kafka (1925). The plaintiff's trial begins in May 1998 when she performed as a poet. The prosecutor asks her questions about Ernie because he "seem[s] like a reasonable man. And from what you tell me in your deposition, an upstanding citizen of your community" (205). Even the court struggles with the inconsistent attitudes that he reflects. The depositions are the previous phone call stories. After reviewing all the evidence, the court concludes that she is owed her $25 honorarium: "'I need to send a message to all the community members out there that I have no patience for this brown-on-brown crime. To cheat a poet out of monetary acknowledgement is the most pathetic act I've seen all my years on the bench'" (206). The brown-on-brown crime that the judge alludes to is a reality within communities of color. The narrator, who is also the author of the trial, exposes the disrespect and unfair treatment with her fictional court case. She even hints that another similar crime occurred at the California Polytechnic State University. Performance artists already struggle to make a living, and to cheat someone out of their wages, especially a member of your community, is a low crime. She asserts that we need to hold each other to higher standards because we are from the same community. Thus, her trial makes Ernie accountable for his crimes against art.

This chapter explores the ways that Serros bends genres through her decolonial voice. Metaphorically speaking, she rides the waves of her writing and plays with certain narrative structures as tools for expressing major themes in her genre creations. Specifically,

she creates unreliable narrators, what-if scenarios where she layers her writing, diario/testimonio writing structures, uses humor as resistance, and creates spaces where repetitive characters disrupt the flow of the book to disturb the way readers approach her writing. As an author, she uses her creative space to work through the social spaces that she navigates, such as race, ethnicity, class, gender, and sexuality. Her protagonist reflects the contradictions.

Chapter 3: Make and Break the Rules of a Chicana Role Model

"I felt the need to have an answer, to always have an answer…"

In Chapter 3, I analyze stories from *How to Be a Chicana Role Model* to explore how Serros recreates the very notion of a role model. Through narratives that focus on a Chicana woman turned author and role models that are found both in Hollywood and in one's family, such as a mother and father, she argues that representing an entire community is an unrealistic reality. After all, the best role models are the ones who break all the rules and stay true to their decolonized voice.

Most of the topics in *How to Be a Chicana Role Model* allude back to themes and issues first discussed in *Chicana Falsa* (1993), which was the book that launched Michele Serros into "Chicana role model" status. *How to Be a Chicana Role Model* criticizes the rudimentary title of a role model as it reflects and responds to the hypocrisy of such an idea. Labels and definitions as they relate not only to herself but to others in her life play a major role in these texts. For example, *Chicana Falsa* explores her angst and frustration at feeling like a fake, someone constantly on the fringes of a community that finds her unauthentic. In *How to Be a Chicana Role Model*, she critically examines the use of the term "role model"

and the expectations the label imbues on an individual. She questions why someone wants to be a role model at the same time she lays out steps on how to become one.

After the success of her first book, she finds herself in a precarious position of someone who represents an ideal or model for other Chicanas and Latinas. Serros admits that she does not see herself as a role model, but she also understands that personal and social identities are complex ideologies. In "'Lifting as We Climb:' Educated Chicanas' Social Identities and Commitment to Social Action," Aída Hurtado describes personal identities as "derived from intrapsychic influences, many of which are socialized within family units" (112). The understanding of the self often begins at home, which supports the constant focus on her identity in relation to her family. The stories that her family tells influence who she becomes as a writer and a Chicana. Contrasting the personal identity is a social identity, which Hurtado states as "derived from the knowledge of being part of social categories and groups, together with the value and emotional significance attached to those group formations" (112). Serros examines her social categories in great depth in every role model rule she writes. She is a woman, a Chicana, a writer, and a role model, which are a few of the categories that she identifies with. Through decolonial storytelling, she presents both an integrated and fractured understanding of how personal and social identities interact on a corporal level.

Serros creates complex personal and social identities through the characters she develops in her books. In *Decolonizing Methodologies*, Linda Tuhiwai Smith argues that "imagination is crucial to writing" (37). She uses her imagination to develop a story where a sassy teenager complains about a school assembly. *How to be a Chicana Role Model* begins with a young narrator in junior high school. Initially, the reader cannot tell if the person

speaking is the protagonist because of the tone and attitude of the child. “Special Assembly” reads like a journal entry; it has a subtitle of “First Period/Free Write.” The story is riddled with grammar and spelling errors. This stylistic choice does not devalue the piece. Instead, it reaffirms that language is a tool that authors use to tell alternate stories. The tale appears generic. The speaker recalls when soap opera star Anthony Rivera attended her high school to speak at a special assembly for a free write that is due in first period. The misspelled words, shorthand, and slang affirms the age of the protagonist: “Thank God, cuz I’m the worst speller in this whole class” (Serros 1). This vignette stands out in *How to Be a Chicana Role Model* because it is the only piece with this type of language and grammar errors. The style is important because the author wants to emphasize the age and naivete of the speaker. The narrator is a young girl, on the cusp of womanhood, who is being exposed to the concept of a role model for the first time. Rivera is an example of the type of role model that she herself can aspire to as she ages.

The simplistic storyline draws the reader into memories of their own high school experiences. The story is written the day after the special assembly, as a reflection piece for her first period. She is honest about how it was merely a chance to escape the first period spelling test, and it was an exciting opportunity because she was going to meet someone famous. Casually, she remarks how a cop, news lady, poet, and others from the local community spoke at this special assembly. However, it is clear by her tone and hero worship awe that the real star is Anthony Rivera—someone famous from *General Hospital*. The social class of the speaker is revealed as she admits that she cannot even see him on *General Hospital* because her Betamax is broken and she “come(s) to this prison everyday” (1). She does not even know who Rivera is because she does not watch the show. The fact that her

family cannot fix their Betamax machine implies that maybe they have financial troubles and limited resources. She also perceives school as an inconvenience or "prison." She is forced to go here, which implies that she is a troubled youth. Perhaps the sentiments that she holds are common feelings for her generation. Still, the fact remains that she does not actually know who Rivera is outside the fame associated with his very name. Everyone before Anthony Rivera reduces to "blah blah blah" even though they speak inspirational messages like "say no to drugs" or "follow your dreams." These nameless members from her community are not Hollywood famous like Rivera. The author builds the tension in the short story through the narrator's excitement in her free write.

Rivera is a significant character in the story because he is a role model. Latinxs are underrepresented in media, and he is an example of someone who "made it." In *The Bronze Screen: Chicana and Chicano Film Culture* (1993), Rosa Linda-Fregoso complicates the representation of successful Latinxs in Hollywood: "Does the 'for' mean representing or speaking on behalf of Chicanos and Chicanas…. [T]here is a certain paternalism in claiming to speak for the community as though its members cannot speak on their own behalf" (xix). Rivera is the reader's first example of a role model in the book. He has this otherworldly quality about him because the protagonist sees him as a speaker for the community. His success is one that others should aspire to. Yet, Fregoso questions this assumption of who is a role model in Hollywood. Similarly, the narrator presents a similar conclusion because the *General Hospital* star is nothing like what the speaker imagined. Instead of a crisp and neat attire, "he looked really tired and his suit was sorta rumpled" (Serros 2). The protagonist excuses his looks because at least he made it to the event. She does not question why he is tired, why his suit is rumpled, or why he is tardy. She wonders about some of the phrases

and encouragements he slings at the crowd for ten minutes "'cause Cinco de Mayo was two weeks ago" (2). These inconsistencies are no big deal because he is Anthony Rivera. He is a successful Latino. Emma Pérez underscores the problems associated with this mindset in *The Decolonial Imaginary*: "…Chicanas have been assigned secondary status as heroines who are idealized, as workers who are exploited along with men, or, as in social history, as women who are only members of a family" (23-24). As a man, Rivera holds power and prestige. The speaker idolizes him even though she does not watch his television show. He transgressed the role of an exploited worker of color. He is idealized as a "role model." He is from her community, and, despite the restrictions of institutional systems, he succeeded. The narrator fails to understand how gender played a significant role in Rivera's success. Instead, she enjoys the moment as a once in a lifetime opportunity to meet a celebrity.

The Chicanx author complicates the intricacies at play through her decolonial storytelling. She provides clues for the reader to discern that the narrator is unreliable. At this stage in her life, she cannot distinguish the critical points that do not make sense. For example, he yells encouraging phrases for people of color and claims that he is happy to be at the special assembly. However, his actions do not match his words. For example, "he looked a little nervous. He kept looking at his watch like Mr. Evans did and tapping the side of the podium like Miss Knudson does when the class gets out of control and he also kept scratching the side of his face" (2). He is obviously nervous. His movements imply that he desires to be someplace else. What he truly thinks is unclear because Serros does not provide insight into his actual thoughts. After all, the story is a free write assignment. Yet, the author provides a decolonial space where the reader can theorize about what happens beneath the surface. Perhaps Rivera does not like talking with high school students. He

constantly looks at his watch because he tracks the time for when he can leave. These theories are reexamined at the end of the book in "Special Assembly, Part 2."

At the end of *How to be a Chicana Role Model*, Serros demonstrates that stories are created through both a teller and a reader/listener. The way one interprets a narrative depends on the perspective and insight one receives about the integral pieces that come together to create the tale. At the beginning of the book, the speaker is young and immature. It is unclear whether the girl is Michele or not. At the end of the collection, the author makes sure the reader knows who is speaking: "'Okay, without any further delay, I present Michele Serros'" (215). The adult character named Michele Serros, who started the book as a girl with a free write assignment, finds herself in the precarious position of a role model who will speak at an elementary school. The emotions she exhibits are insecure ones, which counter the confidence of the earlier younger version of herself at the beginning of the book who just knows that Anthony Rivera is amazing. This protagonist is "still in junior college after six years" (222). She is a Chicana woman and writer, but she does not feel like an authentic representation of that type of a person. She does not feel like a role model. Ironically, the Chicanx author sets the tone and scene for this vignette to reflect the unknown thoughts that Rivera probably had when he showed up late to his own assembly: "Fifteen minutes and already all those kids, brown kids, inner-city [,] low-income underprivileged children of underrepresented ethnic minorities have been waiting in a cafeteria. Waiting for me, their woman, brown woman, suburban-raised, low on income, low on gas, from an underrepresented ethnic minority. And here I am late, again" (211). The kids in the first assembly piece did not care that Rivera was late and it is implied that he was unconcerned as well. Yet, the female role model at the end of the book browbeats herself for

acting unprofessional because she is late again. A good role model is never late. She recognizes her privilege, as a suburban raised brown woman, but she also understands that she represents a successful person of color, or at least one that appears as such since publishing *Chicana Falsa*. Another intersection of oppression is her very gender, as it is harder for women to succeed in a patriarchal society. The children do not know that she defines herself as a low-income and struggling author. In *Chicana/o Identity in a Changing U.S. Society: ¿Quién Soy? ¿Quiénes Somos?* (2004), Aída Hurtado and Patrician Gurin analyze the struggles that Chicanx navigate as they grow up:

> Like all children, Chicana/o children thrive when they are given love, affirmation, and reassurance, and when their basic physical needs are met. Yet, Chicano/a children have additional cargas they must deal with that children from the dominant culture do not bear. Among these are development of a positive sense of self that encompasses their ethnicity, race, class, and gender. (6)

The additional cargas that brown inner-city youth carry weighs on Serros too. She understands the disadvantages and disenfranchisement that people of color experience from a young age. Our value is questioned by others and, thus, we internalize self-loathing born from a colonial history and neocolonial present that dramatically affects our identity and pride that is learned from parents, school, and other personal interactions and social institutions of power. The protagonist, Michele, feels extreme pressure as a role model to inspire others.

Although there are many writers of color, American society usually only recognizes the ones that cross into mainstream literature as canon pieces. In many of her own stories, Serros reflects on how she is often mistaken for other more well-known Latinx authors.

When she arrives at Roosevelt Elementary, they think she is either Rudolfo Anaya or Sandra Cisneros: "'Oh yeah, we didn't think you were gonna show up. Mrs. Kendall is inside reading your book to everyone.' 'My book? You mean my stories?' 'Yeah, you wrote about the old lady and her owl, didn't you?' 'No, that's not me.' 'Are you the one who lives in the purple house?' 'No, that's not me either'" (213). This mistake implies two key points: 1) Serros is not a successful writer because her name does not stand with others in the genre. 2) Uninformed people act as if there are only a few Latinx authors. As she already has self-doubt about her success and is her biggest critic, this encounter does not help her mood right before her assembly talk. It reaffirms her uncertainty. She is not the type of role model that the teacher expected. She is tardy, rumpled, and has a coffee stain on her shirt. Her appearance mimics that of Anthony Rivera's at the beginning of the book. However, Rivera is not censured for his failings whereas the fictional Serros is. The Chicanx author uses this final story to disseminate all the contradicting thoughts she holds about role models.

Furthermore, she uses her nonlinear decolonial storytelling to structure her critiques about role models. For example, Mrs. Kendall introduces her to the robust and anxious fifth graders:

> "I myself saw her read her poetry at a Chicana writers' conference about a year ago, and that's why I've asked her here for Hispanic Heritage Month. She is a role model for you all. She is of your community…a role model not just for Mexican-American children, but for all Hispanic children, children from Guatemala, from El Salvador, from—oh, you're ready? Okay, without any further delay, I present Michele Serros!" (215)

Mrs. Kendall was a teacher from the Chicana Writer's Conference when Serros served as a lunch volunteer a year ago (see "Role Model Rule Number 1"). The connection she makes between these time periods is significant because she juxtaposes a lag where multiple realities exist simultaneously. The reader is asked to recall an earlier story to understand the points that the author makes at the end of her book. In *The Intimate Enemy: Loss and Recovery of Self under Colonialism* (1983), Ashis Nandy states: "If the past does not bind social consciousness and the future begins here, the present is the 'historical' moment, the permanent yet shifting point of crisis and time for choice" (62). Nandy argues that social consciousness changes depending upon the present historical moment a person exists in. Yet, there is a shifting between these points of crisis that influences what types of choices one makes. Serros overcame a difficult historical past to make it to the present where she is about to speak at an assembly. Yet, she shifts between these points of crisis as if they exist in the same temporal reality. The past is not dead, and it confronts her with the accusations that she must represent all experiences from Guatemala to El Salvador. The truth is that she feels lost, not a member of any Chicanx community, let alone the Latin American countries that Mrs. Kendall mistakenly lumps as "Hispanic." There is a constant pressure to succeed and represent a positive role model for people of color, raising expectations and consequently trepidation on some kind of fear and intimidation.

In "Role Model Rule Number 1: Never Give Up an Opportunity to Eat for Free," Serros recalls her early poem writing days before she published *Chicana Falsa*. These early days mirror the struggles she still has at the end of *How to Be a Chicana Role Model*, accepting any opportunity to read poems whether it is at a school assembly, coffee shop, or bookstore. It appears as if she is the eternally struggling author, never quite able to make her

big break when she will stop being mistaken as other authors. When she receives a phone call about a Chicana writers conference in the Southwest, she thinks it will be the big break she was looking for. She assumes they want her to read poetry at the conference. A week before the event, she realizes that she is scheduled to be there for "both Saturday and Sunday…to serve brunch" (Serros 6). She is asked to attend for her body, to be manual labor. The conference organizers do not recognize her talent. She feels inadequate. hattie gossett analyzes these internalized feelings in "who told you anybody wants to hear from you? You ain't nothing but a black woman:" "on top of that you aint nothing but a black woman! Who told you anybody wanted to hear from you? This aint the 60s you know. It's the 80's. don't nobody care nothing about black folks these days" (194). The constant dialogue of negative thoughts that permeate a person of color's psyche is nothing new. Couple this inner voice of worthlessness and doubt with structural and institutional inequalities and people of color face a seemingly insurmountable number of obstacles to succeed and attain the coveted role model title. The internal dialogs in the very first role model rule are the same ones she has at the end of the book and are even explored in her poem "Annie Says" from *Chicana Falsa*, where her tía basically tells her that no one wants to read her writing. Fortunately, Serros has a network of support that helps her navigate the negative internal and external spaces. Thus, she commits to the job to serve brunch and will sign up for open mic at the end of the conference.

While at the conference, she realizes that others do not see her as an authentic Chicana let alone a Chicana author. She is not authentic because her Spanish is not good enough. Language is a very personal experience and, therefore, is often associated with identity. Anzaldúa explains: "So, if you want to really hurt me, talk badly about my

language. Ethnic identity is twin skin to linguistic identity—I am my language" (*Borderlands*, 81). Language is often used as a tool of manipulation and control. Anzaldúa explores the colonial history of language in Borderlands while she also shares her decolonial stories of her own experiences with language. She is brutally honest about how easy it is to hurt her by attacking her language because it is an attack to her very body and her very being. As a fifth generation Californian, she speaks primarily English. She still knows some Spanish, although not at the level others expect. Serros questions the women from her community who belittle her: "First, I was this so-called writer trying to push my poems on supposedly other fellow writers and now I was this wannabe Chicana trying to horn in on a conference, their conference. I wasn't even worthy of serving Cinnamon Crispas" (Serros 8). Her self-worth is filtered through the eyes of the "authentic" Chicana writers, the women who were asked to attend the conference to share their poems. Unlike them, she is a "so-called writer," a poem pusher. She is a "wannabe Chicana" trying to steal a spot at "their conference." She posits herself as an outsider because it is the type of reception she receives from others in her community. If they feel this way, then it must be true. The fact that she is not "even worthy of serving Cinnamon Crispas" implies that she is not even Taco Bell authentic.[20] Rather than try to fit into a category of authenticity that does not really exist, the author uses decolonial storytelling as a canvas to explore her contradictory understanding of self. All the experiences she writes about, both in this story, in others from the collection,

[20] Serros includes a footnote to explain that she and Taco Bell call buñuelos (spelled as buñelos in *How to Be a Chicana Role Model*) Cinnamon Crispas. It is a humerous nod to her in-between state of not being completely Chicana or completely American.

and those from *Chicana Falsa* jump around in the chronology of Serros' life to demonstrate that the past, present and future impact her simultaneously in her decolonial writing space.

The encounter with the woman who mocks her Spanish becomes a muse for later decolonial storytelling. Angela, a dear friend throughout many of her stories, encourages her to use the negative experiences as foundations for future pieces:

> "So you're not gonna go," she said as a statement rather than a question. "And now you're not gonna read your poems at open mike? Man, you're sure giving this woman who dissed your Spanish a lot of power…
>
> I mean, you were so psyched about this conference and even though you were just gonna serve food, you were all looking forward to meeting all these writers, your fellow Chicana writers and you were gonna read your poems and now, because of this woman, you're not gonna do any of it.
>
> …why don't you write a poem or something about how you Mexicans treat other Mexicans who don't speak Spanish?" (9).

The way Angela speaks posits her as someone of a lower social class. She speaks with slang, such as "dissed," and repeats "gonna" even though it is not grammatically correct. She also identifies herself as an outsider because she uses the phrase "you Mexicans." Angela is not Mexican, or at least does not identify with the community. The different perspectives that her friend offers become a powerful aspect of her decolonial storytelling. She can bridge themes across communities because she understands, like many others, how it feels to be on the outside looking in. At this point, it is Angela that stresses issues about power. Serros is not at a stage where she critically examines infrastructures of hegemonic power. As a writer,

her most powerful tool is her voice. Angela will not let her friend just give that up without a fight.

Decolonial spaces for creating and telling stories are important for people of color communities who are consistently disenfranchised not only by white communities but by their own peoples. They are multiply oppressed. In Maylei Blackwell's acknowledgements in *¡Chicana Power! Contested Histories of Feminism in the Chicano Movement* (2011), she explains: "I was taught in the Cherokee way to believe that stories have power: the power to inspire, the power to heal, the power to transform, the power to incite new possibilities, in fact, to create new worlds" (vii). Blackwell reminds us that storytelling is a tradition whose history is tied to indigenous roots, although not everyone identifies as indigenous. Stories can inspire, heal, transform, incite new possibilities, and even create new worlds. In terms of Serros' story, she feels as if the entire situation is absurd because she does speak Spanish, just not the type of Spanish the woman wants to hear. This piece marks her first steps into a decolonial space where she can create a new history that complicates her experiences with this nameless Chicana woman. Through her encounter, she writes "Mi Problema," a poem found in *Chicana Falsa* about not speaking Spanish well as a language outsider.

When Serros is at the open mic event, she is solely concerned with the woman who spoke rudely to her. She wants to teach her a lesson. Not surprisingly, the reading does not go as planned. She is ignored by the very person the poem addresses. What is her next step? Of course, confrontation! She is so intent on revenge that she almost misses a publishing opportunity. She must decide what is more important to her: Educating someone on their ignorance and prejudices or publishing. She chooses her career, but it is still important to recognize how crazy she acts. In *Borderlands,* Gloria Anzaldúa describes what Serros went

through in this pivotal moment: “In our very flesh, (r)evolution works out the clash of cultures. It makes us crazy constantly, but if the center holds, we’ve made some kind of evolutionary step forward” (103). A colonial mindset that degroups communities can perpetuate cycles of internalized violence. It causes a clash of cultures, but, if one can maintain agency through the process, a powerful type of evolution occurs that brings us closer to a decolonized mindset.

Serros ends “Role Model Rule 1” with hesitation and fear. She worries that her inability to confront someone who misjudges her indicates that she will never be taken seriously as a writer: “I looked after the woman. I worried that I’d never be strong enough to question someone’s intent or actions, no matter how much they hurt me. Would I always think about what I should’ve said and then write about it later? How could I ever get my messages across in life” (Serros 12). Authors caught in a decolonial time lag have less opportunities and spaces to speak because the mainstream or (neo)colonial cultures restrict them. In *The Decolonial Imaginary*, Emma Pérez defines this concept a specific way: “the time lag between the colonial and postcolonial during the historical moment…can be informed by the decolonial imaginary. Through the decolonial imaginary, the silent gain their agency. To locate these women’s voices, I argue that the decolonial imaginary becomes the tool that will write these feminists into history” (33). The time lag creates a new space where people of color can enact agency with unconventional imaginaries. Serros resists by writing and retelling histories and stories. As more authors step forward to take the podium the questions and fears will mute long enough for new truths and realities to take shape. By the end of *How to Be a Chicana Role Model*, the Chicanx author silences the doubt and creates a new paradigm for Latinx.

The events in "Role Model Rule Number 1: Never Give Up an Opportunity to Eat for Free" offered a space for her to publish at the same time it connected her with Mrs. Kendall and the children at Roosevelt Elementary. A year passes, but it feels as if this story occurs simultaneously as others in the book. The reader not only visualizes her fidgeting at the podium but also Anthony Rivera. The two are displaced like a television show with bad reception. Their figures overlay into each other until they are a blurred third figure. They are depicted as role models by others in their community, but both exhibit body language that expresses anxiety and insecurity with their positionality. In "Special Assembly Part 2," the reader gets an insight into what she is thinking during her talk. She is "talking, reading these so-called heartfelt words from [her] so-called poetic soul, [and] there are other more important issues that cloud [her] mind" (Serros 216). She uses humor to poke fun of herself and how others describe her writing. She is aware of her contradictions and owns them. Her mind wanders as she thinks about Eduardo Sánchez-Quiros[21] and a random kid messing around with his backpack. Ironically, he is another role model, yet she thinks of him sexually. She humanizes him as a person rather than an unattainable abstraction placed upon a pedestal. They have their own quirks and mannerisms and are more than an image of what a successful Latinx looks like. She even acts as the diva at one point because the children fidgeting distract her: "I'm the guest. I'm the role model. *I'm* the one giving back to my community and I don't want to put up with this shit" (216). Her presence at the school is a privilege. She deserves preferential treatment because she gives back to her community.

[21] Eduardo Miguel Sánchez-Quiros is a Cuban-born American director, most famous for co-directing and writing the 1999 psychological horror *The Blair Witch Project*.

Serros repeats the introduction that Mrs. Kendall used, but she does it with a haughty and sarcastic tone because she does not want to be there. The teacher presumes that as a "Mexican-American writer…everything in her life has been a struggle for her'" (218). The hardships are not solely the result of her ethnicity or race. Yet, that is the feature that the teacher emphasizes because it surprises her the most—there is a successful Mexican American. There are so few people of color role models mentioned in mainstream media or taught as general knowledge that the few big names that students learn about stand as the only ones that exist in history. Other stories are ignored or silenced, as if they do not exist.

Unfortunately, Serros is stuck in the middle of this American Dream fantasy where only certain famous individuals are held as standards of success for communities of color. In this situation, she feels as if the children will remember her for other reasons besides her "poetic soul:" "'It's 'cause of YOU, Miss Mexican-American writer, their high fives accuse, 'that we're gonna be late for recess! It is because of YOU I don't get dibs on the tether ball! Thanks a fudging lot, Miss Struggling Mexican-American Writer!'" (218). The reader cannot help but laugh at this segment because elementary school kids honor recess as a high point of their daily life. It is a sacred time, and anyone that disrupts it is a nuisance rather than a role model. Whether the students really feel this bitterly toward Michele and her presence at the school is beside the point. The author repeatedly mentions in the story that she speaks to a class full of brown inner-city youth. The way they interact with her indicates that they are comfortable with brown bodies, and, thus, might devalue race and ethnicity concerns at this time. In *Chicana/o Identity in a Changing U.S. Society*, Hurtado and Gurin argue that space affects self-identity: "For example, a young person growing up in a predominantly Chicano/a neighborhood may take his or her ethnicity for granted. Attending

a university and taking courses on Chicano history and culture may provide the impetus for this person to reassess ethnicity and its salience and importance" (16). At this point in time, the children are more concerned with playtime. Similarly, Serros has many moments throughout this book and *Chicana Falsa* where she fluctuates in and out of a decolonial space. There are times when it appears as if the speaker is understanding concepts and ideologies about identities through significant new perspectives. Then, often in the same story, the narrator enacts hegemonic tropes that she was previously undermining. The shift between different ways of telling and understanding stories impacts her own self-awareness of the significant influence that race, ethnicity, class, gender, and sexuality have on her identification process.

In this moment, the protagonist is very aware of her gender and race because she is constantly compared to other brown female writers as if they are all the same. For example, Mrs. Kendall cannot stop praising the Peruvian poet Eva Pérez who spoke last week because the kids adored her. They even created a fan-club in her honor. The teacher questions why the students did not react in a similar fashion. All Michele can think about is getting away from this ill-informed educator who seems to think everyone with brown skin is Hispanic.

Serros is aware of the irony of a Hispanic Heritage Month because the term "Hispanic" is a problematic one. In *Occupied America: A History of Chicanos (2011)*, Rodolfo F. Acuña historicizes the term as one that was developed in the 1970's: "Government and the media moved to homogenize all Spanish speakers under the rubric of Hispanic" (327). The label was a government one, popularized by census questionnaires. It was commercialized to make people of color commodities. Acuña continues to explain its history:

> Beer companies distributed calendars with photos of "Hispanics," celebrating them as role models for the community. The term *Hispanic* appealed to many of the marketers; it packaged the Mexican American, the Puerto Rican, the Cuban, and other Latin Americans in one innocuous wrapper. Most of the new heroes and heroines were not activists but business executives, politicians, and political appointees…. The term *Hispanic* also appealed to this new wave of middle-class Mexican Americans, and this identity was much more in line with their class biases and aspirations. (340)

The history of the word "Hispanic" is tied to capitalism. It consolidated groups to make it easier to sell them products. It represents an assimilated term. People are no longer fighting as activists but instead settle for middle American comfortability. The American Dream fantasy appears as business executives and politicians. Difference is intangible, and people follow the status-quo of a hegemonic white society because they desperately want to belong to a community with power and privilege.

The reality is that there are systems of inequality that only allow a token few to succeed, which furthers the false narrative of success. In *The Decolonial Imaginary*, Emma Pérez explains how borders affect the way that Mexicans are viewed:

> Socioeconomically, Mexicans were relegated to an inferior status affecting all areas of their lives in the region that became the Southwest…Chicana/o history from Mexico that tries to cross the U.S. border is detained there as only Mexican in origin. Our "undocumented" history is barred by a political border, as if that imagined boundary can erase centuries of Spanish-Mexican domain. (56)

Pérez acknowledges the history of the Mexican Revolution because it affects how diasporic peoples are treated in the Southwest. At the same time, she notes that the history is limited and constrained by both real and imagined borders between the countries. It is in these intangible spaces that new histories of understanding are created. Serros arrives at a similar decolonial conclusion at the end of *How to Be a Chicana Role Model*: "…I finished a job created by me—with my own thoughts, words, opinions, with my *own* name. I created something out of what I was told I could never do. The so-called obstacles in my life that so many people tried to make me feel ashamed about suddenly seem less important" (222). It is significant that she uses her voice to tell her stories. She is the creator of the histories. The many spaces that she inhabits, including derogatory ones that restrict her, culminate to bring her to a new position of power as the storyteller of her life. For the first time in her life, Serros feels like a Chicana role model because a cafeteria worker at Roosevelt Elementary School listened to her. She admits to an "incredibly intense sense of excitement and happiness" at the knowledge that her decolonized voice was heard (222). The author's stories act as a source of inspiration for the unintended audience. Meanwhile, she has no idea how powerful her words are until someone else speaks up. One decolonized voice leads to another. The words reaffirm her labor as a tool for dismantling structures of power.

Role models are found in expected places and at unexpected times. At the general assembly, Serros did not feel like she represented one until she spoke with an older cafeteria worker. In "Role Model Rule Number 2: Seek Support from Sistas," she writes about a similar situation. The vignette describes the differences between pages and the fly girls who perform on the show *In Living Color*. For example, Michele makes $125 a week while the fly girls make "three or four grand a week" (22). There are other class discrepancies that

categorize her as an other, such as what uniforms they both wear, where they park, and who they hang out with. Despite these class differences, the author explains that when she "first saw Jennifer (she) felt a connection right away. Hey, she's brown, like me. Maybe she is Mexican, like me" (22). In her desperation to find community, Serros uses phenotype as a means of kinship. Surely, the brown women will have similar stories of injustices and hardships to share with each other. The author imagines a community that does not exist as a tactic for survival. Cecile Pineda speaks about imagining a community in an interview with Francisco Lomelí at the end of her novel *Face* (2013): "By putting my theater on the auction block, I was in effect cutting myself off from my artistic community, and by extension, my society. I recognized that I needed to re-invent an identity for myself before I could forge another community" (159). Pineda needed to create a new identity for herself after she cut herself from the theater work that she was previously involved in. She could not belong to another community until she understood herself. The main point to note is that she speaks about re-invention as these categories are arbitrary. They exist in the precepts one holds about life and relationships.

Since communities are imagined spaces, it is no surprise that the speaker and Jennifer cannot relate outside their respective positions of class. There are imagined borders that are felt on a temporal level, based on the amount of money one woman earns over another. Thus, Jennifer is a successful brown woman in the entertainment business while Serros remains a struggling artist, naively insisting that "if only (she) had a chance to talk, Jennifer would help (her). A brown woman supporting another brown woman in a black world" (23). This is a play on the cast breakdown for the show *In Living Color*, which was predominantly black. To excel, the brown girls must stick together, though at this point the

protagonist does not know that Jennifer is Puerto Rican, not Mexican. Like Anthony Rivera from "General Assembly" or Mrs. Kendall from "General Assembly, Part 2," she falls into a trope where she seeks a Mexican persona in a brown body. This naivete is an act of desperation because she seeks a community of support. She clings to an ideological understanding where she blurs "racial difference, want[ing] to smooth things out" (Anzaldúa, *Making Face* xxi). She is out of touch with her own racial diversities because she spent so much of her youth denying that part of herself. If she can "smooth things out" with Jennifer, she will find a place to belong. She still hungers for a community that she cannot articulate.

Role Model Rule 2 is learning the hard lesson that not every person of color is a "sista." Serros and Jennifer will never become more than coworkers because of what the author represents:

> "Don't take it so personally. I mean, she's a Fly girl, you're a page. Maybe she's embarrassed of you, or for you."
>
> "Embarrassed?"
>
> "Yeah. Come on, I'm sure she knows you're Latina and maybe she thinks if someone sees you guys talking, it's gonna make you both look the same." (27)

There are some key phrases in this conversation. Jennifer is "embarrassed" by the page. There is an emphasis on both racial and class differences between the women; after all, Jennifer does not want to "look the same." She sees herself as a success—an American Dream example. The author represents a part of the community that is less successful, that perhaps does not escape the path that institutions of power navigate people of color to, such as blue-collar type jobs. Serros is now "a reminder of how detoured a career can go and

what a waste a college degree could be" (27). The speaker is a reminder that the system does not want people of color to succeed. She is twenty-seven years old, pushing thirty, and she still works at the bottom as a page, a job usually held by teenagers. She is college educated, but she cannot find better work. In Jennifer's eyes, this equates failure, and she cannot be associated with someone like that as it can reflect poorly on her own Hollywood image. In the entertainment field, age, youth, and beauty make a difference. Serros looks as if she is "just floundering and people view [her] as pathetic" (28). She is an unknown person, a nobody in terms of fame. In other words, she is not a role model. Surprisingly, Jennifer does not act like a role model either.

A Chicanx role model is not necessarily the obvious choice. For example, the narrator works as a page and assumes that a successful brown woman of color will support her to achieve similar ends. However, she is shunned and ignored by that individual. The person who steps into that position is unexpected, Ja'net Dubois, also known as Willona on *Good Times*. Dubois is no longer famous to the degree she was in the past. Now, she cannot even get a seat in the audience to watch *In Living Color*. Serros refuses to turn her away because she thinks it is a mistake: "'There must be a mistake. You should be on the list.' …'Oh honey, I haven't been on any list for years.'" (30). Hollywood can be an unforgiving mistress. Dubois' flippant response about not being on a list for years implies transience. In Hollywood, once your heyday passes, you are not important or relevant anymore. Rosa-Linda Fregoso discusses the limitations Hollywood provides women in *The Bronze Screen* (1993): "Not that women have not played major parts in Chicano films, but usually they are portrayed in terms of timework stereotypes: such as virgins or as whores in Valdez's films…as sidekicks of the main characters (supportive wives)…as translators (malinches)

between cultures…as enigmas…and so on" (93-94). Women have limited Hollywood roles, often reduced to gendered and racial stereotypes. Serros learns this firsthand when she writes for *The George Lopez Show*. Still, she sees Dubois as a hero that she admires. She is a role model and offers Michele some valuable advice: "*Life's too short—Do it while you can! Take it from one sister to another. Good luck and thanks for the seat!*"[22] (31). She must let go of the anger and resentment she holds toward Jennifer for not supporting her. Instead, she can find an ally in any individual regardless of their skin color. She demonstrates her ability to adapt by using the slang "sista" instead of "sister." It is a class reference, as if someone uneducated is misusing the word. For the author, the use of the word is a source of empowerment. She owns the unique experiences that her racial and class background provides and writes nontraditional rules that break the conventions of grammar and storytelling.

Serros, like Jennifer, has many lessons to learn about judging others based on their appearances. Role models are not always the obvious choice, especially if one is politically unaware. In "Role Model Rule Number 10: Distinguish the Difference Between a Great Contact and a Good Connection," the protagonist attends an exclusive conference in Washington D.C. hosted by America's Number One Women's Television Network. At this conference, she wants to make great connections, but she is concerned about the types of women she will meet: "It all sounded so bourgie and boring. 'You're gonna be stuck with all these women who married into privilege…. Pretending to have stuff in common with them,

[22] Italics are in the original text.

stuffing your face with crab cakes and champagne'" (162). There is a misconception of the wealth and privilege of the people attending the conference. She does not seem to belong to such a group, and she is worried that she will have nothing in common with them. In *The Color of Privilege* (1996), Aída Hurtado speaks about how class advantages for white women changes the way they develop their writing compared to women of color:

> The economic cushion that many white women, as a group, enjoy because of their relationship to white men has influenced the development of feminist writing. Academic production requires time and financial resources. Poverty hampers the ability of all working-class people, especially racial and ethnic groups, to participate in higher education. (6)

When a white woman does not have to worry about time and financial responsibilities, she can write and theorize. Likewise, working-class women, especially women of color, must balance numerous responsibilities, such as multiple jobs, and their educational opportunities suffer. Theories written by women of color are less represented in academic publishing because the opportunities to become researchers and scholars is not supported by institutions of power. Serros is aware of these inequalities, and she understands that she needs to take advantage of opportunities like this conference. It is a place where she can network and make great connections.

Despite feeling uncomfortable, as if she does not belong, the protagonist tries to network. Unfortunately, some of the topics do not relate to her concerns. She takes notes on some of them, such as "contemplating glass ceilings, the future of breast feeding in the unemployment line, and what women's television programming really should be, between the douche and weight-loss commercials" (163). These are not issues that the author writes

about, so she cannot relate to the concerns expressed. She is filled with self-doubt, and it increases as she realizes where she will sit during the keynote address. Her merit is called into question: "They gotta have their little rainbow roundtable ready for their close-up on national TV" (164). Does she really deserve to sit at the table of honor? Was she only invited because of her race and gender? As Hurtado explains: "Most women of Color are not groomed to be the parlor conversationalists that white women are expected to be. Working-class women of Color come from cultures whose languages have been barred from public discourse, as well as from the written discourse, of society at large" (*The Color* 17). Women of color are degraded. They are taught from a young age that what they say, their language and culture, does not belong in the public nor written discourse. Thus, they can feel uncomfortable when asked to relate to white women's concerns. Decolonial storytelling allows opportunities for these exclusive realities to intermingle. Serros questions her value: "Oh, what could I possibly talk about with these women? What could I possibly say that would add value to their six-figure lives?" (164). Yet, this concern is ungrounded because her decolonial writing reaches many audiences. She attends conferences, like the Santa Barbara Writer's Conference, where the audience is predominantly these white women that she fears. Her eventual confidence comes from lived experiences, such as the disastrous outcome of this event.

Serros misses an opportunity to make a great connection because she judges the guest speaker harshly based on her appearance and actions. She sees the woman's nerves as a sign that she is a drug addict: "You know, coke, cocaine, the evil white powder. Of course! That's why she was so nervous and that's why she was so skinny and *that's* why she was so late. She was in the bathroom doing lines" (166). She cannot imagine a confident white

woman from a middle-class or upper-class social status acting nervous about speaking in front of her peers. These types of women have nothing be afraid of, so, there must be something wrong with her. The narrator must get away because being seen with a coke head is not good for her reputation as an aspiring Chicana role model. She remembers the advice from her father: "…you may not have money, you may not have fame, but you'll always have your credibility…" (166). She cannot let this woman jeopardize her credibility because that is all she has. Her reputation and pride are important. This woman has all these privileges, yet she squanders them on drugs. The headlines will read: "The Chicana Poet in Ross and the Coke Head in Chanel" (166). She emphasizes their class distinctions because the guest speaker is someone who can afford Chanel. Meanwhile, the protagonist's dress is an inexpensive outfit from Ross. She leaves the banquet during Cokey's[23] talk and considers herself all the wiser for staying away from a negative influence.

Unfortunately, Serros was quick to judge and assume the worst about a person she did not know. Later when she watches television, she sees "Cokey." The truth is revealed: "…*Reporting from the White House, this is Cokie Roberts, special correspondent*" (168). She cannot believe that she missed a great connection. The woman asked to speak with her; she wanted to hear the narrator's story. Meanwhile, she assumed the worst, that the woman was literally a coke head. In *Making Face, Making Soul*, Anzaldúa describes this incident as "selective reality:" "Failure to empathize with…another's experience is due, in part, to what I call 'selective reality,' the narrow spectrum of reality that human beings select or choose to

[23] Misspelled in the original text until Cokie Roberts' identity is revealed at the end of the story.

perceive and/or what their culture 'selects' for them to 'see'" (xxi). The white women were not the only ones with selective reality. Serros cannot see outside her own narrow understandings about class, culture, and race. Rather than let Cokie Roberts share her own story in her own voice, the Chicanx narrator creates a fictional one about her. It was easier to make something up than cross a bridge to make a real connection with another human being. She chose her own stories, and made them up about what she saw in Cokie Roberts. "Distinguish the Difference Between a Great Contact and a Good Connection" emphasizes that reality is a creative process in decolonial stories. Perceptions of reality are influenced by education and opportunities, or lack thereof. Like culture, decolonial storytelling demonstrates that reality is not always caught between two extremes but often exists in the in-between spaces. Although this is the only story where she speaks about a famous news correspondent, she continues to reflect on the Hollywood representations of Latinx.

In "Role Model Rule Number 5: Respect the 1 Percent," Serros changes the narrative of the 1%. In this story, the term does not reference individuals on Wall Street. She re-appropriates it as a reference to actors like her Uncle Charlie, who is "a third-generation Mexican, he was always told he looked too brown or not brown enough, too Mexican, yet not Latin enough" for the acting roles for which he auditioned (70). Uncle Charlie experiences the racial and prejudice attitudes that prevent actors such as himself from getting cast for Hollywood roles. He is always in-between and, thus, left out. He shares this information with the protagonist: "'You know…all the Latinos in this country, heading political offices and creating careers with dishwater hands, but you never hear our stories, see our lives on the big screen. We're almost the largest minority in this country and we barely make up one percent of the film" (71). How can this contradiction exist? Like Charlie

states, they hold so many positions of power and make strong careers from the bottom up, yet, their stories are never represented for a large audience. Angharad N. Valdivia explains in *The Routledge Companion to Latina/o Media* (2016): "In presence and erasure, Latinas/os stand in for the imagined nation. They track the interstices and struggles of the contemporary identity crisis that faces the United States, which formerly thought of itself as homogenous or binary in composition" (Kindle Location 1634). One of the reasons this type of media presentation is more uncommon is because it forces the viewer to acknowledge the binary compositions of our society, the black and white divisions. As a people of an imagined nation, Latinas and Latinos can be both visible and invisible at the same time, as noted by Serros' uncle when he comments about the large population but the limited media representations. How can one counter such limitations? Uncle Charlie boycotts Hollywood films. He refuses "to pay money for any films featuring Latino roles portrayed by non-Latino actors" (71). He asks that other family members participate in the same boycott as an homage to Uncle Charlie and other struggling Latino actors. Unfortunately, it is a difficult promise to keep.

In 1996, the film *Evita* came out staring Madonna. As a very famous cultural icon, the family decides to see the movie despite Serros' protests. She describes Madonna as "the greatest offender in cultural appropriation" (71). Yet, her fame allows her to culturally appropriate others without repercussions. It gives her a free license to use others for her own profits. Renowned role models are praised for their efforts of trying to relate to underrepresented communities: "'[Oprah's] a wonderful person, such a good role model. Why, just the other day I saw her trying to talk Spanish with Gloria Estefan and she was actually doing pretty good!'" (71). Oprah is a role model because of her failed attempts. At

least she tries to speak Spanish. Unfortunately, people like Uncle Charlie who spend their entire life working hard, who never receive a big break, are forgotten as invisible labor. As described in *Making Face, Making Soul*, "The difference between appropriation and proliferation is that the first steals and harms; the second helps heal breaches of knowledge" (Anzaldúa xxi). Oprah, a non-Mexican, is praised for sloppy attempts at Spanish. Her ratings will increase, and she will inevitably gain more Latinx viewers. Oprah's attempts harm rather than heal the breaches of knowledge because it encourages people to look at the 99% represented in film and media for their role models rather than the 1% of family members, like Uncle Charlie. Serros is different. She remembers her family, especially her father George and her mother Beatrice.

Serros simultaneously reveals her insecurities and reverence for her parents' labor in many of her stories. Her feelings are complicated, and she explores the how and why of this reality in many pieces including "Fourth Thursday in April." This story is about her father.[24] It is "Take Your Daughter to Work Day." However, she does not accompany her dad simply to learn and receive pride about his labors. She explains: "…my father didn't take me to work so I could simply 'celebrate my worth as a girl' or 'gain confidence and voice in my opinions.' No, my father's decision to let me accompany him to his job—that is, the one he held during the day—was simple: my parents couldn't afford a sitter" (171). School was canceled, and it poses a problem for her family. Currently, they do not have the luxury of worrying about her voice. Her father holds two jobs—one he works during the day and one

[24] See figures 5 and 6.

he works in the evening. Her family has economic struggles, and they cannot afford the school's staff and faculty development day. As she needs constant supervision, she must go with her father to work.

Despite the inconvenience, Serros is excited to see her father at work. Initially, she is proud. He is "a custodial engineer at the Oxnard City Airport" (172). He sounds like an important person at the airport. She presumes that everyone who works at such a facility must be important and must know him. An airport is "filled with movers and shakers, politicians, and deal makers, a place where foreign destination was the focus of everyone's personal and professional agenda" (172). She has no concept of what George's job title means until someone accuses her of not belonging there. The question plants doubt and shame. A woman at the reservation desk sees a young brown girl wandering around, and she immediately thinks that she does not belong. Where are her parents? Even though she explains that he is a custodian engineer, the woman gives no indication that she knows him. At eleven years old, she learns a harsh lesson about how whites view brown bodies. They are invisible labor. She further explains: "It was as though he was a ghost, the brown ghost in green, unnoticed, not seen. I suddenly felt so ashamed of my father. I guess his job wasn't so glamorous after all" (174). If someone is invisible, they are unimportant. Their lives and hardships do not matter. Through association, she internalizes that she does not matter either.

Many years later, when the character Serros is older in the story, she finds out some new truths about her father's work at the airport. Her father was awarded a special achievement for all his years of service:

> …the Custodian III badge—a small, white, oval pin granted by the executive personnel to janitors who exhibited a commitment to custodial engineering. But it was that pin, that small little pin, that scared my father. While janitorial work is a stable and honest way to make a living, and that pin represented a hefty raise, increasing his paycheck to a solid eighty dollars a week, it foreshadowed my father's future as a ghost, an invisible man no one would ever see, get to know, or, much less, respect. (174)

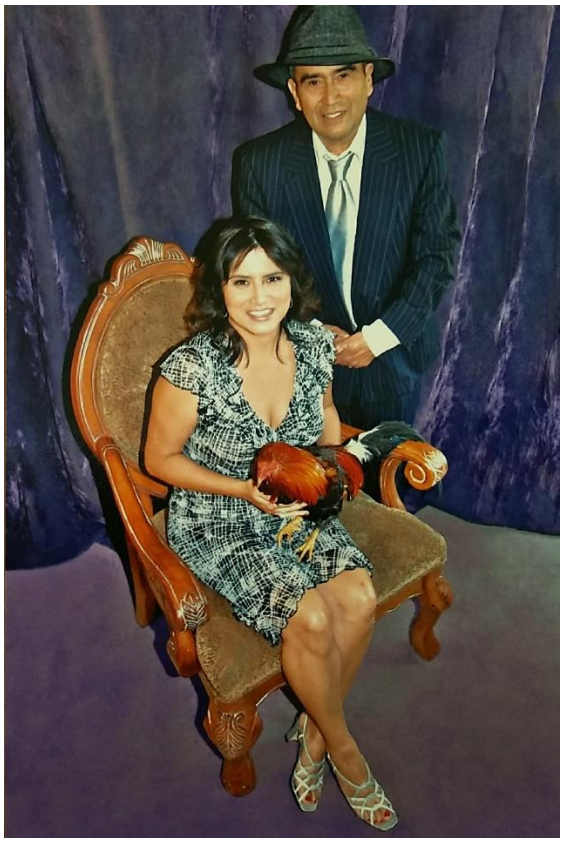
A ceremony that is supposed to commemorate his years of service does the opposite. It reiterates that he is expendable labor, interchangeable with another brown body. He has no right to want more from life or work. He should not dream out of his station. All he can ever hope for is a blue-collar lifestyle. This is the future Serros should prepare herself for. In *¡Chicana Power!: Contested Histories of Feminism in the Chicano Movement* (2011), Maylei Blackwell counters the hegemonic ideology of the silent voices of the subaltern:

> The question, can the subaltern speak? reminds us that the subaltern can and does speak, in multiple, sometimes contradictory registers. Yet the question illustrates the fiction of the speaking subject and makes us ponder not if the subaltern speaks but if the subaltern can be heard within the current circuits of power and international political economy. (Blackwell 41)

Maylei Blackwell asserts that the subaltern speak on many registers that perhaps others cannot hear because they are trained to think only one way. The subaltern stories are muted because they do not follow a traditional narrative function. Serros' decolonial voice provides a new register for her father's story.

At the end of the story, she summarizes the differences for a white child versus a child of color. White people have unlimited possibilities because the system makes it easier for them to succeed. This is a part of its very design. They have "options available to them" (174). What are the options available for a child of color? If she uses her father as an example, she can hope for a minor wage increase with her blue-collar work. For a person of color, the future is not clear. When she reflects on what her father does for a living, it is a reminder that people of color are not given equal opportunities of advancement and careers. Her father is stuck as a custodian, and she fears a similar future for herself. Yet, Serros reasserts power with her decolonial voice. She complicates the narrative by offering one story in which she feels shame at the same time she tells an alternative story where she is proud. They exist in multiple spaces that offer avenues for agency and change.

Figures 6 and 7 - Michele and Father



In "Good Parking," Serros again characterizes her relationship with her father.[25] This time, she depicts the savvy and practical spendthrift who knows how to work the economic system for the best deal. Meanwhile, she is the daughter who seeks his approval despite the tumultuous history from her youth. In an April 26, 2012 interview with Serros, she admits that her father was domestically violent against her mother Beatrice: "My parents fought a lot…they fought a lot over finances" (Personal Interview). Many of the fights happened because Beatrice and George are from different social classes. Beatrice wanted a more middle-class lifestyle while her father struggled as the working-class poor whose labor experiences extended to manual work in the fields. She further recalls:

> …This one major fight that was frightening to me…. I remember my sister sharing with our cousin…talking about how the police were always showing up at our house…. I asked my sister why did you say the police were always coming to our house? They weren't always coming to our house. And my sister was very adamant like, "Oh yes! They were *always* at the house." And it sorta frightened me that I had repressed something. I recall a few visits, like two visits to the house, and I recall one bad fight, but my sister is very adamant that I just blocked it out…. I do remember feeling "Why is mom starting something?" I blamed her for the fighting. I blamed her for the fights that became very physical and it wasn't until I was at UCLA (Serros starts to cry) …." Why can't mom just be good? Why does my mom create

[25] See Figures 6 and 7.

these arguments that make my dad hit her?" Which is a really unhealthy viewpoint, like blaming the victim…. (Personal Interview, 26 April 2012)

She is very young when these fights occur. Her memory is unclear, and she does not understand what is really fact or fiction. How much did she repress? As a small child, she blames her mother. As she gets older, she understands that she did not reflect on the situation. Blaming the victim is not an adequate response to tumultuous and violent times. Instead, she uses her decolonial writing to reflect more deeply on the philosophies of life and the roles that her family members play in her life as role models. Many individuals will villainize George for his cruelty, but to Serros, he is still her father. They are all complex individuals, not solely defined as good or bad. "Good Parking" is the author's attempt to understand and relate to her father despite the unclear and destructive memories or her own generational gap.

The protagonist has a strong desire to impress her father. She lives in Los Angeles, but she will not let him visit because she is afraid he will judge her as unsuccessful. "Good Parking" is about expectations. For her father, "good parking means free parking…my father would claim, 'the city doesn't deserve more money than it already has'" (190). All his life, George worked difficult, often thankless, jobs. Yet, he saves everything he earns and does not want to waste it on the institutions that devalue his labor. He refuses frivolous purchases or hidden fees. Free parking is a metaphor for "sticking it" to the man. George wants his daughter to understand his mindset and imbue similar values. However, she reads his responses as critiques of her career as a struggling writer. After all, the labors of a custodian and author cannot be compared side by side. It creates another hierarchy that privileges one type of labor over another.

George is a complex person. A lot of what he says actually has multiple meanings. For example: “To my father ‘a soda or something’ means a soda and…nothing else. My father hates eating out. To him, restaurants are a big waste of time and money” (191). George considers eating out a luxury. He believes that many people do things for an easy convenience rather than using their own hands to participate in the labor process. Another instance, he complains about her tortilla maker: “‘A tortilla maker! Are you serious? You’re kidding, right? You were born with a tortilla maker, like this!’ He slapped his palms together quickly back and forth, like he really had a piece of masa between them. ‘I can’t believe you actually spent money on something like this. God, I’m so happy your mother isn’t alive to see this!’” (192). The protagonist finds herself in a position where she must validate the choices she makes. She tries to explain that she does not have time to make tortillas by hand because she is too busy writing. She wants him to recognize her labor as significant even though it is different from the type of work he did as an adult. Currently, they are on different communication levels where they are speaking past each other rather than to each other.

Serros doubts her decision to invite her father to Los Angeles. The award ceremony they are to attend is meant to celebrate her labors, not undermine them. She explains:

> I was feeling more and more like a failure. Why did I ask him to visit? I was not ready for this. I was not ready for him. I was twenty-seven years old. When my father was twenty-seven, he was a married man and the father of two. At age twenty-seven he held the keys to a brand-new car and a custom home he not only built, he owned. At age twenty-seven, my father’s credit could buy him the world. He would never understand where I was in life. (193)

She feels like a failure because she creates hierarchical comparisons as to whose achievements hold more value. The truth is that she still feels like a child rather than an adult in her father's eyes. When she speaks about the monetary award for her essay, she creates a bridge that her father can cross. He can understand her labor if he translates it into an hourly wage: "'Three thousand dollars, huh?'" he asked again. 'That's almost a thousand bucks an hour! You're doing pretty good….We're gonna go to a restaurant! And you know…I'm gonna let *you* pay'" (194). It is only with the capitalist recognition of income earned, a monetary gain, that the protagonist's success is recognized. It is a residue of colonial thinking that influences how both characters perceive each other. George reads her through a lens filtered by his own experiences. Since she is doing well financially, she might as well pay for dinner after the ceremony. They cross a milestone with this comment because George does not like to eat out. Yet, a traditional hegemonic story still constrains the characters—success and self-worth are directly proportional to how much money one makes. They cannot see the limitations of the capitalist framework and ironically buy into it more through spending more money to celebrate Serros' success.

Serros attributes her success as a direct result of the first role model in her life—her mother. In her writing, she explores the difficult emotions that overwhelm her with the death of such an irreplaceable mentor. "Role Model Rule Number 4: Discard Discontinued Text" begins in media res because she stands in front of a "carnation-covered coffin" wearing sunglasses (49). The reader does not know who is dead or why she wears sunglasses in the church. She explains that they are significant because of "page 254 in Volume 15, Letter

P"[26] (49). The narrative is confusing and not easy to follow, especially as the narrator flashes back and forth timewise. The significance of the encyclopedia entry is unclear until the end of the piece, but she reveals that it is about social maturity. There is an image of a young girl crying in the privacy of her bedroom with a caption that reads: "'A mature person does not cry in public'" (51). She reads this when she is thirteen years old, and it dictates how she expresses her emotions until she is twenty-five years old. Extreme feelings are a sign of weakness, and she learns to hide behind a pair of dark sunglasses. She must control herself to demonstrate how civilized and mature she is, which counters the unrestrained emotional release that decolonial storytelling promotes. Emotions are expressed as a strength rather than a weakness, which is counters the misinformation that the character receieves from the encyclopedia entry.

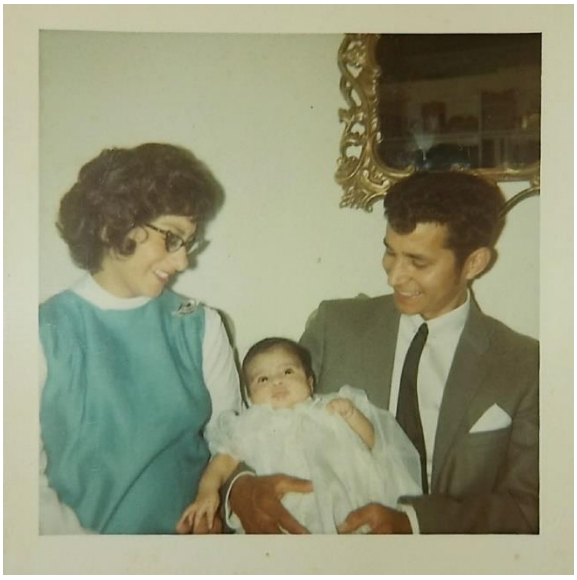
The story flashes forward to Serros in the ICU section of the hospital with her sick mother. She learns a difficult lesson about life and death. No matter what the encyclopedia explains about social maturity, she will not hide her emotions from her mother. This is her first role model, and she recalls memories of Beatrice's labor and support:[27]

> I looked at her fingers and remembered them once filling hundreds of fortune cookies with a junior-high-school campaign slogan ('Confucius say: Vote for Michele!'), the same fingers that typed term papers for me, the hands that laid brick designs for the fancy patio in our backyard and that lovingly pulled my favorite hot

[26] Refers to a discontinued encyclopedia volume that Serros' father bought when he was working as a janitor at the library.
[27] See Figures 8, 9, and 10 of Beatrice and Michele Serros.

chicken pot pies out from our oven. So many things those hands did when they were healthy, active, and warm. (52)

Figures 8, 9, 10 - Michele and Beatrice (Mother)



At the time, the tasks are unimportant. They are just everyday jobs that her mother is expected to do. Now, as her mother lays dying, Serros recognizes the labors as a sign of love. Wolfgang Iser describes such a response in *How to Do Theory* (2006): "[M]y own theory of aesthetic response focuses on how a piece of literature impacts on its implied

readers and elicits a response. A theory of aesthetic response has its roots in the text, an aesthetics of reception arises from a history of readers' judgements" (57). Serros' stories provide an emotional, decolonial experience to self-reflect on one's relationship to others, in this case a mother-type figure who selflessly serves others. The emotional release is significant because they allow people to connect and care about others. It creates bridges that allow others to enter community spaces as allies in struggles for social justice. Serros' story causes a reader to ask serious questions about people one might view as a mother-type figure: How does that relationship affect a person's sense of self? How does that relationship affect how an individual relates to others? What happens when that connection breaks? For Serros the author, her mother's death was a catalyst for her writing career. For the character, she remains naively optimistic because she refuses to acknowledge what a semi-comatose state will lead to. She does not want her mother to stop fighting for her life.

Beatrice's death haunts many of the stories that the author writes. For example, in "Counter Act," the narrator works at a frame store. It appears an innocuous job until a "friend" stops by for a frame on Mother's Day. Although the girl complains about Serros' eternal state as a junior college student, the author does not hear her jabs. Instead, she recalls the absence of her mother: "The lower part of my stomach slowly begins to hurt and my mouth feels suddenly dry…I'm reminded of what she has and what I haven't. Nikki Chase has a mother and I do not" (Serros 156). The stomachache will never go away, and it only worsens in the story. Her mother was nontraditional. She always made grand gestures, even in the last months of her life when she made her a special birthday cake. Even though these times are now just memories, she feels them in her body: "'Sometimes I'm in a lot of pain and I don't realize just how much pain until it hits me much, much later'" (158). The

absence of such an important person, someone who was more than just a role model, makes her physically sick. She barely functions, and she still tries to ignore the pain. Yet, it is always present. In the end, her "Counter Act" is just that—an act. Working in a frame store does not ease her pain. Only writing helps, and she must find her way back to that path. Her mother always believed in her abilities, and she will hold tight to that memory.

Losing a role model is difficult, but losing a mother is even worse. She is the rock of the family, and, as Anzaldúa explains in *Borderlands*, mothers uphold the culture of a community: "Through our mothers, the culture gave us mixed messages…. Which was it to be—strong, or submissive, rebellious or conforming?" (40). She grapples with the history of these contradictions. Beatrice is the self-sacrificing artist who spends every penny that she earns to buy her daughter a writing desk. Yet, she is not infallible, and now she is gone. She feels adrift and seeks a new familial role model in "The Big Deal." Auntie Alma's opinions about her new boyfriend, Doze, are important because she represents Beatrice. Even though she is not physically present, her mother's wishes uphold certain cultural expectations of who her daughter will marry:

> "It's just that since you were a little girl, your mother always dreamed that someday you would meet a nice boy, a nice Mexican boy, and you'd have a big Catholic wedding and…"
>
> "We'd have lots and lots of tri tip [sic],[28] Santa Maria style, and now, the more you tell me about this Doze, it's becoming less and less of a dream. I could accept he

[28] Spelled incorrectly in the original text.

> isn't Mexican, that he doesn't believe in God, but that he and his whole family don't eat meat, won't eat tri tip?" (65)

Her mother has expectations for her daughter's future, some of which follows a certain cultural prerogative. There are expectations that she will marry someone that fits in with her family, both culturally and ethnically, and Doze does not. Family and culture is important, especially the famous Santa Maria tri-tip that only Uncle Vincente can make. So, she lets Doze go; he is a discontinued text and does not fit in her life.

Culture is mutable and ever-changing. Later, Serros marries "a nice Mexican boy" who owns a vegan Mexican restaurant. Ultimately, she even chooses a vegan lifestyle too. She demonstrates that she can create her own culture like Anzaldúa describes in *Borderlands*: "What I want is an accounting with all three cultures—white, Mexican, Indian. I want the freedom to carve and chisel my own face, to staunch the bleeding with ashes, to fashion my own gods out of my entrails" (*Borderlands* 44). Though her mother restricts her in many instances, such as the presumptions of who she should marry, she also simultaneously gives her daughter the tools to create her own realities. She explores this freedom in her decolonial writing. Serros does not have to belong to one community over another, or solely conform to one culture. She recognizes her multiplicities, and decolonial storytelling allows her to extricate and explore these nonconformist aspects of herself. The contradictions her mother embodies becomes a part of the author's experiences too. She carves and chisels her own existence and discards discontinued texts that uphold rules that do not fit with her new realities, such as hiding her emotions or not eating tri-tip. Serros demonstrates that identity is not just a result of one's race or ethnicity.

The way people characterize and perceive race and ethnicity is a topic of concern in many of her vignettes. In "Senior Picture Day" from rule one, she describes how a childhood friend perceives her physical body:

> …I had decided on Cali Girl as my handle.
>
> "You mean, like California?" she asked.
>
> "Yeah, sorta."
>
> "But you're Mexican."
>
> "So?"
>
> "So, you look like you're from Mexico than California."
>
> "What do you mean?"
>
> "I mean, California is like, blond girls, you know."
>
> "Yeah, but I am Californian. I mean, real Californian. Even my great-grandmother was born here."
>
> "It's just that you don't look like you're from California."
>
> "And you're not exactly golden," I snapped. (16)

She is angry that someone else defines her based on her brown body. She wants to control her name and label, and she likes the handle "Cali Girl." She is put in a defensive situation where she must justify her family's history. They lived in California for many years, and, in fact, she is a fifth generation Californian.

Serros explores the idea of justifying one's place when others question your identity later in her book. In "Role Model Rule 8: Reclaim Your Rights as a Citizen of Here, Here," she describes how white people always try to guess where you are from based on the color of your skin. She argues: "When Latinos ask me where I'm from, it really doesn't bother

me. I can't help but feel some sort of familiar foundation is being sought and a sense of community kinship forming" (123). Displaced peoples who straddle multiple borders constantly seek each other out in new spaces. Decolonial communities become a source of strength in an otherwise aggressive society. The person who asks such a question matters. A Latinx seeks others who straddle multiple worlds. It is an attempt to build self-esteem. However, when a white person asks her that question, she feels defensive. Like Terri, she must justify her history and the fact that she belongs here. The author further explains:

> But when whites ask me The Question, it's just a reminder that I'm not like them, I don't look like them, which must mean I'm not from here. Here, in California, where I was born, where my parents were born, and where even my great-grandmothers were born. I can't help but feel that whites always gotta know the answer to everything. It's like they're uncomfortable not being able to categorize things they're unfamiliar with and so they need to label everything as quickly and as neatly as possible. (124)

When a white person asks Serros where she is from, she sees it as a reminder of her difference. She does not really belong here. Her people came from elsewhere. Yet, the author explains that assumption is illogical. Her entire family lived in California for numerous generations. Yet, she must validate her history and existence whereas a white person does not have to. As Anzaldúa states in *Borderlands*: "Borders are set up to define the places that are safe and unsafe, to distinguish *us* from *them*[29]…A borderland is a vague

[29] Italics are in the original text of *Borderlands*.

and undetermined place created by the emotional residue of an unnatural boundary" (25). Borders do not exist except in our minds—they are not natural. Like categories of self-identification, borders distinguish the binary of safe and unsafe. The categories that Serros refers to are not created because someone wants to know or understand those that are different. Instead, it is a power move—a colonial strategy. Rather than use these moments with whites to lecture them on how it is not appropriate to ask a person of color where they are from, she plays with them. She makes up fake cities in Mexico to measure how much white people will act like they know a location even when it is fictional. She laughs at their ignorance and cultural deficiency.

While on a plane trip, Serros asks her "where are you from question" to a man sitting next to her. He gets very flabbergasted and angry by her insidious question. After all, no one ever asked him where he was from—this man with his patriotic American body. She reflects on his attitude and realizes that she feels sorry for white people:

> It's amazing how many white people don't know anything about their own ancestry or background and so it's no wonder a lot of them confess to feeling so culturally bankrupt. A lot of white people get really defensive when you ask them where they're from…They're confused when The Question is put upon them, because after all, they look like they're from good ol' 'here,' rather than some faraway 'there.' As our plane touched the ground I looked over at the man again and wondered how he knew where he was going if he didn't know where he was from? (126-27)

She understands that most people who live in the United States went through a process of assimilation to belong "here." Most are from immigrant families, and the reminders of that faraway past can be painful. Assimilation is a painful process. Communities do not want

reminders that they came from "some faraway 'there.'" Even though Serros is torn between multiple spaces, such as not being Mexican or American enough, she knows her roots through the stories that her families tell. She explores her histories through the decolonial tales that she weaves. She knows her ancestors, the communities of her people. These narratives are significant because they reinforce power and legitimacy for people that are often disenfranchised. It is a source of pride that undermines the ignorance of the racially uneducated.

As a socially constructed concept, race impacts many institutions of power regardless of whether people acknowledge it as an influencing factor or not. In *Racial Formation in the United States: From the 1960s to the 1990s* (1994) Michael Omi and Howard Winant explain what happens to Serros in terms of her racial construction:

> The effort must be made to understand race as an unstable and 'decentered' complex of social meanings constantly being transformed by political struggle. With this in mind, let us propose a definition: *race is a concept which signifies and symbolizes social conflicts and interests by referring to different types of human bodies.*[30] Although the concept of race invokes biologically based human characteristics (so-called 'phenotypes'), selection of these particular human features purposes of racial signification is always and necessarily a social and historical process. (55)

Race is socially and politically constructed. Specifically, it references the "social conflicts and interests" that occur between different bodies. Even though there is the emphasis on

[30] Italics are in the original text.

phenotypes and skin color when race is talked about, one needs to remember the social and historical construction of race. Her appearance threatens her friend Terri because she upstages her with what is perceived as an exotic look characterized by her Indian nose. Her body is not only distinguished as "other," but it is also sexualized. Neither girl realizes how they play into stereotypes and misconceptions of bodies and identities.

Serros is vividly aware of the California girls stereotype: blond beauties bathing on sandy beaches. She writes two teen novels that explores these misconceptions and even recalls how a police officer told her family that they could not go to the beach because it was closed. The hatred she experiences causes the speaker to try and change how she appears:

> "Yeah, and she also has this, this nose, a nose like…like an Indian. Over."
>
> "An Indian?" Lightning Bolt asked. "What do ya mean an Indian? Over."
>
> "You know, Indian. Like powwow Indian."
>
> "Really?" Lightning Bolt laughed on the other end. "Like Woo-Woo-Woo Indian?" He clapped his palm over his mouth and wailed. A sound I knew all too well.
>
> …"In fact, I think she's gonna pick 'Li'l Squaw' as her handle!"
>
> …I touched the ridge of my nose…Men in my family who looked like Indians and here their Indian noses were lumped together on me, on my face. My nose made me look less Californian than my blond counterparts. After hearing Terri and Lightning Bolt laugh, more than anything I hated the men in my family who had given me such a hideous nose. (18-19)

Their prejudices are familiar. After all, media entertainments and Hollywood have stereotypes about the "Woo-Woo-Woo" of cowboys and Indians. It is a hurtful and racist

misconception of how indigenous peoples act or sound. The representations distributed in films and print advertisements reinforce what Erlinda Gonzales-Berry describes as self-hatred. She traces the historical development of this mentality in *The Contested Homeland: A Chicano History of New Mexico* (2000), while arguing that the Euro-American population used colonial domination to reinforce second-class status:

> Negative representational practices justified the exploitation…. Antagonism between the two groups resulted in a social order characterized by separatism and segregation that affected and conditioned most societal and governmental institutions. Discrimination, prejudice, and disdain…. The most intense Anglo-Chicano conflicts were played out in struggles for domination of economic enterprise, for representation and control in politics, and for cultural hegemony. (15)

The exploitation of people of color is linked to a violent colonial past. Society conditions and nurtures such an attitude through corrupt institutions of power. Similarly, they carry the second-class feelings and pass them along with each generation. It is not just an emotional state but, as Serros describes, it is embodied with one's physicality. Those that want to assimilate blame their ancestors for transferring hideous, othering features. The anger and hatred redirect inward to poison relationships with one's family and history.

New connections and understandings are needed to heal these gaps among people. One way to reinforce positive structures of power is through decolonial storytelling. By claiming one's body and one's narrative, the colonized become active agents in identity formation. In *Borderlands/La Frontera*, Anzaldúa comments about how she views herself in terms of skin tone: "Because of the color of my skin they betrayed me. The dark-skinned woman…. For 300 years she was invisible, she was not heard. Many times she wished to

speak, to act, to protest, to challenge…. She hid her feelings; she hid her truths; she concealed her fire; but she kept stoking the inner flame" (44-45). She explores the history of the indigenous woman through her body. She no longer distances herself from such a persona. Anzaldúa claims the dark-skinned woman as a part of the self through a mestiza consciousness which is important because living in multiple spaces creates avenues to accept contradicting identities. It stokes the inner flame of untold histories and stories. The struggle to embrace the part of oneself that others loathe is a task of decolonial narratives, which Serros effectively explores in her writing. However, she cannot control how others perceive her. She controls her personal identity: "an aspect of self composed of psychological traits and dispositions that give us personal uniqueness" (Hurtado, *Chicana/o Identity* xvi). It is a culmination of the way she interacts and socializes with certain groups, such as her family, school, and community. If she wants to be a specific way, she actively tries to achieve the desired results, such as pinching her nose. However, her "social identity refers to that aspect of self that is composed of the individual's group memberships and the emotional value he or she attaches to them" (25). Social identities are more complicated because the self can claim membership at the same time others attribute membership on others, such as all brown bodies being regarded as Mexican. At this point, Serros is not ready to defend her indigenous history or the stereotypes. She is still trapped in the residual effects of colonial hegemony. As the piece ends with the narrator at her senior picture day, she explains that she does "notice the difference. I might be too skinny. My chest might be too flat. But God forbid I look too Indian" (19). Comments about weight and sexual development adhere to more mainstream teenager concerns. However, the tongue and cheek jab about looking too Indian highlights a racial concern paramount for people of color.

Later in "Role Model Rule Number 6: Live Better, Work Union," Serros reinvents her indigenous nose. She creates a fictional union for her nose, so that others cannot exploit her body. As an adult, she works at a small art shop called "Annie's Art Emporium." It is not a very glamourous job, and she only makes $28 for one full day's work. There are many allusions to other rules in this vignette, a feature of her decolonial writing because she refuses to follow a linear narrative plot. Like Pérez in *The Decolonial Imaginary*, she plots "by choosing specific narrative techniques. I arrange the events and make arguments that suit me, arguments that I am pleased to excavate from the text of the documents as I create a Chicana history in which I can believe" (27). She pleases herself first with her writing. It is important to create her own personal history. She wants the reader to read the text differently, so they can understand her reality on a different level. She is no longer the little girl pinching her nose in "Senior Picture Day." She is an entrepreneur trying to survive the daily grind of a minimum wage job.

The protagonist encounters a white woman who will not stop looking at her face. She is uncomfortable about her attentions, and she lies about her card being declined at the cash register just to get her to leave the store quickly. This is not typical role model reaction, and the author breaks the narrative to remind potential aspiring paradigms that she does not condone lying: "***** *I really don't like to lie and I'm not advocating lying. As an aspiring role model, you really shouldn't lie and should always tell the truth. Lying is bad*" (78). [31] The writer plays with her usual tongue and cheek humor. She does not consider lying a deal

[31] The text is an italicized footnote in *How to Be a Chicana Role Model*.

breaker for an aspiring role model. After all, she continuously tells fibs in this story even though she adds this footnote almost like a personal note to herself—remember to tell the truth. In general, writers are often considered some of the best liars because they create stories that blend fact and fiction until neither can be discerned as reality by the reader. In *Decolonizing Methodologies: Research and Indigenous Peoples*, Linda Tuhiwai Smith explains that indigenous research is needed because white, hegemonic research "is research which from indigenous perspectives 'steals' knowledge from others and then uses it to benefit the people who 'stole' it" (56). This is the epitome of appropriation. She finds herself in a situation where a woman who does not understand her wants to use the narrator's body to profit her own craft. The speaker must act as a voice for her own self-interests.

Sheila Emmerson is a local artist, and she wants Serros for an art show. This time, the author remembers to ask for details about what the work and pay is because she does not want to be stuck catering at an event like she did at the Chicana Writers Conference in role model rule 1. Serros is very surprised to discover that Emmerson wants to pay her $10 per hour for 2 days' worth of work as a model. She is confused by the artist's interest because of how she perceives her self-image in the mirror:

> No way. No fucking way. I stood sideways and sucked in my gut. The bright white-green light exposed pink blemishes on my chin, blackheads on the side of my nose, and rough skin across my forehead. Were my eyelids always so puffy? Is that a mustache or bad bathroom lighting? Why didn't I get braces while I was still living at home, rent-free and a beneficiary on Mom's dental plan? (81-82)

Her self-loathing rears its ugly head. She was told all her life by others that she was not the epitome of beauty: blonde hair and blue eyes. She is too ethnic—too Mexican—and, worse,

too Indian. Linda Tuhiwai Smith argues that this "knowledge gained through our colonization has been used, in turn, to colonize us in what Ngugi wa Thiong'o calls the 'colonization of the mind'" (Smith 59). Serros' beauty knowledge is gained through colonization, not just of the body but of the mind—how one views reality. She looks at herself in the mirror and sees nothing but her blemishes and faults, real and imagined. She needs to discover the truth about why she was picked as a potential art model. What sets her body apart from others?

Emmerson's response alludes back to "Senior Picture Day." She wants the author's Indian looking nose because she thinks it looks so exotic. The truth upsets the protagonist: "This woman was totally exoticizing me. It was plain and simple. I read about this type of behavior, this particular form of racism in that book *Making Face, Making Soul*…. Last thing I wanted was to be some exploited subject and be put on display for this woman's little art show" (82). She is no longer a child, and she admits to her decolonial education by naming a seminal text edited by Gloria Anzaldúa. She understands that the artist wants to appropriate her "exotic" features for profit, but she has a decolonial voice and can stand up for herself, evident in the creation of this short story about the incident. Yet, that is not enough. She decides to create a fictional union for her nose, and she lies, again, to Emmerson, albeit in an obviously more comical vein. In fact, Uncle Charlie gives her the inspiration for this payback from "Role Model Rule 5: Respect the 1 Percent." In this situation, she sees herself as the 1%. She tells the artist that Union 233 protects her nose. She cannot let the woman paint it for less than $200 a day. In desperation, the woman agrees, and she pays her three times more than her original offer. The narrator reflects on her good fortune:

> It was Uncle Rudy's nose, Grandpa Rudy's nose, and a little bit of, well, you know the story. And thank God I inherited their nose, 'cause my 'particular feature' knew how to sniff out opportunity. This nose would never be caught dead in a *Marie Calendar* spread, but was able to negotiate supply and demand. And so my little Indian nose went all the way to the bank after having made four hundred bucks in just two afternoons during the month of May. (83)

She attributes her nose to her family and thanks them for this feature. She is proud of her ethnicity. This passage demonstrates the changes in her thinking as she goes from self-loathing to self-worth. She respects her body enough to demand payment for it. She still disagrees with the woman's assessment of her, as she mentions that it is not the type of nose to appear in certain magazines like *Marie Calendar*. Yet, four hundred dollars for two days of sitting is equivalent to two weeks' worth of her retail labor. She cannot pass up this opportunity, and she is wiser about commerce since the entire experience.

As a writer, Serros knows how important self-marketing is. She explores commerce as a measurement of success in many of her stories. Specifically, "Role Model Rule 3: Remember, Commerce Begins at Home" implies that self-reliance and belief in one's worth is the only way to become a Chicana role model. She realizes that she cannot expect fame to just happen and that she must promote her craft as an entrepreneur. In 1993, she finally publishes her first book *Chicana Falsa and Other Stories of Death, Identity, and Oxnard*. She receives ten large boxes of the novel that occupy a space in her living room. She confesses that she needs to peddle her own books because the small publisher cannot push her writing. She is embarrassed, filled with shame and regret, as if self-promotion is beneath successful writers. The boxes sit in her living room for over a year, and she hides them

under a piece of fabric to use as tables in the apartment. When Angela's boyfriend comes over, something snaps in her: "The corner of one of the boxes was torn open slightly and I could see the spine of my book. I could see my name on the spine. The bottoms of his Adidas were scraping against it" (37). The shoes crushing the spines of her books jar her out of her funk. The lines between the Adidas shoes and Serros' name represents a type of border. It is a division between self-worth and capitalist exploitation. A company like Adidas can make millions of pairs of shoes because it relies on exploited labor from disenfranchised bodies of color. Her writing represents the silent unheard voices, and she cannot let it collect dust in her living room. In *The Bronze Screen,* Fregoso explains this division of labor that creates borders: "For Chicanas and Chicanos (border residents, artists, and researchers) and also for Mexicans living on the borderlands, the concept has a longer history and a more politically charged meaning, referring to geopolitical configurations of power and to power relations within a cultural process" (65). The narrator sees the shoes on her name as a sign of disrespect and worthlessness, and she knows that her writing is valuable. The fact that someone is symbolically stomping on her labor depicts a cultural power struggle regarding value. Louie, her roommate's boyfriend whose feet were carelessly draped over the spines of *Chicana Falsa*, uses the opportunity to make jokes about how they are nothing more than old schoolbooks when she dropped out of college. His humor devalues the cultural creativity of such a project.

Commercializing her writing is a scary process for Serros because her writing is very personal. If someone criticizes her writing, it is akin to criticizing her most inner self. For example, she mentally begs one woman at a bookstore to simply say something nice: "*Please, you don't have to like it, just be interested in it. Just say something, something nice.*

Comment on the color of the jacket, praise the font I chose, mention how thick and nice the paper is. Please, just say something, anything *nice about my book.*" (40).[32] The implication is that if the woman says something nice about her book, then it is as if she says something nice about the author who wrote the book. Serros is a decolonial storyteller. Everything that she writes is very personal. She exudes an outward performance that rejection does not bother her. However, every negative comment cuts deeply to her core. In *The Color of Privilege* (1999), Hurtado describes writing as an act of disrobing:

> …feminist writers have documented the testimony of how women perceive themselves at their worst—about bulimia, anorexia, rape, incest, sexual harassment, confessions of abortion—and in this disrobing women have acquired strength through collective nakedness. Although the pain and shame at times becomes unbearable, and at times there is even cannibalizing of one another, feminist writers have continued. (128)

Serros sees her writing at its worst. Her stories disrobe her. The writing represents who she is. If someone does not want her books, they do not want her. They sat in boxes as pieces of furniture in her house for over a year and a half because she was afraid to commercialize herself. If booksellers do not buy them, then she is not a successful author. Her eventual first sale of five copies of *Chicana Falsa* demonstrates her strength and courage to continue to disrobe herself through her decolonial stories. She is figuratively naked and afraid but that

[32] Italics are in the original text.

does not mean she is weak or unsuccessful. It is a testament of her bravery to mark the personal as political.

Since Serros justifies her profession to members of her family and community, this theme is present in many of her stories in *How to Be a Chicana Role Model*. For instance, "Passport to Cross Overland" addresses a character first introduced in *Chicana Falsa*, Tía Annie from the poem "Annie Says." This is the aunt who never believed she was a writer: "I shouldn't be a writer. 'It's not like it's a real job and really…how much money can you actually make?'" (Serros 41). What constitutes a "real" job? This is a question/theme that presents itself throughout *How to Be a Chicana Role Model*. At age five, she reflects that she does not know what a "real job" means. At that age, she cannot comprehend such a concept. What she does know is how writing makes her feel:

> I knew for sure…that I loved to write. Writing granted me freedom. It gave voice to all the opinions I was too afraid to say out loud for fear of sounding unladylike or babyish by family members, classmates, or stupid neighbor friend Patty Romero. But best of all writing allowed me to escape…. Yes, escape was wonderful" (41-42).

No matter how old the narrator is, she recognizes the strength and freedom writing provides. She can say things that she is usually too afraid to utter. She is in control as the narrator of her own life, the lived experiences that constitutes her identity. In *Making Face, Making Soul / Haciendo Caras: Creative and Critical Perspectives by Feminists of Color* (1990), Anzaldúa explains how significant the creative process is for women of color and decolonial storytelling: "A woman-of-color who writes poetry or paints or dances or makes movies knows there is no escape from race or gender when she is writing and painting. She can't take off her color and sex…. Nor can she leave behind her history. Art is about identity,

among other things, and her creativity is political" (xxiv). For a woman of color, creative expression is not only about identity but about politics. Race, ethnicity, class, gender, and sexuality define her experiences. She cannot separate her life from these harsh realities because she does not have white privilege. The aesthetics and artistic training are not important for validation of expertise. What matters are the decolonial stories—the in-between where new narratives can take center stage over dominant hegemonic narratives. Even the title of this story, "Passport to Cross Overland," implies a type of travesía—a crossing into a new land. The passport to cross into this new world is her own body.

At this point in the narrative, Serros does not consider writing a possible job or career. It is merely a pastime that allows her to escape some of the harsher realities of her daily life, such as her parent's divorce. Contrasting her cursory feelings is her mother's confidence that her daughter's future is valuable. She describes it as Serros' "career as a future scribe" (42). First, she recognizes writing as a "career" even though it does not conform to corporate America's idea of a traditional 9-5 job. It is especially significant for women of color because their stories and voices are often silenced or ignored in the annals of history. Next, she calls her daughter a "scribe," which historically refers to a theologian. Her mother recognizes that writers are valued because they create and hold life and knowledge in their hands. She also asks the tough questions that a child of five cannot consider—such as the time spent alone to write, how difficult financial security is for a writer, and whether los secretos are shared with the world. After all, family secrets are meant to remain private, right? A writer exposes the storyteller and her subjects to readers, many who are outsiders from a given community. For example, what are the repercussions if she exposes how Great-Great Grandpa Cruz came to the country? He was a criminal, and

there is the fear that the criminal history reflects poorly on the family. Typical of Serros' narrative style and genre bending, the retelling is exciting, humorous, and, of course, probably not historically accurate. After all, she explains that "stories do get lost in translation" (42). This statement reflects on the poor translations that exist concerning others' histories. It is also a reminder that the best narratives are the ones that come directly from the people who experience the history. Finally, it is another way for her to use her infamous humor to tease her mother about the types of secrets that she might expose. She gives her relation a fond nickname, Triple G.C., which stands for Great-Great Grandpa Cruz, almost as if it is a pseudonym to protect the innocent. She defends his criminal charge and describes the entire incident as if it was a Hollywood drama. The storytelling reframes her historical past and becomes a tool to signify the importance of her family's name. There is a reason Cruz became Cerros and eventually Serros with an "S." This is the name that ends up on the spines of her books, and she is proud of the history. She has the authority to share this knowledge because she is the family writer.

At a young age, she is excited by the stories that her family shares about their past. As she progresses through a white educational system, she is taught shame, encouraged to deny her family name. In grade school, she tells her best friend Martha Reyes that she wants to become a writer. To help her, Reyes suggests that she needs to change her last name because "'people aren't going to be interested in what a girl has to say, let alone a Mexican one. You need to make yourself less Mexican, less girl'" (43). Even in grade school, the children understand that a patriarchal society devalues women's words, especially women of color. Reyes' advice is a warning about gender and ethnicity. White men are taken more seriously than any other segment of the population. It is significant that the advice comes

from another girl of color because the members in the community police each other to encourage assimilation into a white hegemonic norm.

This is not the first time Reyes offers Serros advice. In a later rule, "Role Model Rule Number 9: Any Press is Good Press," the author surprises the reader by writing a story about pressed pants, not news press as implied by the title. She is set to read at an event, but she forgot to find out "[i]f Lori is white, she isn't gonna have an iron, 'cause everyone knows, white people don't iron" (140). It is not that white people do not consider their appearance or how their clothes look on themselves. Obviously, they do. They have the luxury of finding more expensive ways to press their clothes than people of color, who rely on tools like an iron. For example, when she asks a white person about an iron, they respond in a similar fashion:

> "If something's wrinkled, you just throw it back in the dryer on the fluff cycle for a bit…That, or turn the hot water on in the shower and the steam will get all the wrinkles out."
>
> "Turn on the shower? When nobody's taking a shower?"
>
> "Yeah, just shut the windows, close the door, and let the shower run for like twenty minutes. Everyone does it."
>
> No, most *white* people do it. So now I know who to blame for that severe drought we had here in California during the late eighties." (140)

The ways that these anonymous white people advise to remove wrinkles are costly for people of color. When you do not own a drying machine, throwing the clothes into the dryer for a fluff cycle is not a practical solution. After all, it involves a drive to a laundromat, quarters for the machine, money for gas to and from the laundromat, and time wasted as you

wait for the clothes to dry. As the reader learned in "Role Model Rule Number 7: Buy American," time is valuable. It should not be wasted because it impacts work and money to support one's family. Even the idea of using the steam from a shower is a waste of money. If no one takes a shower, why would anyone run it for twenty minutes just to press a shirt? Water is not free, and many people cannot afford to steam their clothes like that. Martha Reyes taught Serros these important lessons about ironing. Now, she contradicts her earlier advice of using a white male alias to write novels. Instead, she encourages her to act culturally different. She admits that she became a self-proclaimed super-starched Chicana when she was just a preteen.

As a preteen, Martha Reyes has a secret collection of different types of irons. She is no longer the inconspicuous girl who acts white. Now, there are rumors that Martha is a chola, a cultural reference to a "bad" or tough Chicana. What propelled her down this path? She reveals a secret picture to Serros from the very first story "Special Assembly." It is of Anthony Rivera, and he looks terrible. His clothes are all creased, he has sweat stains under his armpits, and, really, he is just a disgrace to people of color. Martha explains: "'This picture is gonna be around forever. I mean, after we're dead and after he's dead, someone's gonna find this picture and see how lousy he looked. Can you believe he went out looking like this and he's Mexican?'" (144-45). Ironically, Reyes still believes Rivera is Mexican even though he is Puerto Rican. Her emphasis is that pictures are timeless. They last long after someone dies, and they represent a history of not only a single person but of their entire community, whether real or imagined. Reyes is ashamed by how Rivera looks, and he represents brown bodies in their community. So, she started pressing her clothes. She does not want anyone to catch her in such a disarray. She encourages her to start pressing her

clothes as a cultural statement. After all, when she is a writer, Serros will no longer just represent herself but many others. She must always present the best version of herself to the adoring and often judgmental public.

Although often contradictory depending on the time in their lives, Reyes' advice demonstrates the mutability of identity and thought. Serros can deny and embrace her history at the same time because of its complex decolonial past. In "Passport to Cross Overland," Reyes suggests that the author change her writing name to Michael Hill, which she uses with her earliest pieces. Serros worries that people will not know who she is, that these stories are hers and no one else's. Her father's name has a complex history, as emphasized by the tales she tells about Triple G.C. Yet, even though he is male, his name is not good enough for books because he is racially considered inferior. It is not surprising that she feels uncomfortable with using a pseudonym. Gloria Anzaldúa explains "the mestiza way" and the role of the mestiza woman in terms of culture production in *Borderlands/La Frontera* in these terms: "She communicates that rupture, documents the struggle. She reinterprets history and, using new symbols, she shapes new myths" (104). Communication and documentation are key tools of decolonial writing. It is not just about reinterpreting history but creating brand new myths with a new languages and symbols. Michael Hill cannot do this, but Michele Serros can. She needs to take the path of the mestiza way to create a significant cultural production.

Part of the hegemonic narrative is to make people of color feel like anomalies, as if their histories do not exist because their peoples do not exist. As Serros documents, college becomes a catalyst that ignites and destroys the false misconceptions about nonexistent voices of color. Her mind expands as she realizes that there are many Mexican American

writers and that none of them had to hide their sex or ethnicity to tell their stories. They are read and heard. “Passport to Cross Overland,” perhaps more than any other in this collection, shows her evolution. It starts with her as a five-year-old girl in her Tía Annie’s bathroom. The story progresses chronologically, from grade school, to junior college, and finally as an adult. She is in the process of her travesía without ever leaving her aunt’s bathroom. It seems as if the story has returned full circle, like Hemmings’ return narratives: “Return narratives reassure us that we can all share a single perspective of what we think has happened…. Return narratives offer the opportunity for real synthesis. Subjects of both progress and loss narratives can become subjects of return narratives if they concede a little ground” (97). As a reader, there is a presumption that the progression of Serros’ understanding of race, culture, and gender proceeds in a narrative fashion that all types of people can follow. For this short story alone, “Passport to Cross Overland,” it is chronological and culminates at the reveal that her experiences at a junior college are what enlightens her about a history that she never knew existed in the mainstream. Hemmings assures that return narratives “focus on everyday lived experience and to material or embodied realities instead of remaining mired in a conceptual realm deemed to have no value outside of the academy” (96). This understanding should appease women of color who complain that academic jargon and theorizing devalues their lived, political experiences. Hence, Hemmings emphasizes return narratives as the most powerful storytelling format. Unfortunately, relying on this terminology diminishes people of color’s experiences. Lived experiences are not simply based on material realities. As more women of color move into previously denied spaces, such as the ivory towers of academia, the need to blur materialism with theorizing is the new decolonial project. Gloria Anzaldúa explains the significance of

these academic ventures in *Making Face, Making Soul*: "We need to give up the notion that there is a 'correct' way to write theory. Theorists-of-color are in the process of trying to formulate 'marginal' theories that are partially outside and partially inside the Western frame of reference (if that is possible), theories that overlap many 'worlds'" (xxvi). Theorists-of-color develop new processes that explore a multitude of worlds. There is no one way to write theory nor is there only one way to experience life. "Passport to Cross Overland" implies that one needs a passport, or permission, to make the travesías, in this case the chronological progression of time. It makes logical sense that Serros' mindset expands through her educational experiences. As a decolonial writer, her story argues a completely different point.

She returns to the present day as an adult with no new knowledge or understanding of herself. She stands and counts the tiles as if she is still five years old. Like the grade school child who threw wads of paper on the ceiling in the bathroom, she still throws paper. She went nowhere. She finds herself at a crossroads from three different time periods in her life—the past, present, and future. She resides in the spaces simultaneously, and it leaves her feeling lost as to what she should do. At least she can control the wads of toilet paper that she throws on the ceilings, and she knows that they will eventually break apart and fall. Toilet paper is not resilient. It is made to disintegrate. Yet, wet paper can defy the laws of physics: "And just as I thought it was gonna fall off, it stayed, clinging" (Serros 45). Serros feels like disposable toilet paper, fragmented trash waiting for an eventual crumbling fall. The fact that it resists and does not drop is very important. It is a metaphor for herself. Despite her own disillusionment and fragmentation, she does not fall apart. She survives and

clings. Even though toilet paper is made for disposal, the pieces that Serros plays with defies its generic purpose.

Similarly, she will defy the assumptions of others that expect her to fail and fall apart because of her disillusionment. People in her life will try and crush who she is and her ideas. Yet, she not only survives but endures. She clings to her decolonial self and voice that is not controlled by arbitrary rules. Serros highlights this reality because she constantly pokes fun at and deconstructs the very rules that she creates in *How to Be a Chicana Role Model*. The book is a testament to her identity as a Chicana woman and writer. She is an example for other young people seeking an understanding of self in a racially charged society. She focuses on role models from her life, such as her mother and father, and she examines the capitalist tendencies of Hollywood to solely promote the rich and famous as people for youth to imitate. This text highlights how her decolonized voice developed since *Chicana Falsa and Other Stories of Death, Identity, and Oxnard*. It epitomizes the careful craft of genre bending, discussed in Chapter 2, at the same time it brings all the narrative techniques together into a faux cohesion, appearing as a novel that expresses a fictional story about a Chicanx writer named Michele Serros.

In the next chapter, I will analyze the origins of her unique perspective in terms of the notion of a "Chicana falsa." As this story is encased within a larger narrative of her relationship with her mother, I will further explore Beatrice Serros as the author's first example of a role model who encouraged her to develop a decolonized voice.

Chapter 4: Dislocated Body and Mind of a Chicana Falsa

"She would stay up with me late into the night…"

Chicana Falsa: And Other Stories of Death Identity and Oxnard (1993) was written when Michele Serros was still a student at Santa Monica Junior College. Her first text is a collection of stories, poems, and essays encased within a larger discussion of her relationship with her mother. It begins and ends with her mother, coming full circle with a perhaps unfamiliar or untold history. Siu Wai Anderson discusses the relationship between mother and daughter in "A Letter to My Daughter:" "But part of me will always be missing: my beginnings, my personal history, all the subtle details that give a person her origin" (*Making Face*, 157). Anderson explains that writing a letter to her daughter is an act of empowerment. Because of colonization, people of color's stories are incomplete, missing the beginning, or personal histories, that mark an origin story. The letter to the next generation demonstrates how through the act of writing new points of origin are created. All stories are significant to share regardless of whether they are complete. In Serros' case, she was only able to publish *Chicana Falsa* after her mother's death. These posthumous stories about her first role model are valuable because they demonstrate that stories do not end, not even with one's death. This chapter dislocates the notion of a "Chicana falsa" and deconstructs it as a term of empowerment. I not only analyze the label, but I argue that her mother acts as a catalyst for breaking down binaries in the author's life. The pieces address topics such as family, identity, food and humor, and community to present a truly dynamic presentation of decolonial storytelling.

"Introduction," focuses on the most important person in her life, Beatrice. The first lines are innocuous enough: "It was just one of those days" (xi). She is at Santa Monica

College. It is like any other because she studies her geometry homework. Yet, an unknown entity disturbs the tranquility: "…I just *knew*. I had to call home. Something was wrong" (xi). This essay presents a forum for her multivocality. There are numerous emotions and situations that present themselves at the beginning and at the end of the collection. The narrative is incomplete without a simultaneous reading of the other components. Maylei Blackwell describes the storytelling approach as "retrofitted memory:" "In my theorization of retrofitted memory I complicate the category of experience by considering how political events are remembered and misremembered, by exploring how trauma shapes memory, and by illustrating how political subjectivities are constructed through ways in which we are called to remember" (40). Serros' decolonized voice is an example of retrofitted memory. She complicates experiences by remembering and misremembering events from different angles. She explores how trauma shapes her memory of her mother and illustrates the growth of her political consciousness within her community through her writing.

She changes her life trajectory for Beatrice. She quits school to come home "for a while" (xi). This vague sense of time compounds as the narrative progresses because this hospital stay was different from others. This was the final hospital stay. Serros explains that "'a while' turned into a couple of days, then a couple of weeks. My mama was dying" (xi). Time loses all sense of chronology because it continuously flows into each succeeding day. The significance is not the passing of time but the emotions that play out in Serros' mind and on her body. She physically feels the trauma of death because her "skin broke out, [her] scalp sprouted dandruff" (xi). Her body manifests the trauma. What the author describes here also relates to somatic theory. In *Volatile Bodies*, Elizabeth Grosz states: "The surface of the body, the skin, moreover provides the ground for the articulation of orifices,

erotogenic rims, cuts on the body's surface, loci of exchange between the inside and the outside, points of conversion of the outside into the body, and of the inside out of the body" (36). Grosz argues that the body reflects what occurs within the mind, that the inside and outside of the body are connected through various orifices. Serros not only expresses her emotions through her writing, but her body reflects and feels the inner turmoil. Her body is a canvas that articulates her decolonized voice. She writes the essay "Introduction" because, as the author, she needs to explicate necessary details from her life for readers who are about to read *Chicana Falsa*. It will help them navigate and understand the collection of decolonial poetry and short stories, all of which were created after her mother's death.

Beatrice was an artist, unappreciated and unrecognized in her craft by her family. Her experiences mirror her daughter's: "I was appointed to write her obituary. I was the so-called writer of the family, and this was to be my first published piece. When I described my mother as an artist, someone questioned it. 'Are you sure you want to say that?'" (xi). The author's word choice of "so-called writer" demonstrates that others belittle her, especially as she never published anything before her mother's obituary. The moment holds extreme value because what she says will represent the final image of someone who meant the world to her. Yet, her family questions her representation of her mother: "…'it isn't like she sold anything. Not like she had her art up in galleries or anything. She wasn't an artist, really'" (xi). To be a successful artist, she needed her art in a gallery where people can purchase it. This idea of representation, or misrepresentation, is described by Maylei Blackwell as "represent'n'." At the root of this form is "an analysis of the politics of location and processes of collective self-enunciation. Internal to this mode of represent'n' is the notion that all representation is mediated by power, capital, and agency" (42). Thus, the question on

Beatrice as an artist is irrelevant. The significance of her identity resides in modes of power, capital, and agency. These three aspects hindered her as an artist. She wielded little power within her family as they struggled with financial hardships, which prevented her from freely pursuing art as a career. At the same time, Beatrice's agency was restricted. In the interviews with the author, these misconceptions demonstrate that decolonial storytelling complicates a seemingly streamlined tale: If you want to become an artist, you successfully sell the art that you create. However, even Beatrice's body provides difficulties to achieving the status as a successful artist because new health and weight gain issues complicated her life, which contributed to her eventual death. Power dynamics, capital, agency, and health issues influenced Beatrice's representation as an artist.

This segment of "Introduction," employs a writing technique that Serros uses in many of her pieces: the voice within a voice within a voice. It is a deliberate style that demonstrates a multiplicity of voices within decolonial storytelling. The task to tell one story, her mother's life, transforms into something more. Michele's own life story weaves in and out of the essay as does family members' memories about her mother. The layering of different stories mirrors the idea of interfacing described by Gloria Anzaldúa in *Making Face*:

> In sewing terms, 'interfacing' means sewing a piece of material between two pieces of fabric to provide support and stability…. Between the masks we've internalized, one on top of another, are our interfaces. The masks are already steeped with self-hatred and other internalized oppressions. However, it is the place—the interface—between the masks that provide the space from which we can thrust out and crack the masks. (xv-xvi)

Serros interfaces different stories to provide support and stability for her mother's life. The family member's response that Beatrice is not really an artist is an example of self-doubt and internalized oppression. However, through her interfaces of decolonial storytelling, she provides a new space for agency that cracks masks of disenfranchisement. Untold narratives interlay with others and the policing of identity and definitions are complicated through the decolonial narrative.

The accusations that Serros receives hurt because they come from a personal community—her family. This is where people of color expect to find support and yet often encounter the most resistance in these spaces. Specifically, she states: "These accusations stung" (xi). Accusations do not merely hurt one's feelings, they sting. The diction choice of "stung" implicates the body, like a bee sting. The pain is physically felt, a bodily hurt. Grosz's discussion on somatic theory connects the mind-body duality that Serros' decolonized voice writes about: "…I propose to explore the ways in which the body's psychical interior is established as such through the social inscription of bodily processes, that is, the ways in which the 'mind' or psyche is constituted so that it accords with the social meanings attributed to the body in its concrete historical, social, and cultural particularity" (27). The mind, like the body, is affected by social inscriptions. They manifest inside and outside the individual's physical form because historical, social, and cultural ideologies affect the entire person. The speaker explains even further: "Here was a definition of an artist. Someone who just didn't make art, but who was recognized for it. Someone who just didn't sell art, but made good money from it. Definitions have always played a big part in my life: a true Mexican versus a fake Mexican, a good student versus a lousy one, a true artist versus a wannabe one" (xi-xii). Definitions play an important role in her life and in her

mother's death. She defines a successful artist according to her family. Their definitions restrict her. The essay translates as a personal and political commentary about identity and labels. The introduction is a forum that provides the space for the author to work through these decolonial thoughts.

As explained in the "Introduction," Beatrice's life and death teaches her a lesson about how important risks are. She understands why her mother never sold anything. Beatrice had "fear and lack of confidence" that made it easier to hide her art in the family's garage (xii). Ultimately, the risk is worth it. After her death, Serros takes more definitive steps to become the writer her mother always believed she was. The reason? At first, she implies that it is purely for the enjoyment of the reader. All writers are concerned with their audience because that is how they sell their books. Then, she adds the most important factor to writing *Chicana Falsa*: "That, and I guess I just couldn't bear the thought of someone questioning what my own obituary would say" (xii). Death is not the end of one's story, but it is a transition period. After people die, those that remain keep the stories breathing to share with others. Beatrice's life story ended abruptly, and others now control her representation. The author takes her agency and prevents others from doubting her role as a writer. She is one. This is part of her identity and legacy. In *This Bridge Called My Back*, Cherríe Moraga states that "[s]ilence *is* like starvation" (26). This starvation is not a literal one but still manifests as physical pain in the body. She will not starve because writing provides her the sustenance to live. Her writing builds bridges to others who are culturally starving in either similar or different ways. Although Serros' death at the age of forty-eight prevents her from writing more stories, her legacy is secure. She was, is, and will continue

to be a writer who builds decolonial bridges that connect people who are hungry for understanding, community, and justice.

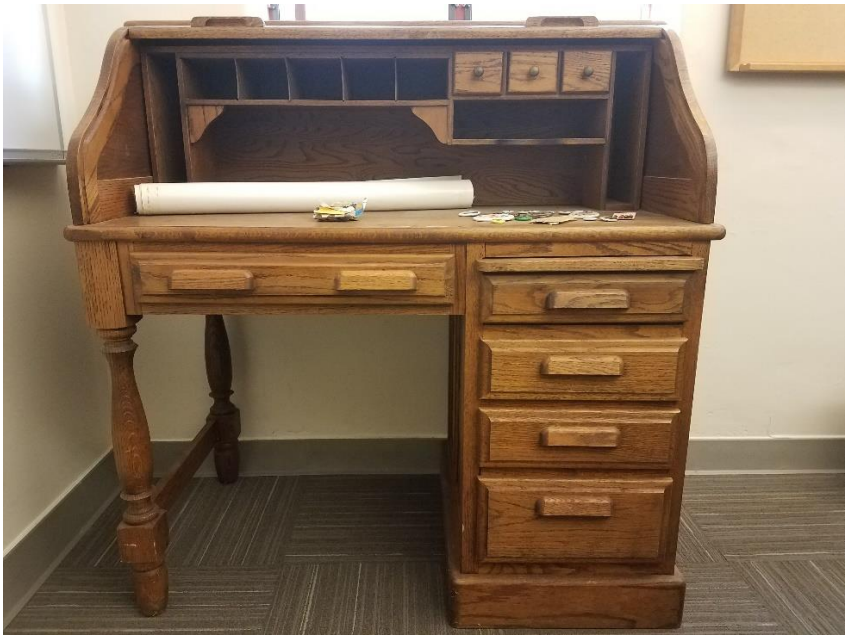
Her collection begins with her mother. It is very significant that she ends *Chicana Falsa* with her too. The entire narrative is framed around the life and death of the most important person in her life. During an interview session, I asked Serros the following question: "Which parent influenced you the most as you grew up?" Her response: "Well, probably my mother. After my parent's divorce, I lived with my mother" (Personal Interview, April 26, 2012). Her mother is the seam that connects all the threads from her decolonial storytelling. She grounds her voice in its ambiguous space where she walks along the path of the mestiza way.

"The Gift," like her other short stories, jumps around timewise. It starts with the speaker as a child who, eventually, grows into adulthood. The speaker's age and perspective expand throughout the story, yet, her mother's gift is always with her. "The Gift" is a writer's desk that her mother bought.[33] As a child, she describes it as "a monster" (73). When her mother hears her, she clarifies: "'It's not a monster. It's a desk. But not just any old desk, this is a writer's desk'" (73). Beatrice does not want her daughter to be intimated by the desk because it is a special gift, one that every writer needs. It is a tool that her daughter will use to create a writing space of her own. She makes sure the moving men place it in a spot of honor, a "vacuumed empty corner of [Serros'] small room" (73). Her mother makes sure she has the only key to the drawers, almost like a key for a diary. This is

[33] See Figure 11.

like her daughter's true self—only something she shares if the desires to. The author exemplifies: "She handed me a key that would lock my privacy away from the outside world and my sister" (73). She is daunted by what the desk reveals She is only twelve years old, yet the key that her mother hands her represents a lot of responsibility that she is perhaps unready for. Failure is not an option. Her mother believes in her, and, soon, others will look toward her as a role model for her community. She imagined herself as the next great American author when she was seven or eight years old. Her mother listened. She heard. So, she took it upon herself to help her daughter achieve such a lofty goal.

Figure 11 - Michele's Writing Desk



Serros does not feel elated that her mother believes in her dreams. She is suspicious. What are Beatrice's true motives? The narrator explains these feelings: "…there my mother was, getting a little too serious about *my* dream. I felt panic as I saw the last mover hand over a payment contract to my mother" (74). She recognizes that this is her dream, and she emphasizes that point with an italicized "my." She claims her dream as solely hers. Yet, she

sees that her mother invests in her dream. Beatrice must pay for the expensive desk, and she understands that they do not have that type of money. Now, she feels the pressures of adulthood weighing on her young shoulders. The key to her desk drawer represents the key to adulthood, and she is not sure that she can handle that responsibility and sacrifice. She is old enough that she recognizes the financial strains the gift pose to her family:

> I heard her tell my father about the extra hours she was going to work to help pay for this desk. I knew exactly what that meant. It meant no more family Friday night KFC dinners anymore. No more Saturday mall excursions, big Sunday breakfasts and no more night school art classes for her. She would not be around. She would not have time. She would have to be at work weekends, working and working to pay for that extra bill, the bill for the desk, my desk. But none of this mattered to her. (74)

Her mother makes sacrifices, and, after our interview sessions, it is clearer that financial hardships put a strain on her parents' marriage.[34] Not only would the family have a new bill, but her mother needed to work extra hours to pay for the gift. The family dinners that everyone enjoyed became fond memories. Still, her mother persisted that these sacrifices were worthy ones to make because all writers need the best tools to work with. The faith and love of a mother knows no bounds, and Serros desperately does not want to disappoint her.

[34] See Figure 12.

Figure 12 - Michele's Parents

The notion of her mother's labors, her hands working long hours at a manual labor job instead of painting, is a concept that Serros considers. She includes a poem in *Chicana Falsa*, "Manos Morenas," that is about women's hands and the labors they produce with those hands. The author begins with a poet named María who has rough, work hands. She explains: "but it is her hands / that speak the memories" (71). The hands not only produce poetry through their ability to write, but they also hold the memories of other labors that she produces. They are "working hands" and she is "embarrassed / of [her] calloused income" (71). They contrast starkly with the manicured hands of the women who live on Wilshire. María's body wears the history of her life in her hands as much as the words she writes articulates stories to others. Other women view hands differently in the poem, like the speaker's friend Yolie: "'A woman / is as good as her / porcelain set / and the rock / a man gives her / to wear'" (72). This analysis of hands implies a hegemonic and traditional viewpoint of women—that they belong to men. A woman is nothing without a man at her

side. In my interviews with Serros, she stressed how she came into conflict about these issues when she married her second husband. She never wanted to be the type of woman who moved to live with a man. Yet, she does. She also never wanted to legally change her name for a man, and, again, she does. Becoming Mrs. Antonio Magaña was important, but she never fully reconciles what it means in terms of her identity. At the time of the interviews in 2012, she admitted that it was still an issue that she was working through.

Serros ends "Manos Morenas" with a stanza about her mother's hands. She recognizes and appreciates all the work and sacrifices that her mother makes to help her with a fledgling writing career. She had the unshakable faith that only a mother can hold onto for a beloved child. Serros describes Beatrice's hands:

> Between a flagging career
> and city college night courses
> my mother's
> own tired hands
> patted homemade masa
> coaxed roses out of dead soil
> nurtured two babies
> typed term paper till
> three in the morning
> never clenched a bottle neck
> or leather belt
> free of nicotine stains
> seldom lifted a paintbrush

but died an artist. (72)

This stanza speaks volumes about the type of life Beatrice lived. Her flagging career as an artist suffered because of all her other work. She took night courses, used her tired hands to cook food, took care of the gardens, took care of two girls, and stayed up late into the night typing term papers. Yet, she never drank, hit anyone with a belt, or smoked. She had no vices, but she had an unending amount of work. Somehow, she never gives up. She admits: "I remember / all of this / when I see Maria's hands" (72).[35] Maria's hands remind her of other perceptions of hands, such as Yolie's assertions that women need to get married and the invisible gendered domestic labor. There are many types of women's hands, but they all remind the author of her mother's hands.

One significant point to make about "Manos Morenas" is that all the hands are brown. The only time white women's hands are mentioned is when she wants to contrast the social and class positionality of the brown women's hands. Gloria Anzaldúa describes how brown women use their hands, both figuratively and physically, to dig into their pasts as they reach for the mestiza way:

> Caught between the sudden contraction, the breath sucked in and the endless space, the brown woman stands still, looks at the sky. She decides to go down, digging her way along the roots of trees. Sifting through the bones, she shakes them to see if there is any marrow in them. Then, touching the dirt to her forehead, to her tongue, she takes a few bones, leaves the rest in their burial place. (*Borderlands* 104).

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[35] Serros does not include an accent on María's name.

Women's hands are used to dig into the roots of the past. They do the labor of sifting among the bones to only select certain ones to take with them. The rest are left in their burial place, dead but not forgotten. This alludes to the fact that not everything from one's past or culture should be cherished. There is baggage to let go, and women are the ones who partake of that labor.

Beatrice's ideologies about labor and women's work are tangled up in the desire to give her daughters more opportunities than she had as a child. Cherríe Moraga explains how she went through a similar process with her own mother in *Loving in the War Years* (2000): "I was educated, and wore it with a keen sense of pride and satisfaction, my head propped up with the knowledge, from my mother, that my life would be easier than hers" (43). Similarly, Serros has the same education and pride thanks to the labors of her brown mother, of Beatrice's "Manos Morenas." Yet, not everyone in the family feels like she warranted such an expensive gift. As the story progresses, the speaker hears all the complaints and pressures from others who want to add their own two-cents to what they see as a waste of money. Multiple stories and thoughts merge as she focuses on the different reactions, from disappointments to unwarranted opinions:

> "Man, you *better* write something good on that thing' he threatened. 'With all that money your mother is spending, she could've gotten you and your sister a couple of mopeds. Maybe three of them! Mopeds are really big now…. I got my kids one and they love it…. They aren't into books and writing poetry and all that kind of stuff. Nah, they just like to ride around on their mopeds. Not really going anywhere, just around, you know." (74-75)

Charlie's priorities are different. He sees the kids as children that are "not really going anywhere." Just because his kids do not have direction does not mean the speaker feels the same about her life. Like he explains, they do not like books and writing poetry. Unlike her cousins, she always did. Yet, he cannot reconcile the differences in the stories, and, thus, lumps them all together as the same—just silly children. He uses his ignorance and short-sighted understanding to justify his opinion that that the desk was just a waste of money.

Of course, Uncle Charlie is not the only relative to speak their mind on how the money should be spent. Yvonne speaks up: "My sister's comments were more clear and to the point. First she glared at the desk, then at me, then back to the desk and said, 'It's because of THAT, we aren't getting the swimming pool'" (75). For Yvonne, the desk meant that they had to give up another luxury that more of the family would enjoy—a pool. The author brushes off her sister's complaints, but then another voice speaks up. Her childhood friend Patty Romero complains: "'Why did you get a desk so big?' she asked. 'And it's so dark! My dad got me a real nice study desk and it's lightweight too. Fits right under my bed at night. He painted it up a real pretty, light pink paint" (75). Patty is socially conditioned to think that there is only one type of desk suitable for a little girl. Her father created her "work identity" by giving her a girlish work space that can be hidden when necessary. The color is also indicative of gender stereotyping for newborn babies—boys must have blue while girls have pink. Patty wants to assert her authority as an expert on desks when she is as knowledgeable as a newborn babe. Her misunderstanding about desks and what types of people should use them is made clearer by her next comment: "…you know, your desk looks like an old man's desk, yeah, that's it, sort of like the one at my doctor's. Oooh, I hate going to the doctor. I wouldn't want my room looking like his office'" (75). Ironically, her

low blow to the narrator's pride is an unintended compliment. In the comparison, the successful doctor has the expensive and nice desk, like the narrator, while the immature neighbor kid has a girly and gaudy, inexpensive piece of furniture. Patty's comment reinforces the mother's belief that her daughter needs the best tools to succeed as a writer. Hence, the more expensive desk is a necessary cost to success. Likewise, a successful doctor has the best tool for his work, a sturdy piece of furniture for his important business. Serros' future career as a writer is compared to that of a medical doctor. Both provide services to communities that are extremely important.

As it turns out, Patty Romero is not a very good friend. Rather than build the protagonist up, she takes every opportunity to tear her down. Serros shares a dream with Patty, that she wants to buy her mother a car when she is a famous writer:

> Like when I told her of my plans of becoming a big famous writer and that someday my stories would make me rich and I would buy a new car for my mother. She rolled her eyes and laughed at me. "Oh brother! That is so stupid. That is so stupid to think that way. You think you're gonna be someone so great, like that guy, the singer, what's his name? That La Bamba guy who bought his mom a house with his record money. You are nothing like him! Nothing. Except that maybe you both can't speak Spanish…Your poor mom, she's gonna be waiting forever for her car." (75)

The narrator confides to Patty only to be laughed at because Patty equates fame with Hollywood, something that is only true in the movies. She compares her to a Hollywood Mexican equivalent: Ritchie Valens. The two are incomparable because Valens was a talented songwriter who had a movie made about his life while the narrator is still an unknown girl struggling to find her place in the world. The only similarity they share is their

lack of Spanish, which identifies both as Chicanos/as falsos/as. She is hurt by this idea that she is unauthentic, but she cannot write to prove that she is different. Summer fades, but the author is not worried: "I was going to make her so proud. I would make the whole family proud…. I had plenty of time" (76). She wants approval from her community as the writer of the family. She knows that she can get that pride, but, like the follies of youth, she believes she has all the time in the world. She falls into a pattern that mimics the seasons of the years. She makes new goals, misses the deadlines, and then explains it away with the excuse that she still uses the gift: "…. I did everyone at that desk, but write IT, the book, The Novel, the down payment to my mother's new car" (77). She humorously recounts the forged signatures, cheat-sheets, and even the EZ tax form that she fills out on that behemoth of a desk. Yet, she fails to work toward her original goal of "The Novel." She capitalizes "it" to give the unwritten novel its own importance—it is grander than lowercase letters. Similarly, she names it "The Novel" because it does not have a name. However, she does not want that fact to distract from its significance.

By the end of the short story, the narrator is at college. She refuses to take the desk with her despite her mother's protests that she needs it to write. Privately, Serros admits to why she does not want to take it with her: "It was such a nuisance, a reminder that I was a failure, a reminder of my aborted attempts at fiction. Why had my mother bought me such a desk? Who did she think she was, buying a kid such a lavish gift, only to have it haunt that kid for the rest of her life?" (77). As She gets older, cynicism sets in. She sees the desk as a reminder of everything that she is not. Rather than accept the responsibility of why she does not write, she places the blame on her mother's shoulders. After all, she was just a kid. Why did her mother think a child could handle such pressures? The desk haunts her as a reminder

that time is fleeting. The desk sits in her mother's house collecting dust year after year until something major happens. She describes it: "Then it happened, a human tragedy…death. The third element to make a writer more experienced with life and pain. But this was *my* mother's death, smack! Ten-day warning on Mother's Day and then she was gone. I mean, just like that. My mother, my mom, my mama" (78). In "Annie Says," the speaker learns about the elements that make a great writer. Here is one such element, but it devastates her. Beatrice, the mother with so many names, is gone.

The rest of the story is a bit of a daze because Serros' state of mind is foggy with grief. Funeral, ceremony, moving men, boxing up her mother's things—everything happens with her physically present but not mentally. The moving men complain about the weight of the desk, and, in that silent childhood space, she truly understands her mother:

> On a foam-filled carton, I sat thinking of my mother, her gift to me, to work my gift. Why did she have so much faith in my dream of becoming a writer? I thought of the art classes she never went to, my uncle Charlie's kids…who still just drive around and around, not really going anywhere, and I thought of my future kids. Would they be big talkers and no walkers like me, their mother? (79).

Her mother's gift was not the desk. It was the luxury of time, time to work her gift. Beatrice sacrifices her beloved art classes and provides financial security for her daughter. She will not wander aimlessly with no future. The path is clear. She seems to know what to do: "There were no more excuses…. I found a notepad and some pens and pulled them out. I made a space for some paper and began to write" (79). As Serros writes, she pays homage to her mother's memory. She acknowledges her mother's faith and makes her mother proud by writing her first book *Chicana Falsa*.

The expectations that Beatrice held for her daughter weighed on her mind as she grew up. It becomes a central theme in *Chicana Falsa* because what people expect of you determines how they understand and accept you into a community. The first two poems present contrasting views on identity and success. "La Letty" has two perspectives from sisters who take different paths in their expressions of identity[36]. Similarly, "Annie Says" is a poem about generational differences between the speaker and her Tía Annie. Both poems depict the narrator as a child who struggles with representations of self. She is ungrounded—very unsure of who she is or how she will become a writer. "La Letty" has a more serious tone as the reader is left wondering what constitutes a home and whether Letty will find her way there. "Annie Says" plays with ironic humor as the speaker subtly undermines Tía Annie's all-knowing advice about what constitutes a real author. In *This Bridge Called My Back*, Cherríe Moraga states: "The danger lies in ranking the oppressions…Without an emotional, heartfelt grappling with the source of our own oppression, without naming the enemy within ourselves and outside of us, no authentic, non-hierarchical connection among oppressed groups can take place" (26). Serros' decolonial writing exposes the hierarchies of oppression. She grapples with personal oppressions, naming her internalized enemy. She experiences a catharsis in overcoming this. At the same time, she acknowledges and counters outside oppressions that reinforce her internalized insecurities. Her decolonial writing bridges oppressed groups in a non-hierarchal connection that empowers rather than restricts. In *The Decolonial Imaginary*, Emma Pérez argues that

[36] See Figure 13.

women are often restricted by their gender: “This poetics tied women to gender-specific roles, at the same time erasing women’s activities, activities which were significant interventions in a masculinist revolutionary rhetoric” (57). The women in the author’s family reinforce gender roles. For example, Beatrice did not have excess time to paint because her primary job was a wife for her husband and mother for her family. The reality is not so demarcated because she did spend time and effort painting, but the labor is ignored and undervalued because it did not merit monetary gain nor was it restricted to her domestic roles as wife and mother. Her artist work is erased and overshadowed by gender expectations in the home.

Figure 13 - Michele and Leticia (from “La Letty”)

The girls from the poem “La Letty” are also restricted by what the dominant patriarchal paradigm states that they should do as middle-school girls who are sisters. The

poem was inspired from a conversation that Serros had with a classmate in the school bathroom. It was the first time she was called a "Chicana falsa," and the poem explores what that label means. La Letty is a chola described as a "racoon eyed beauty" (1). The imagery of a racoon alludes to different representations of Letty's character. She wears a dark mask around her eyes, like a thief or bandit. Letty hides behind this mask, which makes others see her as a trouble-maker. In *Making Face, Making Soul*, Mitsuye Yamada talks about masks in her poem "Masks of Woman:" "My mask is control / concealment / endurance / my mask is escape / from my / self" (114). La Letty's mask provides control, concealment, endurance, and escape. La Letty takes her time when applying her mask, sixty minutes looking in the mirror to carefully outline her eyes with a "thick / darkening…velvet black" (1). The narrator cannot understand La Letty's obsession with her mask just like Letty does not understand the speaker in the poem. They both see each other hiding behind masks, but Letty's mask is one of choice and control. The speaker's mask is unrecognized: "'You know what you are? / A Chicana Falsa. /' 'MECha don't mean shit, / and that sloppy Spanish of yours / will never get you any discount at Bob's market. / HOMOGENIZED HISPANIC'" (1). Letty aggressively calls the speaker of the poem "A Chicana Falsa" because Letty sees her as a conformist. The narrator does not speak Spanish, so she cannot communicate with people at their local market for discounts. The narrator belongs to MEChA, but Letty sees this as selling out. An academic organization like MEChA does not make you more Chicana than Letty who often skips classes. Letty sees the narrator as commercialized. She is safe, like an apolitical "Hispanic." She tries to blend in with the norm, like she is "white passing." La Letty sees the narrator as wearing a mask too, one that is less overt than her own.

Letty went through iterations of how she sees herself while in school. Originally, she was called "'Leticia,' / 'Tish' for short, / but now / only two weeks into junior high, / She is 'La Letty' / *y que* / *no mas*[37]" (1). Leticia is aware of her subjectivity. Events happen as she enters junior high, such as a sexual awakening, and she reinvents herself as "La Letty." Serros switches to Spanish and italicizes the "and no more" to indicate a wall between herself and Letty. The next stanza indicates how Letty and the narrator grew distant from each other. Letty was the one who taught her to ride her bicycle, and now she runs away with "[y]oung boys / in hair nets and Dickies…. / controlled…Steered her / away from me, / my sister, / my best friend" (2). The speaker blames the boys for taking her sister away every night. She sees her sister under their control. Judith Butler in *Gender Trouble* (1990) explains that one can "make gender trouble…through the mobilization, subversive confusion, and proliferation of precisely these constitutive categories that seek to keep gender in its place by posturing as the foundational illusions of identity" (34). The poem "La Letty" makes gender trouble with its displaced posturing of "illusions of identity." The speaker of the poem presumes that Letty exemplifies her gender by falling for the stereotypical low-riding Chicanos. She upholds gender and racial stereotypes through her chola persona—as the type of girl that hangs out with those kinds of boys. This scene in the poem is reminiscent of artist Judith Baca's artwork of "Las Tres Marías." On the right side of the canvas, we see a chola, like Letty. On the left side is someone like the speaker from the poem, a more Americanized woman. In the middle, there is a blank mirror where the

[37] The author did not use accents in her original poem.

person viewing the art finds themselves part of it. Both Judith Baca and Michele Serros complicate the presentation of a Chicana woman through a spectrum of gender and racial performances. The poem is not about Letty's transformation into a woman that her sister cannot recognize. It is about "waiting / and waiting / for Tish / to come home" (3). As time passes, not only does one's identity change but so does the iterations of what was once home. As each new person views Baca's art, they bring new identity and understanding to the two Marías through their representation of the third María. Similarly, the speaker's understanding of her sister Letty changes not only the way she views her own identity but how she views her home. Home means something different when her sister is not there. The mutability of home frightens the speaker because she cannot embrace the ambiguity of gender and identity yet. She is still a child stuck in her childhood innocence and memories of an uncomplicated youth.

"Annie Says" shatters childhood innocence and the fond memories described in "La Letty." It mirrors the language in "The Introduction" when a family member claims that Beatrice was never an artist. Serros' tía destroys her self-confidence: "'You could never be a writer, / let alone a poet. / What do you know? I mean, what can you write about?'" (4). "Annie Says" describes what one family member considers writer's traits, and, through her description, she emphasizes the author's deficiency. After all, she receives poor marks in her English classes, never travels outside of Oxnard, and does not own a typewriter. As Annie lists all these obstacles to her niece's success, she juxtaposes ironic and humorous jabs at her aunt's unsolicited commentary. Although her English grades are low, she depicts her aunt's own English failings with the way she speaks: "'you gotta be able to write English good, / use big words…'" (4). Annie does not use "big words" and speaks slang, such as the diction

choice of "gotta." She also shows that her aunt does not speak or write English well with her misuse of the word "good." Regarding world-knowledge, her aunt believes that the places a writer needs to travel are "every place they make Oil of Olay" (4). Annie's limited understanding of writers is restricted to the corporation of Oil of Olay. She never traveled further than Oxnard, or at least her local grocery store where she buys her "worldly" beauty products. Financial hardships restrict aunt and niece, yet, Annie sees herself as a role model who knows what is best for Serros.

Annie does not read a lot of different literatures. She enjoys *Harlequin* romances and assumes that all writers are like these authors: "'Writers are always in love…. You don't even like boys yet. / You've never given your heart to a boy" (5). Annie describes "pure passionate love" and heartache using diction choices that sound like romance novels. Even though it is an unrealistic representation of love and relationships, Annie treats it as a hard truth or fact about life. She complains that Michele does not know any of these pains and emotions. In *Reading the Romance* (1991), Janice Radway highlights Angela McRobbie's assertion in "The Politics of Feminist Research" (1982) that "representations are interpretations:" "They can never be pure mirror images of some objective reality…but exist always as the result of 'a whole set of selective devices, such as highlighting, editing, cutting, transcribing and inflecting'" (5). Radway and McRobbie understand that representations are interpretations made of another. They are not pure objective representations because they exist in a subjective individual who emphasizes certain aspects of the representation based on their personal experiences. Annie's assertions that she knows what a great writer is and what true love feels likes says as much about her representation and limited life experiences as it does about Serros. This decolonial moment highlights the

women's similarities rather than their differences. In *Chicana Falsa,* the poem "Annie Says" demonstrates that both women are excluded from the Chicano community: "'Look on TV… / The Brown Berets, / they're marching. / The whole Chicano movement / passing you by and / you don't even know about that. / You weren't born in no barrio. / No tortilleria[38] down your street'" (5). Annie and her niece are "safe" in their homes. They watch the Chicano movement pass them by on the television. They did not grow up in the barrio. The unasked question is whether they even have a right to participate in such a movement as it does not speak to their experiences. Annie summarizes that her niece is a "Chicana Without a Cause" (6). The ironic fact is that the headline describes Annie as much as Serros. The "worldly" aunt happily sits at home watching soap operas, like *As the World Turns,* while the world, literally and figuratively, turns leaving more than the author behind in its wake.

Food becomes another avenue through which the author examines gender roles in her family, culture, and her identity as a Chicana falsa. "Dead Pig's Revenge" gives insight into her family's working-class lifestyle. Her "fave[39] uncle Vincent / was a restaurateur, / a professional businessman, / proud owner of a catering truck" (7). Today, catering trucks are considered a hip and innovative way to sell food. At the time that Serros wrote this poem, people associated food trucks with lower-class occupation, for people of color who cannot afford the rental costs associated with traditional establishments. She emphasizes how Vincent's food truck is a loud one that proudly claims its racial and ethnic roots: "A coach as in / Super-rico taco / mariachi blaring / expired license plates / loncheria / but a nice one"

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[38] The author does not use an accent on the word tortillería.
[39] Colloquialism, short for "favorite."

(7). She mentions music and volume to highlight the invisible labor of people of color. Her uncle is proud of his work and culture, and he expresses it through the presentation of his food truck. In addition, she highlights that his truck is "a nice one" because she wants to distinguish it from the not so nice trucks. She is proud of his truck, and she does not want a reader to assume it is dirty. Inés Casillas explains in "Listening (Loudly) to Spanish-language Radio" the agency that listening loudly offers people of color: "Listening loudly in the face of anti-immigrant public sentiment becomes a form of radical self-love, a sonic eff-you, and a means of taking up uninvited (white) space." In a society where youth of color are taught to be afraid, expressing oneself loudly becomes a form of activism. This action reclaims self-love and pride and creates new spaces for dialogue in normally white spaces. Vincent's loncheria represents his self-love and pride, and her poem memorializes those sentiments.

Vincent's food truck opened opportunities for him and his family. In the second stanza, Serros explains what he hopes for: "He always dreamed of / one day owning his own business / becoming a self-employed man…after scraping up / what little money he had, / he got the coach" (7-8). The food truck was the first step toward achieving financial independence. Rather than working for someone else, Vincent is his own boss. It is a type of American Dream, and the truck represents a class move from blue collar labor to entrepreneur activities. Uncle Vincent is successful; he pays for Johnny, their fourth child, to attend college. Contrasting this achievement is the description of Aunt Dolly, whose labor remains invisible. Michele laments how Aunt Dolly was up all night "chopping / and chopping, / cilantro, / onions, / tomatoes, / with dull knives" (8). Vincent is the face of the business, and, perhaps, the chef. However, the person who preps the food, staying up late

into the night, is Dolly. She does not receive recognition for her labor and sacrifices. The family expects her to help, and Vincent receives all the gratitude for paying for Johnny's college education. In *Women's Words: The Feminist Practice of Oral History*, Kathryn Anderson and Dana Jack stress that "what is often missing is the woman's own interpretation of her experience, or her own perspective on her life and activity" (19). Dolly does not share her experiences or perspective because she is not given a space to share them. She is expected to be silent, the suffering woman figure. She is out of sight prepping the food. Later in the poem, she is out of sight inside the house with Beatrice: "my mother inside with Aunt Dolly" (9). Women are often hidden figures inside a domestic household, banished to engage in women's work. Serros' decolonial writing creates a space that illuminates these labors at the same time she subtly suggests a critique of the misrepresentation of women within a family or household. "Dead Pig's Revenge" ends with her almost choking on her beloved chicharrones because she does not listen to her mother's advice to stop eating them. It is a humorous childhood exaggeration of a "near death" experience tangled in a web of intimate, gendered mini-stories about members from her family.

Food represents Serros' culture and family life. She uses it to provide humorous fodder for life lessons. For example, "Attention Shoppers" is a short story that examines wasted potential while at a supermarket. She satirizes the Chicano Power movement with the way her friend Martina brings the various ethnic communities together to fight the corporatization of ethnic cuisine. In the first paragraph, she lays out where this particular Ralph's supermarket battle will occur: "Discrimination breeds in the Ralph's supermarket on Venice and Overland. Not in employee opportunities, race, age or sex. Nothing like that, but

rather in the temperature controlled depths of the frozen food section" (22). She emphasizes the location because she is aware of the difficulties people of color face in the city. However, the injustices one imagines they might fight against, such as equal opportunity hiring practices, is not addressed in the story. She plays with her decolonial writing because she uses humor as another way to connect with people outside her community. Readers who do not identify as Chicanx can relate to the story based on how she presents information and the action scene in the frozen food aisle.

Serros provides vivid characterization of Martina, so the reader can easily identify with her. They are hosting a fundraiser and are making Spanish Rice. She describes Martina as "an activist. Maybe what you'd call militant and maybe what you'd call serious, but still, I liked to hang out with her. She was smart" (22). She playfully acts like descriptors such as "militant" and "serious" are deterrents toward a friendship. Yet, she connects with her because of her intelligence. While in the frozen food aisle, Martina angrily points out that Malibu Style Vegetables and Latino Style Vegetables are segregated. Discrimination happens even with food. Meanwhile, she embarrassingly questions her friend's outrage. In response, she deconstructs the presentation of the vegetables:

> "*Latino Style Vegetables*, they have the vegetables cut up all small. Like, what's that supposed to mean? Like, little food for little people, little minds, little significance?…And this *Malibu* kind, the broccoli, the carrots, are cut up large, all big and grand, like 'of great worth,' or something. The cauliflower, which is WHITE is the biggest vegetable in the picture, overpowering all the rest." (22-23)

Martina conducts a visual analysis of the vegetables. She sees the two frozen bags as artifacts worthy of a detailed critique. She questions their presentation for consumers amidst

the speaker's admonitions that her friend reads too much into the packaging. Martina ignores cautionary words and continues to analyze every detail from how one is messy and overflowing in a wicker basket while the other is neatly arranged in a white crockpot. Even the labeling and pricing is worthy of her rage:

> "…and look at this, the packaging. *Malibu Style* kind is labeled 'From Ralph's *Private* Selection.' Private, as in 'Not everyone is welcome, no entry to YOU, especially *you*, wetback. Go Back!...*Malibu Style* are twice as expensive as *Latino Style*. Why? Are they better vegetables? Did white people from Malibu pick them themselves? Did they take off from some corporate meeting early or leave the tennis court midgame to fly up north, put on their designer jeans to get on their hands and knees to pick their own kind of vegetables? Did they? Did they?" (23)

Even though the situation is humorous, Martina, a brown girl standing in aisle nine yelling about frozen vegetables, the author addresses immigration. Not everyone receives a warm welcome when they come to the United States. Specifically, she mentions how derogatory slurs aimed at Mexicans, such as "wetback," are used as intimidation tools. The message is clear: Go back to Mexico. Then, there is the issue of stoop labor for those who work the fields in the hot sun providing the fresh fruits and vegetables that people consume. Martina is furious. She indignantly asks if white people will work the fields in their designer jeans, with the implications that this form of labor is beneath their privilege. Serros comments on class inequalities and the disproportionate number of people of color who work unskilled manual labor jobs.

Though what prompts Martina to take a stand in aisle nine seems frivolous and ridiculous, especially to a white audience that has no notion of the discriminations she

speaks of, Serros uses the diatribe as a platform about deeper issues in her community. In *Chicana/o Identity in a Changing U.S. Society,* Hurtado and Gurin describe the Migrant Generation (1901-1942): "…there was a need for a cheap labor pool and the United States looked to Mexico to provide 'immigrant' labor. Large numbers of Mexicans crossed the largely un-patrolled U.S.-Mexican border to work in the agricultural fields" (87-88). Though many people saw them as immigrants, Hurtado, Gurin, and other academics argue that they were migrants rather than immigrants because of the ease of crossing the imaginary border and the ideas of how the two lands were virtually the same—there was little policing and reduced documentations needed to cross to the United States during this time. Yet, this history of migration is unknown to the public who does not realize that many Southwestern states were part of Mexico until the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo in 1848. Instead, the white majority uses their ignorance to justify the mistreatment of people of color. In a topic highlight from *The Riverfront Times,* a section from *Chicana/o Identity in a Changing U.S. Society,* Ray Hartmann explains this white attitude:

> We live in a largely white country. The white majority enjoys a disproportionate share of its wealth and comfort and an even greater share of control over most of its institutions. But white power is so pervasive that it's never perceived, or even considered, white power. It's just the way things are. Racial percentages aren't tallied from the white side, only from the "minority" point of view. Thus, when 20 percent of public contracts on a building project are "set aside" for minority contractors, it is a "racial" or "gender-based" issue, but when 100 percent goes to firms owned by white males, it's just, well, reality. (75)

When Serros insists that the frozen vegetables are not a big deal, she does not understand the white power that pervades around the production and sales of such a product. Martina mentions how it is people of color who harvest these vegetables, but white corporations profit from their low-paid wages. She says people should not accept the status-quo as a reality, and that they need to reject their white privileges.

As Martina teaches the narrator all these lessons about speaking up against injustices, she inspires a revolution in the frozen food section. Others stop to listen to her speech, and, soon, everyone is picking up their stereotyped vegetables to toss on the ground like trash:

> And then this extraordinary thing happened. One by one people started to pull frozen produce bags out of the freezer compartments. I saw a Korean woman and her two children stomp on *Oriental Style Vegetables*, a young guy in cowboy boots kicked *Country Style Vegetables* down the aisle toward the checkout lines, and a handsome, dark-haired man ripped apart a bag of *Italian Style Vegetables*. More and more people began to pull bags out of the compartments and destroy the corporate invention of "stereotypes in a bag." (24)

Martina inspires people to not accept a reality of corporate invention, such as the "stereotypes in a bag." The author writes the names of the vegetable products in italics because she wants to stress that they are foreign and unnatural. More likely, they are created by white men who work for Ralph's advertising markets. This is what they think the public will want to buy. She examines different layers in this short story because, though it appears that Martina inspired a revolution for strangers, the protagonist still has not learned anything. Instead, she asks to snag a bag of ice cream or frozen fries, and that they might get arrested if they continue to make a ruckus in the store. Martina simply responds: "'This isn't

about excitement, free food, or getting on TV…Man, *you* really have a lot to learn'" (25). In this instance, the author puts "*you*" in italics to emphasis her own identity's impermanence. She does have a lot to learn, and she is still young and unaware of the infrastructures of power that affect people at all levels of life. Yet, this decolonial story, written when Serros is an adult and can reflect on these adventures from her youth, demonstrates that she does grow from her adventures. She understands the complications associated with a multitude of perspectives, and her decolonial story offers a creative way to highlight how stories weave in and out in unending ribbons of life.

The author revisits "Attention Shoppers" in her audio compilation of *Selected Stories from Chicana Falsa*, participating in NPR interviews, radio spots, and other audio presentations about her literature. Even with all these live events, she only produces one CD of stories for the public to purchase. There are fourteen tracks with two of them dedicated to "Attention Shoppers." One is her reading the short story and the other is her calling the Ralph's supermarket. "Frozen Food Section" is a minute and eight seconds long. She speaks with someone in the Frozen Food Section to ask if they can tell her the difference between *Latino Style* and *Malibu Style Vegetables*. Their response demonstrates many of the points in the short story:

> "…*Latino Style* has like, um, like little peppers, you know, uh, I guess it's kinda spicy, and, um, I guess Latinos like spicy foods, and, uh, *Malibu Style* is like the pieces are bigger, like they're cut different, their diced different, more like neater, like Malibu you know. The *Malibu Style* costs more because…I don't know, actually. I think it's the packaging, you know, cause it's different packaging. (0:26)

Even the employee cannot answer the question: What is the difference between *Latino Style Vegetables* and *Malibu Style Vegetables*? The employee relies on stereotypes about Latinos, like how they all enjoy spicy food, to justify why it receives a certain branding. He even expresses that the peppers included in the bag make it Latino style even though cuisines from around the world use peppers. Plus, he does not identify what types of peppers are used, indicating the misassumption that all peppers originate in foreign lands. Meanwhile, just as Martina identified in Serros' story, the unnamed worker states that the Malibu product is neater like Malibu. When pressed for why there is such a difference in costs, he explains it away as a packaging issue. At first, the worker admits that he does not know, and the constant "um" and "like" in his explanations expresses his doubt as to the validity of his answer. Still, he tries his best to help a customer and to justify the ridiculousness of the products. Like most consumers or employees, he does not question the presentations of the vegetables, his own racist readings of the frozen vegetables, or the discrepancy in costs. His responses, though, mirror many of the points that Martina scrutinized with her visual analysis. Unfortunately, he does not have any understanding of the social, racial, historical, or political contexts because he accepts the positions of inequality as a natural state. Like Serros, he "really has a lot to learn" (*Chicana Falsa* 25).

In "Attention Shoppers," Martina draws the shoppers into a frozen food revolution. Whether they completely understood everything that happened, the interruption to their food shopping experience provides a seed of doubt. Similarly, the unnamed employee who answered the telephone call from Serros might also have a moment where he interrogates the strange questions posed by an anonymous caller. The journey toward a decolonial mind is not a straight path, and it can occur at different points in one's life. In *Making Face,*

Making Soul, Gloria Anzaldúa clarifies this point within the dynamics of her classroom: "Though there were important lessons learned, the inability to listen and hear, along with the confusion, anger and doubts about ever being able to work together almost tore our class apart" (xx). A lot of the author's decolonial writings and actions, such as the phone call to Ralph's, offer insights into lessons she learns. Still, it is important to listen and hear others, to accept the confusion, anger, and doubts, as a stepping stone that moves one to a decolonial state of mind.

She expresses her decolonized mind through her writing. She often associates gender identity with food. Food acts as racial and cultural markers while it influences how she interprets issues about health and beauty. "Disco Gymnasium" flashes forward to when the author is an adult. Although she has a coveted gym membership, she is treated as a custodian because of the color of her skin: "'You're late! / Bathrooms are a mess!'" (15). Serros must prove that she belongs by flashing the white employee her membership card that has a picture on it, which the woman scrutinizes as if it could be a fake identification card. She does not fit in with the normal clientele: "I'm the solo *Mexicana* /in loose *chongo* / ex-boyfriend's sweatpants / oversize T-shirt / fashion outcast / creating a nuisance / to iridescent / pearlescent, / adolescents!" (15). She is the only Mexican American attending the gym. She wears comfortable workout clothes that hang loose on her body while the white women wear tight aerobic outfits that outline the shape of their bodies. She feels as if she is back in high school. Because she does not mimic the popular kids, she is a suspicious individual, the outcast that disrupts the status quo. Her disruption is important because it provides a space for alternative histories and resistances. In *Decolonizing Methodologies*, Smith explains the precarious position that indigenous peoples inhabit: "We live

simultaneously within such views while needing to pose, contest and struggle for the legitimacy of oppositional or alternative histories, theories and ways of writing" (39). The speaker struggles for legitimacy at the gym. Although the gym requires membership fees, she is in a financial position where she can afford access. She has the right to be there with the other women. She can embody who she is, her oppositional and alternative self and history, and create a new community space despite misconceptions of servitude.

"Disco Gymnasium" implies that everyone enacts a character. They are all dancing to their own unrecognized identities. She dances to her own music and stays true to her sense of self, but she understands that those around her are "wealthy white westside women / sweating to inner city rap boys (like they secretly do at home)" (16). There is a public and private self that the women put on display. The westside women must represent their wealth to maintain self-confidence and power, even when they are at an inconsequential place like a gymnasium. They subscribe to a certain set of discourses that hides attributes that do not represent the dominant hegemonic ideology, such as their interactions with inner city rap boys. It is unclear if Serros implies that they listen to rap music in secret or if they have affairs with men of color in the privacies of their home, almost as if it is an attempt to control the bodies of men of color. Regardless of the ulterior motives, Linda Tuhiwai Smith stresses that these different dialogues must come together for change to occur:

> At some points there is, there has to be, dialogue across the boundaries of oppositions. This has to be because we constantly collide with dominant views while we are attempting to transform our lives on a larger scale than our own localized circumstances. This means struggling to make sense of our own world while also attempting to transform what counts as important in the world of the powerful. (39)

Serros' decolonial writing provides a space for dialogue across the boundaries of oppositions. She engages with all types of people within her literatures, and her works are read not only by Chicanas, people within her community, but outsiders. In "Disco Gymnasium," she struggles to make sense of a world that is obsessed with health and beauty—especially a certain type of white beauty that does not represent her ethnicity. The fascination with this type of transformation is lost on the author as she barely makes it to the gym late Friday. The hilarious truth is that she would much rather eat a chimichanga supreme than exercise. Yet, she plays the game along with the other women as she struggles to make sense of her world in relation to the world of the wealthy, white privileged.

There are women that have mastered playing the game of the wealthy, white privileged. Donna Rodríguez,[40] a plus-size woman of color from the poem "What Is Bad," is one such character. She works a corporate office job, and, even though she does not have white privilege, she is the one with all the respect. The author indicates her power with the word "bad." She explains how she is more than this word because "she has power / the kind of power / that gets respect / the kind of respect / I envy" (17). "Bad" is used throughout the poem, often in all capital letters, as an indication of Donna's essence. It is not a derogatory term. It is a word that indicates power and respect. She envies Donna's ability to be her "bad" self in the workplace. She did not have to conform to a white corporate business model to succeed. Donna does not worry about how others view her. She wears a tough exterior, and no one dares to question her actions. Her presence takes up space. Not only

[40] Serros does not use an accent on her name.

does she use two parking spots with her black Trans-Am, she walks around the office as if she owns it. The other employees get out of her way, and the author describes her persona in epic proportions: “Suit of armor she wears well / fifty lbs. extra flesh / padding a forty-eight double-D brassiere” (17). Donna is a big woman, and she wears all her extra weight like armor. She protects herself from others, and puts off an attitude that discourages confrontation. Her demeanor contrasts starkly with the other women in her office: “the Anglo women shudder in fear…/ they pretend to be her friend / get on her good side early / ask about Hector, / her 19 year old baby behind bars” (18). Because the white women fear Donna, they say and do things that will not cause trouble. They ask about her red press on nails, her incarcerated son, and whether she has a good salsa recipe. They do not really care about her responses because they do not really care about her and her experiences. It is about survival in the office, and, currently, Donna has the most power, both as an individual and as a woman of color. To reclaim some of the power back, the Anglo women play a game with her, but she does not participate.

In the poem, Serros explains that Donna knows the game, a daily ritual she suffers through each day at work. Instead, she “stays silent” and scrutinizes their fakeness: “judging their sloppy eyeliner / creaseless corduroys / tofu tacos” (18). The women occupy different spaces and realities. Donna has a tougher upbringing, emphasized by the type of car she drives, her defensive attitude, and her incarcerated son Hector. She does not live a life of privilege, and fights daily for her respect and positionality. Meanwhile, the Anglo women are unfamiliar with these experiences because they do not know how to interact with Donna. They are uncomfortable because of their ignorance, and they fake a willingness to cross

borders to avoid uncomfortable confrontations. In *Borderlands/La Frontera,* Anzaldúa explains:

> The dominant white culture is killing us slowly with its ignorance. By taking away our self-determination, it has made us weak and empty…. The whites in power want us people of color to barricade ourselves behind our separate tribal walls so they can pick us off one at a time with their hidden weapons; so they can whitewash and distort history. Ignorance splits people, creates prejudices. A misinformed people is a subjugated people. (108)

The Anglo women at Donna's office are not used to a "bad" woman of color. Ignorantly, they expect her to act a certain way or work at a certain type of job. Instead, she infiltrates a white space and will not let them whitewash her with their ignorance. Thus, there is a split between the people. It occurs not only through misinformation of a subjugated people but when the subjugated retain their agency. Then, they cannot be forced into a box that others control.

Their inability to control Donna scares them because she embraces her power to enact change.

To her white coworkers, Donna appears out of control. She receives special treatment, such as multiple cubicles to work in because she needs the extra space: "'I'm a big woman. / I need bigger space.' / And she gets it, / just like that. / Now that is *BAD*" (19). No one questions her right to demand an extra cubicle. Her logic is sound. When she needs something, she demands it and eventually receives it. There are rumors that their male boss is afraid of Donna. Serros describes him as "Mr. Equal Opportunity Employer" (19). He sees himself as a liberated white male because he hired someone who he assumes is an at-risk

person of color. Even though her appearance frightens him, he did not let it deter him from giving her an "equal opportunity." However, he holds his own private perceptions about her character: "he suspects she could have / been / might very well still be / a '*chuca*, / as in *pachuca*, / a nonexistent breed / in his Westside life / but here she is…and he doesn't want any trouble" (19). Donna's white boss classifies her as a dangerous Pachuca because of her attitude and the way she presents herself, from clothes to makeup. Since he does not want to cause trouble, he lets her get away with more than the other employees, from the extra cubicle space, extended lunches, loans on her paychecks, and even early departures on Fridays. Her unnamed white boss never argues with her about these issues because political correctness and sheer fear hampers him. All the while, Serros reads Donna as a woman who has power, respect, and dignity—everything she wants. The final stanza reads: "Now that is *bad*. / That's respect. / And I want it" (20). She uses the word "bad" as if she is saying a prayer to the woman. She reveres her as a role model. She holds no derogative opinions about her, and she hopes that someday she can have the same badass respect that Donna commandeers.

Donna is a fascinating figure to analyze in this decolonial poem because her character is presented through different narrative filters. First, the reader receives the author's voice, whose tone is awe and worship. Next, the white employees' tones are filled with disgust and fear. They fake friendships or just stay out of her way completely because they want to remain on her good side. After all, Donna represents trouble, the type of trouble only a person of color can bring when they accidentally enter a white neighborhood. They assign her a certain type of character because of the clothes she wears, and she plays with their fear to enact the role they expect. Although some might interpret Donna as a selfish

woman out to take advantage of the system, her actuality is one of hardships. After all, her 19-year-old son Hector is in prison. She has a lot on her mind, and she does not have time to worry about their racist fears. The only line of dialogue she has in the entire poem is to state that she is a big woman who needs bigger space. This supports her attitude of self-preservation. She needs a comfortable workspace. Donna prefers silence over speaking because silence protects her. There is also strength in her silence. In *The Woman in the Zoot Suit: Gender, Nationalism, and the Cultural Politics of Memory* (2009), Catherine S. Ramírez describes a significant argument about speech and silence: "In exploring the meanings and uses of silence for those who called themselves and were pachucas, I argue that Chicanas' silence can be and has been as oppositional, rich, and complex as their male counterpart's speech" (85). Ramírez closely examines the Sleepy Lagoon Trial and how the women pachucas who testified often refused to speak as an act of solidarity for their male counterparts as well as a form of resistance. This silence mirrors Donna's when her coworkers ask her questions about her son Hector. She will not let them into her life because she knows they are not sincere. Their small talk is a means to gather information to use against her. Meanwhile, she disrupts their confidence and comfortability with her silence.

Silence can be loud and disorderly. In a case study about Aguilar, she is one of the pachucas who "says nothin'" at the Sleepy Lagoon Trial. Ramírez exemplifies the significance of silence:

> …Aguilar's strategic use of silence reveals that the absence of words 'has its own contours, its own texture.' It compels us to rethink resistance and to recognize the many contradictory and hidden forms it may take. Her refusal to speak shows us that, like the creative wordplay of young Mexican American men, silence, too, can

express opposition, especially when it comes from someone whose speech is overdetermined by the fact that she has already been spoken for and about. (103)

The absence of words can be as powerful as a convoluted speech. People often think political activism is violent and loud, yet there are many hidden forms of resistance. The courts tried to compel Aguilar to speak, and she refuses. Donna is not compelled to speak; after all, she will not get fired from a refusal to socialize. Yet, it can create a hostile work environment. Still, she resists the compulsion to speak to "fit in" with the work crowd because she controls her voice—no one else. Even though people of color are often "spoken for and about," Donna finds a way to reclaim her agency through silence. She ignores their chit-chat as useless prattle. She silently judges them as harshly as they judge her. Let them imagine that they know her. The narrator hears Donna's silence is louder than any scream, and it inspires her to demand the same respect and equal opportunities in her own life. The complex layering of narrative perceptions in this poem is an example of the strength and agency that exists in decolonial storytelling.

With her decolonial voice, Serros examines femininity through culture, food, health, and beauty. It is displaced from sexuality while masculinity finds release through the body. In the short story "Shower Power Hippie Man," the author explores the gendered practice of masculinity through the innocent eyes of a child. The man lives in "the 'other neighborhood,'" which is six blocks from where the author lives (12). The demarcation of another neighborhood implies that a border stands between her and the strange man. Michele, Lydia, Patty, and Goony unknowingly emphasize race, gender, sexuality, and social class through his almost ridiculous nickname. A distinguishing fact about him is that he bathes twice a day. The author explains: "…'cause unlike our own fathers and brothers,

he showered twice in one day…long hot twenty minute showers. I'd never heard such a thing, guess no one ever pounds on his bathroom door" (12). The fact that water is not a free luxury for Serros' family is a motif that she mentions in *How to be a Chicana Role Model*. "Role Model Rule Number 9: Any Press is Good Press" has a white person named Lori who implies that it is easy to get wrinkles out of one's dress clothing because you let the hot shower run for twenty minutes for a natural steam press. Just like in "Shower Power Hippie Man," the narrator is shocked that can take more than one shower a day because it is a completely foreign concept in her household.

This story touches on gender representation and what makes a "real man." The fact that Shower Power Hippie Man can take two showers a day contrasts starkly with the men in the author's family. He also has long hair, "almost reaching his shoulders. No men in our neighborhood had such hair. We had so called 'real men,'…. with hair that was short, black and slicked all the way back…that's what real men were made of" (12). The greased and slicked back black hair indicates a racial difference from the long hair of the hippie man. It is a marker of their Mexican ethnicity. The foreignness of the other man merits more study, which is why Serros and her friends constantly cross to the other neighborhood to observe him. The speaker and her girlfriends have a limited understanding of masculinity as ideas of machismo restrict them: "Machismo involves men displaying a hypermasculinity that thrives on power and domination that is threatened by weakness" (*Beyond Machismo* 55). Their understanding is based on what they see at home. The men in their homes shower once a day and keep their hair cropped and slicked back. Any deviation from this norm is read as a weakness. The Shower Power Hippie Man represents a different iteration of masculinity that warrants more study.

Like any good researcher, they make weekly visits to their site. Serros admits that they observe him at least three times a week. They are only nine years old, but the girls are fascinated by their white man who is "tall, pink, and freckled" (12). He is fair-skinned, and his paleness fascinates the girls as they voyeuristically watch him bathe. This is their first foray into sexual awareness. The author explains: "He was truly our man, no wait, he was our *boyfriend*.[41] We were too good for all the 5th grade boys at Rio Real Elementary. We were the cool girls with the big secret…" (13). They claim the Shower Power Hippie Man. He is not only a man but their imaginary boyfriend. He makes them feel mature, better than the boys in their classroom. Their secret places them in a social class standing above others their age. In *Gender Trouble* (1990), Judith Butler theorizes about interactions between men and women: "One possible interpretation is that the woman in masquerade wishes for masculinity in order to engage in public discourse with men and as a man as part of a male homoerotic exchange" (52). Though the girls do not dress up as men, they engage in a type of masquerade because they hide themselves from him. Their safe, public distance allows them to engage with him through their schoolgirl fantasies. In this regard, the girls hold masculine power because they control the discourse. They feel older and wiser than others their age.

The girls have no idea how little they know until they witness their "boyfriend" masturbate. At first, they cannot understand what his actions mean. They are used to him washing his naked body, but this time "[h]e spent a lot of time lathering *IT*" (13). Nine-year-

[41] Italics are in the original text.

old Serros cannot say the word "penis" because she is too immature. The author represents that time period in her life by selecting a word choice that matches the narrator's youth, "it." As his penis gets larger, the word "it" gets larger, italicized and capitalized. She references "[a]n alien tentacle from another planet" to describe its strangeness (13). Instead of singing in the shower, his demeanor is angry. A violent eruption will occur, and the girls will bear witness to this man's wrath. The author describes him thus: "Shower Power Hippie Man's face slowly grew violent, and anger began to envelope his usual calm. And suddenly, like the volcano in the film…[t]hick Twinkie cream ringlets spurted here, there, everywhere" (13). His climax ends their research. They never go back to the "other neighborhood" to visit him again. The man's sexuality was violent and different. It scared them. They felt unsafe, and they seek shelter in the familiarity: "Our neighborhood trees and graffitied street signs welcomed us back. We were home…" (14). Again, the children mark the social class differences between themselves and their faux boyfriend. Where they live, they have graffitied signs, indicative of a barrio type culture. This border represents safety rather than a prejudiced and false notion of gang affiliations.

In terms of the sexual eruption, the decolonial story provides layers of narrative. As an adult, the speaker reflects on this memory from her childhood. It is told through the perspective of her nine-year-old self and friends. She presents a silent narrative of the Shower Power Hippie Man who runs to the window and sees the girls. He even shouts unintelligible expletives at them, and the author emphasizes his awareness by using all caps. Both parties are vulnerable, one as a naked, sexual man and the others as young, inexperienced girls with naïve fantasies. For all characters in this story, there is a focus on the body and one's relationship to a corporal sexuality. Judith Butler states: "…some parts

of the body become conceivable foci of pleasure precisely because they correspond to a normative ideal of a gender-specific body" (70). For the first time, Serros and her girlfriends see a man engage with a pleasurable sexual experience with his body. Although Shower Power Hippie Man's activity is normative—all people masturbate—they are frightened. As women, female masturbation is often discouraged in conservative households. So, the girls, on the edge of womanhood, do not know how to engage with such a visible yet forbidden act. Butler explains further: "The strategy of desire is in part the transfiguration of the desiring body itself" (71). Serros' desire is discouraged, and, as discussed in other pieces, she does not know desire at such a young age. Her body is as foreign as the man's. "Shower Power Hippie Man" is a story about sexuality, but it is filtered through the narrative voice of a child. Gender and sex norms are questioned in this decolonial story, but the limitations of the 9-year old speaker prevent further depth or explorations on the topic.

In a later poem, "The Superhero Scam," the speaker is an adult woman who reflects about feminine expectations of men, specifically men that her friend Marsha terms as superheroes. The poem's first line starts with a big secret and perhaps major disappointment to many Batman fans: "Batman has a small penis" (48). Whether this is truth or not is up to each reader to interpret. The source of this information is Marsha, who at the time of the meeting worked at an El Torito as a waitress. Is she a reliable narrator? There are some word choices that imply that she is not one: "Just Mr. B. himself / for chicken fajitas / or something. / Anyways" (48). She uses the words "something" and "anyways" to progress the story, which simultaneously implies that the details are not significant. Yet, the truth is often found in the details, and if Marsha cannot remember why Batman was in the restaurant, or what he ordered, maybe it was not really him. Regardless, Marsha has her

moment with a real Hollywood star. They got hot and heavy making out in Hollywood Hills. Yet, Marsha complains about the sexual encounter: “But / he never let her see / the Bat Dick / in bright life / and now we all know why. / cause batman has a small / penis” (48-49). In these lines, the author capitalizes Bat Dick as if that is his name. She also changes the way she writes Batman because now his name is using a lower-case “b.” Finally, the most obvious point she wants to make is the word “penis.” In the poem, she sets penis on its own line in the stanza, and Serros reduces the font size to half the size of the rest of the poem. The existence of Batman was reduced to his penis, and it is not that impressive. Thus, Batman, and the way he treats Marsha, is also not worthy of more wasted emotions.

“The Superhero Scam” has more to do with the way the public views famous people. There are expectations for them, and when those expectations are not met, then there is a sense of disappointment and loss. Marsha looks toward Batman to pull her out of a generic existence, that perhaps our heroes can be like role models for one to emulate. Unfortunately, Batman just disappointed Marsha, and there is no superhero to save Marsha from her life. The speaker explains: “How I pity poor Marsha / misled by Hollywood hype.” (49). She is not caught up in the fake allusions that Hollywood provides. She knows how disappointing it all really is from “Role Model Rule Number 5: Respect the One Percent” in *How to be a Chicana Role Model*. Uncle Charlie exposed how Hollywood treats Latinas and Latinos in the business, so the speaker is not surprised by Marsha’s frustration. She pities her as someone who is duped by the hype and sparkle of a business that succeeds because of the very lies it can sell. She continues with other superhero disappointments whose business end up in magazines that like to tattle on superhero’s imperfections. For example, some of the headlines read: “‘Popeye Has Herpes, / Girlfriend Sues!’ / Superman dead again. / Where

have all the superheroes gone? / Any real men left?" (49). With this disheartened feeling that she presents the reader, it is significant to point out that these male superheroes are all white. The representation of men of color, both in entertainment and in theoretical and academic studies, is still bereft compared with more traditional white studies. Aída Hurtado theorizes about this phenomenon in *Beyond Machismo*:

> Latino men occupy a contradictory position within a system of privilege, one that offers them advantages but concurrently disadvantages those belonging to devalued social categories, that is, men who come from working-class backgrounds, who are immigrants, who speak Spanish, who often look racially nonwhite, who have a Latino background, and who may be gay—all statues that contribute to experiencing racism, ethnocentrism, classism, and heterosexism. Although men as a group are privileged by patriarchal structures, all men do not share in the privileges equally. (12)

Though Marsha and Serros lament over the state of superheroes, this idea that white men are having them buy into impossible ideals for a savior, their frustrations should not necessarily be directed at members from their own communities. Like Latina women, multiple sites of oppression influence Latino men. Though they receive privilege in one category, that of acceptance into patriarchy, they do not share in the privileges equally. In fact, they can receive more criticisms for embodying such identity characteristics that emphasize their otherness. In her poem "What Boyfriend Told Me at Age Seventeen," readers know that the author is aware of these factors that contribute to the criminalization of male color of bodies. She sympathizes with them and imagines decolonial spaces where they can heal the wounds

between members of their community, especially the feminine who suffer from strictures of male culture.

The very last stanza of the poem flips the masculine script that superheroes often epitomize. Serros implies that Marsha seeks the wrong type of superhero: "Poor Marsha, / maybe Wonderwoman / will come thru her checkout line" (49). Women are separated from each other in their silence and invisibility. Marsha seeks someone to save her, and she looks to a male superhero rather than acknowledging that there are other women who feel the same way she does. Their depressions are silently held close to the body rather than shared among the community. Maylei Blackwell examines this point when she interviews NietoGomez in *¡Chicana Power!*:

> NietoGomez described the deep alienation she felt as one of the first Chicanas to step onto a college campus in the late 1960's. She described feeling lost in lecture classes of 250 people and how professors would literally ignore her when she raised her hand or walk away from her while she was talking to them. Chicanos and Chicanas were made to feel invisible—literally, ethnically, and culturally unintelligible. (56-57)

Blackwell and Serros offer the decolonial spaces where these stories are finally spoken aloud and witnessed by others. Through the witnessing of silenced truths, new strengths are emphasized and collaborations can occur to promote social justice and change for the communities. It is important for people of color to see themselves represented in different positions in society as it leads to self-confidence and more opportunities for others to save themselves rather than waiting for a made-up ideal of a superhero to rescue them. After all,

the scam is that such a superhero does not exist, and the waiting only leads one to staying in the same position in life, which fits in with the status of a hegemonic, patriarchal society.

Ironically, after the author implies that Marsha just needs a different type of superhero to checkout at her line, the next story, "Stuff," is a giant rant about friendships and people letting you down. This short story reads like something one would find in her diary, and it is difficult to decide how much of her rant to accept as a serious critique of friendships and how people use each other for stuff. Angela, who appears in many stories and poems, is late picking her up. As far as she is concerned, this is the time when she will confront Angela for how terrible of a friend she really is. The speaker reflects on what friendship even really means:

> I guess "friend" isn't really the proper word here—perhaps "People that annoy me the least," or "People that keep me from watching too much TV," better yet "People I really don't want to write off because someday in the future I may need something from them." I put up with all kinds of crap people dish out just 'cause I worry what I may lose out on if I lose them. (50)

This definition of friendship is equated with the amount of favors or "stuff" one can expect from them. Hence, the title of the story references the payoff from keeping certain people in one's life. This is a rather cynical and angry way to view friendships, and it reflects the frame of mind the narrator resides in as she impatiently waits for Angela. She claims that the payoff is no longer worth keeping Angela around anymore because she is always late. She sees it as a sign of disrespect, as if her friend does not invest time in their friendship.

As "Stuff" continues, Michele takes the opportunity to complain about other friends in her life that she maybe write-off as well. There is NeNe, who inappropriately touches

Michele's current boyfriend's hair all the time, and J. Walker who proves his masculinity by vocalizing his horniness and inability to commit to a steady relationship. Michele's focus is lost, and it is apparent that the emotions she feels now are perhaps common ones that will dissipate with time. She just wants to make sure the reader understands her anger and frustration, and her tone comes through the imagery very strongly. She refocuses her story when midway through she reminds us who originally angered her: "Anyway, back to Angela. It was already four PM and our date was for two" (52). She went off topic complaining about friends that had nothing to do with Angela's tardiness. Angela is two hours late for their date, and that is what she needs to focus on. It is her excuse and reason for her anger. So, Serros does not want to forget the facts. Still, she admits that their friendship is not an easy one to terminate: "Besides being a childhood playmate, blood sister, and, really, the only one who bothered to show me how to use a tampon correctly…. Angela's mom owns a recreational vehicle, which means she travels—A LOT" (52). They have a long history, and they are blood sisters. Even with all that knowledge, what makes her hesitate to let Angela go is that she wants to continue to receive nice presents from when her and her mother travel. The protagonist implies that there are some people you keep around only because you get certain "stuff" from them. Whether this is a mercenary tactic or a survival technique is debatable. The emotions tied to using a "friend," or someone for things is tied to the colonial mentality that only the token few can succeed. To become one of the chosen ones, the speaker plays the colonial and neocolonial game to gain success against institutions of power that notoriously exclude people of color. The author's story becomes a decolonial forum for her to explore the ways that a hegemonic history influences how people treat each other.

In *How to be a Chicana Role Model*, the author explains in "Role Model Rule Number 6: Live Better, Work Union" that you must understand your own worth and demand from people what you think they owe you. Obviously, the narrator feels like Angela owes her from all the times she was late. She thinks about it: "…I know why people have other people in their lives. Not for love, companionship, nurturing or any kind of that human need crap that they feed you in psychology class. The real reason we have people in our lives is because we want stuff, free stuff, and we'll put up with all kinds of shit to get it; we will lie to get what we want" (53). There is some truth to her harsh words as people often are drawn to others who provide something that they are missing, the addendum that opposites attract. She provides examples with characters she introduced in her stories and poems, such as Marta, Aunt Dolly, and her cousin Amy. No one is immune to the charm of free stuff. She feels overwhelmed by this philosophical discovery, but, in the end, she keeps Angela as a friend because she will be traveling to Europe over the summer. She is excited about the types of snow globes her friend will bring home as a gift to her. In the end, "[i]t was just that easy" (54). It is easier to go with the flow than try to change bad habits or ideologies about one's self. The speaker understands that she uses her friend, but she believes all friends are using each other. So, why disturb a pattern that is mutually beneficial for all partners engaged in the farce? Like she states, it is just easier to let it stand as is.

Although the protagonist admits to keeping her friends for the free stuff she receives, she still respects them as human beings. She does not own their bodies, and she is frustrated by the complicated forces that she does not understand, which unconsciously influences the way she treats people in her life. Other characters in *Chicana Falsa* do not receive the same type of humanity. For example, in the poem "Tag Banger's Last Can," the poet offers an

example of a masculine body that is not respected as a human being. Flaco is a troubled male youth who must prove that he is a man: “Flaco held his manhood / steady. Aimed it at / a city block / pissing boosted Krylon / citrus yellow / cherry red / black” (21). At first, it seems like he is pissing on the side of a building. He holds a stolen can of Krylon, spray paint, that represents his “manhood.” It sprays on the wall like pee. The gang colors, yellow, red, and black, bleed on the side of the building. He participates in the tagging because he wants to join a crew: “His defiant stand / earned him / a loyal crew / customized baseball cap / TV tabloid exposé / and a toe tag” (21). Flaco’s stand was enough to get him initiated into a crew. They have his loyalty. Community, a sense of belonging, is important because it provides the reassurance that someone will be there to support him. Plus, he gets a customized cap that represents his hood. Unfortunately, loyalty does not keep him alive. “Tag Banger’s Last Can” translates to his last stand, the end of his life. The poem concludes with a toe tag; Flaco’s involvement leads to his death.

Figure 14 - Serros’ Name and Book Title in Graffiti

"Tag Banger's Last Can" reads like a poetic eulogy. In fourteen lines of free verse, she gives a glimpse into Flaco's brief life, one in which he struggles to demonstrate his manhood. With her verse, she implies that he "pisses" his life away before, unfortunately, dying. In *Gender Trouble*, Judith Butler explains:

> This "body" often appears to be a passive medium that is signified by an inscription from a cultural source figured as 'external' to that body. Any theory of the culturally constructed body, however, ought to question 'the body' as a construct of suspect generality when it is figured as passive and prior to discourse. (129)

In the poem, Flaco's body is a passive medium. The cultural act of tagging/graffiti constructs his body's masculinity[42] as does the "customized baseball cap" (Serros 21). Butler reiterates that one needs to question this understanding of the body because it is not passive prior to the language that determines what cultural acts are masculine, which is a compatible idea with decoloniality. Butler continues her discussion about the body in terms of a Christian and Cartesian ideology: "…understand 'the body' as so much inert matter, signifying nothing, or, more specifically, signifying a profane void, the fallen state" (129). Her poem implies a similar understanding as Flaco's body becomes inert matter. His interactions with what he understands as masculine culture in his community leads him to a profane void, literally a fallen state as he lays on a gurney with a toe tag. The author's decolonial writing causes the reader to question gender and destructive, false cultural practices that destroy the human potential of members of the community. The poem begins

[42] See Figure 14.

with creation and potential as Flaco stands poised and ready to claim his masculinity and place in a community. The poem ends with death and loss, a sense of regret and wasted potential that will be forgotten by society.

Male bodies of color are often viewed by a hegemonic society as disposable. Serros explores this theme at the same time she exemplifies a mestiza consciousness and decolonial narrative in the poem "What Boyfriend Told Me at Age Seventeen." It is easy to read it and forget that the speaker is the girlfriend. The ambiguous narrator allows a more complicated poem to develop through the blending of who is experiencing what. The girlfriend retells her boyfriend's story, but she also lives everything he explains through the telling. The entire poem is in dialogue, with quotation marks noting the beginning and the end of the piece. The 17-year old exposes his life as a young Mexican boy on the cusp of adulthood to his uninformed girlfriend. Whether the reader receives the full, unedited speech from the girlfriend is debatable, but the quotation marks imply that she relays his story word for word. A question arises: Why did he not tell his story himself? There is potentially a disconnect between the male speaker's body and emotions. He is discouraged from having intense feelings, and he does not know how to express them. There are many intimate facts shared in this poem, and one can presume that the boyfriend would only share his narrative with someone he is close to, such as a significant other. Once she hears the story, she feels a compulsion to share it with others because it contains sentiments that many in the community can relate to. It is decolonial in its presentation and retelling. The poem begins with the boyfriend at seven years old. Uncle Eddie brings him to the San Diego border

before leading him into T.J.[43] The purpose behind this trip over the border? Uncle Eddie wants to show him his culture: "'This is your culture, / these are your roots / now lay in it.' / Then he laughed…at me" (28). Uncle Eddie's tone is harsh, ironic, and even full of shame. Uncle Eddie wants to shock the youth with what he sees in T.J. Boyfriend at age seventeen remembers the following: "'My eyes witnessed / dark-skinned / legless men…gold-toothed vendors, / young girls / pinching puss / out of boyfriend's back, / spray-painted mules / with blood-stained hooves / and three feet high / serape-covered women / rocking their meal tickets to sleep'" (28). These sights are supposed to frighten him, and they have the desired effect. The word choice of "witness" implies as if he will go to trail to testify against the crimes of humanity he saw while in Mexico. The conclusion of the trip is that Mexico is a dirty, dangerous place with a culture that he should not want to partake in. It is as if Uncle Eddie wants him to deny his ethnic roots. The ironic reality, though, is that TJ is one of the worst representations of Mexican culture because the impact of white tourists from the United States changed the focus and lifestyle of the city. There is an emphasis to please the outsiders who come to party for a weekend rather than sustain the native populations. Thus, there are extreme situations of poverty for the Mexicans or indigenous populations that live there. Yet, the memories that boyfriend at age seventeen recalls pervade how others treat him as he becomes an adult.

As the poem continues, the boyfriend is now seventeen years old and is in high school. He meets with a nameless counselor, simply referred to as "Mr. A through M" (29).

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[43] I use the colloquialism for Tijuana in deference to the author, who also uses TJ to refer to the city in her poem.

The lack of a title implies that the boyfriend and the counselor are like strangers to each other. He just happens to fall between those two letters of the alphabet. The boyfriend goes for guidance and receives rejection: "'College is unthinkable' / he tells me / 'you better do The Service,' / at the rate you people / are killing each other / you'll be lucky / to get out of high school / ALIVE'" (29). The counselor sees the teenager as a liability. He explains that people in his community kill each other anyway, so he might as well put his death toward a purpose, serving the country. If he signs up for The Service, he can die with honor. As it is, the counselor does not even think he will survive high school with all the gang violence. Thus, the counselor does not want to waste time on a hopeless case as he sees young men of color as criminals. Someone like him should not go to college. Then, they notice another man that looks like the boyfriend at age seventeen: "Another hair-netted kid / wrong pair of numbers / tattooed on brown belly / being dragged away / to waiting police car. / Mr. A through M / announces, / 'This is your culture. / These are your roots. / Now lay in it.' / He then shakes his head / and laughs…at me" (29). The implications are obvious: All men of color look like criminals. That could just as easily be boyfriend at age seventeen. They are interchangeable bodies. Serros emphasizes the idea of culture when she repeats the words spoken by Uncle Eddie when the boy was just seven years old. This is his culture and roots. The encouragement to "lay in it" implies that he should just give up. Literally, he should lay his body down to die because his culture and roots mean nothing but destruction. In fact, it is laughable. This is his shame that directs the type of life that he will lead. It also probably complicates his relationship with the real narrator of the poem, the girlfriend that he explains himself to. For her to understand him and his actions, she needs to recognize his gendered experiences as a man in their community. Whereas women of color are exotic sexual bodies,

men of color are criminalized as dangerous bodies that are killed or locked away. Whether your body is sexualized or criminalized, people of color are controlled by a white reinvention of their history and culture. Decolonial storytelling is important because it gives agency back to the people of color to determine how they present their stories to outsiders.

The last two stanzas of Serros' poem end with an empowering decolonial move. Rather than the boyfriend sharing what others presume is his culture and roots, he reinvents himself. He explains: "'I prefer / ditching 7th period / Econ. class / hiding out / in the football bleachers / getting in touch with my culture / my way / with Lydia the Loadie / Bonnie the Braindead, / smoking cheap Mexican sinse' / taking Physical Graffiti / over territorial graffiti'" (29-30). Some might see what the boyfriend does here as just as bad an activity as others spoken about in the poem. He continues to reinforce stereotypes by ditching classes to smoke it up with others that are lost. However, with the additional information about his background history and the types of pressures and assumptions placed on his mental state, it is no wonder he escapes by using marijuana. He has a counselor that tells him that he is not meant for college. Thus, what is the purpose of attending classes? He also has gang pressures, violence, and other stresses weighing on him, so he seeks a release from it in a controlled environment. There are key phrases where he asserts that, at least here, he makes the choices. He explains that he prefers to do this than be in class. He also emphasizes that it is how he gets in touch with his culture—his way, regardless of whether someone else approves of it or not. The most powerful line is when he says that he takes this Physical Graffiti over territory graffiti. He actively refuses to join a gang, and if it means hiding out under the bleachers at school, at least he stays out of an even worse situation. Though the boyfriend asserts his agency, the final lines of the poem leave the reader frustrated that he

cannot escape the situation he finds himself in: "'This is my culture, / my entertainment, / nothing to laugh over, / This is me'" (30). All his life, people laughed at his situation, his culture. He demands that the reader not laugh at him because this is who he is. It is his culture and his entertainment, and the implication is that this is a situation to cry over rather than laugh at. Frustration and helpless pervade the poem, and the reader is left to wonder at how the girlfriend reacted toward the tragic story that he shared. Was she one of the people laughing at him and his culture? If so, did she stop laughing and to what end? It is as if there is a subtle call to action, but Serros does not explain what needs correcting. Instead, she leaves the reader as well as the girlfriend with a better understanding of men of color hardships so that one can empathize with their situations and still love them.

Culture is a word repeated throughout the poem "What Boyfriend Told Me at Age Seventeen," most often with a negative tone associated with it. This is an intentional technique because Serros mimics Anzaldúa's anger over what she terms "Cultural Tyranny:" "Culture forms our beliefs. We perceive the version of reality that it communicates. Dominant paradigms, predefined concepts that exist as unquestionable, unchallengeable, are transmitted to us through the culture" (38). Culture holds extreme power because it forms people's beliefs, whether they are justified or true conceptions about reality. Thus, dominant paradigms, or cultural beliefs that are incorrect, such as all men of color belong to gangs, can infiltrate people's understandings about life. Cultural tyranny is when these ideologies remain unquestioned, which allows for the continual perpetuation of injustices under the pretext of "culture." Hence, Mr. A through M can excuse his lack of empathy for the unnamed seventeen-year-old boy of color because he cannot help someone whose culture dooms them. This shifts the focus to blaming one's culture, or in this case stereotypes about

someone else's culture, rather than acknowledging the environment and social institutional systems of power that continue to let people of color fall through the cracks. It ignores the inherent racism built into our society, and responsibility remains on the children who fail. Likewise, Uncle Eddie can see his tough education of the boy at age seven as a way of preparing him for the prejudices people will hold about his country of origins. What many people forget is that culture is not a static, unchanging ideology. Younger generations, especially, create their own cultural expressions to counteract against the tyrannical ones. Anzaldúa and Serros create theirs through stories: "My 'stories' are acts encapsulated in time, 'enacted' every time they are spoken aloud or read silently. I like to think of them as performances and not as inert and 'dead' objects (as the aesthetics of Western culture think of art works)" (*Borderlands* 89). The beauty about creating stories is that they encapsulate a time. Yet, they are enacted and read differently in every performance as the period that was captured is alive and changing. It is not a piece of dead history. Thus, decolonial storytelling show the transmutability of life, history, and culture through ambiguous narrations. It questions hegemonic ideologies and misrepresentations at the same time it begs for new interpretations and stories. Thus, boyfriend at age seventeen can take back his history and culture to make something different. He shares it with his girlfriend, and what she will make of it is only known if she continues the story rather than remaining silent.

Having the ability to tell one's story is important. All her writing develops her own decolonized voice, which is tied to her notions about language as part of culture. Her poem "Mi Problema" explores the difficulties that she had with language. Her inability to speak Spanish properly marks her as an outsider to her community. She exemplifies: "My skin is brown / just like theirs, / but now I'm unworthy of the color / 'cause I don't speak Spanish /

the way I should. / Then they laugh and talk about / *mi problema* / in the language I stumble over" (31). She looks brown, but the way she speaks identifies her as not brown enough. She is unworthy of the color because others view her as a vendida, a sellout. She complains about how white people are encouraged to speak Spanish, no matter how poorly. There is always this assumption that "'…he wants to be brown / like us.' / and that is good" (31). This idea repeats in *How to Be a Chicana Role Model* when her family applauds Oprah for being a mainstream entertainer who tries to speak Spanish when Gloria Estefan is on her show in "Role Model Rule Number 5: Respect the 1 Percent." During the interviews with Serros, she stressed that her family had a specific strategy to guarantee success in American society. They wanted her to learn to read and write English very well and explained that Spanish was something she could worry about later: "Don't worry about Spanish. That will come naturally. That will come when you need it because Spanish is in your blood…part of your culture (Personal Interview, April 26, 2012). Yet, that is not the reality of her childhood. She never learns Spanish, and she starts denying her roots—well, I am not a Mexican from Mexico—I am not that type of Mexican. She finds herself distanced and lost, shamed by her culture, or lack thereof. Since it was "part of her blood," Spanish should be natural, but it never is. In the interviews, she admits that she would not consider herself bilingual because when she was living in Mexico she could not converse freely enough, even when it was necessary, such as when she saw a medical doctor. She was often frustrated by her inabilities to get the help that she needed because of a language barrier.

The poem is a confession of her personal shame. Others view her attempts at speaking Spanish as insincere: "My earnest attempts / make me look bad, / dumb. / 'Perhaps she wanted to be white / like THEM.' / and that is bad" (31). In her interviews, she explains

that people blamed her and her family for prioritizing English "to get ahead." Thus, they interpreted her body as less Mexican. Then, when she earnestly attempts to learn the language, she hears the same types of statements about culture as expressed in "What Boyfriend Told Me at Age Seventeen." Culture creates shame because she is culturally deficient. Only her grandmother gives her "permission to learn" (32). Even when she goes to Taxco, Mexico for sixteen weeks, she is called out by the instructor for her deficiency. In addition, she is the oldest student and the only self-identified Mexican American in a group of young white college students. The fact that *Chicana Falsa* was already published at this point only causes more people to talk about her failures at language. They cannot reconcile how someone so successful, a published Chicana author, cannot speak Spanish. She ends "Mi Problema" with a mocking tone as she summarizes: "And then one day, / I'll be a perfected 'r' rolling / tilde using Spanish speaker. / A true Mexican at last!" (32). She acts as if someone can embody a true Mexican, and that person must speak with a perfect Spanish "r" roll. Yet, she knows that this is not reality because culture and language do not determine who is fake versus real.

In *Borderlands/La Frontera*, Gloria Anzaldúa has an entire chapter on language and how it affects Chicanas and Chicanos. "Chapter 5: How to Tame a Wild Tongue" focuses on the importance of a multitude of languages, even ones that are created from others. She explains:

> For a people who are neither Spanish nor live in a country in which Spanish is the first language; for people who live in a country in which English is the reigning tongue but who are not Anglo…what recourse is left to them but to create their own language? …A language which they can connect their identity to, one capable of

> communicating the realities and values true to themselves—a language with terms that are neither *español ni inglés*, but both? (77)

The in-between state of many Chicanas is a decolonial space. Not belonging to either country, not fully feeling comfortable with either language, it only makes sense to create a new language in the spaces that these individuals reside in. Through the creation of a new way of speaking, Chicanas can form the connections of a decolonial existence and reality that is true to what they experience in unorthodox spaces. This is significant because creating languages creates culture. It allows one to regain pride and stay true to a decolonial experience. Serros' writing is a type of language, which empowers her. She uses Spanglish, reinvents grammar, misspells words, uses colloquialisms, and leaves off accents to demonstrate how she creates her own style of language and writing. As a writer, she presents her creative voice to counter hegemonic and deprecating ones. Anzaldúa states: "I will no longer be made to feel ashamed of existing. I will have my voice: Indian, Spanish, white. I will have my serpent's tongue—my woman's voice, my sexual voice, my poet's voice. I will overcome the tradition of silence" (81). Similarly, Serros develops a sense of pride through her writing. Although chains of doubt and insecurity constantly pull her into darkness, she will not drown. She overcomes a "tradition of silence" and speaks out about the various issues that face people like herself. Decolonial storytelling provides a nontraditional avenue where the author can reclaim her voice to create new traditions that are not restricted by the chronologies of time.

The Chicanx author explores her identity in relation to those around her, both within and outside her community. Race relations are a key concern because she notes how people treat her differently because of the color of her skin. she demonstrates her ability to not only

hear her own story but to tell stories in honor of someone else. In the poem "White Owned," she dedicates it: *"for Guillermo Gomez-Peña*" (26). She writes it for Gomez-Peña to honor the realities that he lived. In the poem, there is a mother walking with her child. She scares her child to stay close by explaining that people from Mexico might steal her away, almost like a white version of La Llorona. The author uses color to emphasize race: "Pink mama tugs at pink baby" (26). They do not have names, but they are identified by their fair skin. As the poem progresses, Pink mama explains that "'Spanish people / …from Mexico / They snatch white babies / drag 'em across the border / for pornography, / slave labor, / human sacrifice'" (26). She differentiates between people from Mexico and those north of the border by the color white. Pink mama and pink baby are white. The color of their skin makes them desirable, and it makes pink baby especially valuable. She scares her daughter into thinking that all people from Mexico have nefarious plans for white children. She compounds the horrors by stating that it starts with pornography, transitions into slave labor, and eventually ends with a human sacrifice, which is a negative indigenous reference to Aztecs. The child has no concept of what the mother means until Pink mama shares her prejudices and racist attitudes with her child. Initially, the child asks the mother to explain what she means about people being crazy: "'You mean people / from Spain?'" (26). The child is a blank tablet who picks up her notions of race and social interactions by what she views around her. It will influence how she constructs her identity as an adult. The mother teaches her child the fears she embodies rather than expanding the child's understanding of others.

The entire conversation takes place while the speaker stands in an unemployment line waiting to receive some financial assistance. She listens in horrified silence as these

racist attitudes are passed down to the next generation of children. In *Borderlands*, Anzaldúa states: “But it is not enough to stand on the opposite river bank, shouting questions, challenging patriarchal, white conventions. A counterstance locks one into a duel of oppressor and oppressed; locked in mortal combat, like the cop and the criminal, both are reduced to a common denominator of violence” (100). The narrator stands on the opposite bank from Pink mama and pink baby. She listens to the violence, but she remains silent. She understands that they come from different social realities, but she cannot risk losing her place in line just to educate the ignorant. They are onlookers, and the mother acts like the people who stand in the unemployment line are foreigners that do not deserve financial assistance. The poem focuses on different groups of people but reduces them to a binary of oppressor and oppressed. No one will cross any bridges: “holding the knot in my stomach / and wonder if white boyfriend / will give me beige baby / everyone thinks I stole” (27). The narrator feels sick in her silence. At the same time, she wonders how people will view her if she has children with her white boyfriend. Serros emphasizes color throughout the poem as a border metaphor. The narrator experiences a jarring event that makes her wonder about other possibilities and realities at the same time she feels a gap between her and the white people passing by. Gloria Anzaldúa explains it: “At some point, on our way to a new consciousness, we will have to leave the opposite bank, the split between the two mortal combatants somehow healed so that we are on both shores at once and, at once, see through serpent and eagle eyes” (100-01). The bridging between the two cultures and realities is significant to expanding the way one sees the world. She describes it as a seeing at once through multiple eyes, multiple perspectives. Similarly, Serros expresses the same conclusions with the way a bi-racial or bi-cultural child will disrupt a hegemonic racist

perception. The beige baby will exude a mestiza consciousness that offers avenues of decolonial storytelling and theorizing that will counter the disdain exhibited by Pink mama.

Although Pink mama does not offer violence to the people of color waiting in the unemployment line, racial tensions can manifest into physical confrontations. In the poem "A Belated Victory (for Us)," the narrator is sexually harassed by a ninth-grade boy named Ressie B. The speaker is in seventh grade and a girl; she explains that there is "[n]o such thing as talking back" (43). There is an attitude of silence for the women in this piece. They are not expected to speak up against the harassment but to ignore it, take it quietly. This is an attitude that pervades the generations. She states how her mother handles men who catcall her: "'Hhhhey… / Wanna see something? / Wanna see something real good?' / he taunted me. / I knew what something was / tried to ignore him / the way my mama does / when men / in back of pickup trucks / hiss at her" (42). To some degree, the silence is a form of protection, so as not to provoke the men to go from verbal threats to physical harm. Yet, she is afraid of this boy, and her mother is afraid of the men in the back of pickup trucks. The responsibility to stay safe falls on the women and the boys and men are not held accountable for their inappropriate actions. Even the neighbor, Mrs. Macías, who becomes her "Getaway" also encourages her to ignore the boy: "Quickly, I dived / into a safety net of / torn, faded upholstery. / 'Mexicans / always have the rattiest cars!' / Ressie B. yelled after us. / 'Just ignore him, mi'ja. / He'll never amount to / anything,' / Mrs. Macías predicted" (43). Often, the advice children receive is to ignore the bullies rather than report them. Boys like Ressie B. get their racist and sexist attitudes passed down through the social interactions they have in their everyday life, most likely a father-figure. Unfortunately, if unquestioned and the behavior is excused, it will not be long before a boy like Ressie B. becomes like the

men in the back of the pickup trucks. The essential point is that this type of behavior should not be ignored, and women should not have to just deal with it.

Part of this representation of the Chicana woman and her behavior relates to patriarchal historical stories from the Chicana and Chicano movement. Maylei Blackwell describes this Chicana woman through a description provided by Alma García in *¡Chicana Power!*: "The construction of gender for women in the movement was based on what Alma García has called the 'Ideal Chicana,' an ideal that 'glorified Chicanas as strong, long-suffering women who had endured and kept Chicano culture and family intact'" (47). This representation is not indicative of all women, and it also puts an unfair responsibility of maintaining family dynamics through the sacrifice of one's own body, much like the example from "Dead Pig's Revenge" when Aunt Dolly stays up all night chopping while her husband receives all the praise for the success of their lonchería. In "A Belated Victory (for Us)," She explains why Ressie B.'s actions against her where significant: "But I was afraid. / Afraid of this kid…who laughed after yelling, / 'La Migra!' / in the E.S.L. classes. / Was he right? / Will I own a ratty car / when I'm older? / Will I always be afraid of / big, white men, / always looking for a car to flag down?" (43-44). This fear stays with her as she grows up. There is a lack of confidence in one's ability to succeed. She is afraid that everything Ressie B. says is true. Why else would he say it? And she sees examples in her community that support these fears. These ideologies take shape in her mind as a reality of her culture. She must distance herself from this negative stereotype lest she also perpetuate it. The poem takes on narrative qualities when it propels to twelve years later. Serros does not want to leave the reader in uncertainty about how time changes our perceptions. Time offers moments for progress and growth if one's mind is opened to the new messages that resound

around us. Thus, she sees Ressie B. still spouting his same hate-filled speech. He has not changed much over the years. He still rides a bicycle like the one when he was in ninth grade. The speaker, on the other hand, has transformed. She sees him for the pathetic man that he is, who never made anything of his life. The fact that some boys are simply angry boys equated a belated victory for all women: "And suddenly, / I was no longer afraid / of him" (45). She went to college and learned to empower herself. She published books, went to Mexico to learn Spanish—simply put, she lived. Ressie B. stayed stuck in their childhood town, riding a bike, and bouncing checks. Her decolonized voice allows her to step outside the binary of a colonizer and a colonized. She can view society and her own life in a manner that does not reify traditional hegemonic norms. Although Ressie B. still spouts the same narrative of anger and hatred, the speaker refuses to engage in the conversation or story. She realizes that his narrative is not the only one that people ascribe to, and it holds no power over her own stories and experiences. He cannot hurt her.

"A Belated Victory (for Us)" expands a long period of time, from seventh grade to twelve years later. There are key events that stand out in the poem, surrounded in a silent fog of violence. Yet, the poem ends happily with this assumption that everything worked out because the speaker kept her mouth shut and lived her life. It presents an unrealistic view of gendered and racial experiences between people with a false happily-ever-after fantasy. Although things worked out between the speaker and Ressie B., we do not learn about the other women, such as her mother and Mrs. Macías. More than ever, these types of overt aggressive attitudes are encouraged and excused, and they do lead to visible violence enacted on the bodies and minds of people from our community. Anzaldúa explains the fear in even more detail in *Borderlands/La Frontera*:

> The world is not a safe place to live in. We shiver in separate cells in enclosed cities, shoulders hunched, barely keeping the panic below the surface of the skin, daily drinking shock along with our morning coffee, fearing the torches being set to our buildings, the attacks in the streets. Shutting down. Woman does not feel safe when her own culture, and white culture, are critical of her, when the males of all races hunt her as prey. (42)

There is a disconnect between peoples, and this is a dangerous state to find themselves in. They cannot protect each other when they are too busy living in their own separate cells, staying silent about the violence that occurs. It creates a mindset when one shuts down and gives up. Certain stories take hold as absolute truths and are passed along to newer generations as a single approach to understanding society and their lives. There is no space that offers safety, empowerment, and a togetherness where people can fight back with their own narratives that exist simultaneously with the negative and destructive ones. Decoloniality creates a new space where multiple stories are told outside the mainstream chronology. It breaks the reigning silence and isolation. Anzaldúa demands an accounting, one must hold the other responsible for their actions:

> What I want is an accounting with all three cultures—white, Mexican, Indian. I want the freedom to carve and chisel my own face, to staunch the bleeding with ashes, to fashion my own gods out of my entrails. And if going home is denied me then I will have to stand and claim my space, making a new culture—*una cultura mestiza*[44]—

[44] Italics are in the original text.

with my own lumber, my own bricks and mortar and my own feminist architecture. (44)

Unfortunately, Serros' poem does not provide this type of conclusion. The narrator overcomes Ressie B.'s harassment through a forced silence. He is never held accountable for his actions. By the end of the poem, he is the same hateful and racist person he was in the past. Neither character moves completely from the spaces of blood and hurt to create an empowered space for everyone to grow and thrive in. Anzaldúa admits that this accounting might never occur, and that is exactly what happens in the poem. Only the narrator enters a new space where she stands and claims her existence as an older and wiser Chicanx. Her decolonized voice gives her empowerment and agency against those that treat her racially and culturally inferior.

In the poem "Johnwannabechicano," a speaker named John struggles with his own appearance because he desires to become a Chicano, but no one sees him as thus. The title of the poem implies doubt—this John person is a "wannabe," which is a colloquial word that means fake. He is just as bad as a vendida. The narrator identifies who he is in the first line of the poem: "John Michael Smith, II is / a Chicano" (33). This bold statement counters the insecurities implied by the title. His full name sounds white, but the speaker asserts that he is still a Chicano. The narrator describes the ways he claims this identity through his daily routine: "pockets his blond hair / into black hair net, / stuffs skinny pink legs / into stiff beige khakis, / severely creased" (33). John wears a hair net and pressed khaki pants as an homage to a mix of a pachuco and barrio expressions of style. It is difficult to tell if he really embodies the attributes of a Chicano or if he only plays the role from what he thinks a Chicano is supposed to act like. His parents do not get his style or attitude as "he slurps

canned *menudo* / ignoring his mother's French toast / and John Michael Smith, II's / stinging silence" (33). The speaker describes John as "pink," so his phenotype is white. His parents are assimilated into a white culture that they want him to emulate as well, such as eating a French toast breakfast. However, the author explains that his consciousness awoke to this new identity at least two years ago, and he will not let it go.

Midway through the poem, the reader learns that his name is really Juan Miguel, but his parents whitened it to John to deemphasize his foreign roots. They want him to belong to the white dominant society, but Juan Miguel refuses. For example, his mother packs healthy lunches that include "chicken salad, Ambrosia Surprise" when he wants "*tacos de sesos*" (34). Food is another expression of his culture and roots, and he does not want "his homeboys" to tease him about what his mother serves him in his junior high lunches (34). Anzaldúa addresses food as a tie to one's identity in *Borderlands/La Frontera*. She explains: "There are more subtle ways that we internalize identification, especially in the forms of images and emotions. For me food and certain smells are tied to my identity, to my homeland" (83). For Juan, food becomes a very visible way to identify as Chicano. He rejects the "white" food in front of his homeboys and instead actively eats certain foods that are tied to his new identity. He creates these new stories with his experiences and rebellions against a mainstream ideology that wants everyone in the United States to melt or homogenize into one generic American citizen. As Juan bikes to school, he recognizes the labor that is usually invisible to white eyes: "He peddles his lowered Schwinn Stingray / past rows of mini mansions, / lawn jockeys, / leaf blowers attached / to the backs of dark-skinned

gardeners. / '¡Hola! / ¡Buenas Dias![45]'" (34). He recognizes his privilege as a fairer skinned Chicano. He lives in one of these mini mansions that the dark-skinned gardeners work at. Yet, he sees them. He sees them with heavy equipment attached to their backs, stooped over in their labors. He takes the time to greet them, not in English but in Spanish. Through his hail, he gives recognition of "the other" who is denied her or his subjectivity, ignored as inexpensive labor. In *Giving an Account of Oneself* (2005), Judith Butler states:

> When we come up against the limits of any epistemological horizon and realize that the question is not simply whether I can or will *know* you, or whether I can be *known*, we are compelled to realize as well that "you" qualify in the scheme of the human within which I operate, and that no "I" can begin to tell its story without asking: "Who are you?" "Who speaks to me?" "To whom do I speak when I speak to you?" (134).

Butler explains that it goes deeper than wondering if the other can know you or if you can know the other. She says that the very questions we ask about "you" and "I" equate the beginning of identity and decolonial storytelling—both "you" and "I" exist only in relation to each other and how we explain ourselves to each other. Thus, John's story expands to include "his people / His new familia" (34). The poem ends with the knowledge that John knows his place in society only in relation to this new family that he personally chose. Serros begins the poem with the assertion that he is a Chicano, and she ends the poem with the same line.

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[45] The author did not use accents with these Spanish phrases.

The parents in "Johnwannabechicano" are indifferent to the Chicano experience and lifestyle. To them, it is more of an irritation because their son does not act the way they want him to. The opposite reaction to indifference is guilt. The poem "Mr. and Mrs. White Guilt" addresses how one white couple finds a way to alleviate their white guilt for having white privilege in their lives. One way they help the communities of color is by offering opportunities for artists to display their art in exclusive galleries. They consider themselves "Patrons of the Arts" as they "open their back door / to every minority issue / they can get their / jeweled freckled hands on" (55). They have the money and the means to help those less fortunate then themselves. Their philanthropic deeds make them look good in their communities, but Serros is still critical. She points out that they only open their back doors to their charity cases. She also emphasizes their privilege that they show off with the freckled jewels on their hands, which emphasizes the class distinctions between the patrons of the art and those that are meagerly fighting for the pittances that they donate to receive their tax breaks. These patrons of the art look for a specific demographic to support: "incarcerated, / deprived, / abused, / suffering…African / Latino, / Third world kitsch" (55). They want the lowest denominator who will just be grateful that someone with such class and prestige sees some worth in them. It is a power trip for the patrons because, without them, these people of color would remain in their isolated cages. The truth of what they want is revealed in the final stanza: "As long as it stays in artistic format, / and as long as they enter / through the back door" (56). The white patrons of the arts do not want to know anything about the people whose art they support. It must remain solely on the art, especially if the art becomes popular and sells well. They also need to use the back door, like the servants, because the wealthy white patrons do not want the people of color "artists" to

disturb the neighbors who probably see them as criminals. The decolonial poem elucidates that appearances are often more explicit than actions. Mr. and Mrs. White Guilt act like they are in a post-racist mindset, but their actions imply otherwise. They are selfishly assuaging their own guilt and are still capitalizing on bodies of color for their own profit and status gain.

The reason Mr. and Mrs. White Guilt act the way they do about the artists they help is because they still see themselves as better than people of color. They have certain attitudes about how they really act if you get to know them. They are lowbrow human beings even if their art can reflect high culture. For example, in the poem "Mr. Boom Boom Man," the man of color drives a "lowered Nissan mini truck" with "automated tinted window" (58). It appears as if he tries to mimic the lowriders. He drives a loud, lowered truck. He has unusual customized decorations on it, as if he wants to draw the viewer's attention to his sweet ride. Serros notices him: "I see his calling card / baby lavender twinkle lights / hugging a chrome-plated license plate / five-digit proclamation: OO-BAD / coming at *me*!" (57). Everything about his vehicle presentation is garish because the narrator sees him as brash. This is not the type of man to associate with, more likely the type that Mr. and Mrs. White Guilt would force to use their servants entrance to enter their home. He screams his masculinity at all who see him, from the ridiculous license plate to the hickies around his neck. Mr. Boom Boom Man wants to intimidate the protagonist, and he does as he bears down on her. She italicizes "me" to show how afraid and uncomfortable he makes her. She impatiently waits for the light to change because she does not want to interact with him. In *Beyond Machismo*, Aída Hurtado states: "Machismo involves men displaying a hypermasculinity that thrives on power and domination and that is threatened by

weakness…with an underlaying tendency toward physical domination and abuse of those who fail to live within the parameters of their perspective Mexican masculinity" (55-56). Mr. Boom Boom Man displays his hypermasculinity so that other men as well as women know how powerful he is. He thrives on the attention, and, thus, will continue to harass a woman that does not want to talk with him. He cannot show any weakness or else it means that he is less of a man. Of course, the speaker recognizes that she is not like the "cool girls" who "like the cars that go: / BOOM BA BOOM" (58). In the poem, she implies that she wishes she could be like them. Yet, she maintains her silence even when he calls her a "deaf bitch" for not speaking to him when he asks her questions (58). Just like in the poem "Belated Victory (for Us)," She keeps her head down and speeds away without causing any trouble. She imagines what she would say, about how she would tell him off in Pig Latin, but that she "…don't have the time / (or the balls)" (59). His hypermasculinity intimidates her into silence. If she does not interact with him, he cannot hurt her. She wishes he would fade away with his loud music, but, in the end, it is Serros who fades away into the distance. After all, she takes off as soon as the light turns green and tries to put that uncomfortable situation out of sight and out of mind by distancing herself. Now, she can focus on herself and her needs rather than the overblown ego of Mr. Boom Boom Man. They are both trapped in colonial ways of being and acting, yet the speaker wants to break into a new space of understanding that is outside the destructive images that she was taught. A decolonial space will give her the freedom to determine what her needs really are rather than engaging in a performance to belong with a perceived community.

Serros is a bit of an enigma in all her writing. It is difficult to tell who she really is because she is too busy trying to figure it out herself through her decolonized voice. To

explore her identity, she writes a poem titled “The Real Me.” It is about how she interacts with the neighbor kids who are tripping on acid next door. Because of the drugs, they see the world differently. They see “in full color spectrum” (60). It is almost as if they have a second sight. Everything is intensified, and now she does not want to step outside her house because she is afraid: “for fear that their / almighty psychedelic power / will enable them to see / right through ME, / the real me” (60). Me is capitalized, implying that there is a different self that she presents to others, a self that is not authentic. The real speaker is private, and she does not want to share it with anyone, especially the neighbors that she sees on a daily basis. Her sense of self reminisces back to Anzaldúa’s description of la mestiza in *Borderlands*:

> She has discovered that she can’t hold concepts or ideas in rigid boundaries. The borders and walls that are supposed to keep the undesirable ideas out are entrenched habits and patterns of behavior; these habits and patterns are the enemy within. Rigidity means death. Only by remaining flexible is she able to stretch the psyche horizontally and vertically. (101)

Serros’ decolonial writing reflects the sentiments of la mestiza. Concepts and ideas cannot be held in rigid boundaries because that is not the way women of color understand their lives. They are flexible and move in and out of borders, real or imagined. The lack of direction is part of the power inherent in the ability to read history and culture not contained by the strictures of a hegemonic understanding of time. So, with all this in mind, one might imagine that the author ends her poem “The Real Me” with a strong, philosophical message. Characteristic of her exclusive flavor of decolonial writing, the author adds humor to demonstrate how her own fears and insecurities are the same as many other women: “the

real me: / gray chalky skin stuffed / into J.C. Penny panties / with broken elastic" (60). The real narrator is a woman who wears budget clothing that is barely holding together. She is the type of woman that does not spend enough time on self-care, implied by the gray chalky skin, and she is embarrassed by the realities of her outward appearances. Hence, she, like many other women, is secretly concerned about how others view her outward appearances even though she is educated and intelligent enough to know that it should not matter. On the other hand, this glimpse into her insecurities allows more everyday women to connect with her writing, which bridges the variety of experiences everyone walks with in their lives.

Serros continues to explore her sense of self in "The Best Years of My Life." This poem focuses on her time at Río Mesa High School and the anxieties that she faced at what she equates to a holding cell. As apparent in "The Real Me," the narrator is afraid of exposure, and high school has a way of turning into the worst years of one's life. Part of the discrepancies between the experiences is that when students do not worry about othering factors, such as race, class, gender, sex, and ethnicity, then they can focus more on pleasurable engagements. During our interview sessions, she talked about the anxieties that she experienced in terms of school, and Río Mesa High was one of the schools that she struggled with.

From the beginning of the poem, the reader instantly understands that the speaker's tone is one of worry and dread. She does not want to go to this high school. Her body physically gets sick at the thought of having to go to school. Once at school, she explains everything that she is up against: "battled / acid damaged 'nam vets / who taught calculus / Bio lab instructors flirting / with wealthy white girls / whose fathers owned country clubs / they so badly wanted to join…Monica Winters wanting / badly / to kick my ass / 'cause I

wouldn't give in / to the pharmaceuticals / she carried / in her stolen Gucci bag" (62). The descriptions that she provides mimic the confusion and difficulties experienced by NietoGomez in the interviews she had with Maylei Blackwell. There is no support network in place for the students of color. It leads to depression: "Like many in her cohort, NietoGomez's isolation, homesickness, and invisibility led to depression. Finding others like her on campus helped her survive, and the movement provided a haven" (Blackwell 58). What happens if you cannot find the network that helps you survive the systems of oppression and depression? The infrastructures and the teachers, even the counselors as noted by the poem "What Boyfriend Told Me at Age Seventeen," expect people of color to fail. There are studies written about the educational dropout rate, and it is very high for students of color. This is not because they are not intelligent enough or capable to succeed. This happens because, to survive, they leave the system of oppression. It is another form of agency that they can enact. In *The Handbook of Latinos and Education: Theory, Research, and Practice* edited by Ernique G. Murillo, Jr. et. al., Aída Hurtado, Karina Cerbántez, and Michael Eccleston have a chapter titled "Infinite Possibilities, Many Obstacles: Language, Culture, Identity, and Latino/a Educational Achievement." In this chapter, they analyze the dropout rates for people of color. When Latinas/os enter elementary school, they are fully enrolled at 100 students out of 100. By high school, that rate decreases by more than half, 54/51. The number continues to decrease, especially for those who graduate with a doctorate degree being less than half a percent. Serros' short story gives a glimpse into the hardships that teens of color navigate that other students do not face because they are racially colorblind.

The fun and exciting days that occur at school, such as Hawaiian, Pajama, or even a '60's day, cannot hide the ugly realities and experiences that teens of color have because of race, gender, sexuality, and class differences. These theme days allow students a chance to play a part, a masquerade, to imagine they are someone different. The illusion only masks and compounds the issues. Students of color always return the next day, unless they drop out, as themselves. They continue to deal with unsafe spaces without any decolonial tools for empowerment and agency. The author clarifies:

> How would I explain / to Tia[46] Annie's confused hands / to sew me a costume / portraying me / the real me / latch-key emptiness / suicidal contemplation / internal jellyfish canker sores / stinging and sucking / the last of my school girl esteem / nothing no / over the counter chocolate chalk / or weekend in Ojai could ever / soothe coat and protect?" (63).

Her vulnerability exudes from the poem with phrases such as "latch-key emptiness" and "suicidal contemplation." She is lonely, unfettered, and empty. She thinks about death. She has little school girl esteem, and there is nothing that can soothe or protect her now. She barely survives the experiences in high school. One way she survives is by sneaking away to be by herself: "to the girl's bathroom / to find an empty stall / a toilet to sit on / to wait / and wait / for the three o'clock bell to ring" (63). The final lines of the poem remind the reader of "La Letty" when the narrator waits and wait for Tish to come home. Here, she waits and waits for the bell to ring and save her. Even as an adult, when she was asked to speak at her

[46] Serros does not use an accent for Tía Annie's name.

high school in *How to Be a Chicana Role Model*, she feels the anxiety come back because it was a traumatic time that influenced a lot of her writing—low expectations, pressures, and a lack of resources to turn to for support and help during the difficult years. Her decolonial writing is how she overcomes these lingering hardships and emotions.

As she tries to shield herself from others, she has another influential moment in her high school years that has the opposite effect. In the poem "Planned Parenthood: Age Sixteen," she exposes herself with an almost coming of sexuality story rather than a coming of age story. She was told from various family members and mentors to stay away from what her catechism teacher called "the sin clinic" (64). This euphemism is a politer way to describe it as a place no Catholic girl should attend. The poem begins with an even stronger warning to keep her from going to Planned Parenthood. She calls it "[t]he devil's workshop" (64). Obviously, the speaker does not agree with these blasphemous and negative connotations about a place that many people, especially lower-income and people of color, rely on for sexual and healthcare needs and educational materials. It is not only her catechism teacher that warns her away but her Aunt Chávez and Aunt Marla. Yet, she remains at the clinic: "I'm the minority / in a sea of blond and green eyes. / Equal only 'cause / separately, we share / student status, potential fear, / having a lover (or two)" (65). At this Planned Parenthood, she stands out as an anomaly. She is the only person of color in the clinic. Yet, she feels equal with these other girls because they are all students, and they all fear entering sexual maturity with no one to help navigate them. She learns to accept that she is a sexual woman of color. She claims this identity at the end of the poem in her answer to the questionnaire that the clinicians give her: "I take the questionnaire / cross out 'other' / to pencil in 'woman of color,' / and wait for my name to be called" (65). The speaker knows

who she is, and she is not represented in their whitewashed questionnaire that does not recognize women of color as having their own experiences. These experiences merit their own categorization, and she writes that in. Anzaldúa also expresses a sexual awakening at the end of the Coatlicue state: "And someone in me takes matters into our own hands, and eventually, takes dominion over serpents—over my own body, my sexual activity, my soul, my mind, my weaknesses and strengths. Mine. Ours. Not the heterosexual white man's or the colored man's or the state's or the culture's or the religion's or the parents'—just ours, mine" (*Borderlands* 73). As described here, the speaker feels someone inside herself take over. She is tired of the misrepresentation and the invisibility. She dominates the questionnaire. This moment represents her exerting control over her own body, her sexual activity, her soul, and mind. Like Anzaldúa, at age sixteen she was taking the first steps into a new state of being and thinking, a space that is dark, scary, and lonely, but that can lead one into the light of a new existence and understanding of the self in relation to others. The decolonial poem is one avenue that lets such work get done.

Blurring the lines that creates borders is an important task for Serros. As a decolonized voice, she reads situations differently. She opens them to multiple avenues of interpretations to complicate knowledge production. In the poem "El Cielo or Bust," she explores ideas about life and death because her great aunt is about to die. To access the next phase of her life, she must pass "a uniformed woman / in rosary beads and name badge" who brings "[t]he wafer / the key, / that will unlock that gate, / her final destination, / last trip, / no senior discount needed to / *El Cielo*" (40). The Catholic wafer, the body of Christ, is a metaphor for a key that will unlock her mind to a new way of thinking. Her "final destination" is significant because it will take her to departed family members. The speaker

believes she will meet up with her aunt again: "'cause someday, at the gate, / Great aunt Linda, / Great uncle Willie, / and Warlord / will be ready and awake / waiting to welcome ME" (41). The speaker lists her departed family members as if she creates a family tree. Knowing her family's history is important for her to enter a new way of thinking, to become free like *El Cielo*. *El Cielo* acts as a metaphor for a borderless existence. As Gloria Anzaldúa expresses: "Deep in our hearts we believe that being Mexican has nothing to do with which country one lives in. Being Mexican is a state of soul—not one of mind, not one of citizenship. Neither eagle nor serpent, but both. And like the ocean, neither animal respects borders" (*Borderlands* 84). Rather than saying "heaven," the speaker represents it in Spanish as *El Cielo*. Once they make it to *El Cielo*, they will be able to look at their identity as a multifaceted ideology that can be everything at once. This understanding of self has nothing to do with where one lives, the corporeal planes of one's existence. Anzaldúa states, it "is a state of soul" that ignores borders. This is what decoloniality provides. It is a new way of understanding knowledge and stories that allow not only authors but readers to enter spaces of understanding that are nontraditional. Thus, once the speaker is in the next realm with her aunt, a place that many cannot logically understand, the border illusions will disintegrate to allow her to create new stories and beliefs that represents the complicated histories of her family.

Though "El Cielo or Bust" presents another plane of existence where family members eagerly await one's arrival, the truth is that her family acts like a sitcom on television. In the story "The Grudge-Holders," the author playfully explores family antics and how they can bear grudges even through death. She takes her friend Angela to her Great-grandpa Louie's funeral. Along the way, she explains to Angela that they will need to

be careful because her family is full of grudge-holders. Angela does not believe her because death is supposed to bring families together. The speaker laughs and says: "'You don't know *my* family…. [I]t's only certain ones, but their stubborn blood taint the rest, makes everyone sick. The little ones catch on early, and the tradition is handed down generation to generation…'" (66-67). Serros explains that her family is stubborn, and the younger family members mimic what their elders do. Thus, it becomes a tradition to bear a grudge against certain members of the family. This ideology alludes to *How to Be a Chicana Role Model* and "Role Model Rule Number 5: Respect the One Percent." At the end of that rule, she maintains her own grudge against the family members who do not respect Uncle Charlie's request to never pay to see a movie where non-Latinas/os play Latina/o roles. That was a lonely Christmas, yet, it was always the principle of the matter that was significant.

Angela does not understand what the protagonist means because she sees this as misplaced pride. This is the first indication that the reader receives that Angela is not Mexican: "'Mexicans are so funny. It's always a pride thing with you guys.' 'Not pride,' I corrected. 'Principle, it's the principle of the matter'" (67). The speaker then goes on a long exposition about how principle of the matter is different from a vague pride reference. She points out various family members and tell the stories about the grudges they hold against each other. Finally, she admits that she even partakes of the grudges because she herself holds a grudge against Aunt Alma for something that she said about Beatrice, her mother: "'I mean, right there my mother is dying and she says,' 'I knew this was coming. Your mother never took care of herself properly and who's really suffering? Her? No. Me? No. *It's you*, that's who…all alone in the world. Your mother did this to you'" (69). She holds a grudge against Alma, and, now that she cooked all the food at the funeral gathering, she

refuses to eat it. At a time when she already felt lost and alone, Alma's words about her mother hurt. Decolonial storytelling allows simultaneous stories to exist at the same time and space despite whether they are positive or negative ones. They complement and contradict each other. The narratives are difficult to understand as each storyteller's truth is different. Yet, all versions need to exist because they deconstruct hegemonic narrative structures that privilege some over others.

By the end of the short story, the narrator reveals that grudges are not just a matter within her own family. As the friends sit alone and eat their burgers, Angela gets extremely mad at her for messing up the burger order, just like she messed up Angela's cake for her eighteenth birthday. Angela makes a scene: "She threw the hamburger into my lap and ran to my grandma's bathroom…'Go ahead, run away!' I yelled after her, 'I have nothing to be sorry about, NOTHING. Baby…big baby wannabe grudge-holder and you aren't even Mexican!'" (69). The scene and dialogue that she uses to describe the funeral proceedings seem like a moment from a sitcom. None of her family pays attention to the drama or Angela's outburst as she leaves. They are all used to these silly antics, and everyone is too busy holding their own grudges to care about any new grudges that develop. The truth is, all the grudges mean nothing when you are dead: "And my Great grandpa Louie, sat in heaven, looking down, laughing at us all" (70). Death marks a transition from the physical realm to a new state where the mind and body disconnect. It represents a type of absence at the same time she speculates that Louie enjoys himself by watching the petty squabbles on Earth. With her usual flair and humor, she familiarizes the reader with antics from her family at the same time she broadens the scope for a non-Mexican audience, through Angela's own faux grudge. Even though Angela is not part of the speaker's family, her story becomes as

important to the narrative as all the ones that the protagonist shares. Decolonial storytelling creates bridges for all types of people to access different communities in ways that will hopefully help them understand each other outside of hegemonic ideologies of "the other."

Serros' humor is a tool that she uses to draw all types of readers into a type of story that they might usually pass on reading. She wields it like a master craftsperson. Before one realizes it, they are thinking about race, ethnicity, class, gender, and sexuality at the same time they are holding their stomachs laughing over a telenovela plot. The poem "Dear Diary" exemplifies such a quality to it as it is a rather light-hearted piece about truths that her current beau cannot stomach. Her lover is sick outside her window: "I got up from bed / and saw out the window / my newest lover / balancing on bent knees, / vomiting in the landlord's garden" (46). The action is in media res. Why is her lover outside throwing up all over the garden? Angela speculates that the diary strikes again. Apparently, she writes some hard truths in the journal that no one can stomach: "'Found your diary, didn't he? / And just like the others / took advantage of your sound sleep / and read the thing, / didn't he?'" (46). She refuses to admit that this is what happens. She is too caught up watching him spew the spaghetti and wine dinner all over the place. It has such an acidic smell that her own stomach turns. It is no surprise that she refuses to discuss the contents of the diary entry because of "Role Model Rule Number 6: Breaking the Major Rule" from *How to Be a Chicana Role Model*. Diaries are sacred places to work out deep thoughts and emotions without the fear of a reader's interpretation. They are extremely private and should never be read by others unless you want the type of drama that the speaker must deal with—a "man" who acts like a little boy. His disappointed masculinity does not matter anymore, though, because she is done with him: "We sipped our coffee / watched my new ex-lover, wipe

mouth / swagger to parked convertible / and slowly drive away" (47). She changes her diction and now refers to the stranger outside the garden as her "new ex-lover." The speaker is ready for him to leave. She could care less about ever seeing his face again, so Angela's comforting words about "'there'll be others'" fall on deaf ears (47). Angela plays the role of the supportive best friend who takes the side of the wronged girlfriend. Yet, she does not join the act. She is already over the whole scene. Her sardonic humor expresses what really upsets her about the entire situation "I saw the yellow belly lining clusters / he left behind, 'Yeah,' I agreed, / 'but it was this rose bush / I liked best'" (47). The man's feelings mean nothing to her. She does not need to check if he is ok after he stumbles away. Instead, she is saddened by the fact that he ruined the beautiful roses outside her window, which she liked the best. The reader is left with many unanswered questions about the entire exchange in the poem. What did the ex-lover read that was so terrible that he tossed his dinner in the rose garden? How often does this happen to Serros? Is she cruel for not showing remorse or concern? What about the comment of loving the rose bush best? The reader cannot know the answers because "Dear Diary" is about the secrets and emotions that one writes that are meant to stay in the private realm. The author offers the reader a space to theorize other scenarios and missing lines to the poem, which is a decolonial storytelling technique. Readers can participate in the creative act at the same time they reminisce and laugh about their own failed relationships. After all, everyone surely has a significant other throwing up in the flower garden story from their life that they can share while at a party. As an author, Serros encourages others to tell their own stories, even people who probably do not see themselves as storytellers. The decolonial approach broadens the empowerment and agency that the author and readers have. Serros' "Dear Diary" uses humor to create the decolonial

space for people to relate to each other in a new realm of understanding, even about trivial topics, such as ex-lovers.

Chicana Falsa and Other Stories of Death, Identity, and Oxnard represents years of struggle, time, and effort. The author's emotions cover a wide spectrum of possibilities, and, by the time the reader closes the back cover to the slim volume, it feels as if a roller coaster ride just ended. Without the dedication and unwavering belief of her mother, this collection might not exist. Her decolonial voice is one that encompasses many registers of tones. Ultimately, what she does differently than other writers are present the cacophony of beliefs in a chaotic and untamed space where new insights about race, ethnicity, gender, sexuality, and class are produced. It is an exploration into identity and subjectivity, not just of the writer, but everyone she creates in her poems and stories. She stiches different threads of storytelling and layers them to create bridges that open into wide spaces where one's mind can wander and think. She decolonizes notions about authenticity, familial expectations, motherhood, friendships, and family histories. Her writing is dynamic as she decolonizes her mind without sacrificing the pure pleasure and enjoyment of the reading experience. The writing process, using specific narrative techniques, such as humor, is a significant approach to understand her own issues outside the constraints of chronology. Thus, she can discuss the most minute topics or ideas and still receive immense revelations from them. Ultimately, her writing is for herself, but she lets the reader come along and enjoy the ride. She represents a decolonial excursion into different ways to tell stories, through her genre bending techniques, and she blends them in and out of time and reality. She mixes facts and fictions from her life in a nonchronological and nontraditional format to unground the reader from traditional ways of looking at a text. Her presentation brings marginalized stories to the

center of a text as relevant and worth the time to consider by completely removing them from the traditional timeline into a new and chaotic space. Hopefully, the reader is left with a type of guidebook that offers the space to wander aimlessly but not without a purpose. Wandering is not destructive or negative. It is the disconnection from one's self as she or he relates to others. Her stories encourage interactions with other types of people to promote social change. To understand the self, you must understand the other. Her book offers one bridge to begin such a discussion.

Conclusion: Define the Undefinable with Decolonial Storytelling

"I feel very powerful. I feel very strong. I feel inclusion almost…"

My final chapter concludes my research and reiterates the major theoretical points that I made in my preceding chapters. I offer insights into how this research is a unique contribution to scholarly thought. I also explore other avenues where this research can transcend to further solidify Serros as a decolonial writing voice in different fields of study. Through the continued discussion of theorists who are not traditionally considered decolonial authors, such as Judith Butler, I exemplify how all types of narratives exist and elucidate new understandings from each other because of their interactions in a decolonial and unorthodox space.

At the end of *Giving an Account of Oneself* (2003), Judith Butler leaves the reader with a thought-provoking message. It is one that deeply influences the way I interpret decolonial storytelling:

> To be undone by another is a primary necessity, an anguish, to be sure, but also a chance—to be addressed, claimed, bound to what is not me, but also to be moved, to be prompted to act, to address myself elsewhere, and so to vacate the self-sufficient "I" as a kind of possession. If we speak and try to give an account from this place, we will not be irresponsible, or, if we are, we will surely be forgiven. (136)

Butler stresses that when one tells a story, one must be "undone." To be undone means to deconstruct the self to recognize the other. It is an awareness of space and place, of movement, and the call to a type of action, one that hopefully changes the world to be a better place. Serros enacts this process as part of her decolonial writing. She uses genre bending and other decolonial techniques to create unique genre creations that cannot easily

be categorized. She explores her sense of self in moments of poignant anguish that are tied with to a unique ability to see humor, irony, and satire in the painful experiences of her life. She is a nepantla author, part identity and part cultural politics. She straddles multiple places because she is multivocal. For example, in her poem "Annie Says," she elucidates the disregard Annie has about her niece's desire to write at the same time she undermines the perspective by showing, with the very creation of the poem, that the niece can and does write. Serros is subversive in her writing space and through her decolonized voice and storytelling, she constantly moves her positionality as one that rejects, accepts, and thinks about the provocative ideas that people carry. She is a person that is in a constant state of becoming, and she allows the reader to enter her mind and space through the poetry and prose that she shares. It is a powerful way to explore not only ourselves but ourselves in relation to the other.

Visually, decolonial storytelling is like a DNA helix with an endless continuum of narrative strings.[47] Rather than a single strand that flows in a unilateral direction, there are numerous strands that layer above, blow, and between the original strand. The multiplicity of strands creates a storytelling matrix that flows in many directions. When viewed from only one angle, one cannot understand its full shape or destination. A decolonial voice broadens the scope and allows for the lack of structure to transform into multiple ways of viewing a story that yield different and significant insights about life and society. Stories do not need to have a beginning, middle, and end. They need to have a purpose, such as

[47] See Figure 1.

providing an escape from everyday struggles. However, this common perception about narratives is undermined in many reader-response studies. For example, Janice Radway concludes in her definitive study *Reading the Romance: Women, Patriarchy, and Popular Literature* (1991) that romance readers cannot exclusively state what they receive from reading this genre. She admits to an ambiguity in the results of her study:

> If in concluding these chapters, the reader remains unsure as to whether the romance should be considered fundamentally conservative on the one hand or incipiently oppositional on the other, that is not surprising…. Although the indistinctness is perhaps frustrating because it hinders the elaboration of a single conclusive statement about the meaning and effect of the romance, it is also an indistinctness born of ambiguity resulting from the planned superimposition or double exposure of multiple images. These images are themselves produced by the several perspectives brought to bear upon the complicated, polysemic event known as romance reading. (209)

Her study was supposed to determine what romance readers gain from their reading experiences—a conservative message that reinforces hegemonic ideals about heterosexual relationships or an oppositional counter to these misconceptions about the genre. Imagine her surprise when she was confronted with double exposures of multiple images. They produced a different conclusion that was ambiguous, which did not answer her initial research question. She admits that her results are frustrating because many want a single conclusive statement to point to the success of a study. Although no one would categorize Serros as a romance author, her writing creates ambiguity with her own numerous exposures of multiple images and themes, such as the way she views her mother and father. She is

complicated and polysemic, which is how she forms real connections between distinct groups of people that are racially and socially different.

Serros has a very unorthodox and unconventional style that balks categorization in any specific genre. The ability to genre bend and act as a chameleon with her writing allows the author to reach wider audiences. Her polyphony of form allows her works to exist in multiple spaces and levels. Radway's conclusions mirror my own about Serros: She does not provide a conclusive statement about topics such as genre, humor, role models, Chicana falsas, gendered labor, and other Chicanx cultural topics that she addresses in her writing. Her process is about the journey to the ambiguous space where an author can play with narrative structures. She is in constant motion, becoming an agent for transformative changes in thought processes.

In her speech "How I Became a Genre Jumper" (2006), Ana Castillo cautions against the specialization of our literatures, as if Chicanx can only write a certain way about certain topics. She explains: "When something is important to me, I look for as many ways as I can to share it with as many people as I can." When a story is shared, it is because the author believes that others need to hear it. For Serros, writing was an outlet to express herself, her emotions about the adventures and misadventures in her life, both factual, fictional, and a mix between. Genre bending in her collections was an experiment on self-expression within a short span of time. It was freeing to genre create in a single book. On the other hand, Castillo genre jumped for a period of over thirty years, distinctly separated by each book she published. She admits that she was trying "to figure out how to explain myself right with hopes that we'll all try to do something about it, together." The task is similar across both writers—to understand the self in relation to others and to inspire others to do something

together. Serros did not believe the genres needed to be separated by different books and instead created an amalgam of knowledge, and different access points to it, in diverse pieces all collected under the umbrella of one text.

Decolonial storytelling is another cog in the knowledge and hierarchies of power. Linda Tuhiwai Smith in *Decolonizing Methodologies: Research and Indigenous Peoples* (1999), stresses that Western philosophical ways of thinking were imperial tools used to colonize indigenous peoples: "Said's notion of 'positional superiority' is useful here for conceptualizing the ways in which knowledge and culture were as much part of imperialism as raw materials and military strength. Knowledge was also there to be discovered, extracted, appropriated and distributed" (58). Empires, such as Britain and Spain, sent their colonizers to foreign places, such as India and the Americas. They took information and the very bodies of the peoples they conquered. They appropriated it, claimed it as their own (or changed it to fit their Western needs), and distributed it as new ideas to their own peoples. Thus, they maintained a power dynamic that was top-down, in which what was said or discussed had more merit when it came from the center rather than the margins. This colonial history affects Serros, even as a fifth generation American. Her body is viewed as foreign and exotic—an ethnic person. She is placed in the margins because of her features and culture. One of the important tasks of decolonial theory is to undermine this practice and assumption that all academics, theories, and other topics we learn in the academy need to follow a destructive tradition of research practices based on colonial models. For decolonial storytelling, its goal is to offer spaces for theorizing and discussing that demonstrates how people of color narratives are more than a reduction of aesthetics, genre, or other literary elements that are usually compared to the great British and American canon literature.

Serros has various pieces that emphasize the need for a new space of theorizing and emphasis, such as "Role Model Rule Number 8: Reclaim Your Rights as a Citizen of Here, Here." Her narrator flips the narrative and puts a white man on a spot to justify where he is from. She undermines the unspoken privilege that allows a white person to ask that question to someone who has a darker skin color.

Decolonial literatures still have significant components of aesthetics and genre, among other literary conventions, but there is something even more born from a politic of necessity. Judith Fetterley describes a similar point in *The Resisting Reader: A Feminist Approach to American Fiction* (1977): "I hope my book will be suggestive—that it will stimulate dialogue, discussion, debate, re-reading, and finally re-vision…a political act whose aim is not simply to interpret the world but to change it by changing the consciousness of those who read and their relation to what they read" (viii). Fetterley claims that her feminist approach to literatures is about dialogue, discussion, debates, re-readings, and re-visions. Whereas Radway's romance readers spoke a lot about how their genre caused them to see the world differently, or consider time periods and relationships differently, Fetterley pushes interpretations even further. It is not simply about receiving the information but changing one's consciousness and approach to what one reads. Even with these deeper understandings and ways to relate to literature, there is still something that decolonial storytelling does differently. Serros epitomizes the different approaches with her decolonized voice. She reclaims her knowledge through her act of not only writing but writing in a manner that is unique to her process of self. Her pieces reflect the colonial, capitalist resistance that she must overcome, very evidently pointed out by the Adidas shoes that crush her name on the spines of her first book in the story "Role Model Rule Number 3:

Remember, Commerce Begins at Home." She has a hegemonic history that she must overcome, and it is not an easy task to undertake. She disrobes herself and elucidates the struggles to break into a market that does not recognize her brown body nor her experiences as a woman of color. She epitomizes mestiza consciousness and theory in the flesh because it is her history, present life, and future self. Through her raw and honest approach to traditionally controversial topics, she strengthens and presents new approaches to storytelling that echo her forbearers, such as Anzaldúa and Moraga.

Clare Hemmings in *Why Stories Matter* attempts to address the points missing from both Radway and Fetterley with her analysis of progress, loss, and return narratives. Hemmings states that readers need to come back to the body rather than remain in abstract theories that have no value outside the academy: "…[W]e are exhorted to return to a focus on everyday lived experience and to material or embodied realities instead of remaining mired in a conceptual realm deemed to have no value outside of the academy" (96). There are a few issues with her return to the body call. First, she limits herself to a white, Western paradigm of scholars. She ignores decolonial scholars in her attempts to rectify the politics of citation. Second, people of color writers, historians, scholars, and many others never left their material, embodied, and lived experiences behind. We carry it with us in all the work and research we produce, both in our communities and in academia. Third, she calls for a deemphasis on the theoretical as if high theory and lived experiences are mutually exclusive. Michele Serros expresses her lived experiences in her writing, which adds to the myriad theorists of color scholarship. Pérez writes about the decolonial time lag, Anzaldúa is known for many key topics such as mestiza consciousness and nepantla, and Moraga labels lived experiences as theory in the flesh. Serros enacts many of these ideas in her writing without

consciously being aware of it because she is in an ambiguous state of being. Decolonial theory transforms academics and communities and transports the storytelling to a new spectrum.

The unfortunate result of Hemmings assertions is that she undermines all the theoretical works of people of color as we finally find recognition and a place for our theories of color, which were historically ignored or discounted in lieu of mainstream white theorists. Linda Tuhiwai Smith stresses that self-determination occurs in many indigenous research projects, and it counters the misdirected theories that continue to undermine people of colors experiences:

> Self-determination in a research agenda becomes something more than a political goal. It becomes a goal of social justice which is expressed through and across a wide range of psychological, social, cultural and economic terrains. It necessarily involves the process of transformation, of decolonization, of healing and of mobilization as peoples. The processes, approach and methodologies – while dynamic and open to different influences and possibilities – are critical elements of a strategic research agenda. (116)

Serros has a decolonized voice that is self-determined. She transgresses a mere political goal and enters a realm where the outcome is always social justice in all areas of life. To get to such a position, she takes a journey of transformation, one that heals the schisms between groups at the same time it mobilizes to dynamic and very necessary new possibilities about life. She demonstrates such an example in her short story "Attention Shoppers" from *Chicana Falsa*. She uses humor to show a political and cultural revolution in the frozen food section at a Ralph's superstore. Humor is subversive. She undermines and mocks monolithic

ways of thinking with her witty tone. She questions the process of their brief revolution because the speaker in the piece is still unable to transgress to a realm where social justice overrides the political goals. After all, the narrator really wants to run out of the store with free food rather than take a stand against corporations who culturally appropriate ethnic foods for profit. Yet, the story is a powerful piece of prose that causes many readers to revisit the way they see strategic marketing in everyday life.

The theoretical contributions I make in this dissertation are significant because they create a bridge between traditional disciplines, such as English and History, and nontraditional disciplines, such as Chicanx Studies and Ethnic Studies. These avenues offer spaces for collaborations across respective fields of studies. Understanding decolonial storytelling and a decolonized voice can transform the way critics read and interpret literatures. It is most effective for people of color literature because their bodies of writing are often relegated in marginal categorizations within English departments, such as Ethnic Literature. Serros' decolonized voice exists in multiple, ambiguous spaces without sacrificing the very differences that defines her writing. Rather than a hierarchy of literatures, or even a spectrum, I argue that she places them on equal planes. One should not read her texts in a chronological fashion or as a type of period classification. Instead, her stories layer and overlap. Viewing her texts in a simultaneous space appears messy and incohesive. How can one follow the trajectory of narrative development without a clear demarcated path? By blurring the delineated borders, Serros threads together new content about herself as an author, the fans who read her works, her Chicanx and American culture, and the notion of time as it relates to her understanding of her life.

Even her young adult novels, *Honey Blonde Chica* (2006) and *¡Scandalosa! A Honey Blonde Chica Novel* (2007) include elements of her decolonized voice, albeit in a more mainstream fashion so that youth can more easily follow her thoughts. For example, she makes the main protagonist, Evie Gomez, a fair skinned, honey blonde Chicanx who loves to surf. She adopts a mainstreamed American, middle-class lifestyle. Though she appears traditional, the protagonist is really an unconventional rebel. Even in my interviews with the author, she admits that Gomez is a direct reflection of her own youth as she slowly comes into a deeper consciousness about her sense of identity and self. Serros' nontraditional formats allow avenues for new ways of reading a text that will hopefully expand peoples' minds about issues of race, ethnicity, class, gender, and sexuality.

My findings raise additional questions about a decolonized voice. Can it be found in a work that is not located in a third space? What are the implications of an ambiguous and unorthodox, often chaotic, site? If the storyteller has one and the reader/listener does not, how are the exchanges of knowledge influenced? Expanding and empowering the decolonial is a key task of such a voice in literature because it will allow an osmosis of information to flow in a multitude of directions. The impact that this new wave of connections will have is potentially unquantifiable because time is a nonentity. It does not matter whether a story occurs in the past, present, or future because a decolonized voice is timeless. All events can happen at once to influence the text in different ways with each reading. Serros' positionality is key because her vision draws readers and listeners to discard colonial ways of thinking and knowledge production. Hence, she can disrupt her narrative structure with numerous calls between an author and an individual who owes her an honorarium. If a decolonized voice exists outside a third space, how does it help make allies of good

contributions from those that lack a full perspective? Rather than discard a piece of literature as problematic, a dialog occurs that opens channels for deconstructing and rebuilding the narrative from a more equitable place. Serros herself demonstrates such a task with her short story "Stuff" from *Chicana Falsa*. In this piece, the speaker admits to using her friends for capitalist profit; she wants the "stuff" they give her as gifts. Although the topic appears problematic and out of place from some of the author's other topics, she keeps it as part of her collection to offer a space for discussing the contradictions that the author and the narrator simultaneously present.

Everyone can have a decolonized voice, but many never experience a rupture in their lives that creates the catalyst which propels someone into ambiguity. It is the task of those who embody one to complicate their stories. Serros is an author who masters the layering of storytelling. Her writing takes on hierarchical theories and topics that restrict the types of stories that are told. She dismantles them through her own contradicting perspectives and themes, where all realities and ways of thinking can coexist simultaneously. Serros' stories will continue to take root and grow over, around, and through colonial and destructive stories, such as ones that privilege racism and hate, because her decolonized voice is loud. It demands attention through genre bending, humor, unique and unorthodox narrative approaches, and other techniques that she masters through her continuous practice of writing. It is a craft that she perfected until her premature death. Her voice continues to speak for social equity because her books influence readers. They stand as a testament to who she was, is, and will always be. As she expressed in her "Introduction" essay to *Chicana Falsa,* she never wanted anyone to question what her obituary would say. Michele

Serros is an eclectic, decolonized author whose multi-vocal approach to writing resonates with many readers and fans, often encouraging others to claim their own Chicanx identity.

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