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RIVERSIDE

Our Mother's Daughters: The Daughter's Voice in Chicana/Latina Literature

A Dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction  
of the requirements for the degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

in

English

by

Lisette J. Lasater

June 2019

Dissertation Committee:

Dr. Steven Gould Axelrod, Chairperson

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2019

The Dissertation of Lisette J. Lasater is approved:

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Committee Chairperson

University of California, Riverside

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To my husband Damien: your love and support have sustained me throughout this journey, and I am filled with gratitude to have you as my partner in life.

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## ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

Our Mother's Daughters: The Daughter's Voice in Chicana/Latina Literature

by

Lisette J. Lasater

Doctor of Philosophy, Graduate Program in English

University of California, Riverside, June 2019

Dr. Steven Gould Axelrod, Chairperson

Attention to family relationships in work by Chicanas and Latinas reveals mothers as paramount figures to a daughter's identity formation. Mothers may serve as gatekeepers of patriarchy and also as a daughter's closest female role model—as a result, mother-daughter relationships may also be source of deep ambivalence. The literary and cultural study I undertake in this dissertation examines how Chicanas and Latinas find their voice through asking difficult questions of both their mothers and of the institutions that guide them. The primary texts I examine are foundational to the development of Chicana literature, feminism, and cultural criticism since the 1980's, and take into account a spectrum of mother/daughter experiences. This work considers how daughters discover their voice through and against their mothers, and how self-expression on the page and on the cultural stage are necessary sites for creation and articulation of a daughter's agency.

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## Chapter 1

### Chicana/Latina Daughters: Lived Experience, Theory, and Practice

I am the American-born daughter of a Mexican-born mother. My mother was nearly 40 when she became pregnant with me, a less-common occurrence in the 1970's than it is now. Her age means there is a larger generation gap between her and me than with most mothers and daughters. Coupled with the challenges of acculturation, much of our relationship has been characterized by conflict between her expectations for me as a daughter and my own desires. I often struggle to understand my mother, literally and figuratively—between my broken Spanish and her limited English, communication can be strained and exhausting for us both. Raised on a remote ranch, which she left upon her marriage to my father at the age of 18, my mother has led a very different life than I have.

Our household was traditional in that my father, also an immigrant, made all of the decisions. While she worked seasonally in a cannery overnight, my mother's work was primarily domestic; she cared for the home, cooked all meals, and raised six children. Although poor, my parents appreciated the opportunities the United States afforded our family, and prioritized education for all of their children. To this day my mother relishes the material assets and freedoms of the United States—she fondly recounts her first American hamburger, which remains her favorite meal. Yet my mother has remained traditional in terms of her values and worldview: she is a devout Catholic, and the statue of the Virgen de Guadalupe on her nightstand shares space with a portrait of her own mother, Soledad, who died at the age of 87. Any trips back to Mexico after her migration were to see her mother, who was widowed when my mother was nine—the

same age I was when my own father was killed. Her memories of her upbringing on the ranch are idyllic; to this day she recounts the joy of helping her mother and sisters with domestic tasks, caring for livestock, and horseback rides into the backcountry. Leaving her mother behind upon her immigration was a profound loss, and although they would see each other frequently over the years, my mother did not know what the future held at the time of her leaving.

Like many young women, I felt a profound disconnect from my mother starting at early adolescence and into my adulthood. Many daughters have asked themselves “*why is she like this?*” when it comes to their mothers, and I am no different.<sup>1</sup> While she supported and advocated for my education, it was constricted by the expectation of geographic—and emotional—closeness. It was difficult for her to understand why I would want to cleave from her both physically and ideologically in pursuit of my own goals. I both celebrated my culture and chafed against many of the gendered, heteronormative practices that came along with it. A particular practice I didn’t fully understand was how my mother doted on my brothers for what I perceived as merely existing, while my sisters and I were the ones who provided for her physical and emotional well being. It was “just the way things were” in my family, and to question the norms, especially when it came to my mother’s expectations of her daughters, was to be

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<sup>1</sup> In this work, I do not mean to overlook individuals who may not be biologically female but identify as a daughter, or those who do not ascribe to a gender identity. While the term “daughter” largely remains linked to a biologically female identity, I recognize there remains much for me to explore in terms of the complexity of gender identity and familial affiliation and I while I do not use it here, I appreciate and support the field’s move towards the use of inclusive term Chicanx/Latinx.

an *ingrata*.<sup>2</sup> I wanted to be more American than Mexican; as a Mexican daughter, my appeared to be a life delineated by gendered duties and obligations.

My mother often says, “*ser madre es sufrir*”—to be a mother is to suffer.

Growing up, I recognized that she had suffered as a woman and as a mother, but I did not fully understand the forces responsible for her suffering, and how those forces shape us both. Understanding why she is “like this” and “the way things were” in my family thus goes beyond personality and into history: a history of immigration, of colonization, of deeply rooted cultural and religious beliefs and experience. It is an understanding many daughters before me have sought, and I began to find answers in the writing of other daughters. I do not have children by choice, so my mother’s admonition “you’ll understand when you have a daughter of your own” will never come to bear. How, then, can I understand my mother, and the institution of Chicana/Latina motherhood, from my subject position as an eternal daughter?<sup>3</sup>

My mother turns 80 this year. She is in good health, but I am acutely aware that the only way I know how to be a woman is to be her daughter, in a world with her presence. All I have had to guide my journey to understanding thus—and all I will have

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<sup>2</sup> Ungrateful

<sup>3</sup> Lorna Dee Cervantes and Norma Alarcón argue identifying as “Chicana” is a choice based on individual backgrounds, histories, and political affiliations, and thus is not a blanket term. In the same way, Chicanas may resist identifying with “Latina” as the term more broadly encompasses Latin America, thus lacking specificity. My use of Chicana/Latina is meant to indicate women who reside in the United States who identify with a Mexican heritage (Cervantes in Maylei Blackwell’s *¡Chicana Power! Contested Histories of Feminism in the Chicana Movement*, Alarcón in “In the Tracks of the Native Woman”). Cherríe Moraga explains her use of the term as such: “To be a Chicana is not merely to name one’s racial/cultural identity, but also to name a politic, a politic that refuses assimilation into the U.S. mainstream” (*The Last Generation* 56).

after she passes—are the words of other daughters who have sought answers to the same questions I have. In casting about for how to start this work, I found myself following the path of other Chicana/Latina daughters by starting with my mother’s story. The literary and cultural study I undertake in this dissertation examines how Chicanas and Latinas find their voice through asking difficult questions of both their mothers and of the institutions that guide them. I examine how daughters discover their voice through and against their mothers, and how self-expression on the page and on the cultural stage are necessary sites for creation and articulation of a daughter’s agency. Like playwright and performer Adelina Anthony, who I discuss in Chapter 3, I recognize there is a “cost” to loving our mothers, and I want to explore the origins and effects of the cost (95). The work of Chicana/Latina “daughters who write” also allow me to consider questions of my own: if “to be a mother is to suffer,” what is it to be a daughter? How are daughters shaped by maternal loss, and how is a mother’s absence as powerful as her presence?

In writing by Chicana/Latina feminists, I discovered daughters coming to a political consciousness, or what Gloria Anzaldúa calls *conscientizacion*, through interrogating cultural practices and beliefs. Chicana feminist studies developed in response to the Chicano Movement of the 1960’s and 70’s. While culturally and politically unifying, the Movement primarily relied on the rhetoric of the patriarchal, heteronormative family and fixed gender roles. Women were to do their part for the cause by maintaining the home and caring for her children and husband’s needs. Sonia Saldívar–Hull writes the Movement was a site of “oppressive Mexican and Anglo-American traditions that demand women’s passivity and subservience to men,” a mirror

for the expectations for women in the Chicano family” (30). The concurrent Feminist Movement was also concerned with gender equality, yet exclusionary in the way it overlooked how women of color were impacted by issues of race and class.

Chicana/Latina writers and artists were inspired by members of the Black Feminist Movement; their early collaborations are documented in the 1979 anthology *This Bridge Called My Back*, edited by Gloria Anzaldúa and Cherríe Moraga. Although the initial imperative of the volume “may have been to protest, complain, or explain to white feminist would-be allies that there are other ties and visions that bind, prior allegiances and priorities that supersede their invitations to coalesce on their terms,” Toni Cade Bambara observes the contributors have been “awakened” to new possibilities for political and social change (vi).<sup>4</sup> The text is an archive of Chicana, Latina, Black, African-American, Native-American, and Asian-American women who “are not so much a ‘natural’ affinity group, as women who have come together out of political necessity” (Moraga, Foreword to the Second Edition). Solidarity with other women of color globally and an examination of “geopolitics as well as gender politics” aligns U.S. Chicanas/Latinas with Third World feminism, recognizing how, as Saldívar-Hull notes, “our subject position exists in the interstices of national border” (55). The anthology is also significant in its diversity of genres, featuring critical essays, poetry, personal narrative and artwork. Creating across genres “advances a transdisciplinary method,” one of themes Karen Mary Davalos argues is characteristic of contemporary Chicana feminist scholarship (153). A transdisciplinary method is significant because it

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<sup>4</sup> Also see Chela Sandoval’s “A Report on the 1981 National Women’s Studies Association Conference” for an analysis of racism in the Women’s Movement.

“produces social change and aligns formerly separate fields,” a phenomenon I examine in my discussion of Cherríe Moraga in Chapter 2.

Contemporary Chicana feminist scholars continue to examine the domestic as a site of critical inquiry, particularly through the lens of class, gender and sexuality. Attention to the everyday practice of women’s lives in addition to academic theory allows Chicana feminism to resist hierarchical models of knowledge, “challenging analytical frameworks that dichotomize the multiple sources of Chicana oppression; at the same time, it posits alternative frameworks grounded in the Chicana experience. . . Chicana studies places at center the Chicana subject” (Pesquera and de la Torre 6). Contemporary Chicana feminism helps us understand the family as a site of Chicana experience, and how the power dynamics between mothers and daughters shapes a Chicana’s subjectivity. The multiple theoretical frameworks that can also inform an analysis of the Chicana experience means that we can consider how history, myths and folklore, gender norms, sexual orientation and class impact mother-daughter relationships.

Another key theme of Chicana feminist work Davalos identifies is use of the autobiographical voice, placing women’s experiences as a central concern and allowing for what Tiffany Ana López calls the “personal as a springboard for critical engagement” (“Reading Violence” 205). Many Chicanas were the first in their family to attend institutions of higher education and empowered to document the material realities of women’s lives. The editors of the anthology *Cuentos: Stories by Latinas*, note “Most of the writers in *Cuentos* are first-generation writers. This means that your mother couldn’t

have written this story—or even helped you write it” (ix).<sup>5</sup> While this dissertation focuses on written texts, the oral traditions of storytelling and *testimonio* are important practices in Chicana/Latina feminist knowledge transmission and production. The editors of *Telling to Live: Latina Feminist Testimonios* write of how through *testimonio*, the “personal and private become profoundly political,” as the narratives disclose “the political violence inflicted on whole communities” (13).<sup>6</sup> Chicana/Latina feminist thought is thus grounded in examining the intersectional forces shaping women’s lives. Saldívar-Hull employs the term “feminism on the border,” which for practitioners means “recognizing the urgency of dealing with the sexism and homophobia in our culture; our political reality demands that we confront institutionalized racism while we simultaneously struggle against economic exploitation” (34). She notes Cherríe Moraga’s role in advancing discussions around gender and sexuality, and how attention to the issues faced by Chicana lesbians are “central in our oppositional and liberatory projects” (33).

Chicana feminist studies also recuperates female cultural figures as a means of understanding how women internalize myths and replicate negative beliefs between each

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<sup>5</sup> In her Introduction to *Teatro Chicana: A Collective Memoir and Selected Plays*, Yolanda Broyles-Gonzalez gives additional context to the climate under which a new generation of Chicana artists emerged: “Although the first women of color cohorts began entering university shortly after the civil Rights Act forced the desegregation of higher education, Chicanas by the 1970’s were still underrepresented, as they are today, in higher education” (xv).

<sup>6</sup> *Testimonio* and oral histories also allows for communities to cultivate “collective memory,” which Jennifer Nájera argues is an important tool for understanding the gendered experiences of migrant women. See “Remembering Migrant Life: Family Collective Memory and Critical Consciousness in the Midcentury Migrant Stream.” *The Oral History Review*, Vol. 45, No. 2, pp. 211-231.

other. The Catholic Virgin Mary (La Virgen de Guadalupe), thought to be special guardian of the Mexican people, was a dominant symbol of the Chicano Movement. Culturally and politically, the Virgen represented paradigmatic motherhood for Mexican and Mexican-American people. “In Chicana/o literature and art and in Catholicism, women, particularly mothers are represented as essentially sacred and holy. Chicanas are held accountable to la madre's self-sacrificing and pure nature in the image of La Virgen de Guadalupe. . . La Virgen as both cultural and religious representation of the good mother frames this gendered/ethnic sense of self (Segura and Pierce 77). The “good mother” is countered by representations of “bad mothers” via the historical figures of Malintzin Tenepal (colloquially known as “La Malinche”) and the mythic La Llorona. La Malinche, believed to have aided Hernan Cortés in the Spanish conquest of Mexico, was historically understood as the betrayer of her people, an interpretation widely popularized by Octavio Paz’s 1950 *Labyrinth of Solitude*. “She not only translated for Cortes and his men, she also bore his children. Thus, a combination of Malintzin-translator and Malintzin-procreator becomes the main feature of her subsequently ascribed treacherous nature” (Alarcón, “Traddutora, Traditora” 59). Her facility with language and reproductive power made Malinche a threatening figure to the patriarchal ideology of the Chicano Movement, and her name became a “handy reference point not only for controlling, interpreting or visualizing women, but also to wage a domestic battle of stifling proportions” (Alarcón, “Chicana’s Feminist Literature” 182). Literary critic Norma Alarcón and anthropologist Adelaida del Castillo were instrumental in exposing “the male biases and outright misogyny in the Mexican philosopher Octavio Paz’s



formulation of La Malinche” (Saldívar-Hull 28). The work of Cherríe Moraga and Gloria Anzaldúa also aided in what Alarcón calls a “revision and re-vision” of Malinche’s patriarchal mythology; sold into slavery by her own mother, she can also be understood through the lens of a daughter betrayed. In Chapter 2, I examine Moraga’s use of the Malinche myth in creating a daughter’s voice, and what is at stake when a daughter speaks.

Another figure representative of the inherently untrustworthy woman and failed mother is the mythical La Llorona, or the “weeping woman,” a ghost who wails for her small children she has drowned so that she may run away with her lover. The specifics of the tale vary according to region—in some versions, the woman is indigenous and her lover is Spanish—regardless, the tale functions as a cautionary tale about a “bad” mother. Like with La Malinche, a Chicana feminist attention to the historical conditions of women under colonization and patriarchy opens up new interpretations and representations of La Llorona. In her analysis of the Llorona figure in Sandra Cisneros’s short story “Woman Hollering Creek,” Saldívar Hull argues her infanticide as “a political act of resistance by mestiza indigenous women” (120). Another example of Chicana feminist recuperation of female mythical figures is Gloria Anzaldúa’s engagement with the pre-Columbian Coatlicue (goddess of birth and death) and her daughter Coyolxauhqui, who was killed attempting to prevent the birth of her brother, the god of war.<sup>7</sup> Anzaldúa’s *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza* is significant for her theories about the effects of living in a borderland, a “vague and undetermined place

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<sup>7</sup> Cherríe Moraga also embraces the imagery of Coatlicue and Coyolxauhqui throughout her work: see *The Last Generation* and *The Hungry Woman: A Mexican Medea*.

created by the emotional residue of an unnatural boundary” and calls for a new mestiza consciousness as a means of healing the trauma from living in duality (25). Recuperation of female and maternal figures enables healing from deeply held cultural beliefs about women embedded at an early age. I believe Norma Alarcón’s claim about Malintzin extends to other figures as well; she writes, “It is not only Malintzin’s appropriation and revision that is at stake, but Chicanas’ own cultural self-exploration, self-definition, and self-invention through and beyond the community’s sociosymbolic system and contact” (“Traddutora, Traditora” 72). Alarcón also reminds us myths are not only perpetrated by men, but also often transmitted by mothers, “who are entrusted with the transmission of culture,” and as a result “all we see is hatred of women” (“Chicana Feminist Literature” 183).

Attention to family relationships in work by Chicanas and Latinas reveals mothers as paramount figures to a daughter’s identity formation. Cristina Herrera’s description of Celaya in Sandra Cisneros’s *Caramelo* captures another aspect of a daughter’s struggle:

Celaya’s desire to construct her own voice may be read as distinctly American; however, she is astute enough to realize that her ethnicity has relegated her to a marginalized, invisible figure in American society. Celaya’s refusal to be silenced goes against decorum deemed appropriate for Mexican women, leaving her caught between two value systems. How can she give herself a voice while remaining true to her Mexican heritage? This struggle is undoubtedly inherent to the Chicana experience. (191)

Concern over how a daughter's *conscientizacion* will impact the mother/daughter relationship also resonates in Claudia Colindres's "A Letter to My Mother." Colindres writes, "I feel as if all this knowledge, all the papers I have written, puts a distance between you and me, and still I feel very much like your daughter," echoing Moraga's claim in *Loving in the Wars Years* that even after her interrogation of culture and family, "todavía soy la hija de mi mamá" (Colindres 73, Moraga xiii).<sup>8</sup> Moraga and Colindres illustrate how even after examining the limits of the family, their maternal roots often remain "their greatest source of strength and power" (Broyles-Gonzales xvii). Broyles-Gonzalez speaks specifically of the performance collective of 17 women during the 1970's, documented in *Teatro Chicana: A Collective Memoir and Selected Plays*. Comprised primarily of first-generation college students, these women created original work, using performance to address issues of race, gender, and political activism during the Chicano Movement. Understanding the gap between the home and the university, the women invited their mothers to see them perform, "affirming and cultivating the connections between themselves . . . and their mothers, who continued in a working class existence" (Broyles-Gonzales xvii). A daughter's coming to political consciousness thus becomes more than just an individual project—daughters who seek answers recognize the possibilities "revision and re-vision" for her mother as well.

Recognizing the home and mother-daughter relationships as "a legitimate site of struggle," Chicana/Latina writers also evince the other side of the coin: the difficulties of being a daughter in a culture that privileges sons, often to the point of undermining the

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<sup>8</sup> "I am still my mother's daughter"

needs and desires of mothers and daughters (Saldívar-Hull 84). Alarcón argues Malinche's story makes us aware of how for women, "abandonment and orphanhood and psychic/emotional starvation occur even in the midst of tangible family" ("Chicana's Feminist Literature" 187). Mothers may serve as gatekeepers of patriarchy and also as a daughter's closest female role model—as a result, mother-daughter relationships may also be source of deep ambivalence. Additionally, Rosa Linda Fregoso writes:

Many of us . . . have had to confront our experiences in oppressive biological familias: instances in which women and children were victims of incest, child abuse, rape, spousal battery, and beatings. Others grew up in nontraditional familias that departed significantly from the reigning model of la familia in cultural discourse . . . some of us have been raised in blended families, among multiple, nonbiological parents, with extended kin, between several households, in female-headed homes, or with lesbian and gay parents. (73)

Uncovering the origins of trauma allows writers to consider the conditions under which families and mothering practices are shaped, and how those practices impact daughters. Families of course exist within nation and culture, and Eden Torres cites psychologist Maria Root's idea of "insidious trauma" to describe how "historic trauma and unresolved grieving," "the reality of ongoing socioeconomic and political inequality" and "the consequences of imperialism" continue to impact Mexican American families (16). Writing allows for daughters to stage public conversations about trauma experienced by women, personally and historically. Writers and their readers can thus serve as critical witnesses, enabling both to "act as agents for social change" (López, "Critical

Witnessing” 63). Critical witnessing, or “engaged critical reading” of texts and performances further allows for “understanding, the very foundation for personal and social change” (López, “Critical Witnessing” (64). The practice of critical witnessing is tied to *testimonio*: the examination and sharing of the personal creates a space for questioning cultural norms, and allows for connection with others who may have had the same experiences. Through the critical witnessing producing the work invites, Chicanas and Latinas recognize their mothers as fully human; as women outside of the social construct of motherhood, with hopes and dreams of her own she may have never had a chance to pursue.

Though language might otherwise threaten to (further) alienate a daughter from her mother, it instead forms an archive, creating “models for defying authority and subverting the dysfunction of the parents. Chicana writers are taking major steps toward recovering the lost self, or as Anzaldúa and Castillo have both suggested, healing the split” (Torres 43). This dissertation explores how Chicana literature and cultural productions create opportunities for both celebrating and healing from mother-daughter relationships. I am interested in how the Chicana daughter’s voice is mediated through her mother. If the daughter is a witness for her mother, how do we witness for the daughter?

### **Chapter Overviews**

The authors of the essays, poems, short stories, and dramatic texts I examine are not only significant for the range of daughter’s experiences they reflect, but also for their representations of how women negotiate and survive the spectrum of cultural and familial

violence, and how writing enables cultural and personal change. Chapter 2 focuses on Cherrie Moraga, whose *Loving in the War Years* (1983) was the first Chicana text to speak explicitly of the effects on daughters when mothers privilege sons, and of the deep intimacy between mothers and daughters. Moraga perhaps writes more critically than any other author in Chicana literature about mothers and daughters, exposing the gender and cultural paradigms that frame and contain our relationships. Moraga also connects desire and sexuality to her mother's body as a significant part of her identity as a queer Chicana feminist. In *A Chicana Codex of Changing Consciousness: Writings, 2000-2010*, she writes of the double loss of her mother; first mentally to Alzheimer's, then to death. The mother who once "made space for me next to her in the bed" now turns to Moraga and asks, "Do you have a mother?" (74). Mothers may "forget" they are mothers, but Moraga's work makes clear daughters can never "forget" their roles. I am interested in how the loss of her mother impacts Moraga as an adult daughter (and mother to a son) who has spent her career writing about motherhood. As Chicana daughters age, how can we reconcile our mother's mortality with our own? What does the knowledge of the inevitable death of a mother whose presence has emotionally shaped us, for better or worse, do for the evolution of Chicana epistemology?

Poetics are necessary for articulating Chicana/Latina daughterhood: imaginative language can attempt to articulate what our bodies know in order to heal ourselves and others. Poetry allows us to be critical witnesses to the traumas of the emotional and physical distances between mothers and daughters, and the social and cultural conditions that foster and challenge women's relationships. Chapter 2 discusses the poetics of the

daughter's voice in the work of Lorna Dee Cervantes, particularly in terms of her traumatic early loss of her "imperfect" mother whose struggles with issues of substance use illustrates how traditional roles get reversed, and Chicana daughters act as parents to their mothers. In Cervantes I examine another kind of double absence; that of a mother who is first emotionally, then physically unavailable but who remains central to the daughter's development of voice. How does the economy of language, use of imagery, metaphor, and structure that the genre of poetry invites allow for a daughter to tell both her own and her mother's story, particularly in a mother's absence? In Cervantes, absence is as important as presence, and poetry is a powerful means of giving shape to a mother's absence.

Chapter 3 examines the staging and embodiment of mothers in solo performance texts by contemporary Chicana theater artists Adelina Anthony (*Bruising for Besos*) and Dulce Maria Solis (*Chela*). In Anthony's one-woman work, she performs the roles of the autobiographical character, Yoli, as well as the roles of her brother, mother, and father. Adult Yoli reminisces about her childhood while stranded on the side of a deserted road on the way to visit her gravely ill mother in the hospital. Her memories recreate her father's cruelty and violence that her mother attempted to escape, but was forced to return to. As Anthony takes on each of these characters, every facial expression, movement and intonation is saturated with meaning and powerfully conveyed to the audience. Whether she is speaking as Mom entreating Younger Yoli to remove her clothing so the curandero can give her a *limpia* or speaking in her younger brother's terrified stammer, the viewer is compelled to feel the anxiety, the terror, the concern along with the character. The legacy

of domestic violence follows Yoli into her adult lesbian relationship when she nearly strikes her partner in anger, and her horror at replicating the pattern forces her to stop and consider who she has become. *Besos* is an attempt to understand the mother and to understand one's self, and illustrates Moraga's claim that for better or worse, family is where we first learn how to love.

In *Chela*, Solis tells her mother's story of trauma and survival: Chela survives rape, a manipulative mother, immigration to the U.S, a brutally violent relationship, and time in a mental health facility. Solis also includes in her performance a video re-creation one of the beatings her mother received and that Solis witnessed as a child. Solis takes on her mother's story as her own, I am interested in the different ways theater makes the unspeakable palpable to an audience. Both Anthony and Solis infuse their performances with moments of wry humor, another survival strategy that demonstrates the complexities of how daughters feel the burden, duty, or privilege of telling their mother's story. When so many female survivors of abuse carry visible and hidden scars, when they still have nightmares of unsafe bedrooms, when they cannot love another person without violence or when they turn that violence inwards and harm themselves—how does one forgive her mother for being unable or unwilling, by choice or circumstance, to protect her child from abuse? The plays by Anthony and Solis demonstrate how through embodiment, the artists tell their own stories as much as their mother's stories as a means of healing. The stage becomes a space where the daughter's voice can be heard, and where an audience can critically witness for both mother and daughter.



Chapter 4 examines the cultural practice of the quinceañera, the coming-of-age celebration for Chicanas/Latinas held at age 15. I consider how contemporary quinceañera practices put daughters at “center stage” and become a site to express identity, familial relationships, and one’s place in community. Despite the likelihood of her mother being the most significant parental relationship in the young woman’s life, mothers are often visibly absent from this public staging of a daughter’s transition from girlhood into womanhood. I argue this is because while the form and practice of quinceañeras have evolved, they generally remain based in patriarchal ideas of male ownership. The quinceañeras evolution is further complicated by the pressures of consumerism that perpetuate the idea that a quinceañera party doesn’t “count” unless it is expensive. In this chapter I explore what the quinceañera dress both represents and obscures, and argue for a cultural shift in the performance of quinceañera where we place further value on the life experiences of young women, and the importance of recognizing rites of passage not dictated by purchasing power — which is especially important for those who may not be able to wear the dress, or who do not want to.

My teaching experience affirms my belief that we need a public language for talking about the burdens daughters, sons, intersex and nonbinary children carry. The classroom becomes a space where I am not only the professor but also an adult daughter, and often the first person to invite my students to think about what outside forces structure their relationships with their parents. The stories students share in their writing reinforce the narratives I see in literature of young people recognizing their parents’ sacrifices, and describing their parents as survivors who dispense wisdom. What is more

difficult for students to write about is how their parents' values and beliefs may be different from their own. And like in the literature, my students are caught up somewhere in the paradox of wanting to be just like their parents or nothing like them at all. Reading Chicana/Latina literature from a daughter's perspective encourages students to think about how their parents were shaped into their roles and how they, as youth, have agency in writing they may not have at home. Male, female, and non-binary students often experience "aha" moments of personal or cultural introspection in classroom discussions and in their writing. This is the pedagogical force of Chicana/Latina authors, and how I move theory into practice to create opportunities for personal healing and collective social change.

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## Chapter 2

### “Existo Yo”: Cherríe Moraga and the Presence of Daughters

Todavía so la hija de mi mamá.<sup>9</sup> Keep thinking, *it's the daughters*. It's the daughters who remain loyal to the mother, although this loyalty is not always reciprocated. To be free means on some level to release that painful devotion when it begins to punish us. Stop the chain of events. La procesion de mujeres, sufriendo<sup>10</sup>. . . Free the daughter to love her own daughter. It is the daughters who are my audience. (Cherríe Moraga, *Loving in the War Years* xiii)

Moraga's statement of identity through her relationship to her mother in the introduction to her foundational text is significant, as it makes clear the centrality of her connection with her mother to her identity, a necessary foregrounding given the difficult conversations she will have about mothers and daughters in the ensuing pages. She calls the collection of autobiographical essays and poems “my story of change” (xiii). Despite change, she remains “her mother's daughter,” an affiliation that grounds—and sometimes anchors—her. Moraga captures the complexity of a daughter's position and the ambivalence of mother/daughter relationships. Like Moraga, I am the daughter of a Mexican mother, and the first time I read the words “free,” “painful devotion,” and “punish us,” in the same sentence I stopped with a shock of recognition. In my then-

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<sup>9</sup> I am still my mother's daughter.

<sup>10</sup> The procession of women, suffering.

emerging studies of writing by Chicanas/Latinas, I had never read such a direct acknowledgment of a daughter's pain. My own research is inspired by a desire to understand the "painful devotion" through witnessing the daughter's experiences and examining how daughters use writing to free themselves while remaining "their mother's daughter."

I am Moraga's audience: in this chapter, I attempt to show I have been listening, and to understand Moraga's broader "story of change" spanning 1993's *Loving in the War Years* to 2011's *A Xicana Codex*. Moraga is a prolific writer across genres, and her belief that "the personal is political" means that her work remains consistently autobiographical, giving us an archive of a daughter's experience across decades. The anxieties expressed in her earlier works around identity, culture, and loss become increasing complex as she progresses from daughter to mother. My interest in Moraga is more than academic: her life again mirrors my own, as in *Codex* where she documents her mother's aging and attempts to understand what her own life will be like without her mother's anchoring presence. As I write this chapter I too am confronted daily with the reality of my mother's aging, and am moved to consider my evolution as a daughter. A codex is a body of knowledge, a history told and foretold: for Moraga, the old women of her life are her "Xicanadyke codices of changing consciousness" (*Xicana Codex* 16). Moraga's decades of work underlie my own codex as I search for answers my mother cannot give me: how can we love our mothers and also be free? How do we challenge our mother's beliefs and practices yet still remain her daughter? Who is the daughter's

witness? After a life of struggling for freedom from our mothers, can we ever prepare ourselves to lose her?

### **A Broader Audience**

The Chicana movement gave women tools to understand the shared female experiences of oppression in family, culture, and nation, and to recognize that the lessons learned at home were key to theorizing the possibilities for personal healing and social change. Chicana/Latina cultural productions also evince the difficulties of being a daughter in a culture that privileges sons, often to the point of undermining the needs and desires of mothers and daughters. Mother/daughter relationships are often central to how Chicana and Latina authors articulate their identity and subjectivity. Moraga's essays, poetry, and dramatic works are emblematic of how daughters write as a means of understanding their subjectivity, and how the tensions of mother-daughter relationships affect queer and heteronormative Chicana daughters from childhood through adulthood. The cultural, political, and historical specificities of Chicanas and Latinas in the U.S. further delineate the intimate geographies of mother/daughter relationships. Moraga addresses the complexity of women's lives at the intersections of race, class, gender, and sexual orientation. As the daughter of a white man and a Chicana, she consciously aligns with her mother in her claiming of a Chicana identity, writing "To be a woman fully necessitated my claiming the race of my mother" (86). Moraga exhibits a deep love of culture, but also calls attention to issues of sexism, poverty, homophobia, and political conditions for women of color.

When Moraga states, “I am still my mother’s daughter,” does she say this with resignation or with relief? Is the realization an absolution, a life sentence, or a mantra? Moraga’s assertion considers effects of not just being *a* daughter, but *her mother’s* daughter. Each mother/daughter relationship is highly individual; Moraga’s experience is further impacted by her struggles as a queer daughter raised in a working class family who came to consciousness at the cusp of the Chicana movement. Moraga and her contemporaries fought against deeply embedded gender and cultural expectations in their writing and in their activism. Moraga’s project asks Chicanas to reclaim indigenous figures, to take ownership of our place in the “long line of vendidas,” and emphasizes the importance of transmitting lessons to the next generation as a means of preserving culture and identity. Also integral to her work is an attention to what Tiffany Ana López terms “the passing on of wounds” from mother to daughter across generations, and to how writing about shared traumatic experiences can be a means of healing. Moraga published and served as the co-editor of two foundational Chicana anthologies (*The Sexuality of Latinas* and *This Bridge Called my Back*), texts emblematic of a collaborative feminist practice that remains a valuable model today.<sup>11</sup> She also writes across genres, and her texts are often a mixture of personal essays, journal entries, poems, critical essays, and flashbacks. As a result, she can explore her concerns with the various tools each genre offers. Like Lorna Dee Cervantes’s “child scribe,” Moraga is tasked with witnessing,

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<sup>11</sup> In particular, *Chicana/Latina Studies: The Journal of Mujeres Activas en Letras y Cambio Social* the flagship publication of MALCS (Women Active in Letters and Social Change). “This feminist Chicana/Latina and Indigenous academic organization is dedicated to building bridges between community and university settings, transforming higher education, and promoting new paradigms and methods” ([journal.malcs.org](http://journal.malcs.org)).



remembering, and recording.<sup>12</sup> Mary Pat Brady writes of the importance of remembering in Moraga, and of how Moraga embodies “the prophetic task of a Chicana Scribe who must repeatedly and simultaneously turn back toward early codices and turn forward to offer up her own new codices” (154). Moraga is an important first stop in my study of the “child scribe” who grows to become the Chicana daughter who writes, and of the way her relationship with her mother shapes her writing. In my focus on Moraga, I am interested in connecting the threads of a Chicana who is at once a daughter, a *vendida*, a writer and reader of codices, and to consider mother/daughter relationships through a lens capable of picking up the inevitable gains and losses. As Moraga becomes a mother and witnesses her mother’s aging and death, what can her audience learn from the way she makes meaning of the gains, and especially the loss?

### **(W)rite to remember**

In *Codex*, Moraga cites the words of the mother from her play *Shadow of a Man* to her husband in an attempt to get him to recognize her presence: “Manuel, existo. Existo yo” (44).<sup>13</sup> Writing becomes not just a way for a daughter to understand herself, but also an articulation of identity in the world. Moraga continues:

Maybe this is the same refrain in all of my work: an insistence on a presence where the world perceives absence. Maybe this is fundamentally the project of all Xicana work: to announce our presence to one another and the world, but in our

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<sup>12</sup> See “Beneath the Shadow of the Freeway” in *Emplumada* and Chapter 3 of this dissertation.

<sup>13</sup> I exist.

own tongue, on our own ground, brandishing our own homegrown instruments of naming. (44)<sup>14</sup>

What resonates about this statement is the power of writing to enable Chicanas to connect first with each other, and then to a larger audience. “Absence” speaks to the feeling of invisibility many queer, poor, or sidelined women of color may feel in the world, as well as the literal absence of women of color in spaces of power. Rhetorician Thomas Mader writes of the concept of presence: “It is not enough that a thing should exist for a person to feel its presence” (375). Vorris Nunley further develops the concept of what presence means for people of color, stating, “Form has existence, design has presence. . . presence is more than existence; it is to be taken into account on your own terms.”<sup>15</sup> Understanding identity as rhetorical allows us to see how the articulation of identity for Chicana/Latina writers is indeed a constructed project. Mader argues, “presence is that state of transcendence in which one is freed from the context of his existence and as a result of this freedom is able to *act*” (378). Chicanas who write recognize their subject positions are constructs of a hegemonic, patriarchal system that relies on certain bodies remaining invisible. Moraga’s call to use “our own homegrown instruments of naming” echoes Audre Lorde’s analogy, “For the master's tools will never dismantle the master's house” (112). To be freed from context and to reconfigure the self is a risk, and “To risk self is to *see* survival in terms of change, which is the way to progress. And to conceptualize change is to give presence to the future” (Mader 379). Moraga recognizes the inherent

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<sup>14</sup> In this text, Moraga uses the label “Xicana” to recognize her indigenous heritage

<sup>15</sup> Class lecture October 24, 2011

risk in change, asking “*Does change require losing all?*” (*Codex* 57). While writing has helped her get closer to a place of personal freedom, something has always been at stake: in coming out as a lesbian, she risked losing her family and culture. In *Codex*, she fears the dissolution of the “familia from scratch” she has crafted in her decades as a teacher, artist, and activist.

Her vision of the future allows Moraga to recognize risk—to more than recognize, but to sit with it, getting to know its origins and contours, in order to contribute to the archive of Chicana/Latina daughters who, through writing, seek to educate, enlighten, and articulate what Nunley calls an “emancipatory hope.” Moraga’s body of work brings us closer to her vision in *War Years* of freeing daughters to love their own daughters, but first through loving themselves. Writing becomes a means of diagnosing and healing self, family, and culture; part of the way Chicanas use “homegrown” instruments is by recognizing the history of patriarchy, colonialism, and indigenous heritage.

Writing has emancipatory potential and is a means of creating agency and community, yet it can also be a dangerous practice. Remembering “staves off cultural destruction,” but the recording is difficult because of the search for an appropriate language to communicate the writer’s insights (Brady 155). While memory can be painful, the daughter who writes risks reinscribing the Malinche myth via perceived cultural betrayal. Historian Emma Perez notes we must be aware of replicating, copying, and duplicating “dominant first world methods and tools” as in the articulation of a Chicano/a historical consciousness (4). Regardless, Moraga undertakes the work:

I write to remember

I make rite (ceremony) to remember.

It is my right to remember. (*Codex* 81)

In *Barrio Logos*, Raul Homero Villa employs Orlando Patterson's term "social death" to examine the politics of urban space for Chicano/as (31). Patterson explains social death as the result of chattel slavery's dehumanizing practices. In addition to the physical violence of the flesh, the practices of slavery denied the enslaved access to their social identity via bloodlines of "ascent and descent," that is, one's ancestors and descendants. Moraga's drawing upon pre-Conquest and indigenous figures draws much criticism; yet her linguistic word play of her "right" to "rite" and "write" suggest that writing and remembering are a means of enacting presence, of giving "presence to the future" by looking to our past. Connecting remembering to history, or what Emma Perez calls the "decolonial imaginary," wards off social death and creates new possibilities for being, knowing, and healing. While Chicanas/Latinas are by no means oppressed in the same way as those under slavery, Moraga seeks personal and collective freedom from beliefs and practices that oppress marginalized groups today. However, people of color remain vulnerable to the effects of political inequality and the forces of neoliberalism; Nunley cites Guy Standing's term "precariat" to describe Americans facing instability and insecurity at all levels of existence (177). Echoing Lorna Dee Cervantes's claim, "poetry saved my life," Moraga writes, "Fundamentally, I started writing to save my life. Yes, my own life first. I see the same impulse in my students—the dark, the queer, the mixed-blood, the violated—turning to the written page with a relentless passion, a drive to

avenge their own silence, invisibility, and erasure as living, innately expressive human beings” (*Generation 58*).<sup>16</sup> This quote helps us understand how Moraga sees being a queer daughter as another form of disadvantaging, silencing, and invisibility in Chicano families and larger culture. While my research focus is on the daughter’s voice, clearly daughters are not the only ones creating agency through writing. We are decades from the Chicana and other civil rights movements, yet many of the issues facing youth remain in some way, and those youth continue to seek answers. Moraga’s pedagogy extends off the page into decades of her work as a professor and artist-in-residence at Stanford, where she serves as a codex to those driven to save their own lives first as well.<sup>17</sup>

An apt metaphor is that of the instructions to airline passengers to first secure their own oxygen masks before helping a child in the case of emergency—in Moraga’s context, putting self first is a revolutionary act that goes against culturally prescribed norms of women (particularly mothers) as self-sacrificing. Norma Alarcón writes of how in patriarchal cultures, a woman speaking outside of their maternal role is viewed “as a sign of catastrophe, for if she is allowed to articulate her needs and desires she must do so as a mother on behalf of her children and not of herself” (“Traddutora” 63).

Alarcon cites Kristeva’s discussion of the woman’s place in the “symbolic contract,” observing, “The female-speaking subject that would want to speak from a different

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<sup>16</sup> See Gonzalez, Sonia. “Poetry Saved My Life: An Interview with Lorna Dee Cervantes.” *MELUS*, vol. 32, no. 1, 2007, pp. 163-80.

<sup>17</sup> Most recently, Moraga and her partner Cecelia Herrera Rodriguez serve as co-directors of Las Maestras Center for Chicana and Indigenous Thought and Art Practice at University of California, Santa Barbara.

position than that as a mother, or a future wife/mother, is thrown into a crisis of meaning that begins with her own gendered personal identity and its relational position with others” (“Making Familia” 221).

Moraga writes against another kind of disappearance: that of her bloodline. Her criticism of her culture is equally matched by a concern with its preservation within her immediate family. In *The Last Generation* she writes, “I am the only one not contributing to the population. My line of family stops with me. There will be no one calling me, *Mami, Mamá, Abuelita*. . . I am the last generation put on this planet to remember and record” (9). Observing her aging aunts and uncles, she mourns that they have not passed on cultural knowledge to their children, who have become assimilated into American culture. “And we’re all supposed to quietly accept this passing, this slow and painless death of a cultura, this invisible disappearance of a people. But I do not accept it. I write. I write as I always have, but now I write for a much larger familia” (*Generation 2*). Moraga’s wider audience of her “cultural” familia reflects her belief in creating “familia from scratch,” or the necessity to create fictive kinships when your own family falls short, particularly in terms of accepting gay and lesbian sons and daughters. Moraga also describes her vision for family in *Waiting in the Wings*, describing her desire for family as “something woman-centered, something cross-generational, something extended. . . something Mexican and familial but without all the cultural constraints” and ultimately “familia resurrected and repaired, by us” (*Generation 18*).

Writing publicly and using the personal as a springboard for critical engagement as Moraga does also means a Chicana writer risks alienating her mother, even though she

may build a bridge to reach her. Alarcón posits that daughters who write may fear “a terror of total disjunction” in that mothers, the person closest to them, will no longer recognize her as she speaks another language—both literally and figuratively. (“What Kind of Lover” 91). But the daughter must exercise her “(w)rite;” for if she “accepted the whole of her mother’s world held in place by a discourse to which the poet has a reduced access (if any), and that further locks her into questionable, even crippling ways of being, she would end up silent” (92). Thus the bind Moraga finds herself in: though in her mother’s arms she is “uplifted, sustained,” Moraga recognizes her identity as a Chicana lesbian and a writer threatens to make her “an outsider to [her] family” (*War Years* xi). Yet her writing is also what allows her to come into being, to form her own identity and to explore new territory in mother/daughter relationships grounded in the body and desire. Lora Romero argues Moraga’s work demonstrates how an intellectual identity does not have to be exclusive of a communal identity, reinforcing Moraga’s project of criticism as an act of love, and the personal as a political form of theorizing from *within* (122).<sup>18</sup> Claiming “existo yo” to those within the same cultural sphere remains a risky, yet necessary project for personal and social change.

### ***War Years: The battles at home***

Throughout Moraga’s extensive catalog, *Loving in the War Years* remains a standout text for its form, which combines the genres of essays, poetry, and memoir, as well as its insights about the Chicano family and its use of/exploration of Chicano/a

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<sup>18</sup> In *Codex*, Moraga includes Romero in her list of women she mourns; Romero took her own life in 1997. Moraga writes of the losses, “How long does it take to grow a stone of grief inside of you, how many deaths?” (64).

history, Meso-American history, feminist and queer studies. Moraga's work is important because it addresses a critical blind spot in daughters writing about their mothers; it calls attention to the necessity for daughters to ask questions and the difficulty of discovering the answers. Moraga's questioning comes from a place of deep love and deep pain, and an awareness of the effects on daughters when mothers are (inevitably) complicit with patriarchy and pass on restrictive cultural norms, expectations, and beliefs, whether intentionally or unconsciously. Although Chicana mothers claim to love their children the same, Moraga argues, "*The boys are different*. Sometimes I sense that she feels this way because she wants to believe that through her mothering, she can develop the kind of man she would have liked to have married, or even have been. That through her son she can get a small taste of male privilege, since without race or class privilege that's all there is to be had" (*War Years* 94). In a flashback, Moraga recounts her own scene of betrayal in the form of a tearful phone reunion with her mother, where Moraga's heart opens and "*the feelings beginning to flood my chest. Yes, this is why I love women. This woman is my mother. There is no love as strong as this*" (94). As she prepares to "*speak the truth, finally,*" her mother abruptly cuts her off to take her brother's call. "*Her voice lightens up. 'Okay, mi'jita. I love you. I'll talk to you later,' cutting off the line in the middle of the connection.*" Moraga reminds herself "*This man doesn't have to earn her love. My brother has always come first*" (95).

The reality of being secondary to her brother and the unequal affective power dynamics between Moraga and her mother reflects larger cultural dynamics. The betrayals may not always be overt, they accumulate over a lifetime, and they often



continue into adulthood. A daughter cannot offer proximity to male power the way a son can, and although a daughter is generally believed to be emotionally closer to a mother, she “must constantly earn the mother’s love, prove her fidelity to her. The son—he gets her love for free” (94). Emotional or affective closeness does not necessarily result in equal power dynamics within the relationship. Her mother’s preference for her brother complicates Moraga’s feelings towards her mother; Moraga accepts “second place,” but she still desires to connect with and understand her mother. If “as a pivotal sexual person, symbol, and image in the poet’s experience, the mother is simultaneously within the poet and without, is herself and is not herself, is part of a cherished and rejected past,” then Moraga embodies the pressure felt by the Chicana daughter who dares to question (Alarcón “*Lover*” 91). This is part of what compels me to examine Moraga’s work and other daughter’s voices: while the mother of course loves her daughter, witnessing the uneven power dynamic between mother and daughter is frustrating for me as a writer, critic, and daughter. I see it across genres and generations, on and off the page, in the stories of others and in my own story. I want Moraga—I want *daughters*—to demand more from the mother-daughter dyad, to get angry, to find “freedom from the painful devotion.”

Yet Moraga realizes patriarchal motherhood means that the possibility of her mother prioritizing her daughter “was impossible. . . You are a traitor to your race if you do not put the man first. The potential accusation of ‘traitor’ or ‘vendida’ is what hangs above the heads and beats in the hearts of most Chicanas seeking to develop our own

autonomous sense of ourselves, particularly through sexuality” (*War Years* 95).<sup>19</sup> How does a daughter negotiate the “impossibility?” Moraga and other Chicana writers write extensively about the historical and cultural figure of Mallinali Tenepal (commonly known as La Malinche), opposing and revising the dominant narrative of Malinche “selling out” her people. Malinche has historically been viewed as the original cultural traitor because of her roles as translator for the Spanish leading up to their Conquest of the Aztec Empire, and primarily for her sexual relationship with Hernán Cortés and their resulting mestizo child, making Malinche the mother of the Mexican race. Moraga highlights the fact that she was in such a position only because “Malinche was betrayed by her own mother” (*War Years* 93), who sold her into slavery so that her son (Malinche’s half-brother) would inherit their land. The myth of Malinche as the betrayer is one of many that, Moraga argues, demonstrates Mexican culture’s belief in the “inherent unreliability of women, our natural propensity for treachery” (*War Years* 93). However, like Moraga’s own mother, “Malinche’s mother would only have been doing her Mexican wifely duty: putting the male first” (*War Years* 93).<sup>20</sup> Moraga’s situating her own relationship with her mother within a historical and cultural context demonstrates the power of remembering, and of changing the narrative of what is remembered, and of reconsidering who is authorized to write and interpret history.

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<sup>19</sup> Sellout

<sup>20</sup> Sons do not operate under the same threat (in the same way) of being labeled a “sellout” or experience the same struggles with mothers; however, I want to acknowledge that sons too are impacted by these cultural dynamics, an important critical conversation beyond the scope of this project at this time.

### **“What Kind of Lover”**

*To know that one does not write for the other, to know that these things I am going to write will never cause me to be loved by the one I love (the other), to know that writing compensates for nothing, sublimates nothing, that it is precisely there where you are not—this is the beginning of writing. (Barthes, *A Lover's Discourse* 100)*

Though Moraga recognizes her loyalty and love will never hold the same weight as that of her brothers, her desire for her mother never wanes—it instead permeates her work and drives her personal relationships. Suzanne Juhasz argues a daughter's “desire for the mother as a love object” is part of the daughter's “own subjectivity” (158).

Moraga recognizes her mother as the source of her racial identity, as the first woman's scent she desired, and as a woman with her own unfulfilled desires. Writing becomes a way for Moraga to, as Juhasz states, “negotiate and transform the relationship as it has been structured in everyday life” (158). Her poem, “La Dulce Culpa” asks, “What kind of lover have you made me, mother?” and identifies with her mother as a woman and upends traditional familial roles. As a child, her mother drew her into bed with her and “oh, even at sixty-six you do still,” so they can lay together:

as if our bodies still beat  
inside the same skin  
as if you never noticed  
when they cut me

out

From you. (*War Years* 8)

The yearning and frustration that permeates Barthes's *A Lover's Discourse* is reminiscent of how "Due to the intimate relations between mother and daughter, their relationship is as fraught with strife as that with lovers, male or female" (Alarcón "What Kind?" 93). Although Moraga must claim the race of her mother in order to exist, she also must cleave from her in order to not live the same life as her mother, one with a man who refuses her desire and instead holds it "in the palm of his hand" (*War Years* 9). She uses what she has witnessed as her mother's daughter and vows to "whip this world/into shape," a contrast to the earlier image of her mother taking out her frustration on her daughter with a "belt/pressed inside your grip/seething for contact" (*War Years* 9). At end of poem, Moraga promises she will "fight back" not with violence, but instead:

Strip the belt from your hands

And take you

Into

my arms. (*War Years* 10)

In Moraga's work, images of domestic violence are juxtaposed with those of intimacy. She recounts an early childhood memory of her mother's illness and extended hospitalization to articulate her deep connection to her mother and her love of women. Moraga writes of how she and her siblings were primarily cared for by her aunt during the mother's illness, and of her awareness of how her father merely "played" a parent. Upon being allowed to see her mother again, her aunt exhorts her not to cry, but Moraga

has an embodied, visceral response to the woman in the hospital bed she at first does not recognize. After running into her arms, Moraga recalls:

*But my tia had not warned me about the smell, the unmistakable smell of the woman, mi mama. . . And when I catch the smell I am lost in tears, deep long tears that come when you have held your breath for centuries.*

There was something I knew at that eight-year-old moment that I vowed to never forget—the smell of a woman who is life and home to me at once. (*War Years* 86)

While Moraga writes, “Family is the place where for better or worse, we first learn how to love,” it’s clear that by family, Moraga means “mother.” As an adult, Moraga seeks to (re)create home, “driven by this scent toward la mujer. . . With this knowledge so deeply emblazoned upon my heart, how then was I supposed to turn away from La Madre, La Chicana? If I were to build my womanhood on this self-evident truth, it is the love of the Chicana, the love of myself as a Chicana I had to embrace, no white man” (*War Years* 86). Moraga’s same-sex desire allows her to recognize her mother as a woman with her own desires, but whose complicity in patriarchy created an emotional gulf between them Moraga continually attempts to narrow. Yvonne Yarbro-Bejarano argues Moraga’s dramatic works in particular demonstrate, “The intensity and importance of the ‘real bond’ between mother and children (blood being thicker than water) is shown in Moraga’s writing to be matched only by its potential toxicity” (143). Domestic violence is not only physical but emotional, and perhaps the emotional is even more difficult to heal. Moraga alludes to the cycles of violence and the mediations of power in an aside: “Daddy, you did not beat me, but every blow I took/from the hand of my mother came

*from a caress/you could not give her*” (*War Years* 3). The daughter acts as witness for her mother, and Moraga (w)rites to makes meaning of their experiences:

[Moraga] places memory in an evolving vortex from which she not only suggests the significance of what is remembered but also examines the relationship between languages, space, and recollection. In doing so, Moraga undertakes a wholesale attack on the universalizing subject—Man and the epistemic violence that keeps Man in the center—served and held aloft by the underexamined categories of mother, daughter, and sister. (Brady 152)

Moraga’s mother confesses she finds her husband “so soft, not very manly,” adding that he may be “different like you. . . I know what it’s like to be touched by a man who wants a woman. I don’t feel this with your father” (*War Years* 5). Moraga’s response is to take care of her mother’s need, and “it takes every muscle in me not to leave my chair, not to climb through the silence, not to clamber toward her, not to touch her the way I know she wants to be touched” (*War Years* 5). Her response is grounded in desire, situated somewhere between sexual and an emotional desire for closeness; a daughter’s desire to be recognized for what she can provide, to seek connection with her, a deeper intimacy where the mother can recognize the daughter’s devotion. a desire for connection and intimacy that may be based on the sexual but distinguishable from it as well Brady writes that Moraga’s impulse “signals a daughter’s desire to care for her mother, a care that cannot be entirely divorced from erotics” (163). Thus far Moraga has only used language to try and connect with her mother, yet what Moraga’s mother seeks cannot be found on the page. No amount of words written can fulfill desire for physical connection; Barthes

reminds us writing “compensates for nothing, sublimates nothing” (100). Recognizing the role of desire was a key part of Moraga’s coming to consciousness, as, “It wasn’t until I acknowledged and confronted my own lesbianism in the flesh that my heartfelt identification with and empathy for my mother’s oppression” (*War Years* 44). If presence is to be recognized as fully human, desire is also a core part of humanity. Women’s desire under patriarchal motherhood is conscribed and dictated by men’s needs, and there is no cultural model under that paradigm where a woman with desire is not viewed as selfish or aberrant. For Moraga, recognizing the importance of her mother’s desire is a means of recognizing her presence; but what she wants from her mother—to put her first—remains impossible. Like her writing, Moraga’s knowledge of the role of the body in healing is a language that her mother can’t comprehend. Instead, all Moraga can do is respond “Yeah, Mamá, I understand,” reinforcing the cycle of a daughter’s role of carrying the knowledge of her mother’s struggles along with her own (*War Years* 5).

Her mother’s confession confirms Moraga’s suspicion that her mother is not fulfilled in her marriage, emotionally or physically. Her daughter’s devotion and desire for connection to her mother mean that she has been her mother’s primary emotional caretaker. Her claiming the position as “*my mother’s lover. The partner she’s been waiting for*” is a way to subvert the limits of the patriarchal, heteronormative family (*War Years* 26). In her recognizing her mother’s sexual needs, “Moraga constructs her desire as a response to love and as a refusal to conspire with patriarchal oppression” (Brady

162).<sup>21</sup> In response to her mother's tearful assertion, "No one is ever going to love you as much as I do. No one." Moraga responds, "I know that. I know. I know how strong your love is. Why do you think I am a lesbian?" (*War Years* 129). What is the significance of putting a mother's love at the center of her identity and as the seed of all future relationships? Her identity as a writer, daughter, lover, and mother is grounded in her relationship with her mother, in all its pain and joy.

### **Daughter, Writer, Mother**

Although she previously mourned being the "last generation," in 1997's *Waiting in the Wings: Portrait of a Queer Motherhood*, Moraga introduces the text explaining that she spent several years as "the lesbian lover of a mother" (15). After that relationship ends and she is no longer able to see the child, she realizes she "had grown up to be woman enough, on my own terms, to mother a child" (*Waiting* 22). Moraga and her partner, known only as "Ella," decide Moraga will carry the child, and she is artificially inseminated by a male member of her queer familia. The text documents her difficult pregnancy, the struggle to keep her preemie son (Rafael) alive, and the early years of her and her partner's co-motherhood. Prior to this, Moraga's primary model of biological

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<sup>21</sup> Sex and gender remain problematic topics in Moraga's work, especially given criticism around her treatment of transgender issues and same-sex marriage in her 2009 essay "Still Loving in the (Still) War Years: On Keeping Queer Queer." For an incisive analysis of the institutional violence around transgender and queer people in the Chicano/a Studies, see Francisco J. Galarte's "Transgender Chican@ Poetics: Contesting, Interrogating, and Transforming Chicana/o Studies" in *The Journal of Chicana/Latina Studies*, volume 13:2, Spring 2014, pp. 118-139.



motherhood was external, the figure of her own mother. However, she recognizes mothering in other forms of women's caring—she notes her “recognition that I had nursed dozens of hungry women throughout my life as I had my own mother, from the time I could remember, and in that resided my lesbian conviction, my lesbian loving” (*Waiting* 22). The emotional responsibility Moraga feels for her mother is likely an iteration of the parentification of children. Seeking to fill the void in her mother's life means that she seeks to be her mother's lover, but also a maternal figure. Interestingly, Moraga does not speak of learning to mother *herself*—the acts of love are always external.

While she reinforces her identity for her audience, telling us “I am a daughter and have always loved the daughters in all our beauty and brokenness” (*Waiting* 22), what does motherhood do to her understanding of the institution of motherhood? How will her child's male gender impact her understanding of what it is to be a queer mother? If “having a child changes the way Moraga is a lesbian in the world” (Yarbro-Bejarano 137), I am also interested in considering how motherhood might also change the way Moraga is a daughter and writer in the world.<sup>22</sup> In an indigenous ceremony during her pregnancy, she recounts, “*I prayed that I would learn how to raise a male child well, that the wounds men have inflicted on me, even in their absence, will not poison me against my son*” (*Waiting* 41). She remains concerned with the passing on of wounds, but in a different way than those passed between women. Instead of seeking proximity to male

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<sup>22</sup> Yarbro-Bejarano argues that Moraga's pregnancy and motherhood blur the line between her butch lesbian identity and femme characteristics in a way that “queers” both. (140)

privilege like her mother did in *War Years*, Moraga can instead try to raise a different kind of male. Motherhood also exposes Moraga to a deeper intimacy than she ever could imagine. Holding her infant she is reminded of life, is filled with hope for a “*more profound way of believing. Maybe he is my teacher*” (*Waiting* 59). Rafael’s tenuous grasp on life makes her more aware of loss than ever, and of the impossibility of preventing loss, lessons she will need when it comes to her mother.

Her son is born at 28 weeks and due to numerous medical issues, remains in the ICU for the first several months of his life. His birth and struggle for life are set against the backdrop of the AIDS crisis, and Moraga uses journal entries to recount the dichotomies between creating life and the death that surrounds her. She writes, “*At forty, I feel myself respond to the crisis of Rafaelito’s sudden entrance into this world as I did as a child of eight fearing my mother’s death. . . I have never been so close to and so afraid of death as I have been with the emergence of my son into the world. How does one have faith when one is consumed by fear?*” (*Waiting* 58). What stands out about this passage, and about *Waiting in the Wings* overall, is its tone. While Moraga always recognized the risks of her political and personal work, the real possibility of her son’s death haunts much of the text. Her identity as “her mother’s daughter” is further nuanced by the “*miracle that someone will soon grow to call me mami*” (*Waiting* 73). Moraga is irrevocably changed as a daughter: returning to her childhood home “*will never be the same. . . I now always will return a mother. Mother: the term assumes the shape of my being very gradually*” (*Waiting* 92). And while this again may be true for any new

mother, becoming a biological mother is a choice Moraga and her partner made—the expectation of reproduction her own mother operated under likely means that she didn't have a choice. Both Moraga and her mother had to learn how to be mothers, but within different cultural contexts and political climates.

Fear of death and loss is a widespread human emotion, and one Moraga encountered in her fear of losing her mom and her family. Yet Rafael's illness is something new; she feels her child is a piece of her. At Rafael's worst moment in the hospital when an infection threatens his life, Moraga realizes, "my tightest hold against death cannot keep Rafaelito here" (*Waiting* 65). While she accepts her new knowledge, she has difficulty knowing what to do with it: the practice of writing that normally helps her shape her world temporarily fails her. "*It is hard to write when there is no fixed me to be. I am not the same. I don't know how to write of death. . .and yet I know that this is the next necessary step. Rafaelito's close encounter with death, his tenuous hold on life, his fragile and threatened beginnings, have introduced me to living with the knowledge of death*" (*Waiting* 66). Rafaelito's illness is layered onto several other losses: that of a close friend from AIDS, Audre Lorde's death from cancer, and the death of a friend's father. Additionally, Moraga and her partner grow apart and separate: as her sister mourns the end of her own marriage, Moraga tells her "Life is about loss. It's all loss" (*Waiting* 116).

Loss becomes real to Moraga and threatens to silence her, but writing remains "the locus of self-production." The text documents "the layered and changing process of textual production of the self" as daughter, writer, and queer mother (Yarbro-Bejarano

130). Moraga put her writing aside during Rafael's darkest days, but once he is healthy she resumes writing, "*coming out from under the sea of that terror, I need the work, the writing more passionately than ever. I need to know I am more than these tasks of motherhood, more than mother. I need to remember that I am writer*" (*Waiting* 88).

Writing has helped Moraga shape and articulate her presence and existence, and it is significant that she recognizes she is "more," even though her child now anchors her. While her own mother may have recognized she was also "more than motherhood," she did not have the tools or the environment in which to express her other capabilities. Is this a privilege of Chicana daughters? To grow from the child scribe to the mother scribe, remembering and making (w)rite/right? so that their daughters and sons can be free? She must continue to write, yet motherhood changes Moraga as a writer:

I will never write the same. . . With the appearance of Rafael in my life, I can never return to the writer I once was. . . because my soul is never completely empty in the same way. I am conscious of another entity always pulling on me. . . A hole has been created through which my child passed. . . Now the work—the art—passes through me differently. (*Waiting* 95)

The "hole" and "passing through" suggest a maternal body for Moraga's art, rather than an absence, or gap where her child left her. Both writer and mother are changed: how might this generation of children be changed by mothers who recognize and communicate that they are "more than mothers?" Mother and child embody past and future, history and hope.

## Contemporary Curanderismo

A better future for sons and daughters, however, is not guaranteed. Anxieties about motherhood and the fate of children are played out on stage in Moraga's retelling of the Greek tragedy of Medea. Theater is key component to Moraga's work, and a form of political activism, as "theater requires the body to make testimony and requires other bodies to bear witness to it" (*Codex* 35).<sup>23</sup> Through staging, the personal becomes both political and public. Public performance allows for what Tiffany Ana López calls critical witnessing, which not only educates viewers, but also moves them to consider how they may take action and make change (63). Performance is a staging of the claim "Existo yo" and a form of healing, or "contemporary curanderismo," for the artist and for its witnesses (*Codex* 40). *The Hungry Woman: A Mexican Medea* amalgamates the Greek Medea and the Mexican mythical figure of La Llorona, both women whose stories center around women killing their children (and therefore, arguably becoming "bad" mothers).<sup>24</sup> *Medea* is doubly written from a mother's perspective: Moraga as a mother, writing about a mother. The play centers on a future where Chicanos have finally reclaimed Aztlán, the storied homeland of Chicanos. Materially, Aztlán is understood to encompass much of the Southwest United States, territory inhabited by the indigenous ancestors to the Mexican people.

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<sup>23</sup> A curandero/a is a folk healer who uses ancient methods to treat spiritual, physical, and mental ailments.

<sup>24</sup> In the myth of La Llorona (the woman who cries), a woman drowns her children so that she may flee with her lover. Her lover abandons her; stricken with remorse and grief, the spirit of the woman is said to haunt riverbanks, seeking her children. Children are thus warned to stay away from the river at night, as they run the risk of being taken by La Llorona.

In *The Hungry Woman*, the Nation of Aztlán becomes patriarchal and hegemonic, exiling gays and lesbians, or “queers” to Phoenix (or as those who reside there call it, Tamoanchán). Medea resided in Tamoanchán, a “city in ruin, the dumping site of every kind of poison and person unwanted by its neighbors” with her lover Luna before being imprisoned in a psychiatric ward for killing her son from a previous marriage, Chac-Mool. Medea’s story switches between the present and flashbacks. Chac-Mool’s father requests custody and to Medea’s horror, Chac-Mool wishes live with his father in Aztlán, securing his fate in heteronormative patriarchy. The deep bond a mother feels for her child and the difficulty of queer motherhood under hegemonic patriarchy are dominant themes of the play. Medea shares a memory with the female prison nurse of weaning her son, recalling she “knew then that he already wanted to be away from me, to grow up to suck on some other woman’s milk-less tit” (31). When the nurse wryly responds, “Took it personally, did you?” Medea lashes out at her. “There’s nothing more personal than the love between a mother and child. You wouldn’t know. You are childless, a dull mule who can’t reproduce. I will always be more woman than you” (32). Here Medea illustrates the problematic cultural belief that motherhood is the marker of “true” womanhood. The nurse tersely replies, “I was sterilized. Puerto Rico. 1965,” reminding us of how the reproductive power of women of color threatens the homogeneity of the nation, and thus the right to mother-and-womanhood can be monitored and controlled. The trope of mother as “real” woman is also articulated by Mama Sal, Medea’s grandmother:

When you're a girl, hija, and a Mexican, you learn purty quick that you got only one shot at being a woman and that's being a mother. . . You go from a daughter to mother, and there's nothing in-between. That's the law of our people written como los diez commandments on the metate stone from the beginning of all time. . . You leave your mother and go out and live on your own. . . Still, you can't forget your mother, even when you try to. (50)

Mama Sal's comment raises the question of how daughters learn to become mothers, and of the cultural limits to a woman's identity. Moraga subverted the linear progression first by questioning what mothers expect of daughters, then by her own queer motherhood. The "in-between" for Moraga was her mothering of other women, and other women's children. Now that she is a mother herself, motherhood is not just something external to her—as she remembers her mother, so she too will be remembered.

But for Medea, her son leaving her behind in favor of the patriarchy suggests being the mother of a son comes with its own disappointments. Medea observes, "Betrayal occurs when a boy grows into a man and sees his mother as a woman for the first time. A woman. A thing. A creature to be controlled" (70). The kind of man who will not do this, Medea states, "does not exist, must be invented. He will invent himself if he must" (69). By making Medea's child a son, Moraga plays out on the stage the same dynamics she critiques in *War Years*. Although there is no daughter to compete for Medea's love, Chac-Mool represents Medea's hope for a different future, echoing her claim in *War Years* about mothers hoping to mold sons into the kind of men they wish they could have married (94). Medea poisons her son to save him from his future:

becoming a man just like his father in her absence. As she cradles his body in a pieta, she wonders, “How much simpler had you been born a daughter?”

You would have comforted me in old age  
held vigil at the hour of my death  
washed my body with sweet soap  
anointing it with oil. (91)

Medea reinforces the “loyalty” daughters have to their mothers (as noted in *War Years*). In the same soliloquy addressed to “Madre Coatlicue,” Moraga offers a mythical image of mother/daughter betrayal embedded in the Chicano/a imaginary and in Medea’s own history. In Meso-American mythology, Coyolxauhqui is the daughter of Coatlicue. When Coyolxauhqui realizes her mother is pregnant with Huitzilopochtli, the God of War, she attempts to kill her mother in order to “save the culture from misogyny, war, and greed. Huitzilopochtli emerges from the womb fully formed, and slays Coyolxauhqui in defense of “patriarchal motherhood,” eclipsing her female power (*Generation 74*). Medea recounts:

My mother did not stop my brother’s hand  
from reaching into my virgin bed  
Nor did you hold back the sword  
that severed your daughters head. (90)

Medea then rejects Coatlicue and embraces Coyolxauhqui as her new god. What is significant about Medea identifying herself as a betrayed daughter at the moment she takes her son’s life? It suggests a rejection of the narrative of womanhood hinging on



motherhood, or as a rejection of motherhood as the ultimate fulfillment of a woman's life. Medea's adoption of the "La hija rebelde" or the "rebel daughter" is perhaps a reminder of how mothers were daughters first, and of the necessity of healing from legacies of violence. One must wonder, though, how would the play be different if Medea had a daughter instead of a son?

### *Chicana Codex*

In *Codex*, Moraga's lifetime of anxiety around loss comes to a head as she faces her mother's impending death, and reflects on how her own death will one day impact her son. Echoing Eliot's "Prufrock," her anxiety increases as she ages; when she was a child she stood fearless before the ocean, but "Today I do not venture beyond the wave's breaking point at shoulder height. I do not venture deeper than I can touch bottom. I do not venture" (*Codex* 58). She cites lessons learned from witnessing the loss of lovers and family, from the slow deaths of those without health insurance, the suicides and violent deaths of fellow Chicana scholars and female friends. Although she accepts "there is no permanence, only change, only loss and found and loss again," fear returns: "Fear of losing all I love. Home, familia, sanity, my mother" (*Codex* 57). Her mother's "silent companion, Alzheimer's" means she "continues to change into a woman I have never met, but must quickly learn to know . . . She is a deep bruise in my heart" (*Codex* 11-12).

Moraga's work is an archive of a daughter attempting to understand her mother. For her mother to change mentally and physically—to age and to die—depends any sense of security or parity Moraga may have reached in their relationship. Can a child ever

accept the death of a parent? There was not a map for much of the ground Moraga navigated in her work, first as a queer daughter, then again as a queer mother. Yet through these navigations she had her mother as an anchor and ballast; what does her future without her mother look like?

In a poem set during an evening ride with her family in a convertible, Moraga's mother, "nearing ninety," asks her "Do you have a mother?" At the realization her mother does not know her:

My heart quickens at the prospect  
of my sudden orphanhood.  
But Elvira is not afraid  
from where she sits behind the sun-glassed desert  
of her own Tucson girlhood,  
she remembers being nobody's mother. (*Codex* 74)

In this moment when she is not recognized as "her mother's daughter," Moraga embodies the "terror of total disjunction" that Alarcón writes of. Only it is not language that has alienated her from her mother, but the ravages of age on her mother's mind. In this innocent question, Elvira temporarily makes Moraga an emotional orphan. And while Elvira forgets who Moraga is, it is not a moment of full amnesia—her identity prior to becoming a mother remains, reminding us that motherhood is but one part of a woman's identity in the story of her life. This is further reinforced for the reader by Moraga's introduction of her mother's name—thus "my mother" becomes instead "Elvira," a specific person versus a possessive title. The switch stands out, especially when

considering the linguistic habit of siblings conversing in Spanish about their parents with each other using the possessive pronoun: instead of “I spoke to our mother today” one normally would say “I spoke to *my* mother today.” Using her mother’s first name is a means of recognition, of acceptance, of letting go—of putting some distance between the sometimes suffocating mother/daughter dyad.

Yet it has taken Moraga decades to achieve this recognition: how might their relationship have been different if in *War Years* Moraga had instead been able to write, “I am still Elvira’s daughter?” What does it mean for me to write, “I am still Juliana’s daughter?” For me, Juliana is fixed in time in a black and white professional photo taken when she was fifteen, face smooth of lines and flanked with heavy dark braids. She is a girl I do not know, but have only heard about. The only Juliana I know is the maternal Juliana, and as that has been her identity for so long I wonder if even she remembers who she was before.

Moraga responds to her mother’s question, telling her “Yes. . .she’s you” but her mother only laughs. “So, I laugh too./ Big joke” (*Codex* 75). The space and tools of poetry allow Moraga to articulate what she wishes she had done before: grabbed Elvira’s hand, pointed to the sky and had her look at:

. . . those scattered stars of memory

There’s my mother and yours.

Asi que te preocupes, Mamá<sup>25</sup>

I’ll meet you there one day.

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<sup>25</sup> So do not worry

And we will be forever

Sisters. (*Codex 75*)

Moraga's turning to the sky speaks to how both women are daughters of a larger, cosmic, maternal force. In another realm, they can connect as women, not conscribed by the patriarchal mother/daughter relationship and its accompanying power dynamics. The celestial realm also serves as a place for female connection in Lorna Dee Cervantes's poem "Pleiades from the Cables of Genocide," which is dedicated to her "grandmother and the budgets of '89" (43). In the poem, Cervantes writes of the "Seven Sisters" the "only constellation/my grandmother could point out with the punch/Of a heart" in a sky where her grandmother "uplifts/Into heaven" (44). Whereas earlier in the text Moraga stood at the shore in fear of loss, she has come to terms with the inevitability of loss, accepting "that prayers do not ward off death; prayers simply bear witness. And death happens" and is comforted by the idea of a deeper connection with her mother outside in another realm (*Codex 196*).

Moraga's role as a mother means that she must also consider her own mortality and anxieties about the impact her death will have on her son. She recalls a moment shortly after her mother's death, when she feels her son in the room behind her:

I stand at the sink in the full weight of motherhood. I am someone's only mother, as my mother was to me. . . the space that my body occupies, that physicality, is what most matters, that I am *not* gone, that I have returned, that I will most likely return again after long walks with the dog in the rain. And this is

what I miss most about my own mother; that she will not return to me, embodied in this way. (*Codex 197*)

The focus on embodiment is key to understanding Moraga's understanding of the world. Her writing since the beginning has been from a place of embodied experience in the world, pathos as a means to logos. The impact of a mother's body invites comparison to an earlier scene from Moraga's life, that of seeing her mother in the hospital after a long absence in *War Years*. In that moment, she was pulled towards mother's body, made familiar by scent, allowing her to recognize her mother as her source of female love. Here, she is on the other side of the transaction. Though her son does not approach her and she does not turn around to see him, she is aware of how her body represents stability and security for him. It is a weight she carries, a weight she must not let subsume her in order for both of them to be free. "If my mother's last years in the awe of Alzheimer's taught me anything, it was the necessity to love without holding on. It is a lesson that the body refuses; that requires soul to enact; that must be practiced daily and relearned in ruthless confrontation with those most pivotal moments of change in our lives" (*Codex 198*). Loss happens, but from the "change and transformation" we can "make meaning from loss" (*Codex 198*).

Moraga's body of work, with its attention to the lived experience of a woman's body, of a daughter's body, helps me remember the need to love without fear, without pain. And whether daughters become mothers or not, Moraga has taught me that loving one's self is the starting point for healing cultural and familial legacies of pain. Moraga offers critical frameworks that further inform my readings in the chapters that follow:

how a mother's body can be a source of both comfort and pain; the lifetime role of a daughter; the power of writing and performance for healing and agency; and the necessity for understanding our mothers as women first.

## **Epilogue**

*“You look concerned,” the doctor tells my mother as he prepares to share the results of her latest procedure. My polite English tongue that mediates these interactions wishes I could correct him, and instead translate his own words back to him: it’s miedo. Fear. I know she is more than concerned, she is afraid. Afraid of getting sick, afraid of dying. Always miedo. Fear of the death she glimpsed when another doctor in another office in another decade purposefully tipped her backwards to test her vertigo and she panicked. “¡Me muero, me muero!” she cried as her world spun out of control, as I could only sit and watch. My mother has expressed her fear of dying for so long that her death is a certainty to me, an event I have been conditioned to expect in every unexpected phone call. It’s not a question of if I will be ready when it comes—it’s the waiting and the burden of the knowledge that threatens to wear me down.*

*Fear of outside, unknown forces has permeated my mother’s life and bled into mine. It is fear that caused her to keep me indoors as a child, resulting in my turning to books as a way of experiencing the world instead. Fear of her children abandoning her caused her to hold them even tighter, resulting in them—no, me, her youngest and the last one left—squirming away at every chance, her reproaches the soundtrack for my life. My own life was shaped by fear until it became unbearable, and books again became my*

*solace and my saviors as I read the words of daughters in the same seemingly impossible positions of, as Moraga writes, living a life not shaped by fear (Codex 59).*

*Fear still holds me back as I attempted to find my own words, make my own statement of “existo yo” outside of my expected role as a daughter. Knowing that my mother will never read my words affords me some of the freedom I seek. But now, as my mother ages and I remain a daughter (never a mother), I must, like Moraga, acknowledge my fear, and let it go, while remembering the lessons it taught me. My mother has not accepted that she will die one day—she does not have my same tools for freedom—but I can use them to navigate us both through her remaining years.*

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### Chapter 3

Chicana Daughters Staging Mother's Lives: Adelina Anthony's *Bruising for Besos* and Dulce Maria Solis' *CHELA: Her Third Husband, Her First Orgasm*.

In Adelina Anthony's *Bruising for Besos* and Dulce Maria Solis' *CHELA: Her Third Husband, Her First Orgasm*, the artists stage solo performances in which they embody their mothers as a way of (re)discovering them, and attempt to process the wounds that the mothers experienced and passed forward to their daughters. The public staging of theater situates the reader and audience as witness in a way that other genres cannot: theater demands we bear witness for both Solis and Anthony as they explore how their early memories and experiences as daughters shape their worldview as adults. For Solis, the creative process entailed interviewing her mother and learning new stories that ultimately changed her understanding of the choices her mother made and her ambivalent feelings towards her mother as an adult. Anthony revisits scenes from her childhood to the present, bringing to life a spectrum of characters to chart her complex relationship with her mother.

Like the other genres I examine in this dissertation, these artists tell multi-layered stories that span generations about the wounds daughters carry into adulthood. The embodied storytelling of theater enables Anthony and Solis to embody their mothers, better understand who their mothers are, and explore how their own identity is tethered to their mothers. Inhabiting their mother's bodies enables a (re)discovery; while daughters may think they know their mothers, examining memories and experiences as an adult

give the artists intimate access to the sometimes secret histories of their mother's lives. In contrast with works of fiction, poetry, essays, and other genres where daughter speaks *to* or *of* her mother, Anthony and Solis speak and perform publicly *as* their mothers: this "walk in her shoes" means the work has a stronger focus on how daughters are most affected by the pain mothers have carried and passed down to them.

### **Critical Witnessing**

Chicana scholars and artists have historically used writing to resist being silenced in their attempts to work through their experiences at the intersections of race, class, gender and sexual orientation. The family home is most often the first place where Chicanas feel the effects of these intersections and where, as author and mentor to Anthony Cherríe Moraga believes, we first learn how to love for better or worse. Anthony and Solis demonstrate in their work how the scripting of bodies in dramatic literature makes public what cannot be said or understood through other genres. Theater allows the performers to publicly grapple with memories of the spectrum of emotional and physical violence centered in the family, explore their feelings of anger and confusion towards their mothers, and examine how social and cultural institutions allow for the conditions of violence felt most by women and children.

This chapter considers how what theater scholar Tiffany Ana López calls the "realm of witnessing" known as theater subverts the linear, forward motion of violence between mothers and daughters, and allows us to be the witness the *daughter* has not had ("Staging" 39). By examining what and why daughters witness for their mothers as

children and hearing the stories the adult daughters tell about their mothers, the audience becomes part of a prism of critical witnessing that allows us to recognize the daughter's journey as much as her mother's. Anthony and Solis are part of a legacy of Chicana/Latina daughters examining the pivotal role of mothers in their lives, and of using personal experiences as springboard for critical engagement. López identifies the work of Solis, Anthony, and Moraga as "testimonio-driven theater practice," further situating the significance of acting as a witness through "critical witnessing" ("Staging" 18). *Testimonio*, or the public sharing of personal experiences to draw attention to violence, injustice, and trauma is also means of healing and is a significant practice across genres for Chicana writers and artists.<sup>26</sup> López defines critical witnessing as "the process of being so moved by a reading experience as to engage in a specific action to forge a path toward change" ("Critical Witnessing" 63). The examination and sharing of personal experiences is significant for Chicana artists in that it allows questioning of cultural norms, particularly expectations of women and daughters to devote themselves to family shaped by male privilege, and accepting the way are treated as a result. Theater becomes a site of agency where daughters can speak publicly about what happens in the private, sanctified institution of the Chicano family. Embodied storytelling on stage lets other survivors of violence know that their experiences are not outside the norm. Anthony considers her work personally and publicly healing, stating in her introduction to the play, "If story is medicine, then these plays work toward our necessary healing, and this rite of performance requires the audience as active witness" (62).

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<sup>26</sup> For a deeper discussion of the significance of *testimonio* in Chicana/Latina feminism, see *Telling to Live: Latina Feminist Testimonios*, Duke University Press, 2001.

In *Loving in the War Years*, Moraga writes of the difficult position of the Chicana daughter whose love for her mother is a source of constant pain, and the need for conversations about the experiences of daughters. An outsider to her family because of her lesbianism and her ideas that challenged Chicano cultural norms, she writes, “Todavía soy la hija de me mamá. Keep thinking, *it’s the daughters*. It’s the daughters who remain loyal to the mother, although this loyalty is not always reciprocated. . . . It is the daughters who are my audience” (*War Years* xiii). Moraga’s work offers significant insights about the conditions that make many Chicana mother/daughter relationships complex: legacies of patriarchal family structure, domestic violence, heteronormativity, and cultural beliefs about gender roles can all create and obscure the “prism of witnessing” daughters need. Significantly, Moraga has acted as a mentor for and collaborator with Anthony, creating a generational legacy of artists examining how their mother’s behavior may be traumatic for the daughter, and reaching an understanding that the mother’s behavior may be symptom of her own trauma.

Through remembering and reenacting scenes from their family history and their mother’s lives, Anthony and Solis attempt to understand how our histories may help shape us, but are not definitive of us. On stage, the artists are able to grapple with questions of why their mother may have failed to protect them from physical and emotional harm, and in the process of writing and performing are able to connect with their mothers as survivors of violence. In her most recent work, Moraga writes of the relationship between writing and agency:

I write to remember

I make rite (ceremony) to remember.

It is my right to remember. (*Codex* 81)

Daughters have the “right” to remember, yet I would add that daughters also have the burden to remember. Considering performance as ceremony furthers the power of theater for healing through embodied storytelling. We see daughters ritually remembering their mothers in works by Chicanas across genres, but theater makes the remembering public.

### **Mothers, Daughters, Malinches**

Not every woman will be a mother, but all women have a mother—we are all daughters. Moraga further asks us to consider how we are all Malinches, or part of the legacy of a “long line of vendidas” (*War Years* 82). “Vendida,” or “sell out,” has come to have layers of meaning for Chicana/Latina women. Instead of Malinche as the betrayer who “sold out” her native people by translating for the colonizer Hernan Cortes or as the “mother” of the Chicano people through the mixed-race child she had with him, Moraga and other Chicana feminists reimagine her by reminding us Malinche was first a daughter sold into slavery by her mother. Chicana feminists have thus reframed the position of Malinche as a daughter vulnerable to her mother’s actions and desires, recognizing that mothers do not always act in the best interest of their daughters. The realization that one’s parent is flawed can be profoundly disruptive, whether it comes as a child or an adult, and puts the daughter into a difficult position in terms of her duties and expectations toward her mother. Moraga’s work illustrates the sometimes difficult

position of daughters, and how their relationships with their mothers are a complex web of loyalty of punishment, love, devotion and frustration. While *War Years* was written close to three decades ago, the consistent thread of mothers as a subject in works by contemporary Chicanas illustrates how these contradictory ideas about what it means to be a daughter remain central to the field. López reads Moraga as trauma theorist for her examination of how “violence and trauma have shaped her life” and how “a mother’s behavior reflects the ways women have been molded by heteropatriarchal histories that permeate the relationship dynamics between a mother and her children” (“Staging” 4). A key idea here is *behavior*, or actions, which are not always driven by emotion, but rather by necessity or belief. Uncovering and challenging the origins of cultural beliefs damaging to women remains a central project for many Chicana/Latina writers and artists.

Many Chicana daughters remain rooted in devotion to their mothers despite their behaviors, as it is the dominant cultural, heteropatriarchal model López references. The devotion works further than making mothers a conventional subject for Chicana performers: the solo performances of Anthony and Solis continue to reframe our ideas of what daughters, Malinches, or “vendedoras” are allowed to say in the precarious role as translator of her mother’s life. Daughters use writing and performance as a venue to publicly tell stories about and for their mothers; as mothers often do not have the same agency, language or even desire that daughters do to explore how wounds get passed forward. Solis had her mother’s permission and cooperation to write her work, and Anthony writes that her plays “are first and foremost the offerings I promised my

mother—that I would take the experience of what she and my family have survived (and also what we haven’t survived) in order to make peace with the legacies of violence I inherited” (62). These works challenge the invisibility of daughters and the cultural idea that women are only legible as mothers. Chicana theorist Norma Alarcón argues this “symbolic contract” means “women may have a voice on the condition that they speak as mothers” (“*Familia from Scratch*” 221, 229). The daughter’s gift of language serves others: Malinche only told other people’s stories, never her own.

Both Anthony and Solis recognize their mothers were not able to publicly tell their stories themselves. Was this because they didn’t want to, didn’t have the language, or because there was no one to listen? Their daughters not only listened, but in many cases witnessed significant moments of trauma, as well as their day to day struggles that come from poverty, lack of education and lack of social resources. Also important to note are the moments of deep love, tenderness and sacrifice the daughters witnessed and include in their performances, allowing us to recognize our shared humanity. Performance allows daughters to fill in the gaps of their mother’s stories they were not physically there to witness, and in their re-creation continue to witness for her mother. Seeing the world through her mother’s eyes enables the artists to reflect on how they have replicated or absorbed histories of violence, both physical and emotional.

Reframing Malinche’s legacy empowers the critical exploration of wounds through recognizing the daughter’s voice, but there remains an inherent danger of getting the story wrong, of betraying one party at the expense of the telling, or of assuming that one story stands for all. Some mothers may not want their story told. Alarcón’s assertion



about Chicana/Latina women only being legible as mothers must be considered in terms of women as witnesses as well—mothers may never be able to really “hear” their daughter’s pain and frustration, or they may see an exploration of traumatic events as a form of blame. Moraga notes a frequent question posed to her after exposing her family “secrets” in *War Years* is if her mother has read her work (xi). The question reinforces the idea that what happens in the Chicano/Latino family is a private affair, and that public discussion is not only a betrayal of the institution, but also to the individuals involved as well. Mothers may instill a limit point in their daughters for speaking out very early on, which makes the use of child’s point of view particularly provocative in Anthony and Solis. We can be the witness the child did not have, or that her mother could not be. Playwright Dael Orlandersmith, whose works often focus on the “dark side of childhood,” writes of the necessity to “not be afraid to speak the truth that should have been spoken as a child.”

### **Agency and Healing Through Performance**

A constant refrain in any parent-child relationship, and in these plays, is the sentiment of “when you have a child you’ll understand.” Yet daughters may not ever become mothers, and if they do, can they afford to wait that long to understand the way they were raised and not repeat cycles of violence? Daughters may never be legible to their mothers, but the task of storytelling remain with the daughters. This is what is at stake for daughters when they tell their mother’s stories, and why performance is such a provocative medium. When we take into account how meaning is culturally inscribed

and prescribed to daughter's bodies (as having sprung from and always tethered to their mothers, as the site of their own offspring, as property of God, father, and husband) performance carries further significance in the agency and control performers have over their bodies. Daughters can perform the unspeakable and ask the unthinkable through their bodies on stage.<sup>27</sup>

Despite the dangers of speaking, a daughter cannot afford to remain silent: Anthony and Solis's texts and performances are a radical questioning, a questioning necessary to break the legacies of violence, to challenging patriarchal motherhood, and recognizing daughterhood as a state of being in the same way motherhood is. Questioning a mother's actions is not an act of betrayal but an act of love for her mother and love for self, and indicative of desire to understand the formative female figure in one's life. As a daughter of a Mexican-born mother, I share Anthony and Solis's struggle to understand my mother's actions and to create my own autonomous identity without negating her need for a witness. These works raised for me questions about how expressions of Chicana daughterhood get subsumed within stories of motherhood, and compelled me to recognize the need to critically witness for daughters across genres and in my teaching practice.

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<sup>27</sup> Chicana performance scholar Alicia Arrizón cites Gloria Anzaldúa in her discussion of how visual and performance art is liberating for Chicana artists, particularly in terms of portraying La Virgen de Guadalupe, La Llorona and Malinche, noting, "All these mythological and historical figures glorify the power of the feminine body in Mexican culture, influencing the epistemology of feminism in contemporary Chicana literature, art, theatre, and performance. The narratives of these figures . . . represent an unraveling aesthetics of transgression that contests the colonial legacy" (48).

Is Moraga's claim in *War Years* that despite all, "I am still my mother's daughter" an anchor or an albatross? Is it an excuse, or a truth or a verdict?<sup>28</sup> What does it mean for a Chicana to identify herself as someone's daughter? The solo performances I examine help us understand how Moraga's claim, one I believe most Chicanas subscribe to, merits further examination. Much of the writing by Chicanas about their mothers extolls mother's virtues as and positive influences throughout their lives. While enormously productive in terms of deconstructing the patriarchal Chicano family and empowering the experiences of women, much of the textual analysis elides the pain of the daughter's experience. These solo performances shift the reader and audience to thinking about the daughter's role as a witness. "I am still my mother's daughter," does not have to mean the daughter is without her own voice or without need for a public accounting of the ways patriarchal motherhood has impacted her. While Anthony's and Solis's plays are their mother's stories, examining their work through the lens of daughters translating their mother's lives is key to constructing the subjectivity of daughters and being the critical witness the daughters have not had. It is not possible for daughters to heal their mothers, but performing their stories is a means of healing self and breaking cycles of violence through inviting the audience to witness. Mothers often act as the architects of daughter's lives, and while daughters cannot ever raze the structuring forces of mothers, they can retrofit in order to weather the rest of their lives. Theater and performance entail public, embodied storytelling, a practice that lays bare the

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<sup>28</sup> In Helena Maria Viramontes's short story "Growing," the daughter asks herself these questions when her father proclaims he cannot trust her because "TU ERES MUJER" (36).

experiences of daughters and creates opportunities for prisms of witnessing that can heal both artist and audience.

### *CHELA*

*CHELA*, the name of Solis' mother, recounts the major events of Chela's life that lead up to her marriage to the abusive Finito. Solis describes it as a "quest to find love and affirm self-worth" (165). The play opens with a Prologue, with Chela having an orgasm in a hotel room and then addressing the audience, telling us how her pursuit of the man allowed her to feel "alive again—for the first time, in a very long time" (168). We then see Chela as a child in Michoacan, Mexico, sharing with the audience that she does not go to school but instead helps her strict mother (Angelita) sell tacos out of their home and care for her younger siblings. She is an exuberant child whose desire to play is quickly quashed by her mother's harsh words and her household duties. Even though she is only seven, Chela is parentified, a trait that Adelina Anthony also shares and explores in her work. She never gets to be a child herself—her younger siblings even call her "Ama Chela", a diminutive and term of endearment for "Mama." Thus Chela is caught in a position being an authority over her siblings but also at the mercy of her mother's authority, lacking agency or the ability to pursue her own needs and desires.

Chela is raped at the age of fifteen by an acquaintance. She attempts to tell Angelita what happened, but her mother slaps her and tells her she is acting crazy—the first time Chela is left without witness. Humiliated by Chela's ensuing pregnancy, Angelita sends her to work as a maid in Mexico City. After her child is born (Dulce-

Maria), Angelita keeps her, claiming that Chela is an unfit mother and is to join her father in the United States, where she will work and send money back home for her child's care. Chela meets the much older Finito after living in the U.S. for three years, and while she does agree to marry him, she wishes to wait. He takes advantage of her illiteracy and marries her in a ceremony she thinks is only to obtain a marriage license. When she learns the truth and objects, the abuse starts. She becomes a prisoner: he "burned all my 'How to Speak English' books and glued all the windows shut. Everyday before he left for work, he took with him the telephone cords and the kitchen knives, and locked me in the house from the outside" (187). However, Chela feels indebted to Finito, as he pays for her siblings to cross into the U.S., helps them obtain illegal social security numbers so they can work, and provides for her family in Mexico financially. His assistance is another tool to terrorize Chela, as he threatens to have her family deported if she ever reveals the abuse or leaves him. Chela has two additional children with Finito, but as a result of the abuse, suffers eight miscarriages over the six years they are together (196).

Dulce-Maria Solis took the opportunity of her undergraduate theater capstone project to "write about what I had longed to express since I was a little girl . . . The six years of abuse mother and I endured under my brother and sister's father" by interviewing her mother with the plan to "feel my catharsis, and move on" (162). The story she ends up telling is a layered account of how victims become survivors, and how lack of resources are what keep women and their children trapped in domestic violence situations. The work creates Solis and the audience as witnesses to the years of violence and the ensuing struggle for Chela to become self-sufficient, and draws the two women

closer. Solis states that she did not know when she began work on the play that there was a story “that not only needed to be told but also expressed on a public stage to help others” (164). The play is both of their stories, and while the performance is a catalyst for levels of witnessing, we need to witness for the child Dulce Maria, and the adult Dulce Maria who approached her mother armed with a list of questions she wanted answers to, but could never before ask. While making her mother the central speaker is a means of subverting the patriarchal construct that privileges male experience, Solis is only present and legible through taking on her mother’s voice, illustrating Alarcón’s claim about women only being legible as mothers.

Solis writes that the impetus to write her play “did not come from a place of wanting to understand my mother” but instead out of “a very self-centered place of wanting to regurgitate the pain that had fermented inside me over the years so I could feel better” (“Artist’s Statement” 164). While the process is healing for them both and Solis comes to the understanding that her mother “did the best she could,” her comment flags an important issue for daughters who stage mother’s stories: the idea of her pain as “self-centered” (163). As critical witnesses to Chela and Dulce Maria’s story, we can reframe what is acceptable for daughters to feel about their mothers, and recognize how although the process and performance are healing, speaking for and as her mother may still elide the daughter’s pain. Through public staging of her own questions and her mother’s answers, Solis’s work enables readers and audiences to reflect upon the complexity of how mothers and daughters survive violence.

Reading scenes of witnessing are crucial to finding the daughter's voice, and to reframing the idea of the daughter who demands answers or dares to expose her mother's shortcomings as self-serving. What if more daughters asked their mothers these difficult questions, or publicly spoke of the ways their mothers failed to parent? There are a multitude of obstacles (personal, material, cultural) that make these kinds of conversations impossible, but they are necessary in order to create opportunities for critical witnessing and change. In the pages that follow I examine scenes from both *CHELA* and *Besos* where I argue the adult performers are asking us to be the witness they did not have as children. Revisiting moments when the child does not have a voice invites healing, and positions us as the witness they did not have. The audience can be critical witnesses for the daughters without diminishing the mother's experiences. Reframing the narrative to focus on what the daughters witnessed does not minimize what happened to the mothers. The daughter's point of view gives us an additional lens of witnessing: it allows us to see the how violence has effects in outwardly expanding circles, and to experience the violence similar to the way the daughters did, filtered through their mother's bodies.

In addition to the monologues Solis performs as Chela, Solis includes projected recreations of home video as a method of storytelling. The stage directions mark the distinction between Solis on stage as STAGE CHELA and the projected FILM CHELA (Solis continues to portray Chela in the videos). Solis uses this technique in a scene where Finito receives the hospital bill for their infant son's hospital stay and brutally beats pregnant Chela, allowing the audience to see the event from Dulce Maria's POV.

She is forced not just to watch, but to record her mother's abuse and forced suicide attempt. The video starts with Dulce Maria playing by filming her toys, but she drops the camera and hides when Finito arrives home. He places the camera on the table, and the video shows him yanking Chela by the hair and slamming her face into the table as he confronts her with the bill:

*FILM CHELA falls to the floor. FINITO paces back and forth, yelling at her. He walks to the camera and picks it up to see if it is on. The picture goes BLACK, then returns to scene . . . He places the camera in Dulce-Maria's hands.) Take a good look, Dulce-Maria. Take a good look (grabs Chela by the hair) at what happens to stupid women who don't know how to care for their babies. (192)*

STAGE CHELA remains silent as the video continues, documenting Finito's kicks and punches to Chela's pregnant stomach. He berates her, "Do you see how much it cost me to keep you! You know what you are? A pendeja. Who can't fuck, can't cook, can't feed her own damn kids. . . A whore. . . a stray dog is a better mother than you! Women like you don't deserve to be mothers" (192).<sup>29</sup> When Dulce Maria drops the camera on its side and runs away, the video continues and we see Finito force-feed Chela handfuls of pills until "*FILM CHELA, now hysterical, throws off Finito. She takes the pills and starts stuffing them into her own mouth. Too weak to continue, she falls to the floor and licks the pills off the floor. FINITO paces back and forth. VIDEO FADES TO BLACK. End of video*" (193).

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<sup>29</sup> Stupid idiot



Solis's use of video introduces Finito's male presence onto her stage. While it allows her to portray Chela's abuse in a profound way that would be physically and/or emotionally difficult for her to act out on her own, why this moment? The further effect is that Dulce Maria as STAGE CHELA has the choice of how to be present during the video: she could leave the stage, or remain on the stage and look out at the audience, close her eyes, or react to the video in many ways. At this point in the live performance I attended at California State University San Marcos in 2012, my eyes sought out Solis—she stood to the side of the screen, still visible to the audience, hands clasped in front of her, watching the video along with us. Her artistic choice to remain on stage and to watch the video sets up a provocative circle of witnessing that traverses time. The audience can witness for both Dulce Maria and Chela via the video, or witness STAGE CHELA reliving a moment from her past, and also consider how the daughter's body on stage relives a scene from her past. This is the power of live performance.

When STAGE CHELA next speaks, she explains why she welcomed death in that moment. We learn that she eventually did reach out to her family for help, but when her father came for her, Finito broke his collarbone. "My oldest brother came for me, and Finito blinded him with a broken beer bottle" (193). She was hopeless, making death seem a viable option. "Because of me, my family was getting hurt. Because of me, my children lived in fear. Because of me . . . In the corner of my eye, I could see Dulce-Maria watching wide-eyed. I could hear my son screaming. But, the pain . . . I could no longer stay alive for them. I wanted my life to end" (194). Finito's treatment of her reinforced the early narrative instilled by her mother of her not being a fit mother, and by

extension, not fit to live as a human being. Chela's desire to die illustrates how violence and trauma destroy our humanity, and allow for the repetition of patriarchal violence. Chela recognizes ("sees") her daughter's pain, but her own physical and emotional pain is so unbearable that her death is not a martyrdom, but a feasible conclusion.

What is the effect of this silent witnessing on Dulce Maria? Of living your whole life with the childhood memory of your mother welcoming her death, of surrendering to pain and violence? This scene echoes the folk tale of La Llorona, another prominent maternal cultural myths for Chicanos/Latinos. La Llorona (the woman who cries) is said to have been a Native woman who drowns her children in a river so that she can be free to run away with lover, a Spanish soldier. When her lover rejects her, she is filled with grief and commits suicide. Her spirit is said to haunt riverbanks while wailing for her lost children, and children are warned not to be near the river at night for fear of being taken by her. Chela cannot save her children or herself, so she welcomes her own death. Chela gives up her children not for a rosy future without them, but because their future is so bleak. Instead of sacrificing their bodies, she sacrifices her own. In the Llorona story, both mother and children end up dead: Chela would have left her children behind to an uncertain fate. The wail of Llorona is read by Chicana theorists as the native woman's sign of resistance and protest against colonization and "represents the loss of women's voices, their silencing in patriarchal societies. . . . Crying and screaming is about pain, and this pain is the result of the ways in which women are hurt by sexism and patriarchy. . . ." (Elenes 83). Chicana cultural narratives lack a mythical child's wail at the loss of her mother in the way Llorona wails for her children. What if instead of the Llorona's story

centering around her loss and regret, the story was told from the point of view of her children? Why don't we fear the spirits of *both* Llorona and her children? Centering La Llorona suggests a cultural focus the behavior of women, reinforcing their inherent unreliability to both men and children. Dulce Maria reminds us that children, too, are silenced by patriarchal societies and innocent victims without agency who need witnesses.

### ***Bruising for Besos***

*Bruising for Besos* is told by protagonist Yoli, stranded on the side of the road in South Texas as she attempts to return home to see her sick mother after a ten year absence. Through her conversations with her childhood doll (Anita) which she still carries, we learn about Yoli's upbringing in a home at the hands of a violent father and powerless mother, her struggles with same-sex desire and coming out, and how she works to break the cycle of violence in her own relationships. In addition to herself as a child (indicated in stage directions as YOUNGER YOLI) and her mother, Anthony recreates several other characters to reflect on her complex relationship with her mother. Throughout the play, Yoli avoids calls from her girlfriend Daña, with whom she has just had a fight. These phone calls act as a vehicle to bring Yoli back into the present as she reflects on key moments from her past, drawing connections for the audience between her upbringing and present-day situation: estranged from her mother and in limbo with her girlfriend. Her childhood doll, Anita, acts as Yoli's witness on the side of the road, and the audience is also invited to witness key moments from Yoli's life.

While her work is a way of “making peace” with her family’s legacy of violence, they are also a form of communal healing (62). Anthony writes, “I know the stories touch upon the experiences of many of us. The recent staging of the work in Los Angeles confirmed that the communities I am writing for are also hungry for these voices and images” (63). Like Moraga, Anthony’s audience is daughters, reminding us that mothers are daughters too, but that daughters carry and are shaped by mother’s stories. Anthony’s attention to audience recognizes both the shared experiences of women and the lack of public discussion about domestic violence. She situates the audience as witness and reaffirms the power of live performance, in which “the transmission of shared energy creates a wholly sacred and cathartic experience, and it confirms that the solo work is never just about one individual” (Anthony 63). Both Solis and Anthony illustrate how the audience completes a prism of witnessing that begins with the daughter’s body.

The early scenes of the play paint a picture of Yoli’s childhood: the oldest of five children, Yoli helps her mother in several ways. She cares for her younger siblings, and acts as a “co-pilot” as her mother follows her husband to see his mistress. Anthony seamlessly switches in between the characters of her younger self, her mother, her father, and her various siblings in the same scene before switching back into present-day Yoli. The detail and nuance with which she does so reminds us of how a child absorbs everything they see and hear, and of how our bodies carry memory, good and bad. Her embodiment further illustrates “how Yoli bears the imprint of those who have emotionally and physically touched her” and like *CHELA*, “thus demonstrates two types of testimonio: directly narrated and indirectly narrated” (López, “Staging” 49). Even

though her father was a violent man, Anthony's artistic choice to portray him is a form of agency important to healing: no longer a figure to run and hide from, the performance allows her to take him in completely and let us see him through her experience. The flashbacks set up the family dynamic: the mother shares her woes with Yoli, who expresses frustration and wonders why her mother doesn't just leave. Her father comes home and is charming to all, until his patience runs out, and both the children and her mother suffer the consequences, a pattern she replicates in her own dysfunctional relationships later in life. A particularly charged flashback that takes place at Easter illustrates the tension and instability of Yoli's childhood. We learn that Yoli, her mother and her siblings are living in a shelter after her father has abandoned the family. Despite this, he insists on celebrating Easter together. When Yoli challenges his presence and threatens to tell her teacher Mrs. Rosenbaum, an "old Jewish lady who survived Hitler—so she ain't afraid of nobody!" her mother begs her to stop, telling her "you're too little to understand las cosas entre los adultos" (74).<sup>30</sup> When her father leaves, her mother chides her and Yoli continues to push back, wondering why she wants him even though "He already lives with his other poofy-haired vieja—and her kids! Man, you must like the golpes" (75).<sup>31</sup> As a response, her mother smacks Yoli and makes their situation clear:

MOM: Y cómo chingaos vamos a comer, Yoli? How am I supposed to work when I have all you kids to take care of? You don't think I hate him sometimes? You think he's the kind of man I wanted to end up with? I know he's nobody,

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<sup>30</sup> Matters between adults

<sup>31</sup> Hits

nomás otro mojado pelado, but at least he works hard. And when you grow up y tengas tus propios hijos, you'll learn things. Men don't carry babies. That's why they get to float around the world so freely. Pero, I got five anchors in this mundo, but don't you go and sink me with your bad attitude, niña (75).<sup>32</sup>

This moment is significant as it establishes the patriarchal power dynamic of the family, and helps answer the question of why Yoli's mother continually returns to the marriage. This early life lesson no doubt has an impact on Yoli through the way establishes her future path—children of her own, and her status in her mother's life—an anchor that can pull her further down. And while adult Yoli does not have babies to weigh her down and is indeed free to float around the world, she still carries the weight that comes with surviving violence.

Anthony recounts her mother's last attempt to escape her violent husband via a scene set in a Greyhound station.<sup>33</sup> This scene sets into motion a series of events that result in young Yoli witnessing her mother's brutal beating at the hands of her father. The terse dialogue between Yoli and her mother also reveals how Yoli embodies the stress of living under domestic violence, and hints at her mother's own traumatic history. Yoli has frequent headaches and she has bad dreams about “Ambulances. Bright lights. Somebody's always dying” (80). Their clothes are in garbage bags and Yoli is disappointed they aren't going to stay at her grandfather's house because “they always

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<sup>32</sup> nobody, another wetback; grow up and have your own kids

<sup>33</sup> Anthony does not give her parent characters names, only referring to them as “Mom” or “Dad” in stage directions. The effect is that her story becomes universal—these could be anyone's parents.

have food in the fridge” (81). When Yoli presses her mother about why they can’t accept his invitation, she cuts her off, stating “No! We can’t stay there he’s. . .he’s not a good man” (80). Her mother’s vehement response suggests she is protecting Yoli from her father. Although he may be able to provide for them, it clearly would come at a greater cost than her mother is willing to pay.

Instead, her mother takes the children to Houston to stay with a curandero friend.<sup>34</sup> Yoli recalls she “never got a good feeling from him. Never liked the way he looked at you either, Amá” (81). In an attempt to cure Yoli of her headaches since she doesn’t “have money to be buying Tylenol all of the time,” her mother tells Yoli the “healer” has generously agreed to perform her limpieas for free. Her mother doesn’t want her to miss anymore school because of her headaches, though Yoli reminds her she primarily misses school because “we’re always moving” (82). Her mother persists, telling her “you’re bien smart, mi’ja, and you can be somebody in this life. Not like me. I didn’t get a chance to be nobody” (82). The limpia entails Yoli removing her clothing for the curandero while her mother leaves to “go check on the babies.”<sup>35</sup> Although disrobing for limpieas can be part of the process, Yoli’s vulnerability and instinctual dislike of the curandero make it clear that Yoli’s mother’s attempt to heal her daughter only puts her into danger. Her mother doesn’t have the resources to heal Yoli or better, rectify the conditions that cause Yoli’s symptoms, and thus unwittingly exposes her to humiliation at disrobing in front of a stranger (at the very least), and more likely to sexual abuse. Yoli says she won’t take her clothes off because the curandero is “weird,” but her

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<sup>34</sup> Folk healer

<sup>35</sup> Rituals meant to heal to heal physical and spiritual ailments.

mother insists (82). Although Yoli is given the responsibilities of a parent, her status as a daughter and child means she is duty-bound to obey her mother's commands.

After running away to escape the *limpia*, Yoli resorts to calling her father and asks him to come get her to escape her situation. Yoli is so desperate for someone to act on her behalf that she is forced to seek out the "lesser" threat of her violent father. When her father arrives the next morning, Yoli witnesses his wrath against her mother:

He pulled you out of the *curandero's* front door by your hair. Kicked you in the head with his *botas y te grito*, 'Don't you ever run away from me again, *nena*. Not with my kids.' We all watched you dumped like a heap of dirty, bloody laundry on the sidewalk. My brothers and sisters cried. But not me. I was tired of crying. (83)

Yoli's silence suggests she has reached the limit-point of witnessing. She has seen too much, and knows that a child's tears carry no weight with the adults in her life and solve no problems. She has no voice that any adult in her life can recognize, even though she acts as surrogate parent and spouse via her mother's reliance on her. Her decision to advocate for herself by calling her father results in further trauma, thus silencing Yoli until she is forced as an adult to speak the truths of her experience. For young Yoli, to cry is to waste energy that could otherwise be put into surviving the rest of her childhood. Yoli's phone call does ultimately provide an escape from her father: the silent drive home is the last time Yoli sees him. However, he drops them off at her grandparents, where Yoli may be provided for materially but possibly harmed in other ways. Yoli ends the narrative by telling us it was her "first lesson in loving as much as I hate" (83). This



echoes Cherríe Moraga's claim that home is where we first learn how to love, for better or worse. Love becomes entwined with violence, and as we learn more about Yoli's romantic relationships, she replicates violence in her own relationships—and even against her mother. For Yoli, home comes to feel like “a fist in the heart” (84). The power of *Besos* is that it asks us to witness for Yoli throughout her journey: from a child without recourse to her struggle to break the cycle of violence in her own interpersonal relationships.

Another lesson from her father is, “Dad's the one who taught me that I can run away from the mujeres, or I can swerve my smile into their corazones” (84). Yoli reflects on her history with her partner Daña, and how their relationship is tinged with violence—particularly their lovemaking. Daña is a mirror for Yoli's mother: in the scene the morning after the two women meet, Yoli sees a “deep sadness” in Daña's eyes like she saw in her mother's as a child, and she realizes Daña is about her mother's age when Yoli was a child (7). Daña has recently left an abusive relationship, and is too caught in a cycle of violence. During a fight, she goads Yoli to hit her, invoking Yoli's violent upbringing: “Hit me like your papi used to hit your mama!!” (93). In a monologue, Adult Yoli reflects that although she wants to “pummel her into ash for saying that. . . but I made a promise to myself at sixteen. I try to push her off, but she's stronger. And the more I push, the more she grinds her pelvis into mine” (94). They make love instead, and “I didn't hit Daña with my fist, Amá. . . like I did you when I was sixteen. (*Pause.*) And that was it. . . I knew I/we had crossed a line . . . we no longer recognized how we belonged to each other. . . You. . . you used to be my everything, Amá. Mi luna llena

amongst a sky of broken glass” (94). We are witness to Yoli’s grief: like the father she hated, Yoli inflicted violence on her mother and is tempted to repeat it by hitting Daña. The legacy of violence is that it becomes the only language Yoli knows how to communicate with—hitting her mother is a betrayal to both of them as survivors. We witness for Yoli as she realizes those lessons from home are deeply ingrained and ultimately self-destructive. Even though Yoli witnessed the horrors of violence, she still passes it on to the women she loves. Yoli’s statement suggests that mothers and daughters “always already” belong to each other, but that the legacy of violence or effects of heteropatriarchy obscures that knowledge. While her mother was unable to protect Yoli from various forms of violence, it was something they survived together. So when Yoli hits her mother, she breaks that bond and they thus “no longer belong to each other.”

There is a poignancy that resonates with Yoli’s feeling of “no longer belonging” to her mother. Do all children have a moment where the link that connects—or binds—them to their parent is broken? The power of public staging allows the artists to explore the ongoing complexity of our parental relationships. Public performance also allows us to see how we can heal from lessons learned at home. The play closes by coming full circle to the beginning, where her mother’s illness brings Yoli home after ten years away. Yoli reflects, “Thing is, Ama . . . after all this time, despite everything, I’m really happy that I’m gonna see you tomorrow. I’m just afraid of how much it cost to love you (95). This is provocative statement, for it acknowledges that for many Chicana/Latina daughters, loving their mother comes at a personal cost. Moraga’s work makes clear how daughters need a witness and a space for sharing their stories; in *War Years* the

“daughters are her audience” because she believes daughters must constantly earn the mother’s love. Anthony and Solis’s work further illustrates the need to witness the complex dynamics at play in mother/daughter relationships shaped through violence, and how painful it can be for a daughter to see herself as an individual separate from her mother. In both *Besos* and *CHELA* the artists come to recognize how storytelling empowers survivors and enables others to act as witness. The artists recognize the cultural and societal forces their relationships still operate under, and as a result, accept their mothers for who they are and the mistakes they made. Writing and performance becomes part of healing; the language that threatens to alienate them from their mothers instead strengthens their bond, and imbues the artists with agency they did not have as a child. In writing about motherhood in the works of Moraga and other Chicana artists, López writes, “To be motherless is painfully unimaginable. We cannot abandon her, so we must revise our idea of what it is to be a mother” (“Veneration” 152). I argue we can extend this to daughters as well, in terms of what is expected or allowed for daughters to say. Mothers are not myths: they are more complex than La Llorona or the Virgen de Guadalupe. Daughters also do not have to be binary: despite their relationship with their mother (or lack thereof), they can revise narratives about what it means to be a daughter, freeing them from “painful devotion” to their mothers (Moraga xiii).

As the plays conclude, the stage becomes a place of possibility where moments of joy are (re)created, through an infant Yoli with her mother in *Besos*, and Chela in post-coital bliss. Re(creating) moments of joy for their mothers on the stage is another way Anthony and Solis humanize their mothers, reminding us that even in families saturated

with histories of violence, there are moments of pleasure. *CHELA* closes with the scene of her first orgasm with her coworker Pancho, who we learn becomes her third husband. Her desire for Pancho comes from a place of agency. “What I wanted was to be with *that* man. *That* man that my body wanted, *that* man that my body chose, *that* man that my body burned for” (205). When she states, “This time, I chose him. This time, I went after him,” it is a testament to her independence and freedom from relationships built on male desire and dominance (205). At the performance I attended, Solis’s mother was in the audience, and Solis brought her on stage to participate in the talkback with the audience. Mother and daughter inhabiting the stage became a staging of survival in the flesh. The real-life Chela standing on same ground as her daughter endorsed the story Solis just told, and nullified any question of the authenticity or sincerity of the translator. Solis’s work thus contributes to the evolving framework of what it means for daughters and the idea of “we are all Malinches.” While it was an important moment of healing and public display of respect for each other as women, as a daughter who could never achieve such a moment with my own mother it was particularly powerful. I was able to witness for Dulce and Chela, and recognized how Solis’s work stages necessary conversations—but like other daughters in the audience (I suspect,) I could not help but to think of moments from my upbringing when I needed a witness.

The closing scene of *Bruising for Besos* imagines a tender moment between the infant Yoli and her young mother in the shower. Present-day Yoli takes a call, and her reaction suggests that her mother has died; the stage goes black. “(Immediately, a running shower is heard. Low lights come up on YOLI as her mother in the shower. She

*is humming 'Te Vas Angel Mío' when she finally notices baby Yoli. This epilogue scene plays in silhouette)" (95). Her mother bends down to her and affectionately tells her she wishes Yoli "could stay little forever" and that she will give her a bath before breastfeeding her, illustrating the tender bond between mother and infant. As the scene is in silhouette, it could be a moment between any mother and child. Yoli is her mother's first child, and she has yet to feel the weight of motherhood in the form of additional children or, as she stated earlier, "five anchors in the world," or the violence her husband is capable of. The final question of the play is posed in English and Spanish by Yoli's mother: "Yoli, who loves you? Quien te quiere, mi'ja?" (95). Her question mirrors Daña's earlier question, when after fighting Daña tells Yoli, "nobody's gonna love you like me. Who you got?" (92). Who *does* the daughter have once she loses her mother? While Yoli fears the cost of loving her mother back, this scene reminds us of how our mother's love is often the first one we know. The metaphorical loss of her mother after hitting her was something Yoli could bear, but Yoli is not equipped for her mother's death. When her mother dies, Yoli's co-survivor dies. The death of her mother means no more chances to create new memories with the knowledge gained from surviving, no triumphant sharing the stage as an audience applauds both of them—thus the staging of imagined moments of tenderness between mother and child hold a deeper significance.*

Embodying their mothers as they write and perform their stories, Anthony and Solis can imagine what it is to be their mothers: the artists can thus go beyond the limits Pat Mora identifies in writing about her own mother, and not merely examine "what she did" but instead "convey what she is," allowing for understanding, and opening

possibilities for deeper connections with their mothers (82). *Besos* and *CHELA*, in text and performance, add to the archive of works by daughters who seek to understand their mothers, and in the writing and public performance, create opportunities for healing from legacies of violence. Performance and publication also mean the artists' work has further resonance, allowing for audiences and readers to serve as critical witnesses, and inviting witnesses to consider how their own familial relationships have been shaped by intersecting forces.

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## Chapter 4

### Lorna Dee Cervantes and the Poetics of Daughterhood

In this chapter I examine how the poetry of Lorna Dee Cervantes constructs another facet of the Chicana daughter's experience, and consider what poetics brings to our understanding of how Chicanas write about mothers. When examining works by the Chicana daughter-as-writer, we should recognize how daughters are often put into the position of bearing witness for their mothers, and we can be the witnesses the daughter did not have. While other chapters in this dissertation explore both the traumatic experiences and tender intimacies of mothers and daughters, Cervantes's body of work introduces the narrative of early traumatic loss, and asks us to consider how a daughter constructs her identity through a mother's absence. Cervantes is part of a poetic legacy of daughters writing poetry as a means of writing 'self' into textual being, and though she writes of a distinctly working-class Chicana experience, putting her work into conversation with other female poets like Sylvia Plath and Elizabeth Bishop adds to our understanding of how daughterhood impacts a female poet's voice and development. Much of Cervantes's work examines herself through and against her mother, and while it incorporates genres including confessional poetry, *testimonio*, and autobiographical prose, I find Steven Gould Axelrod's categorization of Plath's "Daddy" as a domestic or family poem a useful parallel. The primary poems I examine, "Beneath the Shadow of the Freeway," and "Garage Light," fall within the tradition of the domestic poem, which Axelrod defines as "one that represents and comments on a protagonist's relationship to one or more family members, usually a parent, child or spouse," and is also a "poem of

development, which emphasizes the child's maturation and separation from the parent as well as ambiguities in the parent's character and in the child's feelings" (59). Cervantes further complicates the idea of poetic legacy and genre through her thematic engagement with canonical male poets, particularly T.S. Eliot's musings on time and loss. A focus on her early work in *Emplumada* helps set the stage for an analysis of the evolution of the poetic daughter's voice shaped by loss, which comes to a crescendo in 2006's *Drive*. While the reader may not be a daughter, it is Cervantes's starting point to invite the reader into considering loss, and how "subjectivity can come from loss as well as presence" (Rodriguez y Gibson, "Imagining" 31).

Cervantes writes that her mother wasn't a usual "mother" and she herself never really "felt the way a daughter feels" (*Cables* 15). A "derelict's kid" Cervantes has spoken about how her grandmother stood between her and her mother being homeless (*Drive* 84). She follows the tradition of Adelina Anthony, Cherríe Moraga, Dulce Maria Solis, and Sandra Cisneros, among many other Chicana/Latina writers who delve into their mother's histories as a way of trying to understand them. When a mother is physically gone, this exploration becomes even more fraught. Moraga, whose body of work also illustrates her development as a daughter, spent a lifetime asking questions of her mother in her presence; Cervantes spends a lifetime asking questions in her mother's absence. In *Chicana Codex*, Moraga writes that the elder Chicanas are her codex, a reference to Mayan historical manuscripts, a "history told and foretold" (17). Losing one's mother, conversely, leaves the daughter without a map; the daughter now must draw it herself. When Cervantes seeks a map she finds ash, smoke. Cervantes's poetry is

a record of a daughter navigating the world haunted by loss, covered in a thin layer of ash.

### **Race, Class, Gender, Poet, Daughter**

Thirty years ago, Marta E. Sanchez wrote about the rise of Chicana authors in *Contemporary Chicana Poetry: A Critical Approach to an Emerging Literature*. Sanchez employs the term “Chicana” to identify the primary social identities of the authors she studies as grounded in gender and ethnicity, to which she adds a “third important identity . . . of ‘poet,’ (7). Sanchez and other literary critics of the 1980’s and 1990’s such as Norma Alarcón and Tey Diana Rebolledo explore the “tension and play” among the three identities of Chicana, woman, poet, as a means of a feminist analysis which recognizes the intersectionality, or multiple subject positions that inform a Chicana poet’s identity and work. Recognizing the intersectionality of female poets allows us to explore further the way works about mothers commonly get read, and to recognize that their works are about more than affect and sentiment or blame and condemnation.

A Chicana/Latina daughter-poet, as any daughter-poet, may write to tell her mother’s story, to honor her struggles, to try and understand how her upbringing shaped her own worldview, and to recognize the power of mother-daughter relationships, particularly as sites of complicity and resistance within patriarchal cultures. As maternal relationships can be “as fraught with strife as that with lovers, male or female” a Chicana/Latina bodies are often linked to their mothers (Alarcón 93). Like the historical daughter Malintzin/La Malinche, the bicultural and bilingual daughter possessing the power of language has an additional responsibility. In her analysis of then-emerging

Chicana poets, Norma Alarcón writes, “the task falls upon the daughter to invent and interpret the mother’s life, and how it spills into her own life,” an observation that I believe transcends genre (93). Writing, particularly poetry, becomes a way for Chicana/Latina poets to not only understand themselves through writing about mothers, but as a way to recognize and explore the complexity of their many subject positions, identities, and responsibilities.<sup>36</sup>

My reading of Cervantes is informed by existing feminist literary scholarship of intersectionality and adds the social and gendered identity of “daughter,” thus proposing we consider her work at the intersections of race/class/gender/poet/daughter. Cervantes scholar Eliza Rodriguez y Gibson argues that Cervantes’s work situates poetry as a theoretical site and places the “voice of a working class Chicana feminist at the center of our discourse (“Improbability” 151). Cervantes’s work is imbued with loss prior to her mother’s death: the loss of innocence through sexual violence (“Lots I and II”); the loss of her Mexican culture and language (“Refugee Ship”); the loss of her city streets (“Freeway 280”), and the loss and recovery of her Chumash heritage (“Poem to Los Californios Muertos,” “For My Ancestors Adobed in the Walls of the Santa Barbara Mission”). These losses situate the mother-daughter relationship at the heart of a legacy of colonialism, social dysfunction, and institutional violence.

I do not mean to argue that that the mother/daughter relationship is necessarily more fraught for Latinas, though it will necessarily have a different history and set of

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<sup>36</sup> Sanchez writes, “Like their male counterparts, Chicanas, with few exceptions, have chosen poetry and short prose as their primary media of expression. . . . During the 1960s and 1970s poetry was better able to meet the needs of the Mexican-Chicano community” (17).

valences. I believe Cervantes adds to and complicates existing female poet narratives about mothers, particularly through her theme of traumatic loss within a Chicana cultural context, or what Eliza Rodriguez y Gibson calls a “poetics of loss” that “transfigure[s] meanings of historically devastating experiences” (“Black Holes” 141). We know the world through our bodies: poetics give us another language for articulating what it *feels* like to live in the world in bodies conscribed by gender, ethnicity, and class, and through subject positions that historically have struggled for agency and voice. Different genres ask us to witness in different ways, and Cervantes’s prolific body of work allows us to trace the evolution of a daughter’s voice and witness, and asks us to be critical witnesses ourselves from her first text (1981’s *Emplumada*) to her recent (2016’s *Suenos*), or from youth through adulthood. Jeanette Calhoun-Mish identifies Cervantes’s work as a form of storytelling, a contemporary poetic practice, lyric-narrative, a “hybrid poetic” and “witness poem.” She continues, “The hybrid lyric-narrative form is commensurate with the twin goals of poetry as witness and poetry as art” (“Poetics” 68). Cervantes describes it as “docupoetry. . . documenting my personal history, as a participant in the women’s movement, holding the absolute belief that the personal is political and it is absolutely personal when it comes to women’s bodies” (“Conversation” 101). My focus on witnessing Cervantes’s poetic voice is another means of reclaiming the daughter’s voice, historically maligned or disregarded as Malinche’s was. Whereas Malinche juggled several languages to translate for others, I want to consider how Cervantes creates her own distinct voice, translating her own worldview to make meaning from loss.

## **Witnessing and the Daughter's Voice**

Mothers are intrinsic to but not fully constitutive of a woman's identity. While all women are someone's daughter, how a woman defines and recognizes what counts as motherhood may widely vary. Much of the writing by Chicanas/Latinas illustrates how a mother's presence in her daughter's life has a profound effect on the daughter's worldview, but that worldview is inevitably changed or challenged as the daughter establishes her own autonomous identity. Writing about a mother's life may reveal her questionable choices, choices we understand were often made as a result of limited resources, lack of education, and fear. While no two experiences are identical, frequent themes and experiences emerge. These are often stories of survival: of poverty, of the challenges of immigration, of the spectrum of violence and insidious trauma.

Psychologist Laura Brown cites her colleague, Maria Root, in defining "insidious trauma" as "the traumatogenic effects of oppression that are not necessarily overtly violent or threatening to bodily well-being at the given moment but that do violence to the soul and spirit" (107). Whether fictional or autobiographical, the daughter often writes of the mother's experiences as a firsthand witness. This takes on new significance when we consider how daughters may thus inherit, absorb and process their mother's traumas. How, as readers, do we take in these often difficult mother-daughter narratives? What can we learn, *how* can we learn from the daughter-poet, and think about our own familial relationships, gender expectations, and how violence impacts many women's lives? As daughters witnessed for their mothers, we can become critical witnesses for daughters. Tiffany Ana López writes of critical witnessing and poetry, "The pedagogical

force of poetry lies in its ability to describe, narrate, and document, to move readers by generating a level of emotional response that leads to personal and social change” (“Stunned” 178). If we as readers think about ourselves as critical witnesses, we possibly move beyond criticizing the individual and instead better understand the conditions under which mothers sometimes make choices that cause harm to their daughters, as well as honor the daughter’s ensuing struggles. In terms of the personal, understanding what it means to be a critical witness has helped me, a daughter, work through my own processing of these texts.

Although daughters may suffer from their mothers’ choices, the predominant narrative I see in Chicana/Latina works about mothers is a reverence for the strength and character needed to survive, if not triumph over, life’s challenges. Yet as a daughter who has struggled with my own ambivalent feelings about my mother, I often find the paradoxical silence of the daughters’ writing deafening, and it is what drives me to study the literature in depth. By silence I mean a lack of criticism, a failure to express the anger or frustration a daughter may feel toward her mother. Instead I primarily see devotion, gratitude, obedience, and acceptance. By focusing on the daughter’s silence, I admittedly project my own desires for answers and accountability from my own mother onto the texts. This most often occurs when reading narratives about mothers who were forced to stay with abusive domestic partners and the ensuing emotional and physical consequences on both mothers and children.

While I do not mean to undermine the survival narratives, I do want to think about them in their full complexity. I often find myself more concerned with the daughter’s

emotional well-being as both witness and documentarian than the daughter herself could admit to being? Critical witnessing helps us understand where the roots of violence are in hegemonic patriarchy, and how mothers themselves may become indoctrinated into a cycle of violence. Yet even with this understanding, daughters never *seemed* to be angry at their mothers—at least not in a way that was palpable on the page. I believe this is largely because it is culturally unacceptable for daughters to be critical of their mothers. Regardless of how emotionally close or distant the relationship may be, mothers remain important figures in daughter’s lives. The daughter who writes also may fear alienating her mother through language, or worry that her mother may not be able to understand what she has written, succumbing to what Alarcón calls a “terror of total disjunction” due to language (92).<sup>37</sup> The anger I seek may perhaps initially fuel a daughter’s writing about her mother, but Cervantes helps me understand how to become a critical witness, and how writing more about healing. Yet I maintain that there is something to be gained by acknowledging a daughter’s anger. Anger can lead to action —it may not be towards her mother, but instead towards the oppressive systems that bring about the conditions where mothers make choices that compromise their children’s safety in order for them both to survive. Anger fully acknowledged and worked through can also lead to understanding and a measure of forgiveness. Much of the work in Chicana/Latina studies addresses how writing enables healing, and I do not mean to diminish these readings, or

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<sup>37</sup> The first source of this disjunction, Alarcón points out, is the fact that the daughter may communicate in English, a foreign language to a Mexican-born mother. “Literacy will make her a monster to her mother (by extension her culture) will not recognize her at all” (92).



the role of narrative in healing—it is an important part of my own reading of Cervantes.<sup>38</sup> López writes the craft of poetry in particular allows survivors of trauma a “sense of voice” (*Stunned* 179). Eden Torres observes the themes of trauma and oppression in Chicana narratives suggests, “Chicana writers seem to know that pain, anger, and fear—as well as their own corollary inappropriate reactions—will not dissipate without exposure” (38). Yet I remain inspired to press the question: Daughters may witness for mothers, but who is the daughter’s witness as she documents her mother’s life? While the destination may be a place of acceptance and healing, I am more interested in being critical witnesses for the daughter. My project is one of both justice and care; my reading of Cervantes is propelled by the idea that the daughter’s voice may be elided in her witnessing and recording her mother’s life, and that we can be the witness daughters did not have. I read Cervantes to witness for both herself and her mother; more specifically witness her loss of her mother and how Cervantes shapes her idea of self through this primary loss.

Despite the fear of alienation, the daughter must write if she is to make meaning of her experiences, to resist historical silencing, and as a means of creating self. Steven Gould Axelrod writes of another daughter-poet, Sylvia Plath, and of the imperative to write in order to “enter into existence” (4). As Plath and other poets inform Cervantes’s work, I would like to consider how Plath can help open up our thinking about the shared

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<sup>38</sup> Also see the Introduction to *Telling to Live: Latina Feminist Testimonios*

issues that permeate Cervantes's work.<sup>39</sup> Both poets discuss issues of gender, memory, trauma, and literary influence within societal conditions that attempt to contain them. Axelrod connects the maternal relationship with the daughter-poet's voice; while Plath sought to heal the forced "split" from her mother upon her brother's birth with words, I am interested in exploring how Cervantes negotiates her own "split" from her mother. Is this the paradox of Chicana/Latina daughters? That the mother and daughter are both closely intertwined, but patriarchal motherhood means the daughter will always be second to the male son? The daughter is both the center of mother's attention and never the center. How do daughters manage this constant gap? Does this contribute to the fear of speaking out/"terror of total disjunction," or does it further "drive" the daughter to create a discourse to bridge the gap? Cervantes was using words to heal even before her mother's death, but after her mother's death is when the themes of loss, mourning, anger, and grief become prevalent. I want to consider how Cervantes's voice is impacted both by her position as witness for her mother, and how her mother's traumatic death is her own "awful birthday of otherness" she must use language to understand.

Cervantes helps us understand writing as healing and against the threat of silence. In an interview, Cervantes discusses her mother's murder in the fall of 1982, shortly after the publication of *Emplumada*, and the ensuing work, *From the Cables of Genocide*. Cervantes was twenty-eight when her mother was violently killed by someone who had followed her home:

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<sup>39</sup> *From the Cables of Genocide* is dedicated to Sylvia Plath, Frida Kahlo and Violeta Parra.

This is the conscience of trauma. . . It's my grief book because my mother was murdered, and raped, and battered. Then they burned the house down. . . When people ask me, do you believe that everybody can write poetry, in a certain sense, yes, in a certain sense, no . . . I believe that every human being experiences these deep lessons in life, and experiences grief, and these moments where you are changed and transformed. And most people cannot articulate and cannot isolate the different images and how they can come together. But then, there is the poem. When we experience grief, every grief is a layer. You lose someone, and then you lose someone again. It's layered, the feelings . . . then suddenly it all comes in this rush. (Gonzalez 173)

After her mother's death, Cervantes had stopped writing for several years and notes "I gave up [writing] poetry as if I was in charge" (Gonzales 166). The loss of her voice suggests the powerful connection between self and mother, as well as how traumatic events have the power to silence and thus threaten to erase our subjectivity. As a genre, poetry becomes a way to deal with the constantly renewing layers of grief Cervantes speaks of. In *Poetry as Survival*, Gregory Orr writes, "We must, the personal lyric tells us, become vulnerable to what is out there (or inside us). Not in order to be destroyed or overwhelmed by it, but as part of a strategy for dealing with it and surviving it. Lyric poetry tells us that it is precisely by letting in disorder that we will gain access to poetry's ability to help us survive" (47). Trauma is felt in the body; words allow it to escape. While Cervantes used words to survive her difficult upbringing, she was unprepared for both the suddenness and violence of her mother's death. She did not so much "let in"

disorder as it came “crashing in” (“Striking Ash”). Orr further speaks of how “Until a powerful crisis destabilizes us, we may not even realize how precarious an entity [who we are] really is. And it’s then that the personal lyric steps forward with its offer to restabilize us. What was buzz and din becomes an ‘I’ whose actions and articulations express and regulate the confusions of our situations” (41). The personal lyric may offer hope of reestablishing stability, yet I think Cervantes was already well aware of her precarious being. She may write to heal, but does she find “stability?” Or further, does stability mean and look like something different for survivors of trauma?

From *Cables* to *Sueno*, her work constantly asks questions: while not necessarily “unstable,” her image of “layers of grief” continually presents itself. How far down do the layers go? There is little doubt that Cervantes believes in the power of language to induce healing from personal and historical trauma. She writes:

Name what you will. Will what  
you name. The power of the tsunami  
in the syllables of truth, the reconstruction  
of the hurricane in the uplifting vowels.

...

Know the names of things.  
and heal. (“Know the Names of Things”)

Cervantes reminds us of what is at stake in writing and remembering; words enable us to make sense of our lives and help our truths be known so that others may witness and learn—and accompany us on our journey.

Cervantes's work is not one-note: to know loss is also to know joy. In "The Latin Girl Speaks of Rivers," she also establishes a connection to the history of Black survival and resiliency Langston Hughes illustrates in "The Negro Speaks of Rivers":

I was writing  
all the horror around me into intricate  
filigree. I was writing my heart out. I was  
writing myself back in. (*Drive* 112)

When she writes "to be a dove is to bear the falcon at your breast, your night, your seas" ("Love of my Flesh," *Cables* 56), Cervantes introduces the idea of an appreciation of beauty and delicacy in a violent world. For Cervantes, ash is the backdrop that allows beauty to stand out in sharp relief. Rodriguez y Gibson writes that in Cervantes, "Absence is not psychoanalytic lack, but possibility. We need not replace that which is lost, but create art and subsequently meaning around it" ("Black Holes 140). Cervantes's poetics give a voice to loss, give us metaphors and images that help us give shape to our own losses and grief that are part of being human. Though she seeks healing, she also senses it can never really be attained. Cervantes encourages us to acknowledge that we have an "ambulance heart," ("For John"), that we lose sleep over worry or want, over what might have been. Thus my work also considers the question, "How do daughters understand self in the absence of the mother?" This is the same question I explore in my reading of Cherríe Moraga's *A Chicana Codex*, yet Moraga grapples with this question as she watches her mother physically age and mentally slip away into dementia. With Cervantes, the loss of her mother in one tragic act means that there is a distinct "before"

and “after” marking her work; thus my main interest is in the “after,” and the recurring theme of how maternal loss can shape the Chicana daughter/poet.

### **Literary familia from scratch**

Axelrod’s driving metaphor and book title *The Wound and the Cure of Words* can speak to a spectrum of wounds, and helps us further understand the work of female poets and how they are influenced by the maternal. Literary influence is another layer to consider when examining Cervantes’s place in poetic tradition. Axelrod considers Plath’s creative acts in the context of other creative acts by women to study how Plath “lays claim to her matrilineal inheritance” (83). Plath was not just the “madwoman in the attic” who desired to steal male language, “she was also a woman residing in a house built by other women” (81). This echoes Cervantes’s opening to her poem “Beneath the Shadow of the Freeway,” “We were a woman family”(*Emplumada* 11). When none of the available female roles fit the speaker, she “turns to books, those staunch, upright men” (11). Who then, was Cervantes’s literary family? Does Cervantes have a “poetic” mother?

I wish to consider how literary influence might mean something different for Cervantes than it did for Plath: she may have also thought of language as controlled by males, but she was not plagued with exactly the same anxieties Plath had towards male authority or female precursors. If “literary influence retraces the outlines of the initial parent-child bond” and “writing unconsciously reproduces the writer’s developmental history while at the same time seeking to correct, to avenge, and to supplant that history”

(Axelrod 83), how do we understand Cervantes as a poet given what we know about her ambivalent early relationship with her mother and the trauma of the mother's sudden death? Cervantes has spoken of her mother's influence on her writing, which she describes as "ironic"; her mother "read poetry, and she read a lot. She was very literate. But she was very bitter" (Gonzalez, "Poetry" 169). A high school drop out, her mother:

had bought into the whole thing of the woman's place is in the home and marrying. And then, she gets divorced, and then, no future. And so, she would punish me for reading books. I had to read books under the covers. . . . Because if she would see me reading a book, she would say: 'The only thing you are going to be is a maid. It's the best that you can get out of this life. So you better make sure that you know how to clean the toilet, 'cause no one is ever going to pay you to read books. (Gonzalez, "Poetry" 169)

Cervantes's father remained present in her life, yet as early as *Emplumada*, Cervantes refers to herself an "orphan" ("Refugee Ship"), and later she describes herself as a "derelict's kid" ("California Plum") who has "never felt the way a daughter feels" ("For John"). Instead of feeling anxiety or competition, I argue Cervantes "corrects, avenges, and supplants" her unstable upbringing by embracing her influences, and collecting literary family members she can draw upon at will to serve her own poetic development. Her body of work is rife with both overt and subtle homages to poets of both genders and across a variety of ethnicities and poetic traditions.

Cervantes has said of her influences: "I have this common debt. . . . I think that it's very different than the 'anxiety of influence.' It's more in a sense of mothering, than of

killing the authoritative father” (Gonzalez, “Poetry” 177). “Mothering” suggests the creation and caring for of a child, and it is interesting that Cervantes would use this metaphor given her mother’s challenges in life and the emptiness left behind by her death. While Cervantes does share thematic interests with other Chicana/Latina writers, it is important to note that writers like Moraga and Cisneros are Cervantes’s contemporaries: these women were the first wave of Chicana authors coming out of academia and publishing creative work. Granted, Cervantes also sought out poets with Spanish surnames, which led her to Gabriela Mistral, Sor Juana, and Pablo Neruda. She dedicates her work in part to Frida Kahlo, and notes how as a young woman she discovered Maya Angelou, June Jordan, Sonia Sanchez and Gwendolyn Brooks and, “Then suddenly, for the first time, I realized that it [poetry] was not a class-bound thing . . . So I've always wanted to write a poem called 'On thanking Black Muses,' because I've said often that poetry saved my life, on a literal level as well as on a figurative level” (Gonzalez, “Poetry” 165). Her female influences include Elizabeth Bishop: *Drive: The First Quartet* features a poem titled “In the Waiting Room,” which is a “deconstructive exercise” based on Bishop’s similarly titled poem.<sup>40</sup> As Plath did, Cervantes also turned to male poets: in “For Virginia Chavez” the speaker reads her pregnant friend “the poems of Lord Byron, Donne,/the Brownings” (*Emplumada* 17). *Drive* also features several epigraphs from T.S. Eliot; the text’s organization of 5 books in one volume, as well as its thematic focus on time and loss, also connects Cervantes to Eliot’s modernist tradition.

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<sup>40</sup> I am indebted to Steven Gould Axelrod for calling to my attention the presence of Plath, Lowell and Bishop in Cervantes, which compelled me to delve further into her archive.



There are also allusions to William Carlos Williams' *Paterson*. Her work thus contains Whitman's "multitudes." When framed through her statement about poetry "saving her life," it helps us understand how not seeing her precursors as competitors (and thereby breaking from Plath as a poetic model) frees her to seek healing from words.

By publicly acknowledging and praising her poetic influences, Cervantes displays a comfortable affinity with her predecessors, a relationship that Plath was never able to fully achieve before her untimely death. In an interview with Gabriela Gutierrez y Muhs, Cervantes states there is no need to annihilate the literary father. Instead, "For us [Chicanas], it's the opposite. We are never in competition with one another. It's all about mothering the text. It's all about the culture. It's all about mothering each other. When one succeeds, it adds to the creation, which makes us better." (192). This perspective illustrates Cervantes's Chicana feminist consciousness, which I argue in an earlier work, might have helped Plath.<sup>41</sup> I attribute Cervantes's easy association with other poets of both genders and various ethnicities, classes, and stylistic traditions to the idea that "Women are able to disrupt poetical norms with an irreverence unencumbered by any nostalgia for a tradition which has ignored them" (Dowson 17).

Instead of competition, Cervantes creates her own literary "familia" from scratch. The term is adopted from Cherríe Moraga, who uses it to describe how queer individuals who become estranged from their families due to their sexual orientation must then create new families for support and survival. In creating her own, "familia," or what Axelrod and Svonkin term "metafamily," Cervantes enacts a form of Gloria Anzaldúa's *mestiza*

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<sup>41</sup> Unpublished essay, "I Send You Love Forward Into the Past:" Cables of Lorna Dee Cervantes and Sylvia Plath."

consciousness.<sup>42</sup> Women who live in the material or ephemeral “borderlands” between two or more opposing forces learn, as a matter of survival, to operate “in a pluralistic mode—nothing is thrust out, the good the bad and the ugly, nothing rejected, nothing abandoned. Not only does she sustain contradictions, she turns the ambivalence into something else” (100). This “something else” here is powerful poetic voice. Anzaldúa describes the mestiza consciousness as “a third element which is greater than the sum of it’s severed parts” that is born of “intense pain. . . its energy comes from continual creative motion that keeps breaking down the unitary aspect of each new paradigm” (101). This description captures the power I see in Cervantes’s poetic voice, a voice that is informed by trauma, but that uses the creative power of words to both express pain and create beauty in an attempt to heal wounds that open over and over again. Cervantes’s work is an example of mediation. Her privileging of the Chicana/Latina experience as a site for examining family and culture firmly roots her in a Chicana/Latina tradition, yet she also utilizes the best of the Afro-American and Anglo-American poetic legacies and uses them to build her own literary presence. Tiffany Ana López writes:

Historically, in exploring matters of agency . . . Latina feminists have insisted on a scholarship that is accountable to social problems and aims to root out injustice and

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<sup>42</sup> Axelrod and Svonkin write the term “implies a new kind of family, and a new way of thinking about family. “Meta” (originally from the Greek “meta”) can mean in-between (such as between the ideal and real, as in “metaxy,” from Plato’s *Symposium*); or beyond or after (as in the word “metaphysics”); or about itself, self-reflexive, or encompassing a higher logic (as in the word “metacriticism”). ‘Metafamily,’ therefore, points beyond traditional conceptions and practices of family and at the same time points to its own awareness of the problematics of actual and represented families” (150).

expose artificial hierarchies and methods of exclusion. By illustrating a poetic practice driven by citation, intertextual reference, and other forms of acknowledgments, *Drive* positions itself as not only engaging in but furthering Chicana feminist discourse in a most exemplary way. (180)

Both Plath and Cervantes reinvent their subjectivities through innovating discourse. Yet Cervantes's role as speaker and witness for her mother means she has additional factors impacting her writer's voice. Alarcón believes the daughter-writer responds to the fear of becoming disconnected from her mother by "invent[ing] a discourse which furthermore will invent them both" (91). This is where poetic language serves Cervantes: imagery, rhythm, metaphor, citation, and device work together to create a poetics of witnessing for both mother and daughter. Writing of her "poetics of loss," we thus further witness the creation of a daughter's discourse, and as critical witnesses we become aware of and are compelled to make change. The creation of the daughter's discourse revises the mother/daughter relationship: although Cervantes never "felt like a daughter," she is mothered by other writers and further, mothers other writers in turn.

### **Reading the Daughter's Voice**

Cervantes is a daughter who is "emplumada." To be "emplumada" is both to be "feathered" like a bird, and also "with pen in hand." This is our first introduction to the daughter-poet, and the starting point for understanding how a daughter is shaped by her mother's presence and absence. In "Beneath the Shadow of the Freeway," we are witness to three generations of women who reside in the shadow of urban growth and progress:

“a woman family/Grandma, our innocent Queen/Mama, the Swift Knight, Fearless Warrior” (10). The freeway of the title is the 280 in San Jose, California, whose construction fragmented the impoverished community of South San Jose. Her mother “dreamed” of the privileged role of Princess, not the role of Knight/Warrior she actually occupies. A warrior is a fighter, a defender. This suggests that roles of warrior/knight were thrust upon her, possibly as a means of survival, and roles she resents or has tired of. The speaker “could never decide,” implying that she occupies multiple roles. She turns to “books, those staunch, upright men,” signs of how the realm of language and writing are gendered in her mind and experience as masculine. Her engagement with language means she takes on the burden of caring for the family, particularly in terms of communicating in English, becoming the “Scribe: Translator of Foreign Mail./interpreting letters from the government, notices of dissolved marriages and Welfare stipulations” (11). She acts as a mediator between the outside world and the domestic, normally a role a parent would take on. In addition, she takes on other adult tasks—“light man-work” of fixing faucets—and she “insured everything against all leaks” (11). The terms “everything” and “all” suggest a larger sense of responsibility: the speaker literally keeps the household together, exemplifying a vigilance for maintaining the family.

The women also reside within a history of family violence in addition to the structural violence of the freeway; the Grandma has “built her house./cocky, disheveled carpentry,/after living twenty-five years/with a man who tried to kill her” (12). The

shadows are not a safe place. A legacy of domestic violence still inhabits the imperfect home the speaker works to protect:

words cracked into shrill screams  
inside my throat a cold fear  
as it entered the house. . . .  
mama if he comes here again  
I'll call the police (13)

The “it” turns to “he,” reinforcing a legacy of male violence. When the daughter says “mama if he comes here again/I’ll call the police” we know the intrusion is not random, but an ongoing occurrence that the daughter cannot rely on the mother to stop. Her mother may be unable to protect her from what looms at her door, and may have even invited him in to the home. The daughter is thus caught between culture and state, and we are reminded of the speaker’s vulnerability between these two opposing forces. Yet it is also an articulation of agency, of a young woman who refuses to allow violence to play any further role in the development of her home and in her community. The violence does not destroy the women: instead the speaker recognizes her Grandmother’s wisdom since her mother appears to fail her, and uses it to construct her own life:

Every night I sleep with a gentle man  
to the hymn of mockingbirds,  
  
and in time, I plant geraniums.  
  
I tie up my hair into loose braids,

and trust only what I have built

with my own hands (14).

While our experiences in the margins may be traumatic, poetry helps us see the beauty as well. The tension of the domestic scene of fear is offset by the agency of the speaker at the end of the poem. She may remain in a site of conflict, as “The freeway is across the street,” but her experiences in a “woman family” set her up for survival, not failure. Part of this knowledge comes from the influence of the grandmother, and her understanding of the natural world as metaphors for survival and a source of knowledge: “seagulls mean storm” and mockingbirds “are singing for their nesting wives/They don’t leave their families/borrachando” (12).<sup>43</sup> Grandmother “trusts only what she builds/with her own hands,” and is thus aligned with intuition and self-reliance as other means of survival (12). The theme of daughters aligning themselves with and upholding the knowledge of grandmothers is consistent in Cervantes’s body of work and across Chicana/Latina literature and cultural productions. Critic Norma Alarcón speculates this is because the mother is “too close” for the daughter, and grandmothers, being one step removed, provide guidance/are a positive female figure a daughter can turn to or rely on when mothers fall short (96).<sup>44</sup>

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<sup>43</sup> On drunken benders

<sup>44</sup> The trope of “saintly abuela” that permeates Chicana literature is most recently discussed in Sandra Cisneros’ *A House of My Own*. What does the presence (or absence) of abuelas in these texts tell us about how mothers are also someone’s daughter, and the cycle of love and parenting between women? See Tey Diana Rebolledo, “Abuelitas: Mythology and Integration in Chicana Literature,” in *The Chronicles of Panchita Villa and Other Guerrilleras*.

Chicana literature features many strong mother figures who endure poverty and abuse as they work hard to provide their children with better lives. What about mothers who fall on the margins of this image? In immediate contrast to the speaker's perception of the grandmother, Mama's voice criticizes her mother/the speaker's grandmother, saying of her:

“It's her own fault,  
getting screwed by a man for that long.  
Sure as shit wasn't hard.”  
soft she was soft. (12)

And later, the “mother's wisdom” to her daughter is, “You're too soft . . . always were./You'll get nothing but shit./Baby, don't count on nobody” (13). Alarcón's exploration of the mother trope in Chicana poetry discusses the options for mothers who, “cannot enable the daughter to see as they become absorbed in a darkness all their own. The daughter's greatest terror is to duplicate the mother's dark suffering” (98). The daughter in the poem has a wisdom all her own; she embraces softness: “I haven't changed” (14). The mother further cannot recognize the daughter's wisdom; her mother is “hard,” and the daughter tells her, “O Mama, with what's inside of me/I could wash that all away. I could” (14). The “softness” Mama criticizes her own mother for is what the speaker values and recognizes as an alternative perspective that her mother can't or won't accept, echoing Alarcón's earlier discussion about mothers being unable to understand their daughters. Knowledge transmission traditionally goes one way: from

the mother to her daughter. Whether or not the daughter will heed the mother's advice is another matter—a daughter may choose her “own way” in her desire to not become her mother.

Following Alarcón's model, the speaker redeems her flawed mother through the grandmother, not an uncommon trope in Chicana discourse. In her discussion of Chicana female poets, Alarcón writes, “The poet can make the grandmother a positive heroine, but she cannot completely do so for her mother. The mother is too close and constitutes the recent past and present. . . . the mother has shaped her experience, and may even appear to block her desire” (97). I do not argue against redemption, but I do argue that in redeeming our mothers we may dismiss the emotional effects of having a mother who could not provide safety or emotional support for their daughters. I call for a re-examination of how mothers have shaped daughter's experiences, a re-examination that is an act of both criticism and love. In the end, in Cervantes' poem, the daughter aligns with her Grandmother, who “believes in myths and birds./She trusts only what she builds/with her two hands” (12). Lynette Seator offers a productive, if perhaps one-sided reading of this move, noting, “Her sense of womanhood goes to the traditional core. Removed from her grandmother in time, Cervantes carries the old woman's attributes into the contemporary world. The poet is not cut off from tradition; neither is she denied the future. She accepts the strengths of her heritage and adapts them to the world in which she finds herself” (36). Though the danger here is in romanticizing the grandmother, I feel Seator captures the spirit of mestiza consciousness a Chicana must possess not just in order to survive, but to make meaning from her experiences.



Images of softness are further juxtaposed with violence:

a gray kitten a touchstone

purring beneath the quilts

grandma stitched

from his suits

the patchwork singing

of mockingbirds. (13)

The daughter shrouds herself in softness: in the innocence of a kitten and in the comfort of a quilt made by Grandma's own hands. Like the house she built, the Grandma takes the scraps from the suits of the abusive man and creates something new. The bird shapes in the quilt pattern symbolically resist the legacy of violence the cloth scraps represent. Quilting makes order and pattern out of remnants, smooths the edges and creates seams. It is a material manifestation of how Cervantes patches together her own discourse, making a different meaning from available scraps. This is the legacy Cervantes inherits and revises, and it is from her Grandmother, not her mother.

"Beneath the Shadow of the Freeway" is a poignant introduction to understanding the complex dynamics of a daughter in "a woman family," and to understanding how daughters may understand self in opposition to their mothers'. While the speaker aligns more with her grandmother, she desperately wishes her mother could hear the lessons she has to teach her. The wisdom of grandmothers and the necessity for female-centered

relationships becomes a recurring theme in Cervantes; in poems like “For Virginia Chavez” and “Bird Avenue” we see daughters helping each other learn how to become women away from their mothers. Other women become our witnesses, but not substitutes, for mothers. Cervantes speaks of how the title of the work following her mother’s death, the *Cables of Genocide*, reflects her need to communicate in form of “urgent telegrams to the earth” (Gonzales, “Poetry” 169). The poems in *Cables* compound the cultural losses she mourns in *Emplumada*, and the opening poem, “Drawings: For John Who Said to Write about True Love,” is the start of her textual strategy of asking questions in an ash-covered world. Cervantes echoes Elizabeth Bishop’s poem “One Art” “when she writes, “My skill is losing./It’s what we do best, us ducks, us lessons on what not to do” (14). Bishop’s poem wryly claims “the art of losing isn’t hard to master.” Loss is part of our human experience, particularly for those who have had “enough bad things happen to you as a child you may as well kiss off the rest of your life” (epigraph to *Cables*). But when that loss is of one’s mother and is traumatic and violent (as it was for both Bishop and Cervantes), the poet is unmoored, and the text as a whole is rife with questions: “What was my role?” “Does love expire?” “What could I do [?]” “If I could stick this back together, would it stay?” (14-15). Her questions culminate in what sounds like a confession: “I was never/a clear thing, never felt the way a daughter feels” (15). Losing her mother forces her into self-examination, into her own confusing and complicated feelings, and she raises the question of, “how *should* a daughter feel?”

Emily Dickinson writes in a letter to a family friend, “I never had a mother. I

suppose a mother is one to whom you hurry when you are troubled. We were never intimate Mother and Children while she was our Mother—but Mines in the same Ground meet by tunneling and when she became our Child the affection came” (Leiter 280). A mother’s death cuts off the possibility of a mother and daughter one day reversing roles in the parent’s old age. Cervantes’s voice in this poem is saturated with regret. She asks questions that any trauma survivor might try to make sense of what happened, yet she also seems resigned to her fate at “losing.” Yet there is hope in words: “Someday, I said, I can write us out of this mess,” but it will remain a struggle, as “the key/stalls out from under me when I spell your name” (15). The writing invites “the past with its widening teeth,/with its meat breath baited at my neck, persistent as the smell/of a drunk” (15). In *Drive*, we witness how a lifetime of writing with the past at your neck shapes a daughter-poet’s voice.

### **“Everything happens in absence”**

*Drive* is dedicated to Cervantes’ mother, Rose, and opens with the closing line from T. S. Eliot’s *Little Gidding*: “the fire and the rose are one.”<sup>45</sup> Cervantes uses quotes from *Four Quartets* to start each of the books within *Drive*, a fitting thematic tribute/parallel/homage to Eliot’s musings on time, as *Drive* illustrates how a journey through the past can be an attempt to understand who we are in the present. Fire is symbolic in Cervantes’s work, and it is a visceral reminder of the violence of her

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<sup>45</sup> The dedication reads, “In memory of Rose, my mother,/who, upon watching me write five entire poems/in one day in my fifteenth year, said,/ ‘You tell ‘em, Lorna! And after you tell ‘em,/you tell ‘em who told you to tell ‘em.’” This is another reminder of her mother’s ambivalent views on literacy she expressed in Cervantes’s youth.

mother's death. Fire and rose, beauty and destruction: the two are always tied up together for Cervantes. Eliot asks in the first book, *Burnt Norton*, "But to what purpose/disturbing the dust on a bowl of rose-leaves/I do not know" (3). For Cervantes, disturbing the dust may be an attempt to find something new in the familiar place of grief, but I also want to consider what is at stake in remembering, and the role of memory in healing.<sup>46</sup> Survivors of trauma may not always remember by choice; Sonia Gonzalez writes of how Cervantes writes about the past as a "carnivorous animal in relentless pursuit of its prey" and of how "traumatic memories. . .emerge time after time until the survivor can consciously grasp the original event. In the act of writing the poetic persona can stay present with the past" ("Narrating Traumatic Memories" 170). By staying "present" with the past, Cervantes creates an opportunity for us to critically witness for her and her mother—we cannot afford to forget Rose's violent death. Her life is worth remembering, as it reminds us how women everywhere still struggle with the same issues of poverty and violence, and love and love-lack.

In "Striking Ash" Cervantes addresses her mother and tells the reader a story that shifts between her experience as a grieving daughter and her mother's life. It is an illustration of the process of "making meaning from loss/absence" that Rodriguez y Gibson writes of. In this poem, the mother has been gone longer than she was alive for her daughter. Cervantes mourns not just the loss of her mother, but also the limited opportunities of her mother's life. The daughter lives in grief and mourning, but is able

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<sup>46</sup> For an insightful and thorough reading of Cervantes's connection with Eliot, see Juan Mah y Busch's chapter, "The Time for Integrity: on T.S. Eliot and the Ethics that *Drive* Cervantes's Poetry" in *Stunned into Being*.

to “strike ash” and “dust” off her memories in an attempt to reveal/discover who her mother was. The poem opens with imagery of distress and unrest; the textual daughter is not at rest, “If I sleep at all” (*Drive* 254). Sleep is not a respite, for when she dreams it is not a means of escape but where her mother’s absence becomes present. If she does “dream at all” she dreams of lack and excess: “the utter/silence of you gone/gushes out (254). She juxtaposes silence and absence with “gush;” there is a sudden overflow of absence, of quiet. In her dreams the “sentries” who guard the past

ignite  
these mute  
birds into flutterings  
of love. (254)

This passage speaks to the trope of birds in Cervantes’s work; being emplumada empowers her through language. Yet the past is guarded, access to it isn’t a given. A sentry is a guard or soldier who denies access to those who aren’t authorized. Who is allowed to remember? By remembering, Cervantes can turn overwhelming silence, figured as “mute birds,” into something productive, the “flutterings” of love being the tender memories of her mother. Birds in the poetics of Lorna Dee Cervantes sing their heart out, caw warnings, call out thieves, flutter in her heart—in this poem they are mute, but they make sounds through their motion. The poem shifts to the first of several italicized lines: “*Love is the standard key to open any lock*” (254). Love will allow her to move past silence and pass through the door of memory.

Cervantes then muses:

How is it that death  
is so inconspicuously  
blunt  
a bludgeon (254)

These lines introduce images of unexpected violence and weight that leave behind fragments. While others may have time to grapple with their mother's aging and death, Cervantes only has pieces she must weave together, "a photo/a report/soot" (254). The poem's abrupt line breaks mimic the disjointed feeling in the aftermath of trauma, and its lack of punctuation throughout mimics the way traumatic memories may flow unrelentlessly.<sup>47</sup> Her mother did not go gently, but instead a "*mean luck wrenched you from my hands*" (italics in original, 255). Death is inevitable, yet the means of death aren't—violent death leaves survivors with a different set of questions that they may revisit over and over in an attempt to make sense of what happened. The survivors of the dead must then live in a world where the unthinkable can happen.

Cervantes mourns the life her mother was never able to lead; not in terms of future potential, but in terms of the limited life she was born into and trapped in. Cervantes circles the remains of their home, "where we lived/listless as shells," and her body mirrors the house, it is "slack" while the house's frame is "spent." Both have

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<sup>47</sup> Many thanks to poet Sonia Gutierrez for her reading of the poem and her sharing of this observation.

succumbed to the forces of grief and loss. She addresses her mother directly: “as you mother/dreamed of somebody/you could be” (255). Notably, this is the first time she has addressed her mother in a poem since before her death.<sup>48</sup> While Rodriguez y Gibson notes how the apostrophe in general creates a “deferral of meaning” and is a means of “connection” with the reader, Cervantes’ shift from “you” to “you mother” grounds the poem in her personal loss (“Black Holes” 144). Cervantes builds upon the recurring theme of home as a formative space where lessons are learned, and as a place of containment. Images from her mother’s youth contradict the “woman family” in “Beneath the Shadow”: as a child her mother resided in her father’s “depression house” (256). Her mother’s life is primarily one of defeat:

when the slay  
of the land  
taught you to beg  
and pray  
you laid down  
your arms (255)

She continues, describing “the violin he forced you/to play” and how her mother was never allowed to:

come down hard on the key  
that would open your life

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<sup>48</sup> In “Beneath the Shadow,” she states, “O Mama, with what’s inside me/I could wash that all away. I could” (14).

your Pandora's box

broken into from birth (256)

What would her mother's life have been like if she had held the keys to open her Pandora's box, which Greek mythology tells us held all of the evils in the world? Love is the key that allows Cervantes to remember, and a musical key that holds the potential to unlock a daughter's potential if she is only allowed to play her own music.

Cervantes extends and juxtaposes the imagery of the bludgeon: while death is a bludgeon, so is love: "*love is the common bludgeon to jimmy any window*" (257). Slowly, Cervantes builds layers of the complicated meaning of love: a key's intended function is to open a lock, while a bludgeon would shatter, rather than force open, or "jimmy" a window. A window allows the inhabitants to see out and also lets others see in. What side of the window is Cervantes on here? Daughters appear to be on the inside, yet are still vulnerable to unwelcome visitors. "Grief is never civil/it comes to your door/at the thieves' hour" (257), uninvited like a "social worker" and "checks through the curtains" judging to see if "you deserve/the benefits/of the poor" (257). It appears that her mother is trapped in the house and wants out—her dreaming daughter is on the outside now, but was once on the inside, too.

Though she has escaped the fate of the house that would contain her, the daughter is still linked to her mother: "you are gone/and still you are/dragging me with you." She is a

sleepless child

helpless before the tow



past colored treats  
past dolls' heads  
past dripping wrecks (258)

Her mother takes her on a strange subaltern journey, but the daughter then gives her permission to “usher me anywhere/mother.” The movement imagery of “drag,” “tow,” and “usher” illustrates two poles of connection with mother: to be “dragged” is to be unwilling, but to be “ushered” is to be escorted, or directed in a mutual understanding of movement. Either way, Cervantes appears helpless to a force that moves her. She is not the one “driving;” her mother is the one who leads. Her willingness to be led at this moment is a reminder of the often tempting pull of grief and memory. For survivors of trauma, grief can be a familiar place, something you knowingly dive or slide into. If Cervantes is at the wheel of our reading experience, where does she drive our attention? I return to the critical witnessing goal of “generating a level of emotional response that leads to personal and social change” (López 178). Cervantes reminds us of the power of memory and loss, and that sometimes “time doesn’t heal/it cuts the cord” (258). Yet we return again and again to where the dead would pull us:

I learn  
why we come here  
striking ash  
off what we’ve loved. (258)

Ash gets into the cracks, into your mouth and ears and hair and lungs, and can threaten to choke you. Once it settles, it obscures the object it lands upon. If left long enough it

solidifies and take on the shape of what it covers, like the tortured bodies of Pompeii. Ash makes a mold that must be broken to reveal treasure beneath. Her mother exists beneath the ash, and memory and writing are a way to recognize the substance of her absence. Ash merely obfuscates her, much like the adobe walls of the Santa Barbara Mission that hold her ancestor's bones.<sup>49</sup>

The umbilical cord that binds mother and fetus needs to be cut for the infant to live. If time doesn't heal but instead "cut[s] the cord," it replicates the child's first separation from her mother. Time thus leaves us to "become ourselves. . . absent from the source/ a fish in air," or something outside of its element struggling to survive (259). This is what feels like to be a daughter whose mother was violently killed. This is how survival feels. Cervantes then poses key questions: "did we love our mothers enough," and then, "did I love you enough" (259).

She first asks this question in "On Speaking to the Dead" in *Cables*: "Did you love them enough?" (33). What does it look like for a daughter to love her mother "enough?" She asks this of:

the air  
this science  
where I find  
evidence of you  
this soot  
irrevocably spoken. (259)

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<sup>49</sup> "For My Ancestors Adobed into the Walls of the Santa Barbara Mission: in *Drive*.

Her mother had an “infant wanting” all of her life, one that her daughter recognized, but could never love her enough to fill. Moraga also writes of desiring to give her mother the love she recognized her father couldn’t provide.<sup>50</sup> This shared desire speaks to the intimacy and complexity of mother- daughter relationships. For Cervantes in this poem, love is key and a bludgeon; a tool and a weapon. She thus speaks to the possibilities and dangers of loving our mothers, and of the “cure” of words—the daughter remains a “child-scribe” for her mother, and even in her absence must work to make sense of the world through language.

Her mother’s presence is fleeting, a “brief and always gift,” a welcome presence (259). Yet she can never really find her mother, only “evidence” of her. Her presence is in imagery of fire and ash, but it isn’t the renewing cycle of a phoenix. Instead ash is a stain that demands she remembers, like the ashes on a forehead on Ash Wednesday. Ash her is a private mark that symbolizes her grief.

In *Little Gidding*, Eliot writes:

We shall not cease from exploration  
And the end of all our exploring  
Will be to arrive where we started  
And know the place for the first time. (39)

What does the Chicana/Latina daughter-poet learn from her exploration? Cervantes started her as a young poet by talking about her mother, and explores her life and her loss throughout her lifetime. In her work we witness a state of daughterhood primarily

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<sup>50</sup> See *Loving in the War Years*.

through a mother's absence, thus recognizing how mother is influential beyond physical presence.

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## Chapter 5

### From Girl to Woman: Coming of Age With and Without Quinceañeras

My mother's closet is an archive of the major events of my life in dresses. She stores my yellowing baptismal gown, my austere confirmation dress, and my beaded wedding gown all together alongside her own wedding gown. The dresses mark major moments in my life where an event of personal significance was publicly celebrated, as dictated by the norms of culture and religion. I grew up admiring my mother's wedding dress and accompanying accessories; I carefully handled the pearl tiara and delicate mesh high-heels, dreaming of my own wedding dress one day. Dresses are important: in Helena Maria Viramontes's story "Miss Clairol," the 11-year-old Champ searches for "her mother's special dress. Pancha says every girl has one at the end of her closet" (122). Champ does not find such a dress, and her mother, Arlene, instead meets her date in a too-tight dress borrowed from Pancha. The absence of a "special dress" speaks volumes about Arlene's life, as does her determination to have a good time regardless. While the dress in the story isn't a quinceañera dress, I am moved to consider what the dresses that are in—or missing—from a woman's closet say about her life.

The "special dress" that is *not* in my mother's closet is a quinceañera dress, as I did not celebrate my 15<sup>th</sup> birthday in the traditional Mexican-American, formal and public celebration. My father's death when I was young and my own desire for American assimilation meant that at fifteen I lived in a predominantly Anglo neighborhood, and was not interested in the coming of age ceremony. What does the lack of a quinceañera dress reflect about my own coming of age as a working-class Latina? Clearly my life

carried on without the dress or the accompanying celebration, but only now as an adult can I consider what I might have missed. A dress seems a fitting way to begin this chapter, as dresses are visually significant markers of our gendered, implicitly heteronormative cultural rituals, amongst many other visuals, that communicate the nature of the occasion and allow for the wearer to display individual style at this turning point in their life.

My interest in quinces is also informed by the following: through my participation as a “dama” in my childhood friend’s quinceañera, the influx of formal dress and tuxedo shops in the working class Latino community I moved to as an adult, the numbers of young women getting their make-up professionally done for their quince at the department store cosmetics counter I worked at in college, and the phenomenon of the banquet venue at my former workplace being booked two years in advance for quinces.<sup>51</sup> Most recently, I am compelled to consider the possibilities for the evolution of quinces via representations of queer and non gender conforming individuals in the media. These elements inspire my approach to this topic, and this chapter’s foundation is an analysis of the visual and symbolic power of a quinceañera.<sup>52</sup>

Upon my entry to graduate school and study of Chicana/Latina literature, my interest in quinces further shifted from the personal to the critical: I realized representations of quinces were absent from much of the literature I read. This suggested

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<sup>51</sup> Image of author’s participation on the “honor court” available upon special request.

<sup>52</sup> The term “quinceañera” refers both to the event and to the girl herself. For the purposes of this work I will use “quinceañera” to refer to the girl and “quince” to refer to the event.



to me that despite their current popularity, my experience was not uncommon, and that there remains a segment of the Chicana/Latina population who also came of age without a quince. Thus another driving question for this work is: what does the *absence* of quinceañera celebrations in Chicana/Latina literature suggest about how Chicana/Latina daughters understand coming of age? How can their experiences help contemporary Chicanas and Latinas without a “special dress” understand their own coming of age, or as the popular quince song states, the transformation from “girl to woman?” Only when I went looking for quinces in literature did I find them, and I will explore the significance of those texts alongside my analysis of key visual elements of the practice. Examining texts alongside the practice of the quince challenges what we understand about coming of age for young Latinas.

The visual and public nature of a quinceañera means we see how the celebration continually evolves—as well as how the celebration can remain tethered to prescriptive ideas about gender. The material nature of quinces also lends itself to a consideration of the role of consumerism and neoliberalism in the public celebration of ethnicity and culture. Quinces may have been largely absent in the texts by Chicanas and Latinas I examined, but I found instead a repertoire of experiences I believe are overlooked when it comes to discussions about coming of age. I argue for a re-evaluation of how we recognize coming of age, and take up the call of Chicana feminist scholars to resist dogmas of gender, ethnicity, and class in our cultural practices. Expanding our definition of what “counts” as coming of age can also help us witness for non gender-conforming, intersex, and LGBTQIA individuals as they journey into adulthood.

The preceding chapters of this dissertation explore how daughters act as witnesses and recorders for their mothers, and how an attention to the daughter's voice allows us to be witnesses for the daughters. Through a Chicana feminist lens, I examine how daughters use writing to create agency and subjectivity alongside, and sometimes against, their mothers, on the page. In examining quinces, I consider how the practice both reflects and obscures a mother's role in a daughter's life. While what draws me to this topic and what drives much of my interpretation is the force of the "big day" itself, the work of Karen Mary Davalos, Julia Alvarez, Norma Cantú, and Evelyn Ibatan Rodriguez reinforces the importance of the affective structures that enable the event—going beyond the church or culture quinces emerge from, but also the material bodies making meaning. Yet I am concerned with how the common practices of the quince may elide the importance of the mother/daughter relationship, and instead reinscribe patriarchal ideologies.

In her work on resisting oppression through "differential consciousness," Chicana theorist Chela Sandoval articulates the possibilities of an identity that "functions within and beyond the demands of dominant ideology" (44). Her approach, based in praxis of *mestizaje*, 3<sup>rd</sup> world feminism, and other 20<sup>th</sup> century revolutionary political and social movements, allows her to make radical interventions into Western metaphysics. In *Methodology of the Oppressed*, Sandoval takes up the conversation from Fanon and Barthes around Western "primary ideological forms that structure consciousness" which become "natural, normal, and neutral categories of being" that call up "possibilities and

prohibitions for thought and behavior that typify the ‘good citizen-subject’” (118). Sandoval argues these ideological forms constitute a “rhetoric of supremacy” that we experience (quoting Barthes) “according to our own particular nation, race, ethnic, sex, gender, or class inflections” (118). Sandoval asks, “How does one go about resisting this dominant rhetoric of supremacy and its forms of cultural imposition, thus making individual and social transformation possible?” (127). While one of the reasons to celebrate quinces is for their expression of culture and identity, I am concerned with how quinces as an ideological practice can become a form of this rhetoric of supremacy in the way they (re)inscribe and reinforce dogmas of gender, ethnicity, and class. We can use our differential consciousness to continually examine what influences how we practice quinces, and to reconsider what we value about coming of age for young women and non gender-conforming individuals. Whether one has a quince or not, how else can we witness for young people as they become the authors of their own lives? In *Loving in the War Years*, Cherríe Moraga tells the reader, “the daughters are my audience” (xiii). Daughters, too, are my audience: this chapter is for girls who wore their special dress with pride and grace, for girls who reluctantly wore that special dress, and for individuals without a special dress at the end of the closet, by choice or by circumstance.

Recognizing the intersectionality of a woman’s experience is central to a Chicana feminist reading of quinces, and my analysis is further informed by how Davalos examines *mexicana* female identity, tradition, and invention in “La Quinceañera: Making Gender and Ethnic Identities.” She addresses the politics of ethnography, and “how writing strategies echo larger theoretical perspectives and agendas” citing Chela

Sandoval, Gloria Anzaldúa and Chandra Talpade Mohanty's ideas of a "decolonizing feminist anthropology [that] requires we study women as active agents, not just exploited and oppressed victims" (108). Thus while I am concerned about the effects of neoliberalism on a young woman's celebration of identity, I do not mean to depict them as victims. A look at marketing materials, however, does make clear how Latino communities are a desirable target for advertisers. One can purchase the "right" to advertise to Latinos of a given geographical area (Figure 1).

## Would you like to own a Quinceañeras Magazine Territory?

Quinceañeras Magazine started in 2004, in Las Vegas Nevada. His founder, Rafael Aguayo had the vision of expanding the concept to other areas in the United States due to the real necessities of this media in the Hispanic market. Back then, we were the very first channel to deliver information to this specialized segment of the Hispanic bridal industry.



In short, we got really good at magazine publishing by learning fast, failing fast, succeeding fast. The question was; could we repeat the dose in a different area, with different demographics, a similar market and the exact same production model, without going through the trials and tribulations of being a start-up magazine? Well, the answer was a resounding yes!

Figure 1: A screenshot from Quinceañeramagazine.com featuring franchise opportunities.

A Quinceañeramagazine.com advertisement for franchise opportunities cites the “real necessities” for quinceañera-based advertisement in the Hispanic market, and connects it to the bridal industry, another celebration traditionally based around gender norms and,

more recently, exorbitant spending. The connection between the bridal and quince industries is clear; becoming a bride is the next natural progression for a young woman in heteronormative, conventionally gendered patriarchal culture. Julia Alvarez's 2007 work *Once Upon a Quinceañera: Coming of Age in the USA* follows several young women as they plan and celebrate their quinces in attempt to understand how the practice has evolved, and reveals what happens behind the scenes of the main performance. Alvarez observes "The quinceañera is like a rehearsal wedding without a groom," and the transformation "from girl to woman" marks her as an eligible consumer as much as it marks her as eligible for marriage and motherhood (56). A representative from nationwide retailer David's Bridal tells Alvarez a girl who gets her quinceañera dress from them will often return a few years later when she needs a prom dress, and again when she needs a wedding dress and bridesmaid dresses (41). Quinces thus necessitate participation in the marketplace as young women and their families seek to celebrate and articulate their cultural identity, both Mexican and American.

Contemporarily, a quince is understood as a young woman's initiation into adult womanhood in front of family, community, and God. Quinces serve both individual and communal needs, to "reaffirm who we are as a culture and signal the coming of age of a young member of the group" (Cantú). In her dual study on coming of age through Filipino-American debuts and Mexican-American quinceañeras, Evelyn Ibatan Rodriguez argues these public events also serve as means for working class immigrant families to "dispute perceptions of ethnic inferiority and makes it possible for middle- and upper-class immigrants to make their ethnicity visible in positive ways" (62). While it is a

tradition, there is no consensus within the Latino community about the origins of the quinceañera; some argue its roots are Aztec, whereas others believe the practice began with the French colonial presence in Mexico during the 1800's.<sup>53</sup> Like many traditions, it is likely an amalgamation of multiple sources, and it is a practice which continues to evolve given the needs and desires of its practitioners. Quinces are, however, still often celebrated within the Catholic Church; Davalos writes that one of the ways it is recognized within public discourse is as “an extension of particular Catholic sacraments,” as well as a “rite of passage” and “tradition” (108). Often parishes will require a quinceañera and her participants to attend a series of classes as a way to “recruit and instruct young Catholic men and women” (Cantú) and to encourage the young women to begin a “life of service” to the Church (Davalos 111). The quinceañera is also recognized as a means of public display of the status of the family, a reaffirmation of the family's Mexican/Latino heritage, and a presentation of the daughter's value to the family. Quinces are a social event that creates opportunities to “maintain, build, and activate key social networks” in the planning and in the day itself (Rodriguez 39). Siblings, extended family, comadres and compadres, godparents, and padrinos (or, “sponsors”) often help out financially, and quinces are an occasion for the family to publicly recognize kinships, acting as what Cantú calls “social glue.”

A quince has no standard template; both Davalos and Cantú note the fluidity of the practice as an “ever-changing organic performance and not a fixed, homogenous

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<sup>53</sup> While predominantly based in Mexican culture, the diverse nature and shared cultural practices of Latinidad means that quinces are also celebrated by other Latin-American identities including Cubans, Dominicans, and Puerto-Ricans.

artifact” (Cantú) and an “open, and sometimes chaotic terrain that is constantly reconfigured in everyday experience” (Davalos 102). However, I find it useful to delineate common elements found in the practice across geography and culture as a basis for analysis. A quince most commonly entails a Catholic mass (public or private) or a church blessing, focusing on “the relationships between the parents and their daughter and between God and the family” (Davalos 109). During the Mass, a common practice is to present roses to a statue of the Virgin Mary, who Rodriguez and Chicana scholars cite as a “model of womanhood” for young Catholic Latinas (65). This is followed by a party, or reception, also attended by her friends and family. The young woman wears a formal gown, and is accompanied by a “court” of fourteen, comprised of her peers and relatives. During the party, the quinceañera will perform additional rituals to those in the Mass symbolizing her transformation into womanhood. Other rituals include, but are not limited to: a “last dance” with her father, the changing of her shoes from flats to high heels, and the presentation of a “last doll.” Cantú notes common elements such as the Mass, the father-daughter waltz and other practices “can be said to be signifiers that carry a semantic meaning in the performance of the ritual.” The dress and other practices “become the cultural signifiers that construct the feminine in a particular fashion. . . the objects worn and received by the young honoree signify adulthood.” The use of the female “a” in the term “quinceañera” is intentional, as there is no equivalent practice for young men. The quince’s emphasis on the transformation “from girl to woman,” is encapsulated by Rodriguez categorization of quinces as an example of “ethnicized gender projects” (62). A young woman interviewed by Alvarez echoes the cultural sentiment,



“Boys are born men but girls turn into women” (72). The transformation into a woman is thus both symbolic and material, ephemeral and for a lifetime.

Quinces are a site where ethnic identity and gender are exhibited, created, and even challenged via the multiple interpretations of the practice. Often the celebrant and her court will perform a formal waltz for the guests, another holdover from the colonial origins. Yet one young woman performed both an Aztec danza and a contemporary dance set to Lady Gaga, an example of how quinces allow for both tradition and individuality contemporaneously.<sup>54</sup> This cultural mixing illustrates the concept of what Rafael Perez-Torres calls a critical mestizaje, in which “Mestizaje becomes more than a powerful metaphor signifying cultural hybridity” through its recognition of the intersections of colonialism, Mexican identity, and indigeneity (4). How a young woman celebrates her quince can be a powerful way to recognize how “The lived practices of subjectivities in difference are not simply ‘choices’ or ‘styles,’ each equally interchangeable with the other. They are, rather, the source of differential forms of knowledge and epistemologies” (Perez-Torres 45). Contemporary quince practices can therefore also resist the “neocolonialism imposed on Chicano/a and other U.S. Latino groups” while still reinscribing it (Cantú). Perez-Torres makes an important distinction in his assessment of style as being more than superficial, but instead a means of expressing a young woman’s intersectional identity. Quinces allow her to emulate both a Disney princess and an Aztec princess, a provocative cultural *choque*.<sup>55</sup>

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<sup>54</sup> *Quiero Mis Quinces*

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The decisions about which practices to include in the celebration are often made between the young woman and her mother. Interviews like those conducted by Alvarez, Davalos, and Rodriguez, along with reality programs like *Quiero Mis Quince*, show us how mothers work most closely with the daughter to plan the event.<sup>56</sup> Though the princess fantasy is just for one day, a quince may take anywhere from several months to years to plan (Rodriguez 75). One professional planner states, “girls who have quinces. . . they’re spending a lot of time with their moms, shopping, talking about life” (Alvarez 32). Davalos learns in her study of how often specific practices in a quince come from remembering what other family members did in the past, so memory and relationships play a “significant role in tradition making. In this way, ‘tradition’ is a bodily experience authenticated by memory and practice” (120). However, as Alvarez and Davalos point out, the constant flow of immigration between the U.S. and Mexico disrupts idealized notions of smooth ancestral and national identity, how traditions get passed on, and how we hold memory of cultural practices. In one interview, Alvarez hears about girls visiting online chat rooms to learn what to do for their quince since “it used to be you could learn these things from your grandmother. . . but with immigration and the amount of mobility in this country, abuelita is not always a resource” (69). While a young woman may turn to the internet or TV for ideas and inspiration in planning her quince, ultimately the young woman’s family—usually her mother’s—desires are prioritized. Rodriguez argues the mother’s dominant role in the planning “better enables immigrant

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<sup>56</sup> This program (*I Want My Quince*) airs on the cable network channel MTV Tr3s, featuring Latino-themed programming, and is an offshoot of the popular MTV program *My Super Sweet Sixteen*, which profiles young women’s lavish birthday celebrations.

parents to exert authority of their daughters—even as their daughters presumably leave childhood behind and are announced as women” (74).

I argue in earlier chapters that a young woman’s relationship with her mother is central to her identity formation. The quince is an opportunity for a daughter to publicly demonstrate her mother’s important role in her life—yet the majority of a quince’s *public* practices emphasize the paternal. What does it say about our culture that at this most public moment in a young woman’s life, her mother is absent?<sup>57</sup> As noted earlier, quince practices continue to evolve, and some quinceañeras may indeed include the mother more publicly in the celebration. Yet when tradition is followed, mothers remain in the shadows. Fathers are the parent who ushers a young woman into womanhood, in the same way he one day might usher her down the aisle to her husband, reinforcing cultural gendered family roles and notions of male ownership. The song this chapter takes its name from, Julio Iglesias’s “De Niña a Mujer/From Girl to Woman,” is a popular choice for the father/daughter waltz at quinces, and I think a productive means of illustrating the patriarchal overtones of the celebration. Although the lyrics appear to point to a romantic relationship, the song’s sentiment makes it compulsory at quinceañeras, particularly for the father-daughter waltz. The male speaker addresses a young girl, observing she was merely “playing to be a woman” and the song ultimately serves as an elegy to her childhood. The speaker appears to have spent some time away from the girl, for he thinks of her often:

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<sup>57</sup> I thank Tiffany Ana López for helping me articulate this critical question.

I missed you so much that not seeing you by my side

I was dreaming to see you again.

And meanwhile I was inventing you

From girl to woman

As time passes, in his mind he:

stopped her in time, thinking

that she shouldn't grow up

But time was cheating on me

my girl was becoming a woman

I knew I was going to lose her

because her soul was changing

from girl to woman. (Iglesias)

He can no longer maintain the fantasy of his “girl” — she has crossed the threshold and her *soul*, the fundamental essence of her being, has changed. She is no longer an impressionable child; he has “lost” her to the freedoms of womanhood. While the sentiment between a parent and child is understandable and expected, the undertones of patriarchal possession over a young woman’s innocence are difficult to reconcile. In her essay recounting a quinceañera she attended as a girl, Chicana playwright Adelina Anthony writes of watching her friend’s glamorous mother slow dance with her quinceañera daughter. She realizes she hasn’t seen the girl’s father around, and reflects, “I’ve never really seen this at quinceañera party, but it seemed so much more appropriate than the typical father and daughter waltz. I mean, shouldn’t it be our mothers

announcing our womanhood to the world?" (167). Other popular songs include Luther Vandross's "Dance With My Father" and "La Ultima Muñeca," written from a father's perspective. The latter's lyrics include, "Today I bought my daughter her last doll/and now she spends hours and hours in the mirror/now she doesn't even say daddy tell me a story/and sometimes she doesn't even kiss me goodnight." The emphasis on patriarchal loss in quinces may be also be an extension of Mexican/Latino focus on the male as the public representative of the family, as the ostensible head of the household. The mother's work is in the private, domestic, realm. Mothers are not perceived as "losing" their daughters to womanhood in both the quince and in weddings. A young woman may go from her father's "protection" to her husband's, but her relationship with her mother will remain as she seeks her guidance for other gendered life events, like pregnancy and caring for her own children. While the reality of the parental relationships with the daughter may be different, the public nature of the quince is a way to present an "idealized notion of familial unity or cohesion" (Ortiz). While a young woman can create agency in the decisions she makes about her quince, the tradition remains overwhelmingly gendered, patriarchal, and heteronormative.

Though the rituals and practices of a quince may be common across regions, the way they are performed varies widely. For example, the young woman may have an all-male "court," she may only receive a blessing from the priest or even eschew the church completely, or she might change from ball gown to mini-dress after the sacral practices are over in order to dance unfettered at her party. While these changes may reflect the quinceañera's investments and personal interests, they can also make a more public

statement: a limousine ride to the church may be standard, but a Hummer stretch limo or party bus is fabulous. Sitting on a throne at the reception is nice, but being carried in on a chaise lounge by young men in full military regalia is much more exciting. Ice sculptures, photo booths, custom-designed invitations, videographers, personal makeup artists, tiaras—the possibilities for demonstrating the importance of the day are endless, and can be costly. Davalos identifies a trend among Catholic officials and journalists criticizing quinces as “overly concerned with money and social prestige,” making the “event into a farce because they spend too much money” (109). Alvarez’s interviews reveal the details of large-scale quinces hosted by wealthy families, including: 5,000 roses imported from Holland, week-long Quinceañera Cruises, quinces held in nightclubs, and a \$125,000 *Phantom of the Opera*-themed quince held at a performing arts center.<sup>58</sup> In my analysis of the role of quinces in understanding a young woman’s coming of age, I am most interested in the poor and working-class, as they are most likely to be overlooked when quinces become “supersized.” Teaching at the community college level, I find they are also more likely to be my students. Discussing their own coming of age experiences is a powerful way for students of all genders to reflect on the intersections of family, community, and culture; when it comes to quinceañeras, we can add an additional layer of analysis in terms of how ethnicity gets expressed through consumption.

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<sup>58</sup> In 2016 a San Antonio family recently made the news for what is possibly the world’s most expensive quinceañera, at the total cost of \$6 million. In 2017 the family made news again for their son’s \$4 million 18<sup>th</sup> birthday party.

The practices and ideologies of neoliberalism, of which Henry Giroux states, “everything either is for sale or is plundered for profit” and results in “social bonds are replaced by unadulterated materialism and narcissism,” can help us understand the shift towards lavish quinces (“Dark Times”). Neoliberalism impacts public life and cultural practices within the economic sphere, and threatens to dictate the “what counts” of quinces. What happens at the intersection of neoliberalism, consumerism, and ethnicity? What is at stake for young Latinas when under neoliberalism, “Social relations between parents and children, doctors and patients, teachers and students are reduced to that of supplier and customer just as the law of market replace those noncommodified values capable of defending vital public goods and spheres” (“Dark Times”). Chicana theorist Cherríe Moraga writes of the power of remembering and performance for a culture fractured by colonization, and of the “right” to make “rite” (*Codex* 81). When a young Latina can only visualize her coming-of-age through what she can purchase, quinces risk being hollowed out, her “right” to make “rite” becomes compromised by her socioeconomic status.

It is not uncommon for poor, working, and middle class families to go into debt to hold a quince. One expert Alvarez consults estimates the average cost of a quince to be \$5,000, yet the celebrations in Rodriguez’s study “typically cost between \$12,000 and \$13,000, but the price tag for the most expensive events topped \$25,000” (67, 118). While family and friends also assist financially, much of the cost still falls on the family. [Quinceañerasmagazine.com](http://Quinceañerasmagazine.com)—one of many “one stop shop” quinceañera planning sites where young woman can go to shop for items, get new ideas, and communicate with

other young women—features financial planners under “Vendors,” one of whom offers private loans. The bilingual ad states, “CASH FOR YOUR QUINCE.”

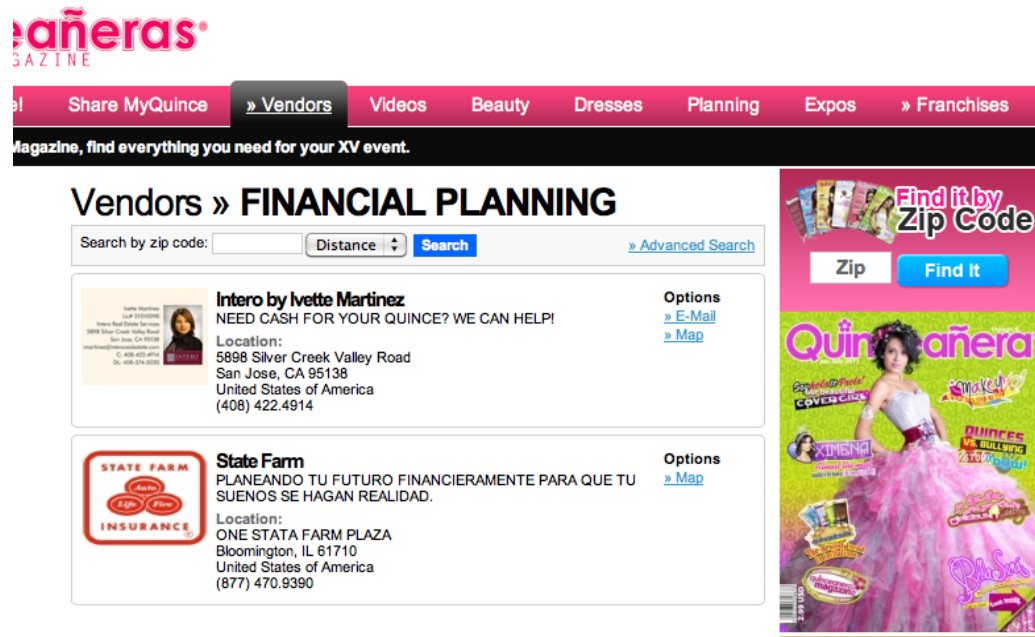


Figure 2: Screenshot from QuinceañerasMagazine.com. The text of second ad reads, “Planning Your Future Financing So Your Dreams Can Become Reality.”

Arlene Davila’s work *Latinos Inc.* explores the role of commercial culture in “cultural citizenship,” which recognizes the “intricate connections between cultural visibility, as the assertion of cultural difference from normative ideals, and political enfranchisement” (11). Rodriguez also suggests that quinces and debuts serve to “reinforce the notion of Filipinos and Mexicans as morally superior because of the close bond they promote between parents and children, especially between mothers and daughters” (94). A quince operates to reinforce both public and private beliefs about identity and culture, which helps us understand why spending for increased visibility may be desirable for its practitioners. Further, quinces and debuts “meaningfully reflect how



Filipino and Mexican American immigrants and their children are positioned in the United States, as well as how they imagine who they are, where they have come from, and who they want to become” (Rodriguez 2). One illuminating interview in Alvarez’s work is with Isabella Martinez Wall, owner of another planning site, [bellaquinceañera.com](http://bellaquinceañera.com). A former beauty queen, Martinez Wall is well versed in gender performances. She tells Alvarez:

Quinceañeras know no social or class boundaries. You might not have the money but you have a quinceañera for your daughter. The family is making that statement. We might not be rich but we value our daughter. . . What better time in your life to have you family, friends, community come together and create a support system for you for the rest of your life? (31)

Many critics of families who borrow money argue that they would be better off saving for college or other “worthy” pursuits. By defying the expectation that “people of modest means should spend their money on only what society approves of (e.g., a wedding) and/or sees as necessary (e.g. college),” lavish spending on a quince “calls attention not just to the fact that they can afford certain luxuries but also to how, despite their hard work, they have been granted only partial access to the goods and services that would enable them to enjoy the lifestyle to which they aspire” (Rodriguez 119).

While class may no longer be a constraint to having the quince of one’s dreams, this “freedom” being tied to financial debt is problematic. Every family has the right to celebrate their daughter, family, and culture; both Davalos and Alvarez speak to the importance of cultural practice. Alvarez notes practicing quinceañeras in the way one

desires “is our human right,” and in Davalos’s documentation of conversations about familial conflicts with clergy, she recounts how families argue for their “right” to perform “aspects of their cultural heritage” (116). Yet I am concerned about families who go into debt to celebrate a coming of age under neoliberalism, which defines what “counts” then offers you the means of accessing what “counts,” thus possibly obscuring what we value about the rite of passage. Consumer debt may also impact the family’s ability to pay for future health and educational needs. Davalos argues mexicanas do not value quinces because of any specific origins, but because:

it transforms and physically connects a person to ‘Mexican culture’ —a time and space that has particular meaning for each individual. . . . mothers and daughters construct their version of the authentic quinceañera not by the form or practice of the event, but by the meaning behind or within the event. Since authenticity is located in meaning, it is not surprising that various forms and practices are referred to as a quinceañera. (119)

I argue neoliberalism takes advantage of the possibility for invention in the practice, and meaning becomes tied up with how much one spends as an expression of value. When asked about having her quince at home in the form of a backyard barbecue or small party, one Latina tells Alvarez, “If I had to be that cheap I just wouldn’t have one. What for?” (65). Rodriguez observes young women who have small celebrations “with fewer than thirty guests who primarily consisted of the celebrant’s family” and close friends were described by the young women as “nothing really,” and “not real” quinces or debuts (55). Neoliberal ideology may make it difficult for a young woman to see how “authenticity is

found in meaning” or the value of celebrating her coming of age via the means available to her. While Rodriguez notes how “these small celebrations still hold exceptional meaning for the celebrants and their families,” she continues, “most daughters did express some disappointment” (55, 57). Under neoliberalism only “big” quinceañeras “count,” and the “consumer becomes the only viable model of agency” (Giroux). If a young woman cannot envision other ways of celebrating her coming of age outside of spending, or feels like her quince wasn’t “real,” neoliberalism threatens to exclude her recognizing how her presence is what counts.<sup>59</sup>

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<sup>59</sup> Ortiz’s study also found evidence of diminishment of small celebrations. “Some people who said at the beginning of an interview that they never had a *quinceañera* actually did have a celebration, it just did not conform to their idea of a *quinceañera* as a large-scale, high-priced, very visible celebration. I frequently hear variations on the phrase, “I had a quince but not a quince quince,” implying that because of its small scale, such a celebration was somehow less authentic or otherwise unqualified to be a “real” *quinceañera*.”

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### An At-Home Quinceañera in Ohio

Check out the homemade quince that Ashley planned!

Play flipbook ▶



1 of 10



📧 email 🖨️ print



[Leer en español](#)

**Her Quince Style:** Laid-back, simple, and fun.

**From:** Lakewood, Ohio

**Proud to Be:** Nicaraguan

**Her Dream for 15:** "I want to go to college and receive my PhD in medicine."

**Why We Love Her:** Ashley proves quinceañeras can be fun and unforgettable on any budget. Don't let "My Super Sweet 16" fool you. An inexpensive, homemade quinceañera is just as special if you're wearing a gorgeous dress, serving delicious food, and surrounded by loved ones. Plus, she wasn't shy about inviting her non-Latino friends and teaching them about her Hispanic traditions.

Figure 3: Screenshot from Misquincemag.com profiling Ashley's quince.

Granted, not every young woman is unhappy with a humble quince. One young woman named Ashley profiled on misquincemag.com shares pictures of her "At-Home Quinceañera in Ohio," featuring a smiling Ashley in a pretty dress in her living room, surrounded by friends sitting on folding chairs and paper cut-out decorations (Figure 4). Ashley states her dream is to attend college and receive her PhD in Medicine—clearly she is a young woman with goals beyond a princess fantasy. Yet in the age of social

media, the Internet, and reality television, stories like Ashley's do not receive the same attention that a "blow-out" quince does, and these images create a new, unattainable standard that compromises the practice.

I do not mean to criticize families who usher their daughter into womanhood via a quince of any size, or to suggest that we should stop practicing quinces. In fact it is the style of contemporary quinces that draw me to them—the endless options for self-expression if I were a quinceañera fascinate me, and have derailed many a research session as I peruse pages of dresses. I do not want to discount the power of *style* and what it communicates, yet I identify a tension between style, neoliberalism, and what we value about quinces. Neoliberalism may threaten to diminish the meaning of small quinces and/or create an obstacle for a young woman who desires to have one. Does neoliberalism also cause us to over-value style, or empty style of meaning? Douglas Thomas helps my understanding of the visual power of quinces through his interpretation of Nietzsche's work of recognizing the individual subject as the creator of truth and style as rhetorical. Through this lens, "Rather as operating as a means to produce value, rhetoric is a means to challenge the production of value, and offer a means of critique that is separated from philosophical dogmatism and metaphysics" (Thomas 34). In the case of quinces, religious and cultural dogmatism about what a young woman "should" be or do may limit the possibilities for young women's lives. Examining quinces rhetorically helps me rethink what we value about coming of age for Latinas.

Through Nietzsche's ideas of style as an "expression of life," and Perez-Torres's claim of style as epistemology, we can consider multiple interpretations of the role of

style in quinces. Thomas writes of how style complicates: it “represents a rupture in the smooth space of interpretation. . . .it is the reassertion of life, identity, and the communication of an inward state,” thus drawing attention to itself and asking us to “decipher its value” (118). The value under question for me is that of style under neoliberalism, compounded by cultural beliefs and expectations. Thomas notes that for Nietzsche, “Style becomes not only the locus of the representation of value but also the locus of the construction of value itself. Values are created as much by how we live as by how we represent that life” (119). Quinces may begin as representations of what the family values about the young woman, their community, and their culture, but under neoliberalism, style gets compromised and becomes the “construction of value.” I argue for acknowledging rites of passage not dictated by purchasing power or neoliberal ideologies as a form of Sandoval’s differential consciousness, fulfilling her vision of a practice which breaks from ideology while speaking from within, and which allows us to “act upon social reality while at the same time transforming [our] relation to it” (Sandoval 155). A “differential valuation” means that culturally, we would recognize the intangible moments in a girl’s life that form the *process* of coming of age: the first time she comforts a parent, makes a sacrifice for someone she loves, witnesses an act of violence, or acts as a role model to a younger child. It also creates possibilities for practicing quinces outside of prescriptive gender narratives and patriarchal overtones, allowing us to celebrate the fluidity of gender and sexual identity. These life events of course do not have style and resonance in the same way a taffeta dress does, but

recognition of these moments is crucial for young women who do and do not wear *the* dress.

Much of the discourse around quinceañeras refer to “fantasy: the birthday girl dressed and treated as “queen for a day,” the fantasy the Church has of creating devout, virtuous young women whose sexuality will be contained by its tenets, and the free-market fantasy of the quinceañera entrepreneur that her services will make the celebrant’s life better. The culturally-affirming nature of the quince leads to the idea that girls who have quinces have better chances at, as Martinez-Wall states, “turning it around” and are better citizens: they don’t drop out of school, are closer to their community, and don’t become unwed mothers (Alvarez 29). When Alvarez is skeptical about the above claims, Martinez-Wall responds:

[Quinceañeras] can create a support platform for that young lady that she can have to look back upon for the rest of her life. That moment when she stands dressed like a queen with her mom beside her looking in the mirror, for that moment, if only that moment, she knows she is all right just as she is. She is the queen of her life if she can hold on to that feeling. (32)

I struggle to articulate what I find problematic about this image Martinez-Wall presents. Perhaps it is because she is invested in promoting quinces as part of her financial livelihood, but further, it appears to oversimplify the complexity of a young woman’s life. Is a feeling enough to get her through the challenges that await her as a young Latina? Interviews with quinceañeras suggest that in that moment, she feels anything but “all right just as she is,” as many of them speak to how being the center or attention at

their quinces intensified their insecurities, if not making them outright uncomfortable (Ortiz, Alvarez, Rodriguez). But fantasy gives hope, and it is every young woman's right to hope. Alvarez writes:

Even if she is at the bottom of the American heap, if the young Latina girl can believe the fantasy—that her condition is temporary, that she is a Cinderella waiting for that fairy godmother or husband to endow her with their power—then she can bear the burden of her disadvantage. And as the years go by, and the probability of her dream becoming true lessens, she can at least pass on the story to her daughter. (58)

Alvarez's observation is framed through the patriarchal fantasy that quinces reinforce about the gendered roles a young woman will take on in adulthood. Yet it also speaks to the power of quinces as a way to experience pleasure, however temporary, and its accompanying mental freedom from reality. The idea of one day passing the story along to her own daughter, presumably while planning her quince, is another example of how quinces, in their attempt to celebrate family and culture, instead reinscribe gendered and heteronormative expectations on young women. Not all Latinas dream of having children, or a husband—some may dream of their wife. One of the reasons I argue Chicana/Latina writers have such strong voices as writers is because of the need to articulate their identity against, as much as through, their mothers. When daughters carry their mother's dreams, the weight can become a burden the daughter sinks beneath. In rethinking quinces, I invoke Moraga's claim that we need to "free the daughters" to construct her own dreams, ones not based on fantasy. Her disadvantage does not have to



be a burden; surviving and thriving past the “disadvantage” is part of what changes a soul “from girl to woman,” more so than changing into high heels. This is part of her “right;” recognizing that she is more than a princess for a day in a dress or a little girl being released by her father.

A quinceañera who *does* have that moment in the mirror may very well still come to this recognition; having a quince does not mean that a young woman is caught up only in the fantasy. In the best-case scenarios the young woman does come to an appreciation of who she is individually and as part of her family, community, and culture. Yet as what it means to be a Latina/Mexicana/Mexican-American evolves, we must also evolve our understanding of who these young women are. One clergyman Davalos interviews describes the significance of the passage “de niña a mujer” as thus: in childhood girls “are allowed to only think about themselves” and in adulthood they should “think of others first” (114). The realities of contemporary life for many Latinas in the U.S. make it unlikely that a young woman has the privilege of solely thinking about herself. Issues of class, education, immigration, housing, transportation, food instability, and a government increasingly hostile in its rhetoric and practices towards people of Mexican descent make daily life increasingly challenging for young Latinas. Which makes having a special day even more important, for those young women who do want one. The discussion board portion of quince planning websites gives additional insight into how important a quince can be. In a thread titled “What’s Your Story,” a young woman named Irma writes of how her plans to have a quince have been curtailed by first her

father's, then her brother's death.<sup>60</sup> She continues, "These two losses have been very hard for me that they have kept my mind off things. Please help to make my quinceañera dream come true. My mom cant [sic] afford my 15." She ends the post with her contact info for people to contact her "If you will like to help me or help with something." The comments section below her post remains empty.

**Quinceaneras**  
MAGAZINE

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Magazine, find everything you need for your XV event.

### What's your Story?

**My Quinceanera I Need Your Help**  
on May 21, 2011

Hi, My name is **Pseudonim**. I was born in December 27, 1996 at Chula Vista CA And I have lived all my life in San Diego CA. I was going to have a quinceanera but my dad who was going to help me have one died back in January of this year. Then, my brother who was also going to help my mom to make me a quinceanera party died back in April. These two loses have been very hard for me that they have kept my mind off things. Please help me to make my quinceanera come true. My mom cant afford my 15 .If you will like to help me or help with something Please tell me or send me a message to my yahoo : [\[redacted\]](#) or please call me to my mom's cell phone number [\[redacted\]](#)

Sincerely,  
**Pseudonim**

**Comments** [\(Add a comment\)](#)  
No comments

**Find it by Zip Code**  
Zip

**Quinceañera**  
**Buy It Now!**

**Your Opinion**  
**WHAT DO YOU USE FOR PLANNING YOUR QUINCE?**

EVENT PLANNER	313 votes
FRIENDS	257 votes
INTERNET	318 votes
MAGAZINE	

Figure 4: Screenshot of discussion board post from Quinceanerasmagazine.com by a young woman asking for help with planning her quince after the death of her father and brother.

<sup>60</sup> Pseudonym

In my introduction I identified the daughters as my audience for this work. But I now understand that this young woman is whom I wish to reach. I came across her post years after she wrote it, and even if I had encountered it when it was posted in 2011, all I could have offered her were words of consolation from another daughter who experienced loss too soon. And at that time, I did not have the language to articulate, even to myself, that her situation illustrates the gap in our discussions about quinces and coming of age. How can we help young women celebrate their cultural past, who they are as young women, and express hope for the future outside of a party? How might this young woman recognize her transformation from girl to woman slipped by her unnoticed, shrouded by grief? She has every right to celebrate with a party in the style she desires; her circumstances, though, mean she will not get her moment in the mirror, that moment of fantasy she craves. This young woman is why we need to rethink as a culture how we recognize coming of age; literature by Chicanas and Latinas is a way for us to witness for a young woman's creation of her subjectivity beyond the dress, and outside of the rental hall or church.

Chicana/Latina authors across genres often reflect in their writing on their formative years, family relationships, and other domestic issues as a means of understanding their own development into adulthood. Texts by Chicanas and Latinas illustrate how womanhood is more than a waltz with one's father in the spotlight—while the waltz may be an important moment of personal and cultural affirmation, it can also be a false moment. Their work publicly illustrates the multiple challenges faced by young

girls at home; often they care for younger siblings, work to assist the household income, and act as “child scribe”<sup>61</sup> or translator for parents with limited or no English. And both inside and outside of the home, girlhood is shaped by her experiences with race, class, gender, and sexual orientation. Anthologies including *Growing up Chicana/o*, *Telling to Live: Chicana Feminist Testimonios*, *This Bridge Called my Back*, and *The Sexuality of Latinas*, are important archives of the realities lived by Chicanas and Latinas. In *Telling to Live*, contributor Aurora Levins Morales articulates the importance of their writing: “My discovery of a community of womanist of color writers, artists, thinkers was probably the most profound validation I’ve ever received of my right to exist, to know, to name my own reality” (29). Memoirs and autobiographical essays like Norma Cantú’s *Canicula*, Gloria Anzaldúa’s *Borderlands*, Moraga’s *Loving in the War Years*, Josie Mendez-Negrete’s *Las Hijas de Juan*, and Reyna Grande’s *The Distance Between Us* illustrate the rarity of a woman only “think[ing] about themselves” (Davalos 114).<sup>62</sup> These texts make clear how girlhood often ends too soon, and gendered cultural expectations for Chicanas and Latinas often means their responsibilities are taken for granted. Psychologist Yvette G. Flores-Ortiz writes, “the psychological development of [Chicana] women emphasizes being in relationship to others and an identity based on their service to others” (106). A quince may be a way of publicly declaring adulthood, but I argue the rituals performed in a quince do not always fully encapsulate the realities

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<sup>61</sup> See Lorna Dee Cervantes, “Beneath the Shadow of the Freeway”

<sup>62</sup> Even though her family was fractured by immigration and her father was an abusive alcoholic, Reyna Grande had a quince, but only because her older sister took it upon herself to plan (and pay) for one.

of the young woman's struggles, and instead serve the institutions of home, family, and church. In an interview with Alvarez, Cantú states, "a ritual is transformative for the whole community, not just for the individual going through it" (235). Like with writing by Chicanas/Latinas, in quinces as rituals I also see a tension between the daughter's voice and the desires of her community, culture, and family. Are quinces another instance where the daughter's voice becomes subsumed due to cultural and gender expectations of the Chicano/Latino family? This question speaks to the work of Chicana feminists, whose goal in their examinations of family is, as Ortiz states to not pathologize or reify but instead "examine critically the strength and support a family can offer, as well as the ways in which family life oppresses and victimizes women" (108). How else can we foster for our young women the same validation Morales found as an adult in her writing? Writing by Chicanas and Latinas becomes then a critical site of agency and connection, or what Anzaldúa calls *conocimiento*, where "By redeeming your most painful experiences you transform them into something valuable, algo para compartir or share with others so they may too be empowered" (540). When cultural practices become hollowed out by the influences of consumerism and neoliberalism, closing off the opportunity for some young women of their right to make rite, means of public *conocimiento* becomes even more valuable.

I am compelled to continually examine the same questions as those put forth by the authors of *Telling to Live*: "How do we bear witness to our own becoming? How do we define who we are?" and, I add, how do we establish relationships with others (12)? Literature helps us take into account the spectrum of experiences that make up

womanhood, with and without the spotlight. The young woman in Lorna Dee Cervantes's poem "Lots II" survives a rape, and makes:

. . . a list in my head  
of all the names who could help me  
and then meticulously I scratched  
each one  
*they won't hear me burning*  
*inside of myself*  
my used skin glistened  
my first diamond. (9)

Her "first diamond" here is the counterpart to the rhinestone in a quinceañera's tiara. How can a young woman reconcile the two? Healing from trauma is part of how she will learn to define herself as "queen of her life," on her own terms, with or without the moment in the mirror.

How will Chicanas, Latinas, Chicanxs and Latinxs in the 21<sup>st</sup> century continue to evolve the way we recognize coming of age? To suggest that becoming a woman happens with one celebration is a narrow view of the complexity of women's experience, as is continuing to ascribe a single gender narrative to the practice of quinceañeras. We know there is more than one development story for Chicanx/Latinx, and quinces are but one tool for a young person to insist on their presence in their own tongue, on their own

ground, and but one way we can witness for their experiences (Moraga 44).<sup>63</sup> In 1996, Chicana critic Tey Diana Rebolledo considered it a “moment of rupture in which we are just beginning to look back to uncover our traditions, whether they be written or oral, and to talk back—to unsay what has been said and frozen in time and place. We are at the moment of questioning everything, even ourselves” (204). I find her words still hold true; Chicana/Latina culture, identity, and forms of expression continue to grow, widely because of the questioning. I call for a continual questioning concerning what we value about quinces, and who quinces really serve. While quinces may not be going anywhere, they remain a provocative site of analysis where ideas of culture and identity may be both celebrated and challenged. In 2011 *Quiero Mis Quinces* featured Rene, their first male “quinceañero.” When asked in an interview with *Latina* magazine about how the idea came about, he states, “I think I deserved as a boy to have a quince because I feel everyone should have a day for themselves – for them to shine. Only girls get to have a day for them. Boys don’t get a day for themselves, except if they’re Jewish and have the Bar Mitzvah.”<sup>64</sup> Rene’s father was initially uncomfortable with his choice to have a quince, but ultimately supports his son’s endeavor and attends the party. He does not dance with his son; the traditional father/daughter dance becomes a mother/son dance.

Entertainment media representations can also advance our understanding of quinces. The Netflix program *One Day at a Time* features a predominantly Latino/a/x

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<sup>63</sup> My thanks to Steven Gould Axelrod for sharing his insights, which have helped both my thinking and writing on quinces.

<sup>64</sup> <http://www.latina.com/entertainment/tv/exclusive-rene-quiero-mis-quinces-being-first-quincea-ero>

cast, and follows the lives of the Cuban-American Alvarez family. Season 1 featured a storyline about the teenage Alvarez daughter's reluctance to have a quince because of its patriarchal origins. Elena is gay, and is out to her divorced mother, brother and grandmother. She comes out to her father during rehearsal for their father-daughter dance, and he reacts in anger and disappointment. When shown the dress her grandmother has sewn, Elena acknowledges its beauty but states, "I'm not really comfortable wearing a dress." Elena suggests she wear her Dr. Martens boots underneath her dress instead of high heels, which she argues no one would be able to see, and "underneath there would be one thing that's a little more me." Her grandmother is horrified, claiming that being "in agony" in order to look "amazing" is an integral part of being a woman. On the day of her quince, Elena is brought to tears when she sees the "adjustments" her grandmother has made to her dress: she makes her debut on the arm of a chambelan in a white silk suit. Under the jacket she wears the jeweled bodice of her original dress, and on her feet are her Dr. Martens. Her father's disapproval is clear and he exits the party, leaving Elena alone on the dance floor as the father-daughter dance is announced. Elena's mother joins her instead, and they are gradually joined by Elena's brother, grandmother, and other members of their "fictive" family. The episode is significant not only for its representation of a queer quinceañera, but also for its depiction of a multi-generational Latino family negotiating issues of gender, sexuality, and tradition.

Cantú herself redefined quinces when she celebrated a "cincuentañera" to mark her 50<sup>th</sup> birthday. At her celebration, her parents "stood up and emotionally wished her



happy birthday and expressed their pride in her achievements. . .acknowledging a change in their own thinking. They were celebrating a life that had not gone the traditional route they had anticipated. For them to publicly ‘bless’ her successful academic and literary career was important, not just for her but for the younger women in the community” a means of affirming Cantú and her life choices (235). Rene, the fictional Alvarez family, and Cantú encapsulate the possibilities for a coming of age that is inclusive across age and gender, for those who desire to celebrate in a public way. As issues of class, consumption, and neoliberalism result in young people being left out, finding other ways to recognize young individual’s agency, and their often difficult transition into adulthood, is critical.

Neither I, nor the desolate poster Irma, nor my mother, has a quinceañera dress in the back of our closet. My mother was nine when she lost her father, the same age I was when my father died. Having a quince would likely have been difficult for my grandmother, a widow living on a ranch with eight children. My mother did wear a wedding dress at 18, and nine months later she wore a hospital gown to deliver her first of six children. I don’t know what dresses might be in Irma’s closet now, 8 years after her post. Maybe she has realized that she doesn’t need—or want—a dress as a symbol, or as a *recuerdo*, and instead honors the person she has become through surviving adversity. I again return to Isabella Martinez Wall, the entrepreneur who has seen quinces “turn girls around” and who tells Alvarez, “I don’t have statistics, this is not academic” (31). When I read Irma’s post I am reminded how for many young people it is not “academic” either. I am in no place to, nor would I ever, tell someone who wants a

quince that quinces don't matter. I will continue to write about and teach texts where coming of age means more than a dress, and support [academic and cultural productions] that continue to reframe the practice, allowing us to publicly celebrating quinceañerx of all ages. When there is a dress, we can both celebrate it and question its significance, but ultimately young people need to see models for how they can be the monarch of their life, with or without the dress.

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## Epilogue

I opened this work foregrounding my position as a daughter of a Mexican-born mother. At its close, I am compelled to reflect on what I've discovered as a daughter as much as what I have discovered as a scholar.

I was plagued by multiple anxieties while writing this dissertation. Most significantly, I was afraid that something “bad” would happen to my mother if I completed it. I was convinced that I would somehow be punished for seeking answers to the difficult questions about mother/daughter relationships: why aren't daughters who write more angry? Why don't Chicana/Latina daughters use their work to criticize mothers who had failed them? Why and how do daughters remain so devoted to their mothers, even through their pain? These questions of course reflect my challenges with my own relationship with my mother. I didn't understand why, if she is by no means a “bad” mother, did I often find it so difficult to be her daughter? I now recognize my fears were possibly of a metaphorical death: how would the insights I gained through my research and writing impact the way I viewed my mother, or myself as a daughter?

It wasn't until I sat with those fears, looked them in the face and even embraced their presence that I was able to recognize them as my teachers. The fears were as much about losing my mother as they were about my role as a daughter. Lorna Dee Cervantes asks in “On Speaking to the Dead,” “did you love them enough?”<sup>65</sup> I was haunted by the same question. My mother's love feels overwhelming at times: I have struggled to breathe under the weight of such love, to the point where my love for her becomes

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<sup>65</sup> *From the Cables of Genocide*

obscured in what often feels like a fight for my own life. Creative and critical writing by Chicana/Latina daughters has helped me answer some of my questions, but more importantly, helped me understand how my relationship with my mother is shaped by forces of history, culture, and institutions. It has also helped me understand that before she was my mother, she was Juliana, and still is.

Although I was paralyzed with anxiety at the start, I have learned to breathe into what it is to be a daughter, a scholar, a writer through this work. My mother will never read or know what I wrote in these pages, and I would not know where to begin to translate them for her. She only knows my daughter's voice, and that voice has been irrevocably changed by this work.