Deslenguadas: The Intersection of Physical and Structural Violence in the Work of Helena María Viramontes

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I. Introduction

Growing up in Bethesda, Maryland, I attended River Road Unitarian Universalist Congregation on Sunday mornings. We were a group of mostly well-educated, well-off, well-meaning white liberals who believed strongly in the interconnected web of all existence and the inherent worth and dignity of every person. Some Sundays after Religious Education classes, cookies, and juice, I would stay late to help put together kits of toiletries for migrant farm workers' children. I theoretically understood that there were children who worked in fields instead of going to school and who didn't have homes or beds or playgrounds, and I am grateful to have grown up in a community that valued service, but I did not understand what I was doing or for whom I was doing it. Yes, we did a good thing, but after we had sorted the toothpaste from the toothbrushes and neatly ziplocked the soap and shampoo, we went back to our clean, safe, mortgaged houses and our clean, safe, privileged lives. Privilege is, above all, insulation from violent realities.

I attended a prestigious private high school with a fantastic English department, through which I learned the proper uses of many literary devices: metaphor, simile, anaphora, scansion, enjambment. I learned how to discuss form and function, learned to evaluate aesthetic, learned about beauty and elegance in literature. I came to college believing that literature could exist as separate from politics. I owe a great debt of gratitude to Elizabeth Ammons and Christina Sharpe in particular for teaching me that any literature that claims to be apolitical can only make this claim from a position of privilege. Traditional Western scholarship that claims 'universality' comes from a colonizing tradition in which those who speak loudest believe that they can speak for all.

Viramontes does not attempt to speak for all. Her books address the experiences of poor Chican@s[1] in California in the latter half of the 20th century. She writes in English but her characters speak some Spanish, and she neither provides a glossary nor apologizes for the linguistic access barrier in her work. The non-linear representation of time that characterizes Viramontes' writing is a reaction by her characters to the trauma of being systemically disenfranchised. The visceral language and vivid imagery she uses to describe the violence of daily life reflect the violence inflicted on her characters by the colonial attitudes and economic structures inherent in the 'American' system. In Under the Feet of Jesus, Viramontes writes about migrant Chican@ farm workers and their children in California. In Their Dogs Came With Them, she writes primarily about Chican@s living in East Los Angeles in the 1970s. The stories in The Moths and Other Stories take place throughout California and Mexico, touching barrios, ranches, urban gardens, border cafes, and bedrooms. Her writing is visceral and a powerful addition to the Chicana literary tradition. Viramontes writes about the experience of poor Chican@s in a way that does not gloss over painful truths, but that ultimately validates the humanity of her characters.

Almost exclusively, I read Chican@ scholars for my analysis of Viramontes' work. Gloria Anzaldúa's book Borderlands/La Frontera provides the theoretical framework for my understanding of Chican@ cultural knowledge and Chicana feminisms. My first chapter is an exploration of feminist refigurations of La Llorona, La Malinche, and the Virgen of Guadalupe. These three icons are central to Chican@ cultural and literary tradition. Sometimes the icon status of these female figures is used to restrict and dictate Chicana behavior, but because

[1] Since Spanish is a gendered language, the word *chicanas* refers to an all-female group of US citizen of Mexican descent, while *chicanos* can mean a male group or a mixed-gendered group. In keeping with the recent trend toward correcting gendered silencing, I will be writing "Chican@" to refer to a group whose gender is not specified.

Chicanas are transmitters of this knowledge, they can also retell the stories in ways that reflect truths about their lives. In my second chapter, I theorize social constructions of the self and the ways that education functions as a civilizing force, both currently and in the United States' past. My third chapter is an analysis of the violence that accompanies the construction of a racially coherent national myth. I also examine resistance to this colonizing mythmaking. In my final chapter, I examine the symbol of the mouth as a marker of environmental racism, suffering, and colonizing silence. I examine the silencing of Chicana lesbians in particular and the ways in which queer Chicanas claim and validate their own identities.

In this thesis, I grapple with issues of race, class, gender, and sexuality. Because of the complicated inflections and nuances of intersectionality, I know I have made mistakes. Though I am white, I hope to put my own feminism into practice by contributing to anti-racist work and by educating myself about Chicana feminism. Chicana feminism, also termed "border feminism" or "feminismo fronteriza," concerns itself with issues of gender, race, class, and sexuality as they apply to the lives of Chicanas (and Chican@s), though it does not stop there. In other words, particular theories are built out of the lives and experiences of Chicanas, but they are practiced with an eye toward broader justice. The linguistic and cultural connection that Chicanas feel to the Spanish language transcends the U.S.-Mexico border, giving Chicana feminism a linguistic particularity that brings to the forefront issues of transnational migration, political injustice, and the material reality of the interconnectedness of the histories and economies of the Americas. In constructing my own theory, I remain mindful of my privilege and of my disciplinary blindnesses. The authors of my source texts are almost all Chicanas, but I recognize that my theoretical references are almost wholly to books or articles published on JStor or other mainstream, hegemonically valued scholarly databases. Writing this thesis has been an enormous

process of personal and intellectual growth for me, and for that I am extremely thankful. I put forth this work with the greatest expression of admiration for the bravery of the authors I am writing about, and in solidarity with those struggling to be heard.

II. Disrupting the Monstrous Double: La Malinche, La Llorona, and La Virgen de Guadalupe

In this section, I discuss three of the central female mythic figures in Chican@ literature and culture. As is typical with mythic figures, there are many different versions of the stories concerning La Llorona (the Weeping Woman), La Virgen de Guadalupe, and Malintzín Tenépal, also called "La Malinche" (a Spanish appropriation of Malintzín) or "La Chingada" (the Fucked One). In this section I focus on the reworkings and reclamations of these figures by Chicana authors. Cherríe Moraga and Gloria Anzaldúa explore the queering of these figures as resistance to a Chicano patriarchy that shames women who refuse to be sexually controlled. Several Chicana scholars cite Sandra Cisneros's reimaginings of la Llorona and Malintzín. Many figurings and refigurings of these female legends show that they are all interconnected. Their presence in Chican@ culture and cultural production sometimes plays a disciplinary role, but feminist refigurations complicate the use of these icons solely as repressive tools.

First, I present a short background on each of the three figures. La Virgen de Guadalupe, also called Our Lady of Guadalupe in English, appeared in Mexico in 1531 to a recently-converted indigenous man named Juan Diego and instructed him to build a church. There are many versions of the Llorona story. Some versions hold that she was betrayed by a man with whom she had children and in a hysterical rage she drowned her children. She wanders the earth at night, wailing her lament and repentance. Malintzín Tenépal was about fourteen years old when the Spanish conquistadors invaded. She was an Aztec woman who spoke Nahuatl and Mayan, and she learned Spanish quickly, translating for Cortez in his interactions with the indigenous people. She had children by him, and she is considered by Chican@ patriarchal history to be a race traitor.

These three female figures appear very different, but each of them has roots in the border time of the invasion of the Americas. The complex relationships among gender roles, sexuality, race, language, and conquest all appear in a tangled web in the stories and legends surrounding La Llorona, La Malinche, and La Virgen de Guadalupe: "The virgin/whore dichotomy, largely represented in the *Américas* by *La Virgen de Guadalupe* as spiritually pure mother and La Malinche as physically defiled concubine, is a foundational theme in Chicana feminist thought, along with this dichotomy's negative effects in the development of female subjectivity" (Lara 99). If La Malinche is the monstrous double of la Virgen de Guadalupe, then La Llorona interrupts and complicates this virgen/puta dichotomy. Though La Llorona is said to have killed her children, she was also wronged by her husband, blurring blame, shame, and retribution akin to Battered Woman Syndrome. In this chapter I explore the similarities among these three cultural icons. I examine the ways that Chicanas and Chicana feminist authors relate to these figures, which are deeply rooted in patriarchal, colonial, women-shaming traditions, and the ways in which they reimagine these women as sources of power, strength, and subversion—both through literature and in their lives.

Piety and Power: The Duality of La Virgen de Guadalupe

La Virgen de Guadalupe is the epitome of piety—a Catholic import superimposed on a powerful Aztec goddess. Such repositioning and diminishing of indigenous female power can be read as repression. Considering the way that Catholicism has been used in the Americas to control the resistance of impoverished people, there is certainly a repressive aspect to the creation of the stories of La Virgen de Guadalupe. As Viramontes noted in a conversation with me, "there was this massive push to…to convert thousands and thousands and thousands of

Indians, and how better way to do it than to have an Indian mestiza Virgen de Guadalupe who looked like them?" (personal correspondence). This comment both proves the coercive nature of creating a mestiza Virgen and acknowledges the powerful impact of a Virgen created in the image of the people that she is supposed to guide.

La Virgen de Guadalupe functions as a centralizing force for Mexican-American and Mexican communities. Her image is venerated and often enshrined, and she is called upon for strength both personal and political: "striking farmworkers and activists and artists in the Chicana/o civil rights movement appropriated Guadalupe's image as a potent political and cultural symbol of resistance to assimilation and injustice" (Blake 105). La Virgen de Guadalupe is the most well-known, but Chican@s celebrate other localized Virgen icons, like La Virgen de San Juan de Los Lagos.[2] Because she is a mother but never a sexual being, her icon status is sometimes used to shame Chicanas for enjoying sex and engaging in extramarital sexual behavior. Though she is a female figure, she is an impossible woman. On the other hand, she provides a "feminine aspect to an otherwise patriarchal God" (125) for Catholic Chicanas. Through her complex functions and multiplicities, Blake argues, "La Virgen de Guadalupe exists as a source of identity, inspiration, *and* subversive refiguring for the working-class and semiprofessional women" (114). All at the same time, La Virgen de Guadalupe is a submissive, repressive ideal and the location of powerful feminista revision and resistance. Denise Chávez "refigures Guadalupe as God" (65) in Novena Narrativas and her performance piece "Women in the State of Grace." Even as stories, legends, and knowledge about women who suffer and submit to men abound, Chicanas themselves relate to these three figures, and through that relation, they recreate these icons as sources of particular Chicana power.

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[2] Blake, 110.

Where La Llorona and La Malinche are dangerous women whose images and legends involve violence, betrayal, and shame, La Virgen de Guadalupe is a fusion of the Catholic Virgin Mary and various versions of a powerful Aztec goddess.[3] Anzaldúa claims that her Aztec name is Coatlalopeuh, while Norma Alarcón calls her Tonantzin.[4] Tonantzin and Coatlalopeuh are both aspects of Coatlicue, the Aztec creator goddess. These divided aspects make tracing La Virgen de Guadalupe's indigenous heritage difficult, reflecting the fracturing force of the "male-dominated Azteca-Mexica culture [which] drove the powerful female deities underground by giving them monstrous attributes" (Anzaldúa 49). Alarcón claims that La Malinche is the "monstrous double" of La Virgen de Guadalupe: "Guadalupe's transcendentalizing power, silence, and maternal self-sacrifice are the positive, contrasting attributes to those of a woman who speaks as a sexual being and independently of her maternal role" (62). Both icons work as disciplining mechanisms but they also play subversive roles for women, allowing women to refigure them in their retellings, both literary and oral.

At the end of <u>Under the Feet of Jesus</u>, when Estrella climbs the through the barn and comes out the trap door in a moment analogous to (re)birth, she represents a feminist refiguration of La Virgen de Guadalupe:

> "Estrella remained as immobile as an angel standing on the verge of faith. Like the chiming bells of the great cathedrals, she believed her heart powerful enough to summon home all those who strayed" (176).

This one sentence packs in many levels of refiguration. As a Chicana with a religious mother who incorporates non-Catholic ritual into her daily life, Estrella may not feel total faith in the Church, though she hears the echo of its presence through the "chiming bells of the great cathedrals" in her mind. Since she is a migrant laborer, she has neither the time nor the means to

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[3] Alarcón, 58.
[4] Alarcón, 59.

attend services. Estrella's mother Petra transmits religion and religious language to her children, telling them that their birth certificates are under the feet of Jesus and taking care of Alejo in his illness "for the love of God" (124). In a religion that traditionally casts men as agents and women as recipients, Estrella believes *herself* powerful. She may be trying to summon home Alejo, her father, Perfecto Flores, and any other Chican@s who are separated from their families. As far as the reader knows, Estrella is not sexually active, but she is also a child undergoing puberty and a romantic emotional awakening. Her precarious perch on the roof of the barn as she feels this intense emotional experience represents her perch on the cusp of womanhood. She is "on the verge of faith" just as she is on the verge of becoming an adult and a sexual being. Her experiences with Alejo, though not fully actualized, hint at sexual experimentation and desire. Her budding sexuality and several discussions of her potential fertility complicate her "virgin" status as the source of her power.

La Llorona: Women Wailing

La Llorona is commonly invoked to frighten children (often female children) into obeying their parents and into not going out at night, or else she will "get them." The Llorona story grew out of Aztec knowledge of various female figures like Cihuacoatl, who cried for dead children.[5] European tales about women taking revenge on men were then incorporated; Américo Paredes explores the connections among Medea, Madama Butterfly, and la Llorona.[6] Saldívar-Hull also cites José Limón's discussion of which groups brought each element to the Llorona

[5] Saldívar-Hull, 119.
[6] Ibid.

story. The Europeans bring in the notion of the woman murdering her own children, while the Aztec tradition contributes the location of the woman as near a body of water.[7]

Saldívar-Hull writes about the version she grew up hearing in Brownsville, Texas. Her variation of the Llorona legend "was emphatically aimed at frightening boys and men" (119). La Llorona seduced men who were willing to betray "their" women, punishing them for violating their own patriarchal structure. In Saldívar-Hull's experience, the storytellers were all women, portraying la Llorona as a disciplinary but ultimately just figure.[8] Saldívar-Hull recognizes the story she grew up with as a feminist retelling of the story told by Chicanos. In her personal anecdote, Saldívar-Hull acknowledges the feminist work that her older female relatives or friends were doing in their daily lives. Feminist reimaginings of popular myths are not limited to published stories or to scholarship; they take place in everyday life.

Chicana feminists revise the figure of La Llorona in multiple ways, situating her historically and giving context to her weeping. "Chicana border feminism, feminismo fronteriza, narrativizes the weeping woman's hysterical laments into historically based, residual memories of the disastrous encounter between sixteenth-century indigenous America and Europe's conquerors" (Saldívar-Hull, 126). In the section of Feminism on the Border entitled "I Hear the Women's Wails and I Know Them to Be My Own," Saldívar-Hull argues that la Llorona's weeping is politically motivated. She discusses Viramontes' "The Cariboo Café," which connects the weeping of an immigrant woman in the U.S. to the political violence in El Salvador in the 1980s—violence that was financially supported by the U.S. government: "she begins screaming all over again, screaming so that the walls shake, screaming enough for all the women of murdered children, screaming, pleading for help from the people outside" (78). Viramontes'

[7] Ibid.
[8] Ibid.

connection to the broader world, and her homage to the painful political and economic relationship between El Salvador (and other central American countries) and the U.S., challenges the notion of the border and reinforces Gloria Anzaldúa's concept of the U.S.-Mexico border as "*una herida abierta*[9] where the Third World grates against the first and bleeds" (25). In this story, Viramontes turns the Llorona story around; she is no longer the woman who killed her children but rather the woman whose child was murdered, stolen from her, desaparecido.

The Llorona figure in "The Caribou Café" and the same figure in Their Dogs Came With Them are both mothers whose children have been taken from them through some form of trauma. The "ubiquitous woman" (81) who scrounges around in the trash for something to eat, who wanders into the homeless shelter but is too traumatized to even remember her own name, stands in for Chicana mothers who have lost children because of "assimilation into the dominant culture or because of violence and prejudice" (Rebolledos 77). Though the unnamed woman in Their Dogs Came With Them is not specifically called "La Llorona," her name appears later in the novel, spectrally echoing her legend in the reader's thoughts.

Turtle, the runaway, remembers a time when she and her brother slept outside, and the grasses "played the shapes and shadows of the trees and resembled La Llorona's long fingers" (171). The Llorona legend appears to haunt Turtle, occupying a more traditional role, but later it is transformed once again into political commentary. "The siren's mouth opened wider and Turtle felt her sweaty fingers slipping from their clasp, suctioned at once and forever into the prolonged length of the street's mournful plea" (172); the siren here applies the sinister aspect of the Llorona figure to the representation of law enforcement. This scene takes place in a barrio in

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[9] An open wound.

East L.A., a poorer area heavily populated by Chican@s. In this area, there are more patrol cars than in other areas, in part due to racist law enforcement and Anglo perceptions of Chican@s.

The mother in Their Dogs Came With Them is never named, and when asked her name by the character Mama who runs the homeless shelter, she begins to cry. But Viramontes describes her tears indirectly, hiding her pain: "feeling a wet, dripping sensation on her face, the woman looked up at the ceiling, forgetting that she wore three hats" (91). This woman is a Llorona, but Viramontes only hints at the weeping, expecting her audience to be familiar with the Llorona legend. Unnamed trauma stifles this woman's weeping, as she realizes that she cannot even remember her own name, nor can she put into words or coherent thoughts the reasons for her potent sadness: "The drops of water bleeding from the ceiling and pelting her head were, in fact, the tears she could not shed and she gratefully allowed them to roll down her cheeks" (95). Later in the novel, the reader realizes that one of this character's fellow occupants of the homeless shelter is, in fact, her son Ben, who has himself experienced a mental breakdown and been hospitalized for psychiatric reasons.

Sandra Cisneros employs similar strategies of indirect reference to La Llorona. In her story "Woman Hollering Creek," Cisneros changes the lament of long-buried grief to a shout of joy and momentary triumph over a system that seeks to keep the woman quiet. "Cisneros underpins the structure of the narrative with the myth of a woman heard crying at night" (Rebolledo, 80); the young woman being abused by her husband weeps, and the woman driving the getaway car shouts. Ironically, though Cisneros' character hollers, her reference to la Llorona does not. Like Viramontes, she employs the indirect reference to incorporate the Llorona story and refiguration. Why? Perhaps direct defiance of the "classic" Llorona legend would be

too uncomfortable for non-subversive Chican@s to read. The indirect reference reinforces the silenced suffering of Chicanas.

Queer Chicanas: A Far and Mournful Cry from Obedient Daughters

Though the legends of La Llorona and La Malinche remain distinct, their crimes intertwine. Saldívar-Hull explains,

> "While I understand that, technically, these two legends are distinct, in the variants I heard as a child, Llorona and La Malinche were the same figure…La Llorona murdered her children because she was betrayed by a Spanish 'gentleman'; La Malinche symbolically murdered her 'children,' the Indian tribes that Cortés and the Spanish conquistadores massacred" (120).

Through the ostracizing process, these female figures merge, and women who are outside the acceptable Chicana prototype may identify with them. These women may feel a positive affinity or sisterhood with Malintzín, but that relationship may come from a feeling of marginalization within the Chican@ community. Such marginalized women may be lesbian, bisexual, transgender, otherwise queer, or they may be any Chicanas who have romantic relationships with white people, male or female. Malintzín translated, La Llorona wailed, and both figures are being reclaimed by Chicana feminists who see the injustice in condemning them for their actions without considering their social positions and the historical implications of their supposed infanticide. Blake writes, "Not all women interpret La Llorona as a frightening ghost. [José] Limón found that working-class women in South Texas identify with La Llorona as a real woman, like many they know, who has been betrayed by her lover or husband" (151). In Blake's paraphrase of Limón's research, these women reassign betrayal to the male instead of the female.

Another face of the Llorona legend is the woman who "does not search for her lost children, but rather for her lost female compañera/self" (Rebolledo 81). This lost compañera is a

loving female being who might represent the self, a lover, or a family member. This revisionist Llorona recognizes that the double bind of patriarchal structures in which she lives has ripped apart a female-centric loving space, and it makes her cry. She lives Cherríe Moraga's definition of Chicana feminism: "making bold and political the love of the women of [her] race" (Loving in the War Years 139). Many queer Chicanas identify with La Llorona. In Moraga's words, "maybe by being a lesbian, my identification was more easily won, fully knowing my crime was tantamount to hers. Any way you slice it, we were both a far and mournful cry from obedient daughters" ("Looking for the Insatiable Woman"). As Debra Blake argues in Chicana Sexuality and Gender, stories and legends that vilify female sexuality function as a "sexual disciplining mechanism for girls" (150). Anzaldúa argues that as a Chicana lesbian, "every bit of self-faith I'd painstakingly gathered took a beating daily. Nothing in my culture approved of me" (38). Policing women's sexuality is a mechanism of control, especially because we exist in a "system of anglo imperialism which long ago put Mexicans and Chicanos in a defensive posture against the dominant culture" (Moraga, Loving in the War Years, 99). Moraga and Anzaldúa make it clear that identifying as a queer Chicana is a political choice that has allowed them each to grow but has also challenged their concepts of "home." Aztlán is not the homeland of queer Chicanas, and both Moraga and Anzaldúa speak about the ways in which they are vilified, ostracized, and called "malinchistas"[10] for speaking out against sexism and heterosexism during El Movimiento in the late 1960s.[11]

Moraga discusses how she came to political awareness and action in spite of not feeling included in the Chicano Movement: "My real politicization began, not through the Chicano Movement, but through the bold recognition of my lesbianism. Coming to terms with that fact

[10] Moraga, Loving in the War Years, 112.
[11] Moraga posits a "Queer Aztlán," which I discuss further in Chapter V.

meant the radical re-structuring of everything I thought I held sacred" (Moraga, The Last Generation, 146). Moraga's "radical re-structuring" of once-sacred truths lines up with the way some have identified her and others like her as malinchistas, or traitors. By speaking out specifically on behalf of queer Chicanas, Moraga is defying both the colonizing Anglo patriarchy and the colonized Chicano patriarchy. She writes, "it is historically evident that the female body, like the Chicano people, has been colonized. And any movement to decolonize them must be culturally and sexually specific" (149). With this race and gender specificity in mind, the struggle to rewrite the story of Malintzín Tenépal becomes extremely important. Because she was a real indigenous woman before she was a legend, many Chicana feminists find the extent to which she has been maligned by Chican@ history to be especially unfair.[12]

Rape, Conquest, and Resistance: Becoming "La Malinche"

While "La Llorona" and "La Virgen de Guadalupe" are both titles instead of names, "La Malinche" is both a title and a name. In Spanish, when "la" comes before a woman's name, it can be a term of endearment or an indication of familiarity. "Malinche" is the Spanish appropriation of her real name, Malintzín. I use Malintzín when I refer to the real historical figure, and I use "La Malinche" when I also want to connote the legends that surround her.

The stories surrounding Malintzín Tenépal also function as a "disciplining mechanism." Where La Llorona is a character in a legend who functions as a Chican@ boogeyman figure to discipline (female) children and also as a revisionist feminist spokeswoman for the suffering of Chicanas at the hands of a racist patriarchy, the story of La Malinche is the exaggeration of the life of Malintzín Tenépal, the Aztec woman who translated for Hernán Cortéz. Moraga argues

[12] In our correspondence, Viramontes spoke to the "unfairness" of the treatment of La Llorona and Malintzín by history and Chican@ culture. I have appended this interview in its entirety.

that the story of La Malinche and the idea of betraying one's race through one's sexual activity haunts all Chicanas: "As cultural myths reflect the economics, mores, and social structures of a society, every Chicana suffers from their effects" (Loving in the War Years 103). Chicana feminist scholars claim Malintzín Tenépal as a sister, arguing that blaming her for the invasion of Mexico and consequent subjugation of indigenous peoples removes blame from Cortéz and the invaders themselves. Malintzín spoke Nahuatl and Mayan, and she learned Spanish quickly, so some feminists argue that she was doing her best to mediate and to prevent bloodshed of her people. She did bear Cortéz's child, but she was fourteen years old when the Spaniards arrived, and her family sold her into slavery. According to present-day U.S. law, she was under the age of consent and was, whichever way you want to spin it, a victim of rape. Anzaldúa reminds us, in Malintzín's voice, "Not me sold out my people but they me" (44). As a young woman sold into slavery and caught in a layered patriarchy on the brink of violent change, what else could she do but attempt to translate? What gives us any reason to suppose that she was acting of her own free will?

As the Europeans colonized and brought Christianity to the Americas, the Malinche story became interwoven with the concept of Eve's betrayal of Adam and the human race. This betrayal narrative continues to function as a shaming mechanism for any Chicanas whose sexual activity does not directly serve the Chicano. Malintzín is particularly maligned because her "betrayal" came in the form of speech and sex. Expression of female desire, whether verbal or sexual, is a threat to patriarchy; even if the woman does not act according to her own desire, as in the case of rape, a Chicana's production of a half-Anglo child is treated as betrayal on her behalf. Not producing a Chican@ child is also considered betrayal: "Lesbianism can be construed by the race then as the Chicana being used by the white man, even if the man never lays a hand on her.

The choice is never seen as her own…Further, the Chicana lesbian who has relationships with white women may feel especially susceptible to such accusations" (Moraga, Loving in the War Years, 114). The Chicana lesbian has no home in a racist, sexist, homophobic Anglo patriarchy or in a sexist and homophobic Chicano patriarchy. Her sexual choices are often ostracized within her community and her racial identity makes her the target of hatred and violence in an Anglo patriarchy.

> "Because she rejects the traditional roles ascribed to women in patriarchal Chicano/Mexicano culture—mother, wife, virgin, whore—and so fails to participate in propagating the race or serving the *macho*, the Chicana lesbian is labeled a *vendida*, or sellout. Hence the Chicana lesbian is marginalized both outside of and within her own culture" (Tortillerismo, 961).

This word "vendida" haunts the Chicana, denigrated by racism outside of her community but marginalized within it because of her gender and sexual choices.

Conquest and the racial mix that emerged from it are inherently bound up in the rape and shaming of women of color. The Malinche and Llorona stories intertwine in Tranquilina's rape memory in Their Dogs Came With Them. The rancher's son-in-law rapes Tranquilina. He is associated with possession and the land, and during the rape, "Mama called, a disembodied wailing from nowhere and everywhere" (214), signifying La Llorona. Though his racial identity is never specified, he is connected to the land and he certainly wields power. This does not necessarily mark him as white, but it is possible. Regardless, the rape and Tranquilina's subsequent shame and internalized guilt—"(it was imperative she find her underwear)" (215)—connote the moment of contact between the indigenous people and the conquistadors and the ways in which that moment of contact has worked its traumatizing way into the Chican@ psyche. Tranquilina hides her shame from her mother and tries "not to feel terror and [tries] to recite Psalm 31:19" (214); instead of feeling rage and using legal channels to bring her aggressor

to justice, she first wants to suppress the memory of the rape and keep it a secret. Tranquilina buries her shame and muck fills her mouth, silencing her during the act and also representing her continued silence after the rape is over: "She suffocated, grasping, coughing, her lungs weighed down by his body" (214). Even her name means "quiet," but the "-ina" ending is a diminutive so her name translates to "little silent one." She internalizes all of the brutalization of colonialism and layered patriarchy, repeating Catholic prayers to herself to keep herself calm and quiet while the rancher's son-in-law violates her.

The theme of the Chicana-as-traitor also haunts Amanda in "The Long Reconciliation." She sleeps with the wealthy landowner, Don Joaquín, because her husband does not want to have sex with her after she tells him she had an abortion.[13] Don Joaquín sells Chato infertile land, and Chato feels doubly emasculated—first by the fact that his land yields no crops and then by Amanda's abortion and affair with the man who sold him barren soil. It is clear through her monologues that those who made the rules of Christianity are not the only ones who practice it. Amanda does not feel served by the church: "You, God, eating and drinking as you like, you, there, not feeling the sweat or the pests that feed on the skin, you sitting with a kingly lust for comfort, tell us that we will be paid later on in death" (90). Here, God sounds like the oppressor, not the savior. Amanda goes to confession and the priest chastises her for her love of sex, instructing her to have sex only for procreation, for the service of the Chicano. But she resists, saying, "Sex is the only free pleasure we have" (89). With this comment, Amanda ties together female sexuality, pleasure, shame, and class division.

[13] Here, Viramontes ties in the political climate of the 1960s and 1970s with the United Farm Workers' movement, who did most of their work in the San Joaquín Valley of central California. The San Joaquín Valley has a high population of Mexican immigrants and Chican@s.

Amanda's affair with Don Joaquín is a clear Malinche reference. He comes onto her in the bar where she works, deciding that he will have her. His hatred of Chicanas becomes clear in his interior monologue: "At first he pictured himself feeling her bare hips…but now…he hated the woman because she was dull like worn bronze" (91). His interior monologues reveal painful racism and sexual objectification of a Chicana of a lower class. He has a Spanish name, but he is a wealthy landowner and a Don. He watches the men walking home from work, distancing himself from them in his thoughts along race and class lines: "Don't you get tired of eating the dust that belongs to someone else's land…Of going home to dull wives and filthy, ignorant children that look just like you?" (91). His ownership of the land and his purposeful distancing of himself from the Chican@ laborers make him a colonial figure; Amanda's affair with him places her in the role of Malinche. He tries to convince her against her will with sweet words and money: "She had resisted his advances at first, even refusing big sums of money for her embroidery" (93). Though Don Joaquín tries to purchase what she produces, Chato says in his moment of forgiveness, "Sit on the porch and weave your threads into time" (95). Chato reveals that what she produces is tied to her body, her mind, and the sum of her social efficacy: "All that can be done is what you have done" (95). The harm that Amanda's shame inflicts on her is physical and real: "her affair with Don Joaquín would soon be over because guilt had grown into a cancer" (94). Though La Malinche is not specifically mentioned, another one of her names is "La Chingada" (The Fucked One), and the shadow of La Chingada hovers over Amanda, driving her to take vicious revenge on Don Joaquín by shoving maggots into his stab wound. Her violent and shocking reaction to his slow death mirrors the horrible guilt she feels as a betrayer of her hombre and the rage and frustration she feels about being trapped in a layered patriarchy that makes no space for a Chicana's sexual autonomy. La Malinche does not need to be mentioned by

name in order to haunt; any whisper of translation, dishonesty, or race betrayal through sexual activity evokes her legend.

Chicana Authors as Malinchistas

Malintzín Tenépal's crime was speaking. She translated for the conquerors, and she is forever accused of bringing down the Aztec empire with her words. Translation is familiar to many Chicanas; they often find themselves navigating between speaking Spanish at home and English at school, or preferring to speak Spanglish.[14] Non-Spanish-speaking Chicanas are aware of this act of translation, since people often assume that they do speak Spanish.[15] They are often expected to speak Spanish by Chican@s and non-Chican@s alike. Speaking one's opinion, according to Anzaldúa, gets young Chicanas in trouble: "talking back to my mother, *hablar pa' trás, repelar. Hocicona, repelona, chismosa*, having a big mouth, questioning, carrying tales are all a sign of being *mal criada*. In my culture they are all words that are derogatory if applied to women—I've never heard them applied to men" (76). There is a heritage of shaming here; if a daughter is mal criada,[16] she inflicts shame primarily on her mother as well as on herself.

In her essay "Traddutora, Traditora,"[17] Norma Alarcón writes, "to speak or translate in one's behalf rather than the perceived group interests and values is tantamount to betrayal" (63). That Malintzín may have been attempting to broker peace between the conquistadores and the natives is immaterial to her critics; defeat through colonialism brings shame onto the masculine nation, and the figure of La Malinche becomes a scapegoat. If a man had translated, perhaps he

[14] Anzaldúa, 81.
[15] In an earlier draft of this thesis, I made the mistake of equating "Chicanas" with "Spanish-speaking Chicanas." Conflating race and language is a common pitfall for outsiders studying a particular racial/ethnic group.
[16] Poorly raised.
[17] Translator, Traitor

might be treated as a traitor, but certainly not with the same shame and vindictive fury that is bound up in the epithet "La Chingada." Alarcón asserts that Malintzín is perceived as speaking on her own behalf and translating of her own free will instead of being forced. Many Chicana scholars have begun to contest this assertion.[18] Regardless of the historical accuracy of Malintzín's motivations, the construction of the translator as a freely-behaving traitor is a vehicle for inflicting shame on Chicanas if they are perceived as trying to defy the Chican@ patriarchy: "To be a malinchista is to be a traitor to Mexico or to Mexican customs" (Saldívar-Hull 120). Irma Vásquez, one of the women that Blake interviews, provides an explanation of the power of the term "malinchista:" "For instance if I am more attracted to American than Mexican ways, they can call me a malinchista" (39). Vásquez demonstrates the common daily use of the word and its powerful shaming function. Any Chican@ can criticize her for assimilating, and that one word carries connotations of genocide, pandering to Anglos, being a sexual object and betraying one's race. The word "malinchista" is laden with a deep, historically-based power.

The concept of a malinchista is central to writing about Chicana authors. Rebolledo defines the relationship between many Chicana authors and Malintzín: "Because Chicana writers identify with the act of interpretation as they consciously shift from one language and culture to another, and because in the power structure they always have to consider their relation to the dominant culture, it is not surprising that many feel closely aligned with the figure of La Malinche" (64). I want to recognize and honor the struggle that many Chicana scholars and artists face to produce work that is meaningful to them, knowing that a powerful cultural concept can be wielded against them as a shaming and silencing tool.

[18] Gloria Anzaldúa in Borderlands/La Frontera, 44.

Infliction of these painful stereotypes, generalizations, and marginalizations of Chicanas (especially queer Chicanas) by their own culture and also by the dominant Anglo culture contributes to the violent silencing of Chicana voices. Stories about La Virgen de Guadalupe, La Llorona, and Malintzín Tenépal can function as disciplining mechanisms and can pass on traditional patriarchal values and expectations held of women. These female figures grew out of the violent clash between Aztec and Spanish conquistador culture. But a narrative of repression is not the whole story. While these stories function as mechanisms to control women, the act of reimagining these stories is a way for Chicanas to assert creative control.[19] Feminist reclamation of these traditional figures takes place through writing and also through oral histories. Chicana authors refigure these three important women in their stories and in their lives. Through their words, Chicana authors weave the Llorona, Malinche, and Virgen de Guadalupe narratives together. They complicate the virgen/puta dichotomy with their voices and their work.

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[19] I do not want to make the mistake of conflating creative control and material control.

III. Tools, Construction, and Education: Building a House of Words

The characters in Viramontes' work are bound by structures of oppression that restrict their physical and intellectual movement, but to call these stories simply narratives of oppression is to disregard the momentary instances of personal power that these characters seize for themselves. Though reading these stories too optimistically is a pitfall of my own privilege, it is important to recognize the depth of these characters and to analyze the agency they exercise in their lives. The common thread that runs through this section is the idea of "tools:" physical tools, political tools, cultural tools, academic tools. These tools are the mechanisms through which Viramontes' characters experience the extent and limits of their own efficacy. Tools function on many different levels in these texts, working both as representations of physical production and as metaphors for cultural production. Importantly, almost all of the characters in these texts are migrant laborers or working class, meaning that their physical labor embodies the bulk of their economic interactions with society—making them into a type of tool.

Because of the depersonalization of labor due to immigrant status and racial expectations, physical labor becomes part of who these characters are in the eyes of mainstream U.S. society and not just what they do to earn a living. Migrant laborers, for example, are treated like tools by an economic system that depends on them as units of labor yet does not value their lives. Similarly the poor characters who live "outside" of mainstream society in the barrios of East L.A. function as pieces of a machine, cleaning and begging and dying without much apparent consequence. The texts of Under the Feet of Jesus and Their Dogs Came With Them present resistance to the social construction of poor Chican@s as nothing more than bodies to be used. This, then, is the crux of my term "tool:" the duality that ties together the use of physical items as

representations of social movement, and also the recognition that these characters are part of a system that uses their bodies as labor-producing objects.

The theoretical frame of the tool accompanies the frame of "construction." A similar duality exists within the concept of construction: Viramontes' characters move in their lives attempting to build personal efficacy, but they also live in a frustrating matrix of socially-delineated categories (gender, race, class, sexuality) that plays a large role in determining their options. In these texts, Viramontes is concerned with the limitations of society and the successes or failures of her characters' resistance to these limitations. Social constructions, such as race, gender, and class, inform and confine these characters' movements and interactions; at the same time, these characters move through their lives attempting to build, attempting to exercise personal control, attempting to *construct* their presents and futures. The process of learning to read and write in Under the Feet of Jesus is the most obvious example of what I mean by construction; Estrella is both acquiring the tools of literacy for potential cultural production as well as being treated like an object by the education system that constructs her as nothing more than a migrant laboring body who will move on when the pisca is over.

In these texts, there are many different instances of physical construction that extrapolate to metaphors of cultural construction, but these metaphors have more weight because the characters involved have so much physically at stake. There is something lost when we disregard the link between the physical object itself and the way it functions as a metaphor. Viramontes dedicates Under the Feet of Jesus to her parents who met picking cotton. When Viramontes writes about labor, about the hot sun, about scratching in the dirt, she is honoring the very real, very physical, very painful history in her family. She is not merely using farm laborers as characters to symbolize social constructions or systems of oppression of a class of faceless

people. She is writing in blood. My concept of "construction," then, touches on a series of constructions in society that are not just literary devices. The characters in these texts, and the people whom they represent, understand a history of physical labor and violence that is always present in social interactions and in instances of cultural production. Many of these Chicana academics come from working class backgrounds and write about their parents' experiences and sacrifices as laborers, understanding that their own academic work and the cultural production in which they engage as careers have been purchased with the sweat and suffering of their parents.

Mirroring the duality of tools and construction, the idea of "education" also carries two meanings. Here I define "education" as the instruction that takes place in schools, containing both the literal subject matter but also the cultural instruction carried out by teachers in an Anglo school system. To further theorize the implications of education in the U.S., I draw on Dakota writer and activist Zitkala-Ša's analysis of the Indian boarding school system. Historically, boarding schools for Native children were used as "civilizing machines" with the slogan "Kill the Indian, Save the Man." As Robin Mangino points out in her doctoral dissertation "Imperial pedagogy: Education and nationalism in early 20th-century U.S. literature," "isolating Native American students at remote boarding schools, where the U.S. cultural values of individualism and private ownership were drilled into them, prepared Indian children to assume their place in the capitalist order as industrial, agricultural, and domestic workers" (41). Chican@ children face similar problems at the hands of the U.S. school system, though boarding schools are no longer the primary locations. Chican@s and Native peoples of the U.S. have been similarly treated by the U.S. government, experiencing cultural imperialism, forced labor and migration, and violent assimilative education in schools. Many Chican@ scholars write about the painful experiences they had in schools as children, often being beaten for speaking Spanish. Though education gives

these children tools without which they could not achieve economic success in the U.S., it also has a disciplining function that mainstream rhetoric overlooks. Zitkala-Ša, in her text "School Days," points out the virtues of education for Indian children while simultaneously speaking out against its imperialist implications.[20]

Tools in this novel function as agents of change, economic devices and also as metaphors for literacy and the political and social power that can be achieved through book-reading. The various appearances of tools speak to the many points of intersection between individual instances of material or cultural construction and their counterparts as academic or political processes. The use of tools, though typically gendered masculine, complicates that gender specificity in Under the Feet of Jesus and the short story "The Moths." In this section I use the examples of tools in Viramontes' texts to explore the intellectual construction of young Chicanas as it relates to the development of Chicana Studies in the United States academy.

Education as a "Civilizing" Tool

Estrella learns to read through a painful process that demonstrates exactly how undervalued she is in the Anglo school system. As a migrant laborer, she will move on, and the teachers do not see her mind as a worthy site of investment because they are too concerned with her body. When Estrella goes to school, she has difficulty learning to read because the teachers are "more concerned about the dirt under her fingernails" (24) than about giving her an education. They dismiss her and wish her "good luck when the pisca [is] over, reserving the desks in the back of the classroom for the next batch of migrant children" (25). Learning to read and write is also a physically painful experience for Estrella, since the teachers scrub "her fingers

[20] Mangino, 35-36.

with a toothbrush until they were so sore she couldn't hold a pencil properly" (24-5). They physically prevent her from learning to read and write because of her migrant laborer status. This refusal to give migrant children access to education indicates societal violence against the poor, and Estrella feels that this treatment is "as excruciating as rusted nails piercing the heels of her bare feet" (25). Viramontes's violent figurative language enhances and builds off of the physical reality that Estrella faces every morning at school.

Through the symbol of the toolkit, Viramontes communicates how essential literacy is in Estrella's life. Estrella peers into Perfecto's toolkit, and "all that jumbled steel inside the box, the iron bars and things with handles, the funny-shaped objects, seemed as confusing and foreign as the alphabet she could not decipher" (24). Estrella recognizes the strength and power in this kit; steel and iron are strong metals that do not easily corrode and handles facilitate maneuverability—the application of tools to one's life. With the pry bar for tearing apart, and the hammer and nails for building up again, Estrella makes the link between the destructive and constructive power of the toolkit and the destructive and constructive power of literacy: "the script A's had the curlicue of a pry bar, a hammerhead split like a V. The small i's resembled nails" (24). She feels that like the proper use of tools, information about the alphabet is kept secret from her. Viramontes makes the power of education in school very explicit: Estrella "lifted the pry bar in her hand, felt the coolness of iron and power of function, weighed the significance it awarded her, and soon she came to understand how essential it was to know these things. That was when she began to read" (26). There is an undertone of empowering violence in Estrella's acquisition of knowledge, a suggestion that she is no longer defenseless.

Bound to the concept of the tool is the concept of the weapon. Because of the violence in the systems that these characters live in (lack of access to health care, lack of education, gangs,

prison, immigration laws), their reactions against these systems can be similarly violent. In order to feel effective—in order to feel one's own power and impact—one must react with violent force. The instances in which these characters seize power for themselves—in which they carve out futures or moments of possibility or resistance for themselves—are often violent, either physically or verbally. One does not break gently with oppression. Similarly, education and construction are forces that tangle with power, and power in these texts is always associated with some type of violence. Estrella's outburst in Under the Feet of Jesus and that of the narrator in "The Moths" are violent, with each of these young women seizing objects and striking out against those who oppress them.

The pry bar, or crowbar, appears again when Estrella's family goes to the clinic to try to save Alejo. Frustrated by the money wasted on information they already know and by the overwhelming sense of desperation they feel, Estrella takes matters into her own hands. She picks up the "heavy, iron cold" (148) crowbar and smashes the picture frames on the nurse's desk. Though Estrella experiences a moment of empowerment, she also recognizes that "they make you that way" (151). She understands that her violent outburst is born of a deep frustration caused by marginalization and forced labor at the hands of mainstream United States society. In this text, tools represent social construction of the self, but Estrella also recognizes that she does not have total control over her self-construction. Estrella compares the crowbar to the stick that she uses to scratch protection in the sand at her mother's insistence: "She felt like two Estrellas. One was a silent phantom who obediently marked a circle with a stick around the bungalow as the mother had requested, while the other held the crowbar and the money" (150). Part of the appeal of the crowbar is that it also represents resistance to her mother's control and allows her to assert her independence as defender of her family.

Estrella experiences pain when the Anglo teachers deny her access to education, but education itself can be a painful and violent experience, as Zitkala-Ša reminds us in her text, "The School Days of an Indian Girl." She writes, "the paleface woman talked in very severe tones. Her words fell from her lips like crackling embers, and her inflection ran up like the small end of a switch" (58). The violent language in Zitkala-Ša's description of the white teacher reflects the violence inflicted on Native children by the boarding school system. She also writes, "my blanket had been stripped from my shoulders" (52) and "I was carried downstairs and tied fast in a chair" (55). The teachers cut her hair, and in Dakota culture, "only unskilled warriors who were captured had their hair shingled by the enemy" (54). She is exposed, shamed, and embarrassed, all in the name of "education." Though she is faced with compelling reasons to assimilate, she fights: "when Judéwin said, 'We have to submit, because they are strong,' I rebelled. 'No, I will not submit! I will struggle first!' I answered" (54). Zitkala-Ša is not a Chicana, but her writing sheds light on the violence in the U.S. educational complex. She went on as an adult to express her rage and resistance through writing—through the use of the very tools she acquired in the oppressive Indian boarding school system.

Bull Hands and "The Moths"

Where Zitkala-Ša makes use of writing, the unnamed narrator in "The Moths" takes ownership and makes us of her own hands. She recognizes her hands as her own tools which she uses to resist her father's pressure to attend church, building instead acceptance for herself at her grandmother's house. Her sisters call her "bull hands with their cute waterlike voices" (27), shaming her for not being appropriately feminine. The word "bull" connotes lesbianism, as in "bulldagger", just as chastising women who are not appropriately feminine carries the

connotation of shaming lesbians. As discussed in chapter II, Chicana lesbians are often vilified or victimized for being race traitors. The narrator begins to "carry a piece of jagged brick...to bash [her] sisters or anyone who called [her] bull hands" (27), preparing herself to fight violence with violence. After Abuelita massages her hands, the narrator begins to use them to care for Abuelita, to express her rage and frustration, and to help with potting plants. She helps her grandmother in her garden, learning from her grandmother's wisdom. Saldívar-Hull points out that the "counterhegemonic strategy Viramontes offers Chicanas is the formation of woman-to-woman bonds established in a separate female sphere" (132), marking a specific space for female self-construction and instruction.

But not all women in "The Moths" participate in this woman-centered support network. The poisonous tendrils of patriarchy creep deep into the family in this story; the father blames his wife for raising "disrespectful and unbelieving" (29) daughters and he pits the women in his family against one another in a circle of punishment and pain. The narrator searches for meaning and safety in her life, and she cannot find these things in her father's house or at church. These patriarchal institutions place no value on her because she is not appropriately feminine, so she must find and build her own space. She finds comfort in the wisdom of her grandmother, who has knowledge of healing and growing things. When she does go to church to appease her father, she sits in the pews and thinks about "the vastness of these places, the coolness of the marble pillars and the frozen statues with blank eyes" (29). She finds neither warmth nor comfort there in that church without denomination, signifying that no Christian institution can provide what she needs. The narrator pairs traditional Catholic signifiers with violent language to illustrate her oppression in her father's house: "he would grab my arm and dig his nails into me to make sure I understood the importance of catechism" (29). Her sisters then reinforce her father's authority:

"my older sisters would pull me aside and tell me if I didn't get to mass right this minute, they were all going to kick the holy shit out of me" (29). In her grandmother's house, the narrator feels "safe and guarded and not alone. Like God was supposed to make you feel" (28). Neither the church nor her father's house as a reinforcement of Catholic values provides any type of safe space for her, so she must construct it herself with the help of her grandmother.

Context determines which objects function as oppressive tools and which function as tools of liberation. Let's look at the mentioned objects in this text: potato slices, crocheting, embroidery, a jagged brick, hammer, nails, empty coffee cans, the narrator's hands, sugar dish, cup of coffee, missal, veil, black Easter shoes, molcajete, wooden spoon. These everyday objects carry within them a code that reveals the complex intersections of the narrator's life as a Chicana. She pricks her fingers on embroidery and knots the thread because she is not feminine enough to use these tools. Her sisters, whose femininity is not in question, enforce their father's violent sanctions on her behavior. When her father hits the table, "rocking the sugar dish or spilling a cup of coffee" (29), it is understood that he will not be the one to clean up the mess. The missal, veil, and black Easter shoes that the narrator hastily and unwillingly dons speak to her discomfort with her Catholic upbringing and the values forced upon her. These objects function as symbols for the intersections of patriarchy, Chicano cultural values, family tensions, and indigenous knowledge.

The grandmother uses whatever she has at her disposal to heal her granddaughter. She is not a trope of the mythic india[21] but a practical figure who uses her cultural knowledge to help her granddaughter find and build a safe space. The grandmother uses potato slices to heal the narrator's fever, and when the narrator questions the grandmother's wisdom, she is reminded that

[21] Connotes a American Indian woman

she is still alive. Saldívar-Hull claims that "the grandmother's ties to an indigenous culture no longer valued in an urban setting are represented by images of the women planting herbs, flowers, and vegetables" (134), but I read these images slightly differently. Indigenous culture is traditionally devalued, but the grandmother has managed to incorporate modern signs of barrio life into indigenous ritual, rubbing her granddaughter's hands with a balm of "dried moth wings and Vicks" (27). The grandmother plants "wild lilies or jasmine or heliotrope or cilantro or hierbabuena in red Hills Brothers coffee cans" (28), marking the union of indigenous knowledge of plants and barrio knowledge of reusing what others might call garbage. The face of indigenous culture in this text deals mostly with the stark realities of barrio life, but the cultural knowledge is still present, and it still heals.

Though the narrator still operates within a domestic sphere, she is not under her father's oppressive rule and she is choosing to do the domestic work with her grandmother that acts as cultural recovery instead of reinforcing patriarchal cultural norms. She uses the molcajete (a mortar and pestle) which Viramontes does not translate or italicize to grind the chiles and also to grind out her frustration: "I…began to crush and crush and twist and crush the heart out of the tomato, the clove of garlic, the stupid chiles that made me cry, crushed them until they turned into a liquid under my bull hands" (30). Domesticity is neither explicitly nor fundamentally tied to oppression, as this scene illustrates. She is making food that she herself will later eat instead of crocheting or cooking dinner for her father. Her grandmother has provided her with a space and tools with which she can nourish herself.

Perched on the Edge: Chicanas in the Academy

The female-centric empowering space of the grandmother's house in "The Moths" allows the narrator to construct and explore her own wisdom; the creation of this space as an act of resistance to racist patriarchy is reflected in the construction of a Chicana feminist literary tradition in the United States. The ambiguous ending of Under the Feet of Jesus is an intentional artistic choice by Viramontes to complicate the possibilities that remain for Estrella. The refusal of closure allows for building; it allows for opening up of possibility without erasing or denying the very real suffering and difficulty in the lives of these Chicana characters. Estrella perches on top of the barn in a physically precarious but emotionally uplifting ending scene: "her feet brushed close to the edge of the roof and it was there that she stopped" (175). In this ending scene the language of incredible beauty rubs against language of danger: "The sparkle of stars cut the night—almost violently sharp" (175), and "The swallows flew out from under eaves of the cedar shakes like angry words spewing out of a mouth" (175). The stars and the swallows evoke beauty and freedom while the angry words and violent sharpness remind the reader that imagery in Estrella's life has an edge. Saldívar-Hull explains the motivations behind such an ambiguous ending: "Irresolution, or the refusal of closure in Viramontes' political text, signals a complex project currently being undertaken by Chicana feminist writers, critics, and cultural workers" (159). By refusing to be wrapped up and written off as pure victims of suffering, or as fully triumphant, these Chicana scholars and authors are "working to undercut old stereotypes and open up new possibilities for empowerment by forging a self-representation of Chicanas by Chicanas, women who insist on a self-identifier that marks their political subjectivity as feminist as well as their working-class identification" (159). These women recognize the struggles that they and others like them have faced, but they refuse to allow their thoughts to be limited by

struggle. They are always navigating and renavigating the complex waters of empowerment and recognition of social and economic realities.

Words are tools and they represent political and cultural efficacy. Though the scene at the end of the novel is uplifting, it shows Estrella in a dangerous and momentary position. Estrella seems to be building her world and her future, but she is still a migrant laborer and she is still out of school. In navigating the complex relationship between realities in the academy and realities in the barrio, Rosaura Sánchez writes, “No one can deny the importance of struggle at the discursive level, but it is at best risky and at worst foolhardy to confuse represented emancipation with social emancipation. Exploitation and oppression are not, of course, simply discursive constructs” (344-345). With an eye to Sánchez’s words, Viramontes and others like her build a literary genre that speaks to their experiences as Chicanas.

Viramontes highlights how difficult and how crucial it is to express oneself when she describes Estrella and Alejo and their process of falling in love: “Estrella pointed to the bottle because she wanted to tell him how good she felt but didn’t know how to build the house of words she could invite him into” (70). In this short line, she weaves together the need for a physical space for the production of knowledge, the power that comes through words and the expression of one’s emotions, and the ability to have a functional relationship. This phrase “house of words” echoes the space that Chicanas are carving out for themselves in the academy and in the world of publishing. Anzaldúa writes, “I will have to stand and claim my space, making a new culture—*una cultura mestiza*—with my own lumber, my own bricks and mortar and my own feminist architecture” (44); she staunchly and bravely values Chicana feminist-specific cultural production while she engages in it. Saldívar-Hull argues that Gloria Anzaldúa, Sandra Cisneros, and Viramontes herself have participated in the creation of a new genre of

testimonio, and that "in identifying their preface as *testimonio*, they express their solidarity with such women as Domitila Barrios de Chungara, Rigoberta Menchú, and Elvia Alvarado, whose own testimonios expose the exploitation and massacre of their people in Bolivia, Guatemala, and Honduras" (47). Saldívar-Hull also speaks to the material complication of the creation of Chicana feminist theory and the construction of a Chicana feminist theoretical tradition:

> "We have to look in non-traditional places for our theories: in the prefaces to anthologies, in the interstices of autobiographies, in our cultural artifacts, our cuentos, and if we are fortunate enough to have access to a good library, in the essays published in marginalized journals not widely distributed by the dominant institutions" (46).

Viramontes, because she writes about poor people, has been called a "political writer" (interview). Discussions of the material constraints in the lives of Chicanas, whether they take place as literature or as academic work, may indeed be political, but only insofar as reality is political as well.

IV. “America,” América: A Violent National Myth

Internal migration and perceived immigrant status are important themes in Viramontes’ work, and in Chican@ literature in general. Questions of permanence and migration inexorably wind themselves into issues of heritage, ethnic identity, and the transient nature of the Nation. Racist U.S. immigration policies are enacted on real bodies, as Antonia Castañeda reminds us in “Que se pudieran defender.”[22] She asks, “How does a history that recognizes the presence and continuity of Chicanas in these [U.S.-Mexico border] landscapes long before the nineteenth century annexation reorder the regional and national space that has rendered their historical experience invisible?” (116). Castañeda’s question of continuity echoes Anzaldúa’s poetic reclamation of the land: “This land was Mexican once/was Indian always/and is./And will be again” (113). Anzaldúa clarifies the ethnic identities of those people whose very presence in this territory is thrown into question by white colonialism, and she also explicitly claims the transience of the land itself as a redemptive quality. In Under the Feet of Jesus, Viramontes very carefully deconstructs the idea of who qualifies as an “American” through the characters’ reactions to quintessential American imagery.[23] American imagery such as the eagle and the baseball game appear in this text in unexpected ways, reconfigured as images of terrorism and not of national pride. In “Don’t Let Them Make You Feel You Did a Crime,” Anne Shea argues, “through explicit and implicit juxtaposition against the citizen/owner, the laborer comes to be conceptualized and categorized as a non-citizen” (130). The image of the eagle in particular comes to signify multiple identities in this text: the emblem of the United States, an important figure in Native American cultural knowledge and traditions, and the centerpiece of the Mexican flag.

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[22] So you could defend yourselves.
[23] This includes imagery relating to the U.S., American Indian Nations, and Mexico.

In a conversation with me, Viramontes expressed confusion at being considered a "political writer" by a previous interviewer. Her response to being told that Under the Feet of Jesus was a political book was, "Because I'm writing about poor people, huh? Is that political?" (personal correspondence). I believe that Viramontes is a political writer just as every writer is. In the United States, claiming apolitical status is a privilege accorded those whose narratives fit the dominant one: white, heterosexual, cis-gendered, male, financially secure, physically able. Lest we think that politics has no place in literature, or that literature can exist as separate from politics, or that immigration injustice is a thing of the past, I present an excerpt from a bill passed in the Arizona State Senate in 2010:

"A LAW ENFORCEMENT OFFICER, WITHOUT A WARRANT, MAY ARREST A PERSON IF THE OFFICER HAS PROBABLE CAUSE TO BELIEVE THAT THE PERSON HAS COMMITTED ANY PUBLIC OFFENSE THAT MAKES THE PERSON REMOVABLE FROM THE UNITED STATES" (S 1070). This law passed in Arizona in 2010 before challenges to its constitutionality prevented it from being enacted. In this case, "PROBABLE CAUSE" translates to "having brown skin" or "looking poor or undocumented." The bill goes on to permit officers to arrest and detain those who cannot provide proof of U.S. citizenship or residency. A nation is perpetually construction its mythos, and in this case, the construction of a racially cohesive national myth in the United States enacts violence on the bodies of those who do not fit. This myth is a violent one that systemically disenfranchises the poor and the non-white.

Crossing the Border: The Open Wound

In Under the Feet of Jesus, the act of crossing the highway and arriving at the shopping center echoes the dangerous journey that immigrants undergo to enter the United States from Mexico. The highway is a site of rupture, of division of people into categories of belonging and not belonging; it seems "endless and hot and dry and wet all at the same time" (114). It is a site of transit of goods and bodies, speaking to the continual motion of commerce and labor and the danger involved in participating in that transit. "Not far across the highway, the rickety store stood as desirous as a drink of water" (103). Anzaldúa also describes the border with language of water: "I stand at the edge where earth touches ocean…a violent clash" and "silver waves marbled with spume/gashing a hole under the border fence" (23). For Anzaldúa, the border is gendered female, a violent space particularly for women: "the U.S.-Mexican border *es una herida abierta* where the Third World grates against the first and bleeds" (25).[24] The relationship between the border and the female body is undeniable, a "1,950 mile-long open wound…running down the length of my body/ staking fence rods in my flesh/ splits me splits me/ *me raja me raja*" (24). Anzaldúa emphasizes the particular vulnerability of women in spaces of crossing or during times of transition.

The act of grocery shopping is fraught with danger and suspicion for Estrella's family. They have to go "by foot, in and out of the orchards" (Viramontes, Under the Feet of Jesus 103) until they reach the highway, and the route that they take is never marked on the map. They must walk across the busy highway to the gas station, frantic, rushed, worried, always in danger. At the gas station they are regarded with suspicion and it is clear that they do not belong. A man driving a Bermuda "cocked the trigger of the dispenser" (105), highlighting the violent prickling of unbelonging that Estrella's family feels. Petra's thoughts describe the life of the driver of the

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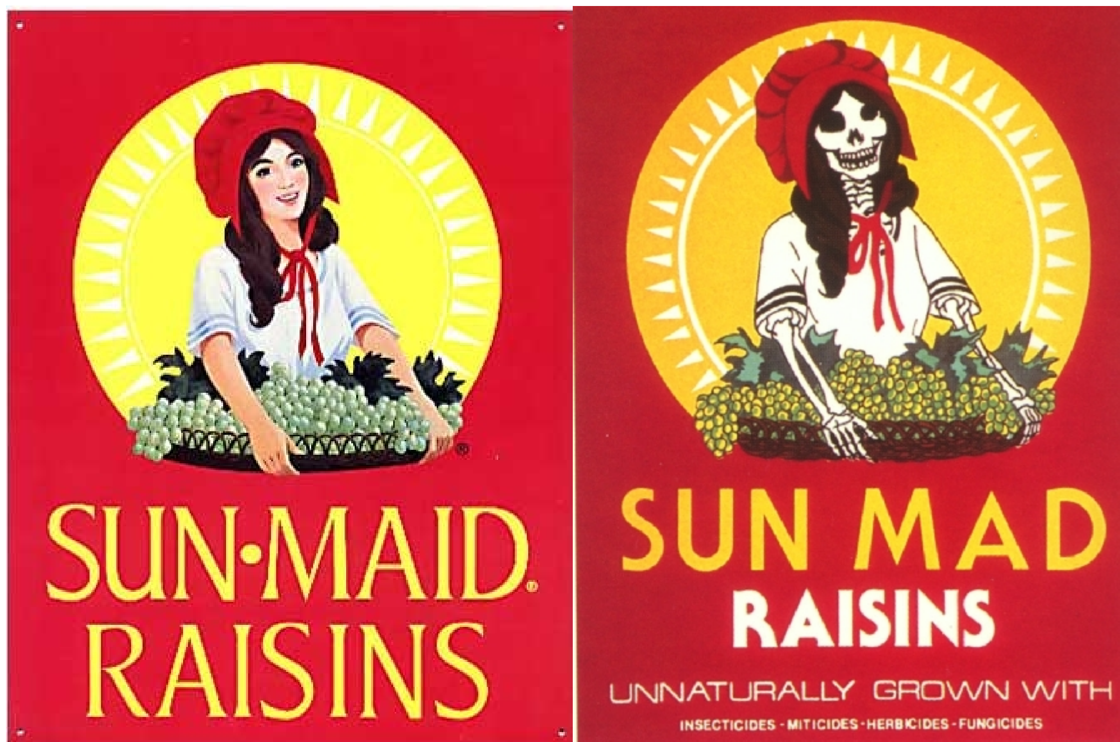
[24] "An open wound.".

car with envy: “She thought him a man who knew his neighbors well, who returned to the same bed, who could tell where the schools and where the stores were, and where the Nescafé coffee jars in the stores were located, and payday always came at the end of the week” (105). At the end of the description of a lifestyle so unlike Petra’s, “the gas dispenser triggered off” (105). Petra’s family does not have the privilege of permanent physical location in their lives, and the violence through which they are displaced reveals itself in descriptions of interactions with the non-migrant world.

The shopping trip exacerbates the family’s feeling of being auxiliary members of society. The “capricious black lines on a map” (103) that represent the roads do not represent the route the family has to take. Petra wears only blue and the driver of the Bermuda looks at her in a funny way, but “blue was a cool color against the hot tempered sun and that was why she was dressed the way she was and she hoped he would stop staring” (106). This man accidentally works himself into Petra’s inner thoughts, and his very presence makes her question and criticize her own appearance, plunging her into the experience of what W.E.B. du Bois calls “double-consciousness” (3): “It is a peculiar sensation, this double-consciousness, this sense of always looking at one’s self through the eyes of others, of measuring one’s soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity” (3). Petra is forced to see herself through the eyes of the man pumping his gas. She feels excluded and disposable like the blue towel that the man crumples and throws to the ground, and the mention of the color blue a few lines after the description of Petra’s clothing emphasizes the connection between them.

The process of marketing erases the racial component of migrant labor in the United States. The raisin advertisements elide the dangerous conditions and hard labor that go into the production of Sunmaid raisins. Ester Hernandez created the poster below, titled “Sun Mad,” to

protest the use of harmful chemicals and to call attention to the dangers that the production of Sunmaid raisins inflict on Chican@ laborers.



While Estrella sinks "in the hot white soil" (50), the woman in the advertisement sits safe and pretty, "wearing a fluffy bonnet, holding out the grapes with her smiling, ruby lips, the sun a flat orange behind her" (49). This advertisement denies Estrella's suffering and presents the finished product, ignorant of the "white sun so mighty, it toasted the green grapes to black raisins" (50). Viramontes does not identify the brand by name, but Sunmaid raisins are so ubiquitous that she does not have to specify to make her point. For many, Sunmaid raisins are a childhood snack, but Estrella's childhood has been poured into the picking and processing of the fruit. Petra and her family pick fresh produce but they are not permitted to eat it; they must wait until it appears in the stores, and even then they cannot afford much. The best crops are not sold where Petra's family can afford to shop: "the fruits and vegetables were firm and solid out in the hot fields; but

here in the store, only the relics remained" (110). The produce that they see in the store is a sad version of the fresh "crops harvested days before" (109). Even that phrase elides the fact that this family and other migrant laborers like them are the bodies doing the harvesting.[25]

Artistic Choice, "Political" Expression

Questions tied to the family's status as migrant farm laborers begin the novel. Under the Feet of Jesus opens with a question, "Had they been heading for the barn all along? Estrella didn't know" (3), marking the reader's entrance into the text as an entrance into uncertainty. The novel opens with Estrella's family in transit, uncertain of their destination and shaky in their relationships to one another. In the opening paragraph, Viramontes names Estrella, but her mother is "the mother" (3) and Perfecto Flores is "the man who was not her father" (3) and "the man whom they called Perfecto" (4). Last names, the markers of familial history and patriarchal inheritance, are "plentiful and easily forgotten," changing "with the crops and the seasons and the state lines" (28). Because of their migrant labor status, the family is constantly subject to forces outside their control. Crop cycles determine where they work and when they travel. U.S. state lines cut into their family identity and frame their movement in terms of California, Mexico, Arizona, not in terms of Aztlán as the country of the Chican@ who is Native American, Mexican, and a citizen of the United States.

Through free indirect discourse and interruption of linear time, the reader feels the ways in which "the imposition of regional boundaries distorts the narrative of the experience of women's lives" (Castañeda 117). Because the characters are always traveling, because they live always uprooted, and because their brown skin causes constant stress and fear about their

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[25] I wanted to bring raisins to my defense, but I could not find any that did not come from the San Joaquín Valley regardless of brand. Needless to say, I did not buy any.

legitimacy as U.S. citizens, the deviation from conventional narrative voice and structure helps to involve the reader in these characters' everyday psychological distortions. Because of their migrant laborer status, they are economic instruments and as such their humanity disappears in favor of productivity: "it was always a question of work, and work depended on the harvest, the car running, their health, the conditions of the road, how long the money held out, and the weather, which meant they could depend on nothing" (4). So where were they headed? Estrella didn't know.

The title of the novel itself reflects the ever-present fear of La Migra and their attempts to fight unfair questioning of their legal status by emphasizing the physical location of their legal documents: "if they try to pull you into the green vans, you tell them the birth certificates are under the feet of Jesus, just tell them" (63). Petra's specification of the physical location of the birth certificates is important; no matter where they move, they bring the statue of Jesus and they place their documents underneath its feet. The location of the birth certificates remains constant, even as the landscape of their lives shifts with the seasons from under their feet. After the Treaty of Guadalupe-Hidalgo, "Mexican-Americans were relegated to the status of suspect citizens in their new land" (Castañeda, 120). The anxiety these characters feel represents a larger Chican@ anxiety—"*el chicano que anda como un ladrón en su propia casa*" (Anzaldúa, 85).[26] The descriptions of the family's possessions underscore the overwhelming feeling of impermanence: "swamp-colored trash bags squatting full of the family's belongings" (17). The word "squatting" speaks to the illegality they feel; even though the children were born in the U.S., they live in fear of La Migra because their racial ethnic, and linguistic locations place their legitimacy in question.

[26] "The Chicano who walks like a thief in his own house." (Translation mine.)

The narrative voice inhabits the thoughts of all the major characters. This strategy disrupts the idea of one continuous dominant narrative told from one character's point of view, and it also highlights the ways in which migrant laborers are stripped of their individuality by agribusiness and consumerism. First the narrator describes what Estrella is thinking: "What Estrella remembered most of her real father was an orange" (12). Immediately the narration transitions to a memory or anecdote that feels more personal: "He had peeled a huge orange for her in an orchard where they had stopped to pee" (12). In this flux between describing the actions of the characters and inhabiting Estrella's inner thoughts, Viramontes complicates the division of self from other. Inhabiting Alejo sprayed with pesticides in the pisca, the narrative voice describes his pain: "He swallowed finally and the spit in his throat felt like balls of scratchy sand" (77). In the next sentence with no punctuation difference to mark dialogue, Alejo's thoughts speak: "Was this punishment for his thievery? He was sorry Lord, so sorry" (77). The shifting in narrative tone emphasizes the characters' thoughts of punishment, crime, and the paranoia of getting caught by La Migra or the foremen. The dialogue itself is not in quotes but rather represented with em dashes:

> "—Shit, I hate this.
> —Nobody buys fruit with bruises.
> —Ask me if I care" (12).

Gumecindo and his cousin Alejo converse quickly, scared of being caught by the foremen, picking leftover peaches at dusk after work. Because the text does not specify which boy is speaking, their voices blur with their identities. The lack of distinct voices attached to separate figures shows how Gumecindo and Alejo are cast as interchangeable migrant laboring bodies in the eyes of dominant white society, but it also connotes a moment of intimacy and connection between them.

Another piece of psychological distortion in Under the Feet of Jesus is temporal distortion. Though there are many indicators that the book takes place in the 1960s, Perfecto Flores says that he is 73 years old and that he believes he was born in 1917, placing at least one part of the novel in 1990. The references to Millie the Magnificent and the United Farm Workers' movement might place the book in the '60s, and as a member of society who directly benefits from the exploitation of migrant laborers for cheaper fruit production, I was eager to read this book as taking place before my lifetime, before present day. This temporal distortion confounds the continuity of the novel; the injustice being enacted on the bodies of these characters is not new.

Creating a Country: La Familia de la Raza

Historically, nuclear family legal status is a privilege mostly restricted to middle- or upper-class white Americans. The history of family in the United States is fraught with racism and political tension. African slaves were not permitted to legally marry one another and their children were sold by white slave-owners; Native American children were sent to boarding schools to have their Native-ness beaten out of them; immigrants from below the Río Grande often have to come to the U.S. without their families, waiting for green cards and visas, waiting for the state to sanction their togetherness. As a response to this large-scale obstruction of the establishment of legal nuclear Latin@ families in the eyes of the U.S. government, many Chican@s feel that their families must and do extend to include their entire race. In his political declaration and analysis of the Raza Unida Party movement, José Armas writes, "The *familia* is therapy for enduring in an insane society" (#). Perfecto encourages Petra to leave Alejo, telling her that there is no hope and that he is not even her child. Jaime Sena-Rivera adds in "Extended

Kinship in the United States", "*Familia* can embrace all extended family kin and single or various combinations of individual households" (123). These various familial models and the racial, economic, and cultural factors that inform them problematizes the idea of the "nuclear family."

Race continues to complicate the idea of the Chican@ family. Chican@s do not all look alike, and reclaiming Chican@ ancestry means recognizing the diverse ethnic makeup of the group that is labeled "Chican@." Under the Feet of Jesus hints at this racial mix: "Petra had deep coffee-colored skin and black, kinked hair that she tamed with a short braid" (7). Petra is clearly of African descent, and the small, one-time mention of her "kinked hair" merely hints at the diversity and racial complications within the family. Gloria Anzaldúa writes about the reclamation of pride in Chican@ identity, claiming that "each of us must know our Indian lineage, our afro-*mestizaje*, our history of resistance" (108). She associates racial heritage with political action, acknowledging the ways in which miscegenation and oppression place members of colonized groups alongside one another as allies, as friends, and as family members.

With Anzaldúa's statement in mind, I include some African-American theory of the family and I apply it to constructions of the Chican@ family in Viramontes' work. Patricia Hill Collins, in her essay "Black Women and Motherhood," presents the cultural concept of an "othermother" as a woman who takes care of non-biological children, both temporarily and permanently. The need for othermother networks arises directly from racial oppression and lack of resources: "Children orphaned by sale or death of their parents under slavery, children conceived through rape, children of young mothers, children born into extreme poverty or to alcoholic or drug-addicted mothers, or children who for other reasons cannot remain with their bloodmothers have all been supported by othermothers" (120). Collins argues, "the resiliency of

women-centered family networks illustrates how traditional cultural values…can help people cope with and resist oppression" (122). Though Estrella's family is not enslaved, they are certainly oppressed and racially targeted, and their response as Chican@s is to strengthen the bonds between them. Petra relies on Estrella as the eldest child to help her care for the younger ones. Chican@s and African-Americans do not share the same history in the United States, and their cultural forms and expressions are different and come from different traditions. But both groups share systemic disenfranchisement by mainstream white patriarchy, and both groups respond to this oppression by the symbolic strengthening of family ties and a revision of the ethics of care.

What Collins calls "othermothering" many Latin@s call comadrazgo or compadrazgo. "Comadrazgo, in its popular usage, refers to friendship between women who have children" (Miranda, 101), but the word means co-mothering, the sharing of parental responsibility when one person cannot do it all by herself. In the introduction to Feminism on the Border, Sonia Saldívar-Hull thanks her sister for co-mothering her son and rearranging her academic and personal schedule so that Saldívar-Hull could pursue her degree. Miranda claims that in its traditional sense, comadrazgo reinforces Chicano patriarchal norms because theoretically, the women care for each others' children while the men do not. The development of a political Chican@ movement toward reclamation of indigenous heritage and Mexican culture and the urbanization and industrialization during post-World War II years changed the social application of comadrazgo.[27] More Chicanas were remaining single than before, and "comadrazgo…took on new political salience for women's survival. Transformation in the practice and understanding of

[27] Miranda, 102.

comadrazgo occurs, no longer qualified by the institutions of marriage and family" (Miranda, 102).

In her book Homegirls in the Public Sphere, Miranda analyzes young Chicana gang members in Oakland, California. She claims, "The young women of the gang, informed by female relations in Chicana/o culture, sometimes seem to be reinventing the tradition of comadrazgo as a premarital and preparental form of solidarity (101). In Their Dogs Came With Them, the Ermila and her friends are certainly more than just friends to one another. They are a strong, female-centered support network and they rely heavily on one another just to survive:

> "they met behind the gym, before homeroom, at the lunch benches, after school, at Concha's not-really-a-beauty-salon, in the back of the bus, and if they had the privilege, they phoned each other at home because a few hours without conversation were insufferable. With conviction, they designed escape routes, rehearsed their breakout and hurled their futures over the roadblocks of their marooned existence. Lest they forget that silence is destructive, they pitted each other against the sorrowful and infinite solitude, each and every hour, because that's what friends por vida are for" (62).

They are friends "por vida," not "for life," because part of their friendship has to do with fighting their social positioning together; English is not strong enough to emphasize the bonds between these young women. The silence and solitude threatening to close in are not merely personal but also represent the fear of political and social disenfranchisement that these young Chicanas suffer at the hands of mainstream Anglo society and also at the hands of their own Chicano brothers. They must protect one another through conversation, through affirmation and reaffirmation of their shared experiences.

Estrella's familia demonstrates resilience and love that extends beyond a nuclear family structure. Because their legal status as a family is always in question, they reach beyond those conventionally white borders to redefine and strengthen familia. Even Big Mac the white foreman understands the strength of migrant families. "Migrant families are tight, he would say,

you ought to know. They look out for their own" (36). Though Alejo is not blood-related to Estrella's family, Petra thinks it is important to care for him: "If we don't take care of each other, who would take care of us?" (96). The foreman would certainly not take care of any of them, nor would the nurse at the clinic, nor would the state. Petra displays faith in familia, in the fact that someone else would take care of her children if she were not there: "If Arnulfo or Ricky or my hija got sick, I would want someone to take care of them, wouldn't you?" (97). In the face of linguistic terrorism, deportation, unjust labor conditions, and all other sorts of structural oppression, the bonds of la familia must become stronger.

Estrella and Petra scratch an unbroken line in the ground with a stick to keep the scorpions out of whatever piece of land they temporarily inhabit. They score their space in the ground, whichever space it is, to protect their transient home against evil spirits and scorpions, but also to carve out, however momentarily, their own physical space against which the "other" can be defined. Petra's belief in "lines which had no opening or closing" (42) provides solace for her in the face of constant labor migration; her family "could depend on nothing" (4) so Petra must do what she can to create a type of permanence. For Petra, the stick ritual keeps out the scorpions, and "Estrella never questioned whether this was true or not" (42). Before Estrella begins the demarcation, she asks, "Aquí?" (41).[28] The rest of her conversation with her mother is in English (or at least is represented in English in the novel), but the question that relates to the earth, to the attempt at carving out some permanence, is written in Spanish. Yet it remains a question, to be asked again and again, and answered again and again. Later, when Petra gives advice to her children about what to do if La Migra come, she says, "Tell them que tienes una

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[28] "Here?"

madre aquí. You are not an orphan, and she pointed a red finger to the earth, Aquí" (63).[29] There is rescue in Petra's declaration. Her mix of English and Spanish and the racial connotation of the word "red" highlights the crux of the migrant laborer issue. To repeat Anzaldúa, "This land was Mexican once/was Indian always/and is./And will be again" (113). There is strength in Petra's refrain; she both finds catharsis and exercises power in repetition of words, songs, and the stick ritual.

Viramontes represents this strengthening through the use of a few Spanish words in a predominantly English text. For Chican@s, Spanish has meaning as a language that in some cases has been stripped from them and that is assigned to them, regardless of whether or not they grew up speaking it. Viramontes herself learned Spanish in college; Cherríe Moraga relearned Spanish as adult; because many non-Chican@s assume that Chican@s all speak Spanish, it has come to represent a crucial part of the bond of la Familia de la Raza. Instead of writing "my daughter," Viramontes writes "my hija," signifying that the English word for "daughter" does not do justice to the relationship between Petra and Estrella. Sandra Cisneros writes, "When I wish to address a child, lover or one of my many small pets, I use Spanish, a language filled with affection and familiarity. I can only liken it to the fried-tortilla smell of my mother's house or the way my brothers' hair smells like Alberto VO5 when I hug them. It just about makes me want to cry" (Kessler and Perrin 106). Cisneros points out that using Spanish for her can be an intentional choice meant to convey more meaning, more emotion, more intimacy. Though Viramontes writes in English, her Spanish words are mostly words of family, of intimacy, of love.

[29] "Tell them that you have a mother here…Here."

Because Spanish binds these characters to one another in way that English does not, they also use Spanish to convey hurtful feelings or expressions of anger. There is a cutting edge to using a Spanish word to hurt another Chican@ that does not come across in English. In Under the Feet of Jesus, the characters probably speak Spanish to one another but Viramontes tells their story in English, using Spanish words to specifically denote love or closeness or frustration. Petra frequently addresses her children as "huercos" and "huerquitos fregados." Alejo comes down with "daño of the fields" (93), and the Spanish word marks the disease as a racially and ethnically targeted sickness, violently inflicted on migrant laborer bodies. In Their Dogs Came With Them, the characters speak English to one another but use Spanish forms of address with one another; they say "vato" to mean "dude" and "joto" as an insult meaning "faggot." It is much more hurtful, more personal, to address one another in Spanish.

In Their Dogs Came With Them, speaking Spanish is associated with shame and lower status within the family. The culminating action scene in the novel is the scene when Nacho is boarding a bus to go back home. He does not speak English and he tries to speak bumbling English and is embarrassed. Ermila teases him about it and looks down on him. FOB—fresh over the border—is a derogatory acronym, revealing the importance of dividing Chican@s from Mexican@s. "[The Chicano] has an excessive compensatory hubris when around Mexicans from the other side. It overlays a deep sense of racial shame" (Anzaldúa 105). Ermila's treatment of Nacho shows the racial othering within the family and the internalization of white Anglo supremacy.

The strength of la familia does not overcome oppression and certainly does not replace political recourse; rather, it is a strategy that grows out of necessity. The emotional bonds between Petra, Perfecto, Estrella, and Alejo are important but they are not enough to overcome

the political and economic reality that tears them apart. Petra's language "I would want someone to take care of them" (97) expresses her faith in other migrant Chican@ workers but it also highlights the painful reality that in the absence of political legitimacy, that faith is all they have. Though the bonds of familia ensure that Alejo is not alone, those bonds cannot save him from death at the unseen hands of commercial fruit production and mainstream white consumerism. The narrator in "The Moths" flees her father's house for a safe, woman-only network in her grandmother's house. In Their Dogs Came With Them, Nacho comes from Mexico to live with relatives so that he can work and support his grandmother, but his death in transit back to Mexico shows that the strength of la familia can only go so far when it is being torn at by a dangerous, violent, racist political system. For some, the attempt at construction of a racially coherent national myth ends in death.

Violent "American" Imagery

The baseball scene in Under the Feet of Jesus also speaks of loss and violence. Estrella watches a Little League baseball game; she sees other children playing while she comes home from work in the fields. This scene represents the violent divide between child laborers and non-laborers. Agents of division—the "tall mesh wire fence" (58) and the "chalked boundaries" (58) reinforce Estrella's otherness. While she watches these other children playing, she thinks about her brothers' dreams: "Arnulfo had talked about playing baseball. Ricky wanted to fly" (59). But these dreams go unfulfilled as the children continue to work in the piscas. She watches the batter "in his bleached white uniform" (58), clean and safe in contrast to her sweaty work clothes. The whiteness of his uniform may stand in for the whiteness of his skin, for though his race is unspecified, his privilege is clear. His reality is so different from Estrella's that he seems

"blurred in the mesh of the fence" (59). In sharp contrast to the burning heat of the previous scene in the piscas, the parents and spectators have "ice chests at arm's reach" (58). Estrella watches from behind physical barriers as the signifiers of healthy, safe childhood play out in front of her.

This scene reveals the violence with which working as a migrant laborer has stripped Estrella's childhood innocence. In the previous scene she gives her peach to Kawamoto,[30] but she wishes "she had not surrendered her peach" (58). Violent language builds throughout this scene, showing the trauma that constant labor, hunger, and fear have wrought on Estrella's psyche. When the bat hits the ball, it sounds like "a ball splitting a bat" (59) and reminds her of "a ball hit, a blunt instrument against a skull" (60). Because of the constant threat of violence against her and her family, this harmless sport speaks only violence for Estrella. She reads the lights of the stadium as La Migra coming for her and her reaction to the lights mirrors the violence they would inflict upon her body: "the round, sharp white lights burned her eyes" (59). Because of the displacement she and her family constantly suffer, she cannot remember "which side she was on and which side of the wire mesh she was safe in" (60). Though she was born in the U.S., she speaks Spanish and the state constructs her as a foreign body, useful for labor but denied the rights of citizenship.

Language of the motivations for and risks of migration spill out in Estrella's rushed inner monologue. "Destination: home plate. Who would catch the peach, who was hungry enough to run the field in all that light? The perfect target. The lushest peach. The element of surprise. A stunned deer waiting for the bullet" (60). While running and hitting a ball with a stick might be harmless pleasures for some, for Estrella they are stressful reminders of the need her family faces

[30] Toothless Kawamoto is a marker of Japanese internment, which I discuss further in chapter V.

every day. Alejo and Gumecindo pick peaches in the dark after work, frenzied, hurrying, illicitly attempting to satisfy their hunger. Even the simple act of eating is fraught with danger for migrant workers. The playfulness of the game contrasts starkly with the desperation Estrella feels on a daily basis: "the players converged, their arms to the sky, the ball like a peach tossed out to hungry hands" (59). Feeling threatened, Estrella clutches her knife and runs home.

Echoing Ricky's dreams of flying, Alejo makes shadow figures for a little boy in the peach grove, and the captivating animal figure is the eagle: "it was the eagle, majestic wingspan of fingers, that made the boy forget his injury, the eagle that fluttered from the tower of shade, gliding its wings into the sunlight" (23). This small boy is chasing America, chasing power, chasing justice, captivated by the symbol of a powerful bird that has the freedom to escape. But this symbol of America eludes him. The shadow is interrupted by the broken and the forgotten: "a discarded tire…some glass shards…the dented trough" (23); the eagle has "vanished" (23) as the boy sprinkles "droplets of blood" (23). Alejo tries to comfort the boy, but the comfort Alejo can produce is only temporary since the boy is alone. The eagle vanishes and the cousins do not see the boy again.

But the eagle also figures as the symbol of the United Farm Workers led by César Chávez. After the Foreman leaves for the day, some workers pass out "white leaflets with black eagles on them" (84), an allusion to "the geometrical black eagle (an Aztec symbol) in a white circle on a red background…the symbol of the United Farm Workers".[31] The United Farm Workers is a labor union produced by the merging of the National Farm Workers Association and the Agricultural Workers Organizing Committee in 1966. Larry Itliong, a Filipino organizer, led the AWOC, and Chávez led the NFWA. The UFW pressured major grape growers in

[31] LaWare, 6.

California to sign contracts for fair wages and humane labor laws; the fact that Estrella and her family are picking grapes during the historical moment when Chávez was organizing grape strikes strengthens the allusion to the United Farm Workers movement. Viramontes dedicates this book "in memory of César Chávez," honoring his struggle to unite farm workers laboring under unjust conditions.

Chávez encouraged farm workers to unite and rise up against unjust systems of oppression, but material conditions for resistance are difficult for undocumented laborers (or documented laborers who are not treated as such) to meet. Estrella carefully puts the UFW pamphlets away and saves them for later reading because "her eyes hurt too much" (84). Though the information for political organizing is available to her, her physical condition prevents her from pursuing political efficacy. Though Estrella is a legal citizen of the United States and will one day have theoretical voting power (if not access to polls), as a migrant laborer she does not have access to information or voting booths. Richard García writes in "César Chávez: A Personal and Historical Testimony:" "For all of us, Chávez seemed to represent cultural solace and potential leadership in an alienated and powerless world. He seemed to represent our lost sensitivity of the land, our historical past, and our cultural traditions" (226-227). This scene shows that though the information about political organizing and about reclaiming cultural knowledge and reconnecting to the land is all potentially available to Estrella, lying folded in her very hands, she is always too hungry or too tired to make use of it. As the eldest female child of a migrant laboring mother, Estrella's responsibilities lie in helping to raise her siblings as well as working in the fields.

The historical archive of the United Farm Workers' website keeps a chronology of Chávez's life. In 1962, "he moves his wife and eight small children to the dusty little Central

Valley farm town of Delano and dedicates himself full-time to organizing farm workers. Dolores Huerta and others later join him."[32] But this archive elides the fact that if Chávez dedicated himself full-time to organizing, someone else (probably his wife) was working to feed his family and taking care of his eight children. The historical context for Chávez's success as a leader was "established by the Mexican-American intellectuals in the early 1960s…[resulting in] the publication, *La Raza: Forgotten Americans* in 1966."[33] The list provided by García of scholars and political figures present at the conference from which this radical publication came includes only men: "George Sánchez, Ernesto Galarza, Eduardo Quevedo, Eugene González, Bernardo Valéz, [and] Julian Samora."[34] Estrella is doubly disenfranchised in this moment of political action, first as a Spanish-speaking migrant laborer and secondly as a woman within the Chicano movement. As Anzaldúa reminds us, "Who is to say that robbing a people of its language is less violent than war?" (75). Estrella's double-devoicing in this political moment speaks to her particular placement as a Chicana migrant laborer constructed as outside mainstream Anglo society but also peripheral to Chicano political organizing.

Moraga's concept of "Queer Aztlán" recreates Aztlán as a radically inclusive space.[35] The concept of Aztlán reads as queer: a nation with no defined physical borders, a nation that has been historically oppressed and marginalized and is undergoing a reclamation process, a nation specifically for those who have always been present but have seldom been heard. Moraga responds to the limited constructions of Chicano Nationalism and "Queer Nation," neither of which includes queer Chican@s. She defines "queer Aztlán" as "a Chicano homeland that could

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[32] UFW.com
[33] García, 229.
[34] Ibid.
[35] Moraga, The Last Generation, 145-150.

embrace *all* its people, including its *jotería*" (147).[36] She responds to the sexist, heterosexist Chicano Nationalist Movement, which was a response to oppression and disenfranchisement by United States Anglo patriarchy, with a refocusing on the Chicana: "The nationalism I seek is one that decolonizes the brown and female body as it decolonizes the brown and female earth. It is a new nationalism in which la Chicana Indígena stands at the center" (150). Queer Aztlán is a concept founded on principles of radical inclusion as opposed to the exclusion that informs the violent political and ideological construction of the United States of America.

[36] Moraga defines this term as "a Chicano term for 'queer' folk" (147).

V. Deslenguadas: The Mouth, the Tongue, and La Lengua

In this section, I focus on the image of the mouth in Under the Feet of Jesus with supporting examples from Their Dogs Came With Them and "The Moths." How do we use our mouths? Eating, tasting, talking, singing, spitting, screaming, biting, kissing. Physical representations of deformed mouths in Under the Feet of Jesus (Toothless Kawamoto, the boy with the harelip) speak about structural violence inflicted on the bodies of these individuals. The symbol of mouths as "torn pockets," as gaping holes, stands in for the constant want and lack in these characters' lives. They want food, love, and connection. They want to be able to express themselves. As a marginalized and silenced population, these migrant laborers acutely feel the physical effects of Viramontes' elegant metaphors. Through tracking the image of the damaged mouth and exploring the social, political, and economic realities of migrant laborers, I argue that Viramontes unites physical and structural violence in one potent metaphor; indeed, through the symbol of the mouth, the different and distinct types of violence in these works are chewed up and spit out as one mass of silence, pain, hurt, anger, joy, and reclamation.

The Deformed Mouth and Silencio

In Under the Feet of Jesus, the image of the deformed mouth stands in as a physical representation of the silencing of migrant laborers. In this text, mouths are often described as gaping holes, torn pockets, and gashes. These are not descriptions of healthy mouths but of mouths that suffer; the gash bleeds, the pocket cannot be mended because there is no time or money or material, the hole will never be filled: "even the gaping hole of his own shirt hung like a speechless mouth on his belly" (22). The mouth—particularly the hungry mouth— is speechless; it cannot cry out about its own suffering. When Estrella thinks about helping Perfecto

Flores tear down the barn, she thinks about the absence left by the ripped-up structure in terms of a mouth: “she would pull the veins out and the woodsheet wall would collapse like a toothless mouth” (75). Estrella associates helplessness with a mouth that cannot chew and therefore cannot eat, that cannot speak and therefore cannot have a social impact. These damaged mouths, and the social and environmental disenfranchisement that they represent, highlight the acute sense of loss and pain that these characters feel every day.

Descriptive language that paints the environment as a predatory place for a young Chicana (or any young woman) appears all over Under the Feet of Jesus, signifying the constant danger threatening Estrella because of her race, class, and gender. When Estrella climbs through the barn and onto the roof she nearly knocks the lantern over, imagining “golden flaming eels dangerously nipping at the straw on the ground” (174). I read phallic imagery into this phrase; as a young Chicana, there is the shadow of the possibility of violence all around her at any moment. These eels have mouths; they nip and bite and devour but do not seem to suffer themselves. Estrella also swims through the water to collect the floating watermelon, and the water “licked around her in velvet waves as the moonlight broke like chipped silver” (40). This pleasant imagery belies the dangerous reality of this water; Estrella knows that the pesticides run off from the fields and slip into the stream. The chipped silver and broken moonlight tacitly interrupt the velvet peace, alerting the reader that something is wrong.

While there is constant threat from predatory, external, non-human mouths, there is also threat to the mouths of the characters in Under the Feet of Jesus. Petra thinks to herself about her unborn child, “Would the child be born without a mouth, would the poisons of the fields harden in its tiny little veins?” (125). With no access to prenatal care and with no way to avoid the pesticides, Petra sighs out her inability to protect the fetus inside her. Her helplessness is

reproduced in the future child's probable helplessness; if it is indeed born with no mouth or with another kind of birth defect, its life will be perpetually even more endangered. Because she does not have access to a doctor, Petra must take care of herself and her children with knowledge that she has gained in her life as a migrant worker. She knows that "the moon and the earth and the sun's alignment [is] a powerful thing" (69), and she calls out to Estrella to bring her safely inside: "Is that what you want…a child born sin labios? Without a mouth?" (69). The regulating mechanisms of Llorona tales linger here; Estrella is not even fourteen but the role of future mother has already been assigned her as a way to control her sexual behavior. Estrella understands the very real threat of the pesticides to women and children and the fear that they inspire in a way that Maxine Devrdige, the illiterate white migrant laborer girl who is about Estrella's age, does not. She refuses to swim in the water, asking Maxine, "You think 'cause of the water our babies are gonna come out with no mouth or something?" (33). Maxine responds, "Looky you. Thinkin' about babies 'ready" (33). Maxine's comment reveals the early assumption of maternal responsibility that has been imposed upon Estrella by Llorona tales and regulation of young women embedded in Chican@ culture. Though Maxine's family is by no means privileged in terms of class or education, their whiteness protects them from seeming suspect in the United States. A large family, though a huge economic burden, does not pose the same prospects of pain and separation due to immigration policy and racial assumptions to a white woman as it does to a Chicana.

The pain that Petra feels as a mother stems from her inability to provide enough for her children, her constant worry about their safety, and her feeling of being trapped in this migrant laboring mother's life. Her tired body and aching limbs are painful due to daily demanding physical labor; Viramontes locates Petra's intense emotional pain in her mouth. Petra cannot

express her fears about the father of her children. She must keep them contained in her own mind: “Petra lied to Estrella because she shouldn’t know her father evicted all of them from the vacancy of his heart and so she lied right to her daughter’s face, right through the cage of her very teeth” (17). Her teeth become a container for the painful truth that she keeps in her mouth and swallows so that she does not burden her young child with her pain. Petra realizes that her children are hungry and her husband is not coming back, and all at once she cracks: “Petra broke, her mouth a cut jagged line” (19). The brokenness of Petra’s mouth speaks in a way that she cannot about the brokenness of her heart; she almost leaves her children, running to the edge of the highway, before she turns around and walks back into her own life.

Petra’s sadness about her husband’s perpetual absences transmutes into Estrella’s anger about her father’s abandonment. Petra keeps her pain inside while Estrella rips and smashes and fights her anger out. When Maxine Devridge calls Pefecto Flores Estrella’s father and brings up questions of family relations and Estrella’s legitimacy, Estrella fights back, ripping Maxine’s mouth “into a torn pocket” (28). Where Petra’s own mouth shows pain, Estrella inflicts pain on others to alleviate the emotional trauma that she cannot speak. Though the Devridges also suffer from economic disadvantage, hunger, and lack of education, Maxine is not silenced in the way that Estrella is. She says whatever she wants, and Estrella’s attack on Maxine’s mouth represents the anger she feels at Maxine’s freedom of self-expression. After this fight, it is not the Devridges but Estrella’s family who must leave the work site; repression, silencing, and the eruption of anger that follows have a real economic impact on these characters’ lives.

Non-Chican@ migrant laborers are often overlooked in discussions of migrant labor. It is important to note that while Chican@s are the majority of migrant laborers in California, and often racist immigration policies do target them, their experience is not the only migrant laboring

experience. Toothless Kawamoto stands in as a marker of Japanese internment and the way it has been hushed up and brushed aside in U.S. history books. The fact that his name includes a reference to his lack of teeth speaks more than he can about the way the internment has been overlooked. When Estrella gives him her peach, he looks up "with a smile so wide, his mouth looked like a vacant hole" (57). This moment of solidarity arises from Estrella's fear of Toothless Kawamoto's shadow "loitering larger and about to engulf her" (56). As the only Asian-American laborer mentioned in Viramontes' text, Kawamoto's lack of family further isolates him from the other characters who are mentioned in conjunction with their families. Kawamoto is a Japanese last name; Estrella does not even know his first name, further emphasizing the distance between them.

Daño of the Fields, A Child Born Sin Labios: A Racially Targeted Disease

Structural racism, a system so endemic that it becomes difficult to name, speak about, or define, reveals itself in the form of "daño of the fields." This disease is caused by the pesticides, herbicides, and fungicides sprayed on the grapes to keep them safe and healthy; the name of the disease indicates a disregard for the people who pick those grapes. Alejo sickens and dies from daño of the fields and the small boy with the harelip was most likely born with a birth defect because his mother had to work in the fields while she was pregnant with him. According to Cancer and the Environment: Gene-Environment Interactions:

> "There was no obligatory reporting of pesticide use [in the Central Valley of California] unless it was Category One (extremely toxic), and there was no record-keeping on these chemicals. Thus, it was very difficult to do investigations in this area. When the data gaps on these chemicals were filled, it turned out that an important percentage of them contained reproductive toxins and teratogens, as well as chemicals that cause skin toxicity" (41).

This book reports on “cancer pockets,” areas of high cancer concentration that do not receive the attention they otherwise might were the bodies in question not Chican@ and migrant laborers. The creation of cancer pockets, as this quote demonstrates, can go relatively undetected for many years if there is not adequate birth defect reporting infrastructure. If investigations cannot occur, policies cannot be changed.[37]

The boy with the harelip represents structural violence and environmental racism enacted on the Chicano body. The boy’s fate and health are uncertain because of his birth defect: “the skin of the boy’s upper lip tugged up toward the beak of his nose and into one of his flattened nostrils” (21-22). This small boy’s disfiguration comes from his mother’s work around harmful chemicals during pregnancy. Since migrant laborers are very often “undocumented workers [who] are poorly educated, and do not speak English. They are loathe to complain and unwilling to cooperate with investigations for fear of deportation” (Wilson, 41). They have no political protection from long hours, ill treatment, and harmful chemicals. If they are documented citizens, they do not have permanent addresses. This system that forces constant migration forbids participation in documented society, and thus migrant laborers are subject to more danger. They live near the fields in which they work and these fields are often sprayed with harmful pesticides, herbicides and fungicides that can cause extreme health problems. In extreme cases like Alejo’s, people die from direct exposure to these chemicals, but even indirect exposure can cause developmental problems in infants. Petra worries about “a child born sin labios” (69); Alejo suffers from “daño of the fields” (93). As I discuss in chapter IV, the racial and linguistic particularity of these fears connects them to the facts: these diseases are inflicted primarily on

[37] I would have liked to find more accurate statistics on the phenomenon of cancer pockets, but because much of the migrant laboring population is either undocumented or fearful of being perceived as undocumented, collecting this information has proven to be very difficult.

Chican@ bodies and they often go unreported. Other illnesses and mutations can occur that are related to field work in an unseen way: "Big Mac the Foreman lied about the pesticides not spilling into the ditch; but the water seemed clear and cool and irresistible on such a hot day" (32). Everyone knows that Big Mac, a representative of Anglo agricultural practice, lies to the workers; unsurprisingly, he is not punished for this gross injustice because of his position of racial and economic privilege.

Smeared Lipstick and White Femininity

Another example of a clash with the racist system that ignores and damages Chican@s is the way in which the white nurse in the clinic in Under the Feet of Jesus examines and ignores Alejo. The description of the nurse's office highlights the racially coded implications of this clinic visit. The "porcelain statue," the "folded white cap," and the "pile of manila folders" (141) all code whiteness and send the message to visitors of color that their experience will not be understood in this clinic. And indeed, the nurse herself does not make an effort to understand their plight, as shown by the family's impression of her appearance and demeanor: "She wore too much red lipstick, too much perfume and asked too many questions and seemed too clean, too white just like the imitation cotton" (141). Estrella attacks her in a way that would particularly damage her white femininity; she breaks the pictures of her children and prevents her from doing her duty as a mother. When Estrella smashes the pictures of her children, the white woman is afraid; she feels silenced and shamed, "sobbing into her hands, her lipstick smeared as if she tried wiping her mouth away" (150). She does not recognize or make amends for the harm she has done. Though the nurse is an adult, she appears youthful, naïve, and innocent in this scene. As James Baldwin writes in his 1955 essay "Stranger in the Village," "People who shut

their eyes to reality simply invite their own destruction, and anyone who insists on remaining in a state of innocence long after that innocence is dead turns himself into a monster" (#). Baldwin's observation is incredibly astute but it does not encompass the whole picture: the nurse lives in a system that preserves her innocence at the price of the innocence of Chican@ children like Alejo and Estrella. She lives in a white world that mostly shields her from violence; the other side to structural violence is a system that protects ignorant innocence of the privileged.

While the nurse exists in a world that protects her, Estrella's lived experience has stripped her of her innocence and taught her critical thinking and analytical skills at a very young age. Estrella makes the nurse's white privilege extremely clear in her stream-of-consciousness narration of the transformation of bones to gasoline:

> "Energy money, the fossilized bones of energy matter. How bones made oil and oil made gasoline. The oil was made from their bones, and it was their bones that kept the nurse's car from not halting on some highway, kept her on her way to Daisyfield to pick up her boys at six. It was their bones that kept the air conditioning in the cars humming, that kept them moving on the long dotted line on the map. Their bones. Why couldn't the nurse see that? Estrella had figured it out: the nurse owed *them* as much as they owed her" (148).

In this passage, Estrella deconstructs the nurse's white, middle-class privilege that comes at the expense of her and her family's safety, comfort, and livelihood. The nurse has the privilege of a stable job so she does not have to move. Daisyfield, as one of the few places actually named in this text, indicates a seemingly pleasant and peaceful life where children go to school and mothers pick them up after their nine-to-five jobs. The nurse can afford to spend the money on extra gasoline to keep herself cool and comfortable in the heat. She has the privilege of transit at her disposal and the privilege of being able to read a map. Why couldn't the nurse see that? She is blinded by her privilege.

In contrast to the nurse's privilege, Estrella's acutely perceptive reading of their interaction highlights the ways in which she has learned to think for herself. But as I discuss in chapter IV, education both scholastic and religious is a civilizing tool. The only book Estrella has ever owned is a catechism book that her godmother gives her, revealing how Estrella's thirst for knowledge is restricted by limited resources that direct her to a religion that harshly regulates female behavior. Estrella repeats the following phrase twice: "*The Holy Spirit came in the form of tongues of fire to show His love*" (31, 68). A patriarchal holy spirit appears in a violent form that is supposed to reveal his goodness. In Their Dogs Came With Them, Tranquilina recites Psalm 31:19 during her rape: "*Oh, how great is thy goodness, which thou hast laid up for them that fear thee*" (215). As her mouth is stifled by muck and mud, she tries to recite these words to find peace for herself, but the words she recites reflect the dynamic between male power and female powerlessness. Cherríe Moraga, in her book The Last Generation, makes explicit the connection between "rape, intermarriage, the African slave trade, and the spread of Catholicism and disease" (153). All of these political tools are tools of genocide and colonization, but some of them are more complex than that. Viramontes constructs a multi-faceted relationship between her Chicana characters and the Catholic church by associating it with fire, rape, danger, and also a last refuge of solace.. At the same time that Catholicism is colonizing and repressive for Chicanas, some of them find deep emotional and spiritual value in it that should be questioned but not dismissed. As I discuss in chapter II, feminist refigurations of Chican@ cultural icons provide a space for Chicanas to make their culture speak for them.

The Mouth and the Lips: Lo que nunca pasó por sus labios

Language is a crucial factor in reclamation and refiguration. The chapter “How to Tame a Wild Tongue” in Gloria Anzaldúa’s Borderlands/La Frontera begins with this epigraph by Ray Gwyn Smith: “Who is to say that robbing a people of its language is less violent than war?” (75). This quote is inset with lots of negative space around it, drawing the reader’s attention and emphasizing its importance. Anzaldúa goes on to explain how it feels to have one’s language deemed “incorrect:” “Until I am free to write bilingually and to switch codes without having always to translate, while I still have to speak English or Spanish when I would rather speak Spanglish, and as long as I have to accommodate the English speakers rather than having them accommodate me, my tongue will be illegitimate” (81). The remnants of what Anzaldúa calls “linguistic terrorism” still exist. Anzaldúa claims that one way to devalue a people is to devalue that people’s language, whether overtly or covertly. She makes explicit the violence inherent in this type of aggression: “Attacks on one’s form of expression with the intent to censor are a violation of the First Amendment. *El Anglo con cara de inocente nos arrancó la lengua.*[38] Wild tongues can’t be tamed, they can only be cut out” (76). Anzaldúa brilliantly illustrates the connection between physical and structural violence: la lengua means “the tongue” but it also means “language.” She gives physical life to the linguistic terrorism that Chican@s suffered and continue to suffer at the hands of mainstream Anglo society. “Arrancar” means literally “to tear out by the roots.” This particular verb choice gets at the heart of Anzaldúa’s concept of linguistic terrorism. Denying Chican@s the right to speak their own version of Spanish or English does not only deny present and future expression and opportunity but also speaks to a history of

[38] The innocent-faced Anglo wrenched out our tongue.

oppression and repression of the Chican@ voice. Anzaldúa locates this violent repression in the tongue as the agent of communication and also the bearer of pain.

Cherríe Moraga, too, connects the tongue and the Spanish language in Loving in the War Years: lo que nunca pasó por sus labios, especially in her poem "Querida Compañera."[39] Moraga draws the parallel between her sexual love for women and her need to speak Spanish:

> "la lengua que necesito
> para hablar
> es la misma que uso
> para acariciar"[40]

Moraga associates consummation of lesbian love through kissing and oral sex with speaking Spanish, treating each as an essential part of who she is. Moraga did not feel comfortable in Spanish until later in her life; she felt ostracized from El Movimiento because of her light skin and her poor Spanish. She associates reclaiming Spanish with reclaiming her Chicana womanhood and claiming her lesbian desires: "A different kind of passion. I think, *soy mujer en español*. No macha. Pero Mujer. Soy Chicana—open to all kinds of attack" (142). She then goes on to associate the act of Chicanas writing and speaking out as being vulnerable to attack, equating attack on the mouth (silencing) with attack on the vagina (rape): "Returning from the Latin American Women Writer's Conference, I say to my friends as I drive down 91 South, 'The Mouth is like a cunt'. La boca spreads its legs open to talk, open to attack" (142). Evoking Anzaldúa's theory of the border as *una herida abierta* Moraga ties in reclaiming the Spanish that was wrenched from her, celebrating her sexual love of women, and suffering attack from within her race and without on the basis of being a Chicana lesbian.

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[39] Beloved Companion.
[40] The tongue that I need in order to speak is that same that I use to caress.

The subtitle of the book, "lo que nunca pasó por sus labios" means "that which never passed her lips." She brilliantly illustrates the silencing of queer Chicanas, but also the ways in which queer Chicanas silently but nevertheless effectively communicate with one another:

> "lo que nunca
> pasó
> por sus labios
>
> but was
>   utterly
>   utterly
>   heard."

"That which never passed her lips" could also be a reference to a child or a penis never passing the lesbian's vaginal lips. Moraga claims that this kind of love and production, though often silenced and shunned, is also valid, valued, and powerful.

Silence, shame and struggle are not limited to queer Chicanas. Queer Chicanos also suffer from repression of homosexuality and domineering machismo. The mouth is a pleasurable, sexual part, but as Lucho reveals, the desires of the mouth and the speech that is permitted to come from it are painfully separate:

> "Big Al returned his request with silence…the sense of violent arousal a moment ago now landed on his lips like a picante, which made it more difficult to resist pressing his mouth forward onto Al's, to feel the scratch of Big Al's mustache. The drugs in his body, the feel of Big Al's flesh against his fingers, invoked the desire to release the stiffness of his erection in the wet hole of Al's mouth as he did yesterday, the day before and the day before that in the back room" (308).

Lucho's name closely resembles the Spanish word for fight or struggle: lucha. But his name has a masculine ending, reinforcing the problems of his particular masculine Chicano struggle. Big Al's response is one of shame and denial; "he wasn't a joto like Lucho. Alfonso even had a

girlfriend he fucked in order to prove he wasn't a joto, never ever a joto like Lucho" (308).[41] Alfonso's denial and his repetition of the word "joto" reveal the internalized self-hate that he suffers as a Chicano who loves men.

Moths from Abuelita's Mouth: Reclamation?

The queer experiences in Viramontes' work are not limited to suffering. The unnamed queer-reading narrator of "The Moths" takes refuge in her grandmother's house as a respite from the patriarchal expectations of the Catholic church. When her grandmother dies, she bathes her and holds her, thinking of the pain in her grandmother's life that went unspoken. But as she sits in the bathtub with her grandmother, "the moths came. Small gray ones that came from her soul and out through her mouth fluttering to light, circling the single dull light bulb of the bathroom" (32). The moths are not fancy and they are not typically associated with beauty, nor are they described in a flattering light. The light bulb is small in the face of darkness and it speaks of stark barrio life, not wealthy and not fancy and not fine. But the moths elevate the moment of Abuelita's death from being only a moment of suffering. The narrator finds solace in what she has learned from her grandmother, even as she watches the respite from the pain she experiences in her father's house slip away from her. Viramontes tells no lies about the difficulties ahead for the narrator, who has just lost the woman whose presence protects her from pain. But she also honors the worth of Abuelita's soul and allows the narrator a moment of recognition, as the moths flutter out from her grandmother's mouth in a moment that is neither real nor unreal.

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[41] "Joto" most closely translates to "faggot." It is the masculine form of a word that demonizes and dismisses those who identify or are identified as homosexual Chicanos.

VI. Concluding Thoughts

Chicana feminist refigurations of cultural icons contribute to a powerful, robust, and growing literary tradition. Though Chicanas, particularly queer Chicanas, experience violent silencing at the hands of the Anglo and Chican@ patriarchies, this thesis proves that they are not merely deslenguadas. Incorporating Spanish into Chicana literary theory, as Anzaldúa does, is one method of linguistic recuperation. But achievement in the realm of theory does not "feed people in all their hungers" (Moraga, Loving in the War Years, 130). How can the hungry mouth speak? If basic material conditions are not met, how can cultural production take place? And what does literature matter in the face of starvation? To echo Sánchez's warning, "it is at best risky and at worst foolhardy to confuse represented emancipation with social emancipation. Exploitation and oppression are not, of course, simply discursive constructs" (344-345). Within the context of scholarship, though, Chicana feminist cultural production contributes to decolonizing the academy, and the use of tools made available by the "civilizing mechanism" of education in the United States allows Chicanas to represent themselves on their own terms.

I would like to end with an expression of the utmost respect for Viramontes and the work that she and others are doing. I had the privilege of interviewing her while I was conducting my research, and some of her words have stuck with me in the course of my writing and editing. We were discussing the bonds of connection made possible through literature, and she commented, "It opens up the world to a potential bond of understanding when you recognize the flaws in this character just like the flaws in yourself." I have tried to carefully examine my own biases in reading Chicana literature, and I have learned enormous amounts throughout the entire process. The crux of my struggle in writing this thesis has been the following: how do I read as practically and pragmatically as possible, paying close attention to the desperate material circumstances of

the lives of these characters, without dehumanizing them or defining their live solely by their suffering? As Viramontes said later in that same interview, "this is why good literature never dictates. It always complicates."

Appendix i. Interview with Viramontes

Sunday April 1, 2012

SL: Okay I have actually-I think-for official reasons I have to ask you again…Is it okay if I record this interview?

HV: Uh yes as long as it's only being used to research and not being posted anywhere else.

SL: Okay I will not put it on the Internet I promise. Haha…well…How are you first of all?

HV: I'm fine I'm fine, Sadie. Can you tell me a little bit about what your project is?

SL: Um yeah so I'm an English major at Tufts University and actually I think you've met my advisor, or at least she's met you. Her name is Christina Sharpe and…

HV: Oh yes yes of course! Right right right, how is she doing?

SL: She's good, actually she published a book called Monstrous Intimacies within the past-I don't know-within the past couple years.

HV: Oh I think I heard about it yes yes oh I have to order it but I did hear about it yeah

SL: Yeah she's great she gives a lot of really insightful and helpful feedback which I'm really pleased about. Um so I'm looking at mostly Under the Feet of Jesus but I'm supporting my argument with excerpts and with analysis from Their Dogs Came With Them and with selected stories from The Moths and I'm focusing on the relationship between physical and structural violence particularly in the lives of your female characters. So I'm…I'm looking at I'm claiming that there is a relationship between physical violence and structural violence---that's a Community Health term, but you know lack of access to health care, migration and immigration laws, and um environmental racism and all of that sort of stuff. And they…they are reproductions of each other.

HV: Mm hm

SL: And I am attempting to…I don't really know if "prove" is the right word but I am attempting to put forth the argument that…figurative language and metaphor and other sorts of literary devices…are a way to synthesize and make clear the relationship between a personal…personal physical instances of violence and larger structural oppression

HV: Okay alright that sounds like an interesting project.

SL: [laughs] I really like it. It's really fun I like it a lot. And I really like your books so I just get ot read them all the time so that's fun

HV: [laughs] now let me so can you define are you clear on the definition of what structural is?

SL: so well actually I would love to hear what you have to say about that but do you want me to clarify more of what I mean?

HV: Yeah I just…just to just to see that we're…we're we're both on the same plane and it's always interesting--I mean I love working with students because it's always interesting to ask them what, first of all, well the clarity on the terms that they use so that they know because sometimes, well English is not always an exact language and what one assumption-- I mean some people have assumptions about what a word means and it could be totally different or if they're aware of that difference it could open a door into their argument or another door into the way they think about things.

SL: Mmm

HV: So so so if you're using that I mean I can understand the physical violence thing but if you're using structural I mean I like the way you say that. You know if that's complex, industrial complex violence is another term.

SL: [typing]

HV: If you say structural I just want to know what you mean by that.

SL: So well so I'll give you an outline of my chapters and maybe that'll help.

HV: Okay

SL: I haven't quite figured out the order but my first chapter is on feminist refiguration of the figures of La Llorona, La Malinche, and La Virgen de Guadalupe so…

HV: Mmmhm

SL: So what I'm doing there is trying to first of all give background to readers like myself who didn't grow up in a Chicana cultural tradition and who may not have had access to learning about those figures. So and then I'm also looking a little bit at…I use Sandra Cisneros as an example but I'm looking at the way that Chicana authors have refigured these these characters and legends to, um, to serve their purposes and to uh so because mostly because…

HV: I think, I think, yeah, I think why we envision - we reenvison- these various icons that we grew up with is because I think that we're really, well, there's a certain…well for me I can only speak about myself but there's a certain unfairness that is tagged or that is, um uh you know connected with la Llorona or la Virgen de Guadalupe. Like when Sandra wrote that wonderful essay about thinking about la Virgen's vagina you know what I mean? And does she have one and you know that in other words not only trying to reimagine but to create some kind of balance. I know that I tried to rewrite La Llorona myth in my story with Carol where I equate the weeping woman with a woman who is a neighbor of this child who hears la Llorona, she's thinking about la Llorona but it's really a woman suffering from domestic violence. And for us I

think there's a commitment to getting these stories that we always grew up with and giving them… not even a spin but really trying to reenvision them and reimainge them and it's stories that are very connected to our material world and also again with me I always feel, you know, with La Llorona, even when I was a kid, I always felt there was something very unfair

SL: mmhm

HV: about this woman being criminalized and condemned because uh, she killed her children but I mean from the various stories it was horrible things that were done to her by the abandonment of her husband and by the town that didn't like her. Again, various stories that all show her like she's this crazy woman

SL: Right

HV: and I mean she could have been a crazy woman, anybody who kills their children of course has a certain degree of mental illness but there's…it's a lot more complicated I guess.

SL: Right. I agree.

HV: Complicated, yeah. These type of stories. So yeah, I think that's why, you know, when we were much younger, Sandra, myself, Ana Castillo, Denise Chavez, [Rhoda de Chamantes—can't understand this part] all tried to just look at you know the stories that we grew up with and you tried to give them that sense of fairness…sense of fair play.

Well one thing I found in my research—I'm reading Feminism on the Border by Sonia Saldívar-Hull…

HV: Oh yes uh huh uh huh

SL: One of the things I found was that she mentioned that for her, growing up, she heard the stories of La Malinche and La Llorona as the same that they were the same…Oh, maybe I'm mixing that up actually, that might be Moraga, now I'm not sure…but I wrote it down correctly somewhere in my 70+ pages, somewhere in there.

HV: [laughs]

SL: so in that section I'm looking at the relationship between these three figures and how it's sort of a different kind of trinity you know? And the way that they reflect one another and the way that each of them was uhhh has …this is difficult to say but I think of it like..so,,,well I'll use her real name but Malintzin lived at a time when…well, she lived at a border time. She lived in the space…and like her life and all the stories about her occupy the space between the indigenous people of the Americas and the European conquistadors and so her…I…I'm…looking at the way that you know the stories surrounding her life also relate to La Llorona also being grafted onto an earlier version of an Aztec goddess and
HV: yeah yeah that's right yeah

SL: and the intersections between indigenous religions and Catholicism and what, essentially, conquered people did to make those traditions have meaning to them in their own lives

HV: Yeah

SL: and it's really fascinating; they seem like three distinct figures with three distinct stories but in reality there are so many different stories surround all of them and they also all contain aspect of one another

HV: right right. Yes that's a beautiful way of saying that. To examine these stories in the context of when they were being created ultimately reflects back to the historical space of colonialism of violence and betrayal and it's all of these things that yeah. You make a…it makes perfect sense. I mean if you look at the Virgen de Guadalupe and you look at Juan Diego who…I mean there was this massive push to…to convert thousands and thousands and thousands of Indians, and how better way to do it than to have an Indian mestiza virgen de Guadalupe who looked like them?

SL: right right yeah you know because people they feel addressed

HV: yeah these stories…anyway, go ahead Sadie I'm sorry.

SL: No that's alright. So that's my…that's how I'm framing this…my whole argument is with the history of those three figures and some background on the stories told about them and them my analysis of the way they relate to one another as a way to insert and I guess introduce your work as both containing feminist refigurations of these icons and also um placing…stories, images, characters in history, and look at real consequence um and I suppose trying to relate image and metaphor and symbolism and free indirect discourse and all those other fun things we say in the English department to the reality of the lives of these characters and also the very real people that they represent and that…I mean…I just…I'm very political in my literary pursuits. [laughs]

HV: Yeah that makes perfect sense. That makes perfect sense. You know I always…it's funny because I was just talking to a group of students at Cal State Fullerton last week and I you know I talked to them about being a I mean I'm a political woman

SL: Mmmhm

HV: And when I say that my work reflects my politics, people, you know, frown because they think that political, politic means that its' propagandistic you know

SL: Mmhm

HV: And they think I'm converting them or doing something with my work that's dishonest, and that's the last thing I want. I always tell people I feel like Flannery O'Connor who said that her Catholicism gave her a clearer view of the distortions of reality but for me…and she would worry about those distortions of reality. And for me it's the same thing but rather than religion,

it’s the politics. I read my environment, and I’m capable to read my environment in ways that make me understand the complicated intersections of race, class, gender, sexual orientation.

SL: Right absolutely

HV: Without those politics I would be a very dishonest writer

SL: Right I agree and also I think…well, so I read your book first my sophomore year in the fall non-no, American Women Writers and I just remember in the beginning of that class we had a discussion of form versus politics and I said something along the lines of yeah but don’t you think a work should stand alone? And what I meant by that was not knowing anything about the author, not knowing anything about the author’s race gender class so background national and just appreciate the words. And…because you know that’s how they taught us in high school because you know they didn’t want us writing papers that were like because of the author’s I don’t know…because the author is a black woman, she believes, blah blah blah…they didn’t want us simplifying it to biography

HV: Yeah yeah

SL: And I remember her saying something along the lines of all form is political and the only people who can claim that it isn’t are people who come from an enormous position of privilege and that really stuck with me and actually really changed the way I think and I really appreciate her uh honesty and that class because

HV: Well what’s so interesting is when I first went on interviews after they had taken out, I mean not taken out, published, I was asked by an interviewee…interviewer, about um you know uh this is a political book. And I was very surprised by that you know what makes it political to you? And that interviewer didn’t really have an answer to it because… And you know when you look at Under the Feet of Jesus and it’s political and it’s not. Because I have to—you know, I was very well aware of what I was doing in terms of making some artistic choices and I’ll tell you a little bit about them before but you know and basically what the interviewer put after it was “Because I’m writing about poor people, huh? Is that political?”

SL: Yeah I mean…

HV: Yeah I mean observation that’s what it was. I was writing about poor people.

SL: Absolutely.

HV: Yeah so class was you know and in terms of my artistic choices you know one of the things that I didn’t wanna do is make you know the clear cut ranchers as being the villain. The rancher owners, the agricultural bigwigs and companies and agribusiness. I didn’t want to make them clearly the villain because then it would be a black and white kind of conflict.

SL: Hmmm

HV: And I didn't want it to overshadow the humanity of this family you know?

SL: Oh absolutely

HV: And so I think its a struggle enough of what they're going through without throwing in additional complicated you know uh conflict with this exploitive people. And that's why so I made that choice and I also made that choice because I don't believe you know polarization I didn't want people to dismiss the book in that way. You know I didn't…already this person was dismissing it as political.

SL: Well yeah and it's hard if you are writing as a Chicana on behalf of poor, mostly Chicana characters

HV: Yeah yeah

SL: to a mostly white audience, I mean mostly because of the demographics of the country

HV: yeah

SL: and uh, I can understand how that might feel, how you might feel you are on thin ice

HV: right exactly exactly. So

SL: well it was really interesting oh, continue

HV: no no go ahead

SL: Well it was really interesting because I was writing on Thursday night and I realized that I had finished my last chapter and it sort of snuck up on me and the last thing I wrote about was the white nurse

HV: uh huh

SL: and it's interesting for me because I am used to identifying with the protagonist of every book because of, then, we do that. I mean we read ourselves into characters, I mean I do that especially if they're young, you know, I mean Estrella is young and she's a girl and I was like okay fine that's me. But it wasn't. The one who looks like me is the nurse. And that was an interesting thing to write about because um my the part that I think I'm proudest of is I'm writing about mouths and I'm using Gloria Anzaldúa's section on How to Tame a Wild Tongue in Borderlands about linguistic terrorism and the relationship between like language and the form of the mouth and what you can say and what you can't and what gets heard um and then also there's a lot violent language about mouths and the boy with the harelip because of because of you know his mother was most likely poisoned while working in the field and all that and the nurses lipstick smeared. And it was this really interesting moment for me because it felt like um it felt like her…I could see so clearly the way she felt, you know the way she felt, that she was

confused and tired and she just wanted to go home and pick up her children and she just didn't understand

HV: exactly

SL: the incredible harm that she was doing

HV: exactly

SL: and Estrella provides that really beautiful adult deconstruction of the structure that keeps the nurse's car running and that keeps her comfortable and that keeps Estrella's family poor and oh man, I mean I just wanna blow that paragraph up and paste it all around the world and be like: read this!

HV: [laughs]

SL: so thanks. Um and I think I understand or at least I recognize how uh I mean there is probably a lot of anger but

HV: you know that's so beautiful the way you just put that Sadie, I have to say because I didn't, I mean, I am always amazed when people say the nurse was mean and inconsiderate and rude because I didn't write her out that way. Just as you describe her, it was the end of the day, she was tired, she had to pick up her kids you know she had her own…You know I always go back to this quote I use from Filo who was a philosopher in Alexandria, which is "be kind to everyone for everyone is fighting a great battle."

SL: You know that is the g-chat status of one of my best friends

HV: Yeah you know really it's a beautiful, you know and the thing is is that I think more than anything else, she just wasn't kind. It wasn't an intentional meanness, you know what I mean? Just as you describe her because you know she Alejo she examined him but she didn't recognize and then you corrected she didn't understand the harm that she was doing. You know that's why I think literature is so powerful because you can talk in the way that we're talking and see your self or else see oh my god. You didn't understand. You didn't recognize. And you know it opens up the world to a potential bond of understanding when you recognize the flaws in this character just like in the flaws in yourself. I mean this is why good literature never dictates. It always complicates.

SL: Right yeah I absolutely agree

HV: Because I'm a Chicana, I identify as a Chicana feminist people immediately put put uh a category and label on me as being political and propagandistic and the fact is and well I just think my work speaks for itself in terms of how political I am.

SL: Mmhm

HV: But anyway Sadie I'm going to off to lunch. Can I call you in another hour? Or I know you're very busy and maybe we could talk a little bit more?

SL: Yeah I would really appreciate that

HV: I'm in California right but um but maybe we could talk a little bit more? I don't know how your schedule is

SL: Um actually I have a thesis and a project so I don't have that much class time so I actually am quite free

HV: Ok

SL: I just, I have one final small question

HV: Sure

SL: Which is that I won't post this interview anywhere. Is it okay if I include some of your remarks in my introduction?

HV: Oh yeah absolutely. Absolutely. And just footnote it as personal correspondence.

SL: Okay I will

HV: No problem, no problem with that. It's just that as we're talking and everything I've had people post stuff on their Facebook and everything that was just, you know, was unedited and it just made me not…

SL: I won't do that.

HV: Well Sadie it was wonderful talking with you. It seems to me that you've got a pretty good handle on what you're doing and not only that but in terms of the way you've presented the project to me uh you know the theoretical legalese and how to say it and you know I think you're doing a wonderful job.

SL: Well thank you very much.

HV: And I can only wish you the best. Are you going to go on to graduate school?

SL: Yeah, actually. I am gonna take a couple years off and actually I'm gonna get certified in medical interpretation in Spanish um and I am going to work I think for a couple years and live and read for pleasure and do those sorts of things but I actually eventually want to teach Chicana feminism and I want to specialize particularly in transamerican feminism in general. And I'm not really sure how to do that 'cause I don't think there are degrees in that but that's what I want to do.

HV: Well in feminisms if you have the right one, we have a wonderful, wonderful, wonderful colleague of mine—Kay McCollum—who is a transnational feminist who is absolutely terrific. She is just terrific.

SL: Could you spell that name for me?

HV: Kay—Katherine McCullough. M-C-C-U-L-L-O-U-G-H. And she's in the department of English and also in FIGS which is an acronym for Feminist and Transgender Studies

SL: Right, right, right.

HV: But I just think the world of her let me tell you. She is just absolutely terrific. And you might want to just write to her, she's got three kids, her and her partner Mary [couldn't hear last name] so she might not respond to you right away but you know you could tell her that you're a student of Christina Sharpe and that you are doing this work and that you just want some advice on how to, when you know it's time for graduate school, what would be the best direction to go to in terms of your interest.

SL: Well thank you very much. I really, really very much appreciate that.

HV: Alright Sadie well listen, you take care of yourself and I hope this helps a little bit…

SL: Oh absolutely it really does.

HV: Okay take care Sadie.

SL: Okay you too.

HV: Good luck, eh? Gracias bye bye.

SL: De nada.

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