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Conocimiento Narratives: Challenging Oppressive Epistemologies Through Healing in
Latina/o Children's and Young Adult Literature

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

Doctor of Philosophy

in

English

by

Sonia Alejandra Rodríguez

August 2015

Dissertation Committee:

Dr. Traise Yamamoto, Chairperson

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Dr. Phillip Serrato

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2015

The Dissertation of Sonia Alejandra Rodríguez is approved:

Committee Chairperson

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DEDICATION

Para mi mami. Upon arriving to this country my mother made sure to enroll my sister and me in school. She did not speak English, did not know her way around her new neighborhood, and could not drive but somehow she made sure we were able to go to school. I obtained my first pair of glasses in the first grade only because my mom bartered cleaning services for them. While the glasses were adult frames and were literally half the size of my tiny face, my mom cleaned the optometrist office for a long time just so that I could see the chalkboard. My mother has lived a tough life but her support of my educational pursuits has never wavered. Although it was not clear to her why I had to leave home to attend college she did not stop me. And even though she did not quite understand my decision to move across the country to continue going to school, she believed, more than I did, that I would do well. Mami, le regalo mi doctorado porque sin su apoyo, su fe, y su amor no podria haber conseguirlo. Sin usted todo lo que he logrado no valdria la pena. Muchisimas gracias. La quiero un chingo.

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ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

Conocimiento Narratives: Challenging Oppressive Epistemologies through Healing in
Latina/o Children's and Young Adult Literature

by

Sonia Alejandra Rodríguez

Doctor of Philosophy, Graduate Program in English
University of California, Riverside, August 2015
Dr. Traise Yamamoto, Chairperson

I introduce the concept of “conocimiento narratives” in my dissertation as a lens to understand Latina/o children's and young adult literature and as a means to engage in conversations about healing in the lives of Latina/o children. I adapt Chicana feminist scholar Gloria Anzaldúa's articulation of “conocimiento,” which she describes as the process of using knowledge for healing, in order to emphasize the different ways this literature represents the oppressions Latina/o children in the United States face and the ways those oppressions are challenged via healing processes. In the course of this dissertation, I provide analyses of realist fiction by authors such as Juan Felipe Herrera, Charles Rice-González, Rigoberto González, and Rene Colato Laínez to explore how structures of knowing and healing impact the various subject positions Latina/o children take.

Chapter 1 of the dissertation introduces conocimiento narratives by examining the creative acts of young Latina characters in order to demonstrate how traditional *künstlerromane*, novels of artistic development, exclude issues of race and ethnicity from its definition of artist. Texts like Luis J. Rodriguez's *América is Her Name* allow me to

highlight the use of art to promote healing in the lives of Latina girls. Chapter 2 investigates how absent fathers, who are “absent” due to immigration status, incarceration, and illness, inform their sons’ *conocimiento* process and constructions of Latino masculinity. Through Juan Felipe Herrera’s *Downtown Boy*, for example, I examine how Mr. Palomares’s search for water that will heal his diabetes is at odds with his son’s own *conocimiento* process. Chapter 3 presents *conocimiento* as an alternative to the oppressive forces of homonationalism in queer Latino young adult novels and moves toward a holistic queer Latino identity. By examining Charles González-Rice’s *Chulito* I complicate the notion that Latino youth must leave their neighborhood in order to be openly queer. Chapter 4 follows Trinidad Ramos, a Latina transgender character in Rigoberto González’s *The Mariposa Club* trilogy, through her senior year and examines the violence that she experiences for identifying as transgender and the ways that *conocimiento* serves as a means to survive.

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Introduction

There aren't many photographs of my childhood. Those that do exist were taken once my family moved to the US but even those gradually got lost as we moved from apartment to apartment. There are significantly more pictures of me in my teens holding my baby brother or my baby sister. From the ages of 13 to about 16 I am holding, feeding, rocking, or playing with a baby. It could easily be assumed by looking at the photographs that I may be holding my own children. While I obviously looked young in the pictures I was still old to enough to bear children and I was brown enough to have that possibly be my experience. There are a few photos where my sister is holding a baby and I'm in the background reading a book. As the oldest child in my family, it was my responsibility to help my mother care for the younger children—which was captured by the pictures of me holding babies for most of my teens. Those photos of me holding babies were emblematic of the possibilities for my life. Because I was undocumented, Mexican, and a woman the possibilities for my future were limited. From a young age I was being groomed by my parents for the only life they knew—a life where I took care of children and a husband. The pictures of me in the background reading stand as anomalies in the albums my parents keep of my childhood. However, I clearly remember that if I wasn't helping my mother take care of the family, I was reading.

I began reading voraciously as a pre-teen. I read through Ann M. Martin's *Baby-Sitters Club* series, Barbara Park's *Junie B. Jones* boxed sets, Beverly Cleary's *Ramona* collection, and Norton Juster's *Phantom Tollbooth* several times. My mom signed me up for library reading programs where as an incentive students would get Pizza Hut

vouchers for individual pizzas when they turned in book reports. I often made sure to turn in enough book reports to earn enough pizza for the rest of my family because we would not have been able to afford it otherwise. I did not realize it then but I read a lot because I searched for something. My home life did not always feel safe mostly because domestic violence was a daily reality. I often read at night because that is when I was most afraid. But when I read I did not feel as afraid—I felt free. Reading offered a temporary escape from the violence around me but eventually the books I read were no longer enough. The violence at home worsened and my anger grew. The life of Junie B. Jones and Ramona stopped being possible. I would never be a carefree, adventurous, free-spirited girl like those characters. It was not until someone gave me a copy of Rudolfo Anaya's *Bless Me, Última* as a freshman in high school that I began to see myself in characters. It was Sandra Cisneros's *The House on Mango Street*, however, that revolutionized my understanding of literature. Up to that point I had not read a character that spoke so closely to my experiences like Esperanza Cordero did. Reading Cisneros's vignettes felt like I was reading about people in my neighborhood. I had not known that those types of stories were even worth writing about. I began to feel a new sense of pride and urgency. I wanted to read more about people like me and I had to tell other people like me that those stories were out there.

Children's and young adult writer Walter Dean Myers shared similar experiences with reading in his opinion piece for the New York Times, "Where Are the People of Color in Children's Books?" in March 2014. In the article, he expressed that while he was an avid reader as a child he eventually had a moment of realization that there were

not many books that spoke to his experiences. He states, “Books did not become my enemies. They were more like friends with whom I no longer felt comfortable. I stopped reading. I stopped going to school” (Myers). Myers speaks about feeling a profound anger that stems from what the lack representations revealed. There seems to be a sense of desolation and even betrayal when books can no longer provide the safety and escapism they once did. At this point it appears best to stop reading. Unfortunately, many children of color experience this disconnect with books today. Myers explains he wanted to change this experience for readers. He writes:

I realized that this was exactly what I wanted to do when I wrote about poor inner-city children—to make them human in the eyes of readers, and especially, in their own eyes. I need to make them feel as if they are part of America’s dream, that all the rhetoric is meant for them, and that they are wanted in this country.
(Myers)

Myers makes clear the very real marginalization that children of color feel when they do not see themselves reflected in literature. The issue of the lack of representation extends beyond harming a child’s self-esteem as it touches on issues of humanity, citizenship, and freedom. In other words, representation is significant because it signals who is visible and who is marginalized. The lack of representation of children of color in books suggests that they do not exist or, worse, that they are less than. Myers’s intent as a writer “to make them human in the eyes of readers, and especially, in their own eyes” further signals the racialization and the consequences of such racialization under which children of color live. Myers reveals that the fight for representation includes a battle to be recognized as human and the rights associated with this legibility. Moreover, Myers argues that diversity in children’s books also helps children of color see themselves as

important. That is, as much as diversity in children's literature is essential because it teaches others about children of color it is equally, or more, important that children of color see themselves as someone who matters.

My dissertation, "Conocimiento Narratives: Challenging Oppressive Epistemologies through Healing in Latina/o Children's and Young Adult Literature," stems from a desire, like Myers's, to humanize children of color because their lives matter. But maybe more importantly I focus on the ways that Latina/o children's and young adult literature can provide healing to Latino children from a variety of oppressions. While diversity in children's literature is definitely still needed and an important aspect of representation issues in children's literature, I am most concerned with the present conditions of racism and how those conditions affect Latino children. In other words, I am interested in the ways that racism hurts Latino children today and the ways that Latino/a children's literature can help mend those wounds. In writing about healing I refer to it as a continuous process rather than one with an end point. I do not mean to suggest that Latina/o children's literature will fix or cure the traumas that Latino children experience as subjects of the U.S. nation but rather that it can instead serve as a tool through which to reimagine their subjectivity and positionality in this country from one of marginalization to one of empowerment. Furthermore, I theorize healing as a state of being rather than a transitory phase. Oftentimes discussions on the need to diversify children's literature suggest that the lack of representation is the crux of children's low self-esteem and that not being valued in literature creates a domino effect that produces marginalized adults. Although I agree with the parallel between the lack of representation

and future marginalization, I would argue that the greater issue is that of racism. While the hope with diversifying children's literature is that it will create larger societal impacts through cultural sensitivity and multiculturalism such societal change will not be immediate. Despite the diversification of children's literature children of color will continue to encounter racism in their daily experiences. For example, the Cooperative Children's Book Center (CCBC) at the University of Wisconsin-Madison releases statistics on children's books published by and about people of color every year. In 2014 out of the 3,500 children's books surveyed by CCBC only 59 (1.7%) were written by Latinos and 66 (1.9%) were about Latinos. These percentages, unfortunately, reflect an increase over ten years. However, an increase in diversifying children's literature has not meant a decrease in the incarceration, murder, or deportation of youth of color. In fact, the recent murders of black youth by police officers in this country suggests otherwise. Again, while diversifying children's literature is definitely a necessity, the daily experiences of children of color suggest that healing needs to also take place every day. Unfortunately, current societal and political conditions in the US continue to suggest that racism will remain a daily reality so then I suggest that in order for children to survive, live, and thrive in this oppressive state healing needs to be as much a part of their existence and that such healing can be learned and taught through Latina/o children's literature.

Theories on Healing by Women of Color Feminists

My understandings, theorizations, and interventions on healing stem from conversations on the topic by Black and Chicana feminists. Theorists like Audre Lorde,

bell hooks, Kimberly Crenshaw, Chela Sandoval, Emma Perez, and Gloria Anzaldúa have all discussed healing in some capacity in their scholarship. Their analyses and critique of racism and institutional violence in the United States makes clear how these oppressive systems harm women of color but in challenging these systems they have also created alternative ways of existing. I read their critiques of colonialism, heteronormativity, and patriarchy, for example, as part of a healing process dedicated to their survival and the survival of people of color. While their scholarship at times engages one another and at various times diverges in different paths, it is their investment in challenging existing epistemologies and in creating new liberating ones that has allowed me to read their critical interventions as relating to healing. In some capacity my dissertation project engages with the varying theoretical lenses on healing by the aforementioned women of color feminists, and others like them, because they often intersect with one another. However, the foundation for my theoretical framework stems from Gloria Anzaldúa's "conocimiento" process primarily because she lays out the varying stages of how conocimiento happens. In an interview with AnaLouis Keating in 1991, Anzaldúa explains, "conocimiento is a theory of composition, of how a work of art gets composed, of how a field (like anthropology or literature or physics) is put together and maintained, of how reality itself is constructed, and of how identity is constructed." In this way, conocimiento is a method of continuously putting together and taking apart the self in order to access healing despite violences that plague our daily existences.

In "now let us shift...the path of conocimiento...inner works, public acts," Anzaldúa explains that in Spanish "conocimiento" means "knowledge or skill" and that

by referring to a *conocimiento* process she refers to “that aspect of consciousness urging you to act on the knowledge gained” (footnote 2). In other words, *conocimiento* is a process of using knowledge for healing. She further argues, “Often nature provokes un ‘aja’ or ‘conocimiento,’ one that guides the feet along the path, gives you el ánimo to dedicate yourself to transforming perceptions of reality, and thus the conditions of life” (540). Anzaldúa grounds her explication of *conocimiento* in her personal experiences, like her battle with diabetes, and by doing so she finds healing in her own stories. In other words, Anzaldúa gives value to her personal stories and uses them as sites of knowledge and healing. Furthermore, by suggesting that “perceptions of reality” can be transformed Anzaldúa also makes clear that existing knowledges can also be changed and as a result so can “conditions of life.” Knowledge can then be defined as the stories we hear around our kitchen tables in the same way that oppressive knowledges about race, class, and gender (i.e. racism, classism, sexism, homophobia) can be transformed. *Conocimiento* is a healing process that prioritizes knowledge of the self to provide inner healing as well using that knowledge for the healing of public spaces. For Anzaldúa, healing needs to take place within the self as well as in the environments we inhabit.

A primary example of the ways that women of color feminists have theorized and applied healing is the foundational anthology *This Bridge Called My Back: Writings by Radical Women of Color* (1981). In it, Cherríe Moraga articulates “theory in the flesh” as “one where the physical realities of our lives—our skin color, the laid concrete we grew up on, our sexual longings—all fuse to create a politic born out of necessity. Here, we attempt to bridge the contradictions in our experiences.” Theory in the flesh centers the

lived experiences of women of color as essential to the construction of knowledges that further seek to challenge existing modes of oppression. In this way, there is empowerment and agency in the stories, the memories, and the histories of women of color. Juan Felipe Herrera's *Super Cilantro Girl* serves as a depiction of theory in the flesh in Latina/o children's and young adult literature. Esmeralda Sinfronteras, the protagonist, uses the knowledge imparted by her grandmother about cilantro to transform herself into the magnanimous hero, Super Cilantro Girl, and save her mother from an ICE detention center. Esmeralda literally uses her body to break down the walls that seek to separate her family. Understanding theory in the flesh as part of a larger healing process suggests that the physical body and the experiences associated with said body matter.

Chela Sandoval's "differential consciousness" provides an alternative way to surviving and healing within varying systems of oppression. In *Methodology of the Oppressed* (2000) Sandoval explains that differential consciousness demands a "new subjectivity, a political revision that denies any one ideology as the final answer, while instead positing a *tactical subjectivity* with the capacity to recenter depending upon the kinds of oppression to be confronted" (14). She further clarifies that this tactical subjectivity can be considered similar to shifting gears in a car—we shift gears in order to adjust to the oppressions we encounter on a daily basis. In other words, differential consciousness is about shifting ideologies and identities in response to different configurations of power. For example, in Nichola Mohr's young adult novel *Nilda*, the mother must shift gears in order to engage with representatives of public institutions like Nilda's teachers and the employees at the welfare office. While Nilda does not really

understand why her mother would be nice to someone that treats them poorly her mother explains that they need to do what they must to survive. In this way, Nilda's mother's application of differential consciousness is practical and it helps her keep food on the table and Nilda in school. Differential consciousness presents a strategy to move about the world, to exist within oppressive structures, and offers an opportunity to survive. Managing to survive in a society where the conditions of racism are still very much felt is powerful. However, living and surviving are two different states of being. Surviving suggests existing within and from the margins while living implies access to humanity and power. Differential consciousness as a healing practice involves a desire to live and doing what must be done in order to remain alive. For example, in Charles Rice-Gonzalez's young adult novel *Chulito*, Chulito's relationship with the local gang is part of his gear shifting in order to survive socially and financially. The gang's heteronormativity and hypermasculinity, while problematic, provides him protection from the violence he might endure if he comes out as gay. Furthermore, by dealing drugs the gang also gives him an alternative source of income that helps to financially sustain him and his mom. In other words, practical applications of differential consciousness as exemplified by Nilda's mom and Chulito can be understood as daily forms of "hustling." Nilda's mom and Chulito maneuver through the complicated systems that threaten their existence by stepping in and out of any given identity and employing critical strategies, or hustles, to survive. However, Nida's mom's and Chulito's healing through differential consciousness does not always include a change in the realities and environments they

inhabit. Healing, in this way, only involves individual survival and sustainability and not necessarily public and community healing.

In a similar vein, Emma Pérez's "decolonial imaginary" serves as a healing practice that challenges existing oppressive ideologies in an attempt to create new more liberating ones. In *The Decolonial Imaginary: Writing Chicanas into History* (1999) Pérez argues that "like differential consciousness, decolonial imaginary in Chicana/o history is a theoretical tool for uncovering the hidden voices of Chicanas that have been relegated to the silences." In this way, decolonial imaginary is an opportunity to decolonize history, memory, and stories in order to include Chicana voices and experiences. I find Pérez's decolonial imaginary an example of how knowledge can be transformed in order to create more empowering ideologies and be able to access them as sites of healing. Because Chicano history and mainstream U.S. history often relegate Chicana and other women's history to the margins their voices are not heard or are completely silenced. The silencing of Chicana voices further signifies a lack of representation and a lack of power. A decolonial imaginary allows for Chicanas to be imagined as part of a larger history and in this way they are able to gain access to a power that comes from being heard. Vicki Ruiz's *From Out of the Shadows* (2008), Elizabeth Martinez's *500 Years of Chicana Women's History* (2008), and Maylei Blackwell's *¡Chicana Power!: Contested Histories of Feminism in the Chicano Movement* (2011) are a few recent examples of the ways in which a decolonial imaginary rewrites a history that includes Chicana experiences. By reimagining history, decolonial imaginary provides visibility, representation, and access to power— all of which contributes to a healing

process that centers Chicanas and their experiences. A decolonial imaginary of children's and young adult literature, for example, suggests a (re)envisioning of the genre that includes children of color. In this way, the inclusion and representation of children of color in children's literature become part of a larger healing process. Furthermore, I would read Walter Dean Myers's desire to write poor-inner city youth into stories as a decolonial imaginary project because he imagines a history and a world that includes and/or centers their experiences. A decolonial imaginary creates a space where healing for communities is possible by reimagining histories, memories, and stories that include or center marginalized voices. Pérez, like Moraga and Sandoval, demonstrates the real struggle to undo and unlearn the oppressive knowledges that marginalize people of color. Anzaldúa speaks to this struggle and explains how her search for *conocimiento* led her to understand healing differently.

Conocimiento Narratives

Anzaldúa explains that there are seven stages of *conocimiento*—*el arrebató*, *nepantla*, the Coatlicue state, the call to action, putting Coyolxauhqui together, the blow up, and the shifting of realities. These stages are not linear but instead serve as a guide for understanding the various directions in which healing can take us. For Anzaldúa, *conocimiento* is a healing process akin to a spiritual journey that takes one from *desconocimiento* (ignorance/darkness) into the possibility for social change. “*El arrebató*” is the rupture or break that disrupts one's present condition. Anzaldúa describes *el arrebató* as a sort of earthquake that shatters the earth underneath and shakes one's foundation. *Arrebatos* are violent and oppressive encounters with another person, family,

a community, an institution, a system, and more. An *arrebato*, for example, in Rigoberto González's young adult novel *The Mariposa Club* is felt by Trinidad Ramos, the transgender Latina character in the novel. One of the *arrebato* that Trinidad experiences is being physically assaulted by the jocks at her school. While the *arrebato* occurs on a personal level wherein individual students attack another student, it also happens at an institutional and systemic level. Trinidad's high school failed to protect its queer and transgender population and therefore making it possible for students to even attack other students in the first place. Systemic violence against queer and transgender people, in general, made it so that the school did not feel responsible for the protection of its queer and transgender students. Being attacked serves as the *arrebato* that forces Trinidad to question her position and identity as a transgender Latina. That moment of questioning one's identity can be considered as part of what Anzaldúa describes as the second stage of *conocimiento*, "*nepantla*."

Nepantla is a liminal space between the old and the new. Anzaldúa describes *nepantla* as a site of vulnerability and openness. This is the stage where one has to decide how to move forward after the *arrebato*. *Nepantla* is the site that requires the examination of previously held knowledge and the consideration of new ways of knowing. While Anzaldúa explains that *nepantla* is a space of great opportunity she further adds that it is also a source of great pain that can thrust one into the Coatlicue stage. This third stage is one of "despair, self-loathing, and hopelessness" (545). In Latina/o children's illustrated books the Coatlicue stage is often represented as a time of great sadness for the child protagonists that might include crying, isolation, and misbehaving. In Latina/o young

adult literature, the Coatlicue stage can be identified as moments of great depression and self-destruction, ranging from isolation to binge drinking and suicide attempts. The fourth stage, the call to action, is a push in the direction of a new self which Anzaldúa describes as walking over a bridge to the other side. She further explains that this is the stage where previously held knowledge about the self is reassessed and contested. Anzaldúa writes, “Identity becomes a cage you reinforce and double-lock yourself into. The life you thought inevitable, unalterable, and fixed in some foundational reality is smoke, a mental construction, fabrication. So, you reason, if it’s all made up, you can compose it anew and differently” (559). It is in this way that previously held knowledges can be challenged and transformed and new knowledge can be created.

“Putting Coyolxauhqui together” is the stage where the transformation or creation of knowledge takes place. In “Let us be the healing of the wound: The Coyolxauhqui imperative—la sombra y el sueño,” Anzaldúa explains that:

Coyolxauhqui is [her] symbol for the necessary process of dismemberment and fragmentation, of seeing that self or the situations you’re embroiled in differently. It is also [her] symbol for reconstructions and reframing, one that allows for putting the pieces together in a new way. The Coyolxauhqui imperative is an ongoing process of making and unmaking. There is never any resolution, just the process of healing. (312)

The “process of making and unmaking” in the fifth stage is what allows for the creation of stories that empower the self and empower communities. Putting the pieces together can be about the individual and also about putting together communities and histories. Anzaldúa warns, however, that the public is not always receptive to these new stories that arise from putting one’s self together again. Stage six, the blow up, is a confrontation between past and new knowledges. The sixth stage is a “clash of realities” because it

requires that previously held notions be challenged and be called out for being oppressive. This stage is significant in part because it further indicates that healing processes require an engagement with private and public spaces. For example, in Rigoberto Gonzalez's *The Mariposa Club* the protagonists' investment in starting their high school's first GLBT club stems from a personal desire to be remembered and from a more public understanding that such a club will benefit future students. However, the group faces numerous clashes of realities with their peers and fellow community members because the new club signals the homophobia present in their high school and community at large. Anzaldúa makes clear that a clash of realities is needed in order for a shift in realities to take place.

The seventh stage, the shift in realities, is both the space for social change and for personal transformation. The shift in realities is the moment of recognition and embracement of a new self for both individuals and communities. In Latina/o children's and young adult literature, the shift in realities is most present in the endings of the stories. Happy endings in children's illustrated books in particular tend to be an essential component of the genre, most likely due to the nature of its audience. The happy endings serve as the most obvious representation of the shift in realities in the protagonists' experiences. For example, Luis J. Rodríguez's *América is Her Name* concludes with an image of América and her family embracing one another and walking through their community. By the end of the story América's father has changed his mind about his daughter's desire to be a poet and is now supportive, and the community that was earlier represented as violent now seems to be a safe space. This ending is clearly a shift from

the arrebatos that América experienced throughout the story. By suggesting that shifts in realities are most apparent in happy endings I do not mean to suggest that the healing process has also ended or that the protagonists are healed by the end of the narrative. Instead I read happiness as part of the larger *conocimiento* process wherein we/they can move in and out of happiness in the same way that we/they can move in and out of the other stages of *conocimiento*.

I introduce “*conocimiento* narratives” as a way to bridge conversations about healing and scholarship on Latina/o children’s and young adult literature in order to demonstrate the larger impact that this genre can have on the lives of Latino children. In referencing *conocimiento* narratives, I mean to employ Anzaldúa’s theorizations on healing and trace them within Latina/o children’s and young adult literature. The reading of texts within this genre as *conocimiento* narratives permits for a broader understanding of Latina/o children’s literature as a tool for healing and as a tool for social change. Furthermore, the concept of *conocimiento* narratives allows me to challenge the notion of childhood as a linear process. That is, instead of understanding childhood as having a direct path into adulthood I mean to signal the ways that racism, for example, forces Latino children to act as adults or carry adult responsibilities at a much younger age while simultaneously infantilizing Latino adults. Current understandings of childhood suggest that childhood as a stage of development is something that everyone has access to simply because of age; however, the childhood of an upper class white boy is significantly different than the childhood of an undocumented Latino boy living below the poverty line. In this way, definitions of childhood vary depending on class, gender,

and race, and are further altered by classism, sexism, racism, and the like. Additionally, certain children's bodies benefit from the innocence associated with childhood while other/othered bodies do not. In *Racial Innocence: Performing American Childhood from Slavery to Civil Rights* (2011), Robin Bernstein explains that "sentimental culture had woven childhood and innocence together wholly. Childhood was then understood not as innocent but as innocence itself; not as a symbol of innocence but as its embodiment. The doctrine of original sin receded, replaced by a doctrine of original innocence. This innocence was race white" (15). In other words, childhood was defined as having to do with innocence and whiteness. Bernstein further demonstrates the ways that childhood and innocence have been utilized to structure and uphold U.S. racial projects and how the protection of certain children has served as a representation for the development, progress, and success of the U.S. nation. This, of course, is accomplished at the cost of African-American children's lives. The historical underpinnings of racial projects like slavery and anti-black violence in general continue to impact the lives of African-American children and I argue that they can also be felt in the experiences of Latino children in the United States today. It is for these reasons that it is imperative that healing processes and practices also be part of conversations that relate to the lives of children of color.

Because I am interested in the ways that healing and literature impact the lives of actual children I focus my dissertation on realist fiction in Latina/o children's and young adult literature. Realist fiction in Latina/o children's and young adult literature is unique not only because it depicts the struggles experienced by Latina/o children but also

because it promotes hope and healing in the face of adversity. By connecting *conocimiento* narratives to realist fiction in Latina/o children's and young adult literature, I suggest that *conocimiento* and healing are applicable to the real lives of Latino children and that literature for and about them is one way to address the impacts that racism and other forms of oppression have on their lives.

The opening chapter of the dissertation introduces *conocimiento* narratives by way of the traditional children's literary subgenre of the *künstlerroman*, the novel of artistic development, in order to consider the multifaceted ways that race and ethnicity complicate the relationship between creativity and subjectivity in Latina/o children's and young adult literature. This chapter examines how creativity and imagination function as tools through which Latina protagonists participate in a *conocimiento* process that allows them to challenge and transform the oppressions they experience at home, in their communities, and as subjects of the U.S. nation. Through an analysis of picture books for children by Juan Felipe Herrera (*Super Cilantro Girl*) and Luis J. Rodríguez (*América is Her Name*) and young adult novels by Pam Muñoz-Ryan (*Becoming Naomi León*) and Nicholasa Mohr (*Nilda*), I examine how the Latina protagonists use creative acts (embodied imagination, writing, carving, and drawing) that allow for the attainment of *conocimiento* and the articulation of empowerment through alternative ways of knowing.

Chapter 2 investigates the impact of "absent" fathers in the lives of young Latino boys and the ways in which *conocimiento* narratives dramatize healing in the protagonists' understanding of Latino masculinity. Through an analysis of the young adult texts by Juan Felipe Herrera (*Downtown Boy*), Torrey Maldonado (*Secret*

Saturdays), and a picture book by René Colato Laínez (*Waiting for Papá*) I demonstrate how fathers who are absent due to illness, incarceration, or immigration status, impart healing and surviving strategies to their sons. These *conocimiento* narratives complicate notions of absent fathers in the lives of Latino children by signaling to systemic and institutional oppressions as the reason for the fathers' absence. Distrust of medical institutions, abuse by the prison industrial complex, and fear of the immigration system limit the fathers' ability to parent their sons and as a result the sons are isolated, further marginalized, and left to construct their own understandings of masculinity. *Downtown Boy*, *Secret Saturdays*, *Sucker Punch*, and *Waiting for Papá* allow for a reading of these father/son relationships as a path toward healing.

Chapter 3 focuses on gay male experiences in Latina/o young adult literature in order to examine homonationalism as a construct that denies the young protagonists to be both Latino and queer. I demonstrate that as a way to normalize white queer identity homonationalism depends on the criminalization of an "other," the fleeing of one's ethnic neighborhood, and separating from one's ethnic identity. *Conocimiento* narratives challenge these tactics by promoting a healing path toward a holistic Latino queer identity. My critical engagement with novels by Alex Sánchez (*Rainbow Boys*), Benjamin Sáenz (*Aristotle and Dante Discover the Secrets of the Universe*) and Charles Rice-González (*Chulito*) allows me to analyze the systemic, emotional, and physical violence queer Latino youth encounter from within and outside of their communities. An examination of these *conocimiento* narratives presents an opportunity to discuss the

tendency to separate queer and ethnic identity in young adult novels as a means to essentialize gay experiences.

Chapter 4 features a discussion on dress, ornamentation, and identity in Rigoberto Gonzalez's *Mariposa* trilogy. I follow Trinidad Ramos, the transgender Latina protagonist, on her journey through *conocimiento* and her battle to exist as a transgender woman of color. Ramos experiences an excessive amount of violence from the straight men in her life, in her school, and in her community. Despite that violence, Ramos continues to assert her trans identity and this is most obviously seen through the way she dresses. By analyzing dress and ornamentation in González's *The Mariposa Club* (2009), *Mariposa Gown* (2012), and *Mariposa U* (2015), I argue that certain types of dress (i.e. women's clothing on a body read as male) disrupt hetero-patriarchal structures by allowing the wearer to use the body as part of a *conocimiento* narrative. In other words, Trini and some of the other characters utilize their clothes to challenge or survive homophobia and hypermasculinity. This chapter highlights the body's roles in combating violence against transgender and queer young adults and the ways that the body is conducive for a *conocimiento* process.

Very little scholarship exists on Latina/o children's and young adult literature including its extensive history. My dissertation attempts to fill in some of these research gaps by providing a critical literary analysis of some of the books published in the 90s and 2000s. A brief overview of the genre further demonstrates the importance for more research on Latina/o children's and young adult literature.

Contextualizing and Understanding Latina/o Children's and Young Adult

Literature

In 1929, Pura Belpré became the first Latina librarian in the New York Public library system. As a librarian, Belpré outreached to young Latinos and their families through various events that highlighted their experiences. Belpré recounted many of the traditional Puerto Rican folktales she learned as a child to the children that would visit her library. Best known for her use of puppetry and performance to educate Latino children about their history and culture, Belpré published many children's illustrated books and received multiple awards honoring her commitment to Latino children's literacy. Some of her works include *Perez and Martina*, *The Tiger and the Rabbit*, and *Other Stories*, and *Once in Puerto Rico*. She also translated many classic children's stories into Spanish. Lucia González's bilingual children's book, *The Storyteller's Candle/ La Velita de los Cuentos*, tributes Belpré's contributions to the Latino community. While the origins of children's and young adults' literature can be traced before Belpré, her significant work as a librarian has had a major impact on the genre and continues to be influential to other Latino writers.

Previous conversations about the origins of the genre signal to a larger history of discrimination and racism against Chicano and Latino communities in the United States. Issues of segregation, anti-immigration laws, and English-only movements were just a few of the challenges that impeded a full embrace of Chicano/Latino culture and expression. Mainstream literature about and for children often times excluded the experiences of Mexican and Latino children or heavily depended on stereotypes to tell

these stories. The rise of the Chicano Movement in the 1970s and 1980s saw an increase in the production of literature addressing Chicano/Latino experiences in the United States. Influential coming-of-age books like Ernesto Galarza's *Barrio Boy* (1971), Tomas Rivera's *...Y No Se lo Trago La Tierra* (1971), Rudolfo Anaya's *Bless Me, Última* (1972), and Sandra Cisneros's *The House on Mango Street* (1984) spotlighted the experiences of Chicano children and young adults in the U.S. and transformed prior understandings of the genre. Writers were concerned with promoting important messages of cultural pride, family values, and community building, while at the same time discussing issues of racism, classism, and sexism in white America and their own communities. The spirit of liberation and empowerment that surrounded these social movements influenced many of the stories in children's illustrated books and novels for young adults.

The 1990s marked a significant shift in the demand for children's and young adults' literature in the Chicano/Latino communities across the U.S. With a major increase in the Latino population, publishers found themselves with a new market to target. Publishing houses like Children's Book Press and Piñata Press, an imprint of Arte Público Press, began circulating more Spanish, English, and bilingual books that spoke to Chicano/Latino experience. The "Little Latin Boom" of the 1990s, to use Alma Flor Ada's words, gave Chicano and Latino writers a clear visibility that was not readily available before. The social and political climate of the 1990s opened up many more opportunities for the circulation and accessibility of children's and young adults' literature directed at Chicanos and Latinos.

Themes in Chicano and Latino children's and young adults' literature often include conversations about immigration, family, culture, traditions, education, identity, racism, and discrimination, among others. These were themes that were regularly left out of mainstream children's literature as they pertained to Chicano and Latino communities in the U.S. Immigration, for example, is a very common theme in many young adult and illustrated books. Given the persistent anti-immigration social climate in the U.S., works underlining stories of immigration sought to capture the varied and complex experiences of those entering the country and the difficult realities of doing so—like living in poverty, learning a new language, and balancing multiple cultures. Issues of representation have been a guiding force to those creating literature for Chicano and Latino children. Emphasizing the importance of Latino culture, history, and traditions is part of an important project to build strong self-esteem and raise social awareness among Latino children and young adults. Authors of Chicano and Latino children's and young adult's literature explore these themes in many ways. Diverse uses of literary forms, styles, and genres have been employed to capture these stories.

Before Cuban writer Alma Flor Ada started publishing children's books, she was very involved in different professional organizations whose focus was to bring attention to Latin American, Hispanic, and Latino literature. Ada released multiple Spanish, English, and bilingual illustrated books, poetry collections, novels, and educational resources speaking to a Latino experience. Some of her works include *My Name is Maria Isabel* (1993), the story of an eight year old Puerto Rican, Maria, and the discrimination she faces in her new American classroom, and *Empty Piñata* (1999), a children's

illustrated book that tells the story of Elena, her piñata, and an adventure about generosity. *Empty Piñata* is part of Ada's series, "Stories the Year 'Round/ Cuentos Para Todo el Año," which includes twelve books, one for each month of the year. The books are also available in Spanish and all comprise family activities to make the books more enjoyable. Other books in the series include *How the Rainbow Came to Be*, *The Kite*, and *The Golden Cage*.

Gloria Velásquez is best known for her "Roosevelt High School Series," a collection of eight young adult novels focusing on the lives of a group of ethnically diverse friends at Roosevelt High in Southern California. The books cover a range of topics such as divorce as seen in *Maya's Divided World* (1995), domestic violence as presented in *Rina's Family Secret* (1998), and alcoholism as discussed in *Tyrone's Betrayal* (2005). The Roosevelt High Series speaks to the many differences in experiences in the Latino community and points to issues of discrimination in education, class differences, and the significance of mentorship in young adults' development. The series recognizes the strength in friendships and community.

Omar Castañeda brings forth a Guatemalan experience by setting his books in Guatemala. *Among the Volcanoes* (1991) tells the story of Isabel Pacay and her struggle to become a teacher. Isabel is limited by the gender expectations of her traditional home but she fights for something different. In the sequel, *Imagining Isabel* (1994), Isabel finds herself in the middle of the turbulent political climate of Guatemala as she pursues her teaching career. In Castañeda's children's book, *Abuelita's Weave* (1993), Esperanza learns how to weave *huipiles* and tapestries from her grandmother in order to sell them at

the market in Santa Cruz to local Guatemalans and tourists. Castañeda's books signal a new perspective in Chicano and Latina experiences in the United States by focusing on a history that is often left invisible—the history of Central Americans. This insider perspective broadens the existing understanding of the type of relationship the U.S. has with many Latin American countries.

Gary Soto has written several award winning children's illustrated and young adult novels. *Baseball in April and Other Stories* (1990) is a collection of short stories that captures the coming-of-age experiences of young Latinos/as in Fresno, California. *Too Many Tamales* (1992) tells the story of Maria and her mother's misplaced ring which Maria believes is in one of the tamales they have prepared for their Christmas celebration. *Chato's Kitchen* (1995) introduces readers to Chato, a cool cat from East Los Angeles. In *Chato's Kitchen*, Chato prepares dinner for his new neighbors, the *ratoncitos*, with the intent to make them the main course, however, the situation turns out differently than he expected. Soto's books speak to the untold experiences of Latino children in the U.S. He captures the daily life of Mexican-American children as they make do with what they have. His *Chato* illustrated books use cool and smooth animals to talk about racism and discrimination in society.

Luis J. Rodríguez is best known for his memoir, *Always Running: La Vida Loca, Gang Days in L.A.* (1993) which recounts his coming-of-age experience in the streets of Los Angeles. Rodríguez's has committed his adult life to educating children and youth about the realities of gang life and advocating for alternative outlets. His children's books include *América is her Name* (1998) and *It Doesn't Have to be This Way: A Barrio Story*

(1999). América, a Mixteca Indian, has recently immigrated to Pilsen, a predominantly Mexican community in Chicago. While she struggles with her new home and school, she finds comfort in writing short stories and poems about Oaxaca. In *It Doesn't Have to be This Way*, Monchi has second thoughts about the gang he has joined after witnessing a tragic event. Like América, Monchi uses writing as a form of self-expression. "Complete literary," Rodríguez's term to describe the capability to participate in society to one's best ability, is an important aspect of the work he produces.

This brief analysis of the regional practices and traditions of Chicano and Latino children's and young adults' literature demonstrate the wide array of projects speaking to children's experiences throughout the U.S. and the strong ties that still exist with Latino cultures and histories across multiple borders.

The 2000s and 2010s marked a shift within the genre that sought to place Latina/o children's and young adult literature within a broader context of diversity and multicultural children's literature. This new era saw an emergence of writers broadening the scope of the themes addressed such as the inclusion of LGBTQ experiences and conversations on mental health and disability studies. Authors like Rigoberto González (*The Mariposa Club*), Charles González-Rice (*Chulito*), Mayra Lazara Dole (*Down to the Bone*), and Adam Silvera (*More Happy than Not*) speak to the diverse of experiences LGBTQ Latino youth undergo as they construct an identity that encompasses their Latino heritage and sexual orientation. Authors like Benjamin Alire Saenz (*Last Night I sang to the Monster*), Cindy L. Rodríguez (*When Reason Breaks*), and Jenny Torres Sanchez (*Death, Dickinson, and the Demented Life of Frenchie Garcia*) create conversations on

depression, addiction, and suicide attempts/ suicide in the lives of Latina/o young adults. Their contributions to the genre challenges stigma around mental health issue and access to mental health resources in Latina/o communities by breaking the silence around these issues.

Despite the breadth of Latina/o children's and young adult literature available, very little scholarship exists on the genre. Leading scholars in this field including Phillip Serrato, Manuel Martin-Rodríguez, and Marilisa Jimenez have carved out a niche for Latina/o children's literature that bridges mainstream children's literature scholarship and Latina/o Studies. The lack of scholarship available in this field, however, suggests that there are many gaps in the history of the genre and in the analysis of the literature that remain to be addressed. Most recently, social media movements on the need for diversity in children's literature like #WeNeedDiverseBooks have pushed for an inclusion and expansion of literature for children of color in libraries and classrooms. Blogs like Latin@s in Kids Lit serve as an archive, a bibliography, and a reference guide on Latina/o children's books. This blog has also created a community of librarians, educators, and scholars invested in the future of this genre. Latin@s in Kids Lit hosts book reviews, conversations with authors, critical analysis, teaching tips, and updates on the awards available in this genre including the Pura Belpré award. Social media movements like #WNDB and blogs like Latin@s in Kids Lit demonstrate that despite the lack of diversity or misrepresentation in mainstream children's literature genres like Latina/o children's and young adult literature have a rich history of resilience and perseverance. Pura Belpré and her legacy are an example of this.

While there is still much research to be completed on the history of Latina/o children's and young adult literature, I start my contextualization with Belpre because her work as a librarian set a precedent for the importance of connecting this genre to actual children. Belpre might not have understood the work she did with Spanish speaking children and communities as activism but that is precisely what she did. Her emphasis on Puerto Rican folklore and folktales served as a way to preserve the traditions of the community's culture and to instill cultural pride into the new generation of Puerto Rican children. In a speech about Belpre's legacy, Jose M. Graciano said in 1974:

Although her books are read throughout the world, its greatest impact must be on the Puerto Rican New Yorkers, for they offer a bridge between their parents' childhood in Puerto Rico and their own in New York. These works are an extension of Puerto Rican Culture and Literature, whose roots can be traced to our diverse ancestry and whose humor, wit, and moral values are timeless and universal. (Jose M. Graciano 1974)

Not only did Belpre connect families and communities but she also played a role in challenging many of the stereotypes of the time about recent Puerto Rican migrants. Belpre's books and activism are an example of how centering a people's knowledges can empower communities and transform existing oppressive epistemologies. It is in the legacy of Pura Belpre and the literature, the librarians, the authors, and the scholars that came after her that I position my dissertation project as a way to continue and create conversations about the lives of Latina/o children.

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Chapter 1

Conocimiento Narratives: (Re)imagining the Künstlerroman for Latina Girls in Latina/o Children's and Young Adults Literature

Juan Felipe Herrera's *Super Cilantro Girl* (2003) focuses on Esmeralda Sinfronteras' imagination as she transforms into a superhero to rescue her mother from an Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) detention center. Through the power of cilantro, Esme turns into a "giant green girl," with hair "longer than a school bus" and eyes that "shine like emeralds on fire" (22). True to her last name, she makes the U.S./Mexico border *sin fronteras*—without borders. Esme's transformation is an embodied process paradigmatic of creative acts in Latina/o children's literature that not only foster self-awareness, but also function as a way to create alternative epistemologies. Through an examination of illustrated texts for children by Luis J. Rodríguez (*América is Her Name*) and Juan Felipe Herrera (*Super Cilantro Girl*) and young adult novels by Pam Muñoz-Ryan (*Becoming Naomi León*) and Nicholasa Mohr (*Nilda*), this chapter demonstrates how the Latina children and adolescents in these texts use creativity and imagination to challenge and transform the violence they experience at home, in their community, and as subjects of the U.S. nation. I employ Chicana feminist theorists like Gloria Anzaldúa, Emma Pérez, and Mary Pat Brady to articulate the many ways the young characters in these narratives use creative acts to negotiate their realities and the larger impact that their works have on those around them.

Like the other Latina protagonists I consider, Esmeralda Sinfronteras is part of a larger genealogy of children protagonists who use an art form to negotiate the trials and

tribulations of childhood. In the subgenre of the *künstlerroman*, the novel of artistic development, growing into an adult and becoming an artist are very much intertwined. In order for children to participate in their communities as artists they must also gain knowledge of what it means to be an adult in their society. For example, in Louise Fitzhugh's canonical text *Harriet the Spy* (1964), Harriet Welsch "learns to reconstruct herself [...]. She resolves the splits—between life and art, between truth and lying, and between gossip and fiction" (Paul 72). Harriet's resolution is due to a transition into adulthood where life is not as definitive as it appears in childhood. Harriet has to mediate the ambivalences of adulthood as a way for her peers to recognize her as a writer. The transition into adulthood, though, also raises several gender politics that often force female protagonists to renounce their art for the sake of preserving gender expectations.

The four Latina protagonists in the books I discuss disrupt the linear development of growth that seems foundational to many *künstlerroman* stories. For Esmeralda, América, Naomi, and Nilda, art is more than a means into adulthood. Rather it serves as a process that allows them to develop their identity while disrupting and challenging various systems of oppression. Their creativity is part of a larger process that requires recognition of the characters' art as more than self-expression and an acknowledgement of the material effects their art produces. In other words, their creative works have the power to make actual change in the environments around them. It is precisely this difference from *künstlerroman* novels that allows me to place the texts I analyze within and outside of the subgenre and also recognize these stories as what I call "conocimiento narratives." Taking my cue from Gloria Anzaldúa's theorization of "conocimiento,"

which she defines as the process of using knowledge for healing, I demonstrate how the female characters in the Latina/o children's text in question use creativity and imagination to develop different epistemologies. Herrera, Rodríguez, Muñoz-Ryan, and Mohr have created characters that speak to lived Chicana/Latina experiences by centering issues like immigration and xenophobia, discrimination in U.S. classrooms, assimilation and acculturation, alongside conversations on race, class, and gender. These experiences provide the characters with the *conocimiento* they all search for. Therefore, when I refer to *conocimiento* narratives in Latina/o children's and young adult literature I mean to highlight how knowing is a healing process captured within the stories and exemplified through the characters. *Conocimiento* is an opportunity to recognize the oppressions that direct the characters' existence and provide a means to challenge and transform them.

For example, Esmeralda's gradual transformation into Super Cilantro Girl challenges the ways that anti-immigration laws and rhetorics are written on bodies by forcibly breaking down the borders that seeks to separate her from her mother. Similarly, América's poetry gives her access to a language to which she was not privy to before. Her initial inability to fully express herself in English and to take advantage of the privileges of being a U.S. citizen is challenged through her political use of poetry. Likewise, Naomi's carving skills give her an ability to envision different possibilities. Her work with soap and pieces of wood encourages her to either see what she will carve out before she begins or to trust the process. Finally, Nilda's drawing allows her to represent her world in a way that is productive for her but also challenge existing power structures. In every case, the protagonist's creative acts permit her to experience and

comprehend her world in new and empowering ways. Anzaldúa's theory of *conocimiento* and her explanation of her creative act of writing help demonstrate how each Latina protagonist practice their art to access her own *conocimiento*.

Conocimiento Narratives

Gloria Anzaldúa explains in “now let us shift...the path of *conocimiento*...inner work, public acts” that *conocimiento* challenges existing oppressing epistemologies by recognizing and acting on different ways of knowing. She further argues that *conocimiento* can be “reached via creative acts—writing, art-making, dancing, healing, teaching, meditation, and spiritual activism—both mental and somatic (the body too, is a form as well as a site of creativity)” (542). In other words, creative acts offer an opportunity to challenge and transform existing epistemologies and the possibility to create and new more liberating ones. Anzaldúa theorizes the concept of *conocimiento* as a process toward different ways of knowing that encompasses seven stages. The first stage is el *arrebato*, the rupture; the second stage is *nepantla*, the in between spaces; the third stage is the Coatlicue state, the depths of “despair, self-loathing, and hopelessness” (545); the fourth stage is a call for action; the fifth stage is putting Coyolxauhqui¹ together by writing “personal and collective ‘stories’” (558); the sixth stage is taking that story into the world; and the final stage is shifting realities. Anzaldúa explains that *conocimiento* is never a linear or teleological process but akin to a spiritual journey.

¹ Cherrie Moraga “recounts the story of coyolxauhqui, the Aztec moon goddess who attempts to kill her mother, Coatlicue, when she learns of her mother’s pregnancy. As we feministas have interpreted the myth, Coyolxauhqui hopes to halt, through the murder of her mother, the birth of the War God, Huitzilopochtli. She is convinced the Huitzilopochtli’s birth will also mean the birth of slavery, human sacrifice, and imperialism (in short, patriarchy). She fails in her attempt and instead is murdered and dismembered by her brother Huitzilopochtli and banished into darkness to become the moon” (*Loving in the War Years* 147)

African-Americanist Farah Jasmine Griffin's explication of healing in her essay "Textual Healing: Claiming Black Women's Bodies, the Erotic and Resistance in Contemporary Novels of Slavery" is useful here in order to better comprehend the ways in which feminists of color theorize healing as a process:

Healing does not pre-suppose notions of a coherent and whole subject [...] the healing is never permanent: it requires constant attention and effort. I am using the term healing to suggest the way in which the body, literally and discursively scarred, ripped, and mutilated, has to learn to love itself, to function in the world with other bodies and often in opposition to those persons and things that seek to destroy it. (524)

Like Anzaldúa, Griffin suggests that healing is never finite but a process that centers the "scarred, ripped, and mutilated" body's experiences. She further argues that "healing does not deny the construction of bodies, but instead suggests that they can be constructed differently, for different ends" (524). The possibility of "different ends" resonates with Anzaldúa's final stage of *conocimiento* wherein realities can be changed by alternative epistemologies. Moreover, Anzaldúa and Griffin's articulations suggest that a healing process includes a permeability of the private/public binary. In fact, in Anzaldúa's stages the move from private to public is necessary in order to achieve a "shift in realities," which she describes as "the critical point of transformation" (545).

Through *conocimiento* I theorize the Latina protagonists' creativity as having the power to transform their realities and give them agency. While the texts I analyze highlight the significance of the protagonists' use of creativity to understand their subjectivity, these acts cannot be understood in isolation from the impact they have on their environments and those around them. As Anzaldúa and Griffin explain, healing is a

process that is also concerned with a collective identity. Anzaldúa's reflection on the significance of her writing demonstrates how she applies the process of *conocimiento*:

Why am I compelled to write? Because the writing saves me from this complacency I fear. Because I have no choice. Because I must keep the spirit of my revolt and myself alive. Because the world I create in my writing compensates for what the real world does not give me. By writing I put order in the world, give it a handle so I can grasp it. [...] And I write the unmentionables, never mind the outraged gasp of the censor and the audience. (168-9)

Anzaldúa's analysis captures the interconnectedness between private and public writing that grants her the opportunity to use her creativity to transform the oppression in her world by providing an alternative one she can grasp. Her indication of the importance of writing about what remains silent or unspoken and disregarding "the outraged gasp" suggests a determined shift from private writing or writing for the self to public writing.

Years before Anzaldúa, Rita Sánchez argued that Chicana Literature provided a similar shift. In "Chicanas Breaking the Silence," she writes:

There is, upon [Chicana's] open expression and in the very nature of this act of opening up, a refusal to submit to a quality of silence that has been imposed upon for centuries. In the act of writing, the Chicana is saying 'No,' and by doing so she becomes the revolutionary, a source of change, and a real force for humanization. (66)

Sánchez explains that writing gives Chicanas a sense of agency and an opportunity to develop a voice that challenges a culture of silence. According to Sánchez, the act of writing presents the potential to transform worlds. She points that writing can function as a "real force for humanization" because it suggests that one of the purposes of creating alternative worlds is to be able to exist despite forces set in place to ensure the opposite. Furthermore, Anzaldúa explains in her foundational text, *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza*, Chicanas/Latinas have been marginalized, silenced, and erased by the

dominant culture and by their own communities. She writes, “[...] hablar pa’tras, repelar. Hocicona, repelona, chismosa, having a big mouth, questioning, carrying tales are all signs of being a 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). Anzaldúa argues that Chicanas are taught to remain silent and speaking up is oftentimes reprimanded. But it is precisely because they write against all odds that their work is revolutionary. It is through the making of creative spaces that Chicanas/Latinas gain agency and a voice through which to challenge and transform their realities.

Anzaldúa’s powerful theorization around creative acts and the political power they provide for Chicanas/Latinas reveals some of the limitations of *künstlerromane* and the necessity to broaden conversations around this subgenre. In “Reconstructing the Female Writer: Subjectivity in the Feminist *Künstlerroman*,” Roberta Seelinger Trites explains that the *künstlerroman*, the novel of artistic development, lays out the significant relationship between art and the formation of a subject position for the protagonist in children’s novels. Trites explains that *künstlerromane* center male protagonists who continue to practice their art, while female characters often have to sacrifice their craft to preserve gender expectations in their community and family. Her analysis of feminist *künstlerromane* demonstrates how writing in particular gives female protagonists access to a language and power otherwise not accessible to them. For example, Harriet, in *Harriet the Spy*, uses writing to archive the happenings of her community; she finds empowerment when she decides to share her art with others. Trites makes clear the importance of Harriet’s determination to write at the end of the novel despite the

opposition she endures from her peers because of her work. For Harriet, writing proves to be a means to gain access to a language and agency that may not have been readily available to her because of her gender. Trites contends that it is through writing that “each of these [protagonist] feminist writers changes her perception of herself and her world” (65). Trites explains, similarly to Anzaldúa, that writing serves as a lens through which the female protagonists of *künstlerromane* understand and transform the world around them. While Trites’s essay demonstrates the ways that feminist *künstlerromane* challenge traditional gender expectations in children’s literature by allowing female protagonists to emerge as “fledging artist[s]” (79) it lacks a thorough understanding of how race and ethnicity impacts such development and the ways that Chicanas/Latinas negotiate the slippage between private and public spaces.

In *Extinct Lands, Temporal Geography* (2002) Mary Pat Brady articulates the ways that Chicana literature challenges and produces space by explaining that because space is always already gendered, “Feminists theorizing the production of space have turned repeatedly to an analysis of the microphysics of public and private spheres to explore how women experience space differently; how they negotiate choices between work, housing, recreation; and how the gendering of public and private space works to reinforce power relations” (87). Traditionally, private spaces, like the home, have been reserved for women while public spaces have been more available to men. It is for this reason that we typically find female protagonists in *künstlerromane* practicing their craft at home and rarely presenting it in public. Sonia Saldivar-Hull complicates the space of the home by arguing that “women are betrayed by the ideology of family, of ‘home,’ [...]”

the domestic site that women are supposed to see as the ‘safe space.’” (90-1). Brady and Saldivar-Hull conclude that the binary between private and public spaces is ambiguous and turbulent. In this ways, they do not always function in the same way for the Latina protagonists in question as it does for the white protagonists of traditional *künstlerromane* because oftentimes the oscillation between private and public of the Latina characters’ in this chapter is often a response to their present conditions.

Super Cilantro Girl: The Body as a Site of Creativity

Juan Felipe Herrera’s *Super Cilantro Girl* presents a healing process that is exemplary of *conocimiento* narratives. Esmeralda’s imagination is an embodied act wherein her raced body is the medium through which she challenges anti-immigration laws, xenophobic attitudes, and creates an alternative epistemology that liberates her and her mother. After returning from her garden with a fresh batch of cilantro, Esmeralda learns that her mother has been detained on her trip to Tijuana and will not return that day. Her Abuelita explains, “Your mamá just called. She’s been stopped at the border in Tijuana. They say she needs a green card.” “Green...card? Green? Like cilantro?” Esmeralda asks. “She’s a citizen, Esme. Everything will be OK,” Abuelita says (5). The color green is significant, as it is invoked by Esmeralda’s name, the U.S. permanent resident card, and cilantro; however, Esmeralda’s relationship to cilantro and her transformation into a “giant green girl” have a different meaning from the green card and ICE. The informal name of the “green card” refers to the actual color of the U.S. permanent resident card used as verification of legal status for individuals that do not have U.S. citizenship. A “Green Card” is a sign of otherness, an indicator that the card-

holder's belonging is limited or temporary. The contested space of the U.S./Mexico border and her brown body in that instant reveal that with or without a green card Esme's mother does not belong in the American national community. Mamá is discriminated against because her body is read as Mexican and therefore undocumented. Abuelita attempts to reassure Esme that her mother will be alright because she is a citizen; however, her faith that her daughter's rights as a citizen will set her free become painfully ironic when her daughter must remain in a holding cell overnight. After learning about her mother's situation, Esme begins to transform into Super Cilantro Girl and she reappropriates the significance of the color green by finding its power in cilantro and embodying the strength of the color to free her mother. In this way, green no longer solely represents the marginalization and fear associated with the "green card" and ICE but instead reasserts change and freedom.

After her transformation into Super Cilantro Girl, "Esmeralda arrives at the border near Tijuana. She gawks at the great gray wall and wire and steel between the United States and Mexico. She stares at the great gray building that keeps people in who want to move on" (22). Esme finds her mother imprisoned in a great gray building. Honorario Robledo Tapia's illustration represents the gray building as a prison surrounded by a brick wall with barbed wire and bright search lights. Mamá is in a dark room when Super Cilantro Girl climbs up the building wearing the janitor's gloves, a green construction paper mask, green tights, gold high-top sneakers, and her Abuelita's starry shawl as a cape (20). Super Cilantro Girl's body stands out against the darkness of the night and the gray building and is comparable to the size of the building while her mother's body looks

significantly smaller. The image of Mamá, a U.S. citizen, imprisoned in that building is representative of the racial politics inscribed on her body. Through Mamá's incarceration, Herrera critiques the unjust anti-immigration laws in the United States that promote racial profiling and the policing of bodies. Such mistreatment suggests that there is an ideal body that belongs to an American imaginary and bodies like Mamá's, Esmeralda's, and those of the other Latina protagonists, are alienated, criminalized, or physically removed². Nevertheless, Super Cilantro Girl transcends those boundaries when her body becomes the force that sets her mother free. Esmeralda's agency is strengthened through her superhero body because it is not legible in the same discriminatory manner as her mother's. The detention center and the ICE agents are so powerless against Super Cilantro Girl that they too begin to transform. While flying away with her mother, Super Cilantro Girl says:

“We'll make everything so green-green, the border will disappear!” the fifty-foot-tall girl says. “Make it *sin fronteras*?” Mama asks. “Yes, just like our name. Oops, I mean *your* name,” the green girl replies. [...] The officers stop the chase. They stumble out of the helicopters and patrol cars in all directions, just to smell the green aromas. “Lovely!” they say. “*Que bonito!*” they say. They are even learning to speak Spanish! (26)

The potential disappearance of the border, the disorientation of the officers, and their use of Spanish are all material effects that Esmeralda's imaginative bodily transformation produces. The officers in their green uniforms and bright green eyes are overpowered by the green foliage that grows around them. The emphasis on the green aromas and the greenery suggests that gray borders and policing of bodies is unnatural and constructed

² Indeed, this has been the case in recent anti-immigration laws like the 2005 “Sensenbrenner Bill” or HR 4437 and the 2010 Arizona SB 1070, which made racial profiling a legal recourse for law enforcement in the state.

and can, therefore, be dismantled. Through the use of her creative act, Esmeralda has imagined a space where her body is not the site of discrimination and racialization but one of liberation. After bringing Mamá home, Super Cilantro Girl falls asleep on the roof and when Esmeralda wakes up she realizes she was dreaming but her Abuelita reveals that her mother has indeed returned. The story closes with their family reunited and a bird with green feathers flying “free and *sin fronteras*.”

Esmeralda demonstrates how her body can be a site of resistance against anti-immigration laws and policies that separate families and in doing so she also transcends borders between public and private spaces. Chicana art scholar, Laura Pérez explains in her leading text *Chicana Art: The Politics of Spiritual and Aesthetic Altarities*:

Indeed, the body itself may be thought of as a social garment. From pigment to physical build to comportment, the presentation and reception of the body is, following the thought of Judith Butler, part of the performance that reinscribes or interrupts social roles attributed as normal to racialized and gendered bodies [...]. (51)

In this sense, the body has the possibility to be a site of social transformation.

Esmeralda’s metamorphosis to Super Cilantro Girl reveals the use of her body as a “performance [that can] interrupt social roles” seeking to confine her and Mamá. By turning into a giant green girl, Esmeralda creates a body that is not confined by the stereotypes against brown and Chicano bodies that result, for example, in her mother’s incarceration in the detention center. Esmeralda’s transformation throughout the text further signals her shift from private to public space and her newfound *conocimiento*. At first, Esme attempts to keep her change private by concealing it from her Abuelita and her teachers. She wears the janitor’s gloves and sunglasses to hide her green hands and

eyes and tries to keep her transformation private because she does not really understand what is happening to her body and possibly fears the consequences of those around her not understanding or accepting her. When she attempts to reveal the secret to Nurse Dedo, though, her own hair pushes Esme out the window (16-17). At this moment it becomes clear to the character that her body is more powerful than she knows. After discovering that Esme no longer fits in her Abuelita's house there is a brief second where she "feels a tender breeze from the south brush her cheek" and knows what she must do with her new body and powers (19). That fleeting breeze allows Esme to recognize her *conocimiento* and shift her creativity from a private to public act. It is with this new sense of knowledge that Esme is able to break down the multiple borders she negotiates.

América is Her Name: Power and Language

Luis Rodríguez's *América is Her Name* (1998) tells the story of América Soliz, an undocumented immigrant from Oaxaca, Mexico to Pilsen, Illinois—one of Chicago's predominantly Mexican communities—and her struggles to find her voice and an identity that captures the complexity of her positionality. Throughout the text América faces discrimination in the classroom, is witness to the violence in her community, and feels patriarchal oppression in her home. Through poetry, however, América gains a language and agency to challenge and transform her reality. In "Poetry is Not a Luxury," Audre Lorde speaks to the impact that writing poetry, in particular, can have on women of color: "This is poetry as illumination, for it is through poetry that we give name to those ideas which are—until the poem—nameless and formless, about to be birthed, but already felt" (36). In this way, poetry gives language to the traumas that cannot yet be spoken, and for

América poetry is the outlet which allows her to confront her oppression. Lorde further argues that “For women, then, poetry is not a luxury. It is a vital necessity of our existence. It forms the quality of the light within which we predicate our hopes and dreams toward survival and change, first made into language, then into idea, then into more tangible action” (37). Similar to Anzaldúa, Lorde lays out a connection between creative acts and the possibility of changing or transforming existing realities. Poetry gives América an opportunity to express what has been silenced in the U.S. because of her immigration status. América’s poetry “emerge[s] from *un sitio y una lengua* (a space and language) that rejects colonial ideology and the by-products of colonialism and capitalist patriarchy—sexism, racism, homophobia, etc.” (E. Pérez 48). In this manner, Chicana/Latina creativity provides a space and a language to liberate women from colonial oppression and move toward a space of healing.

At the beginning of Rodríguez’s text, América is described as having been silenced by the education system in the U.S. América’s inability to speak English marginalizes her, even within her ESL class, and the discrimination in the classroom becomes evident to América when she overhears her teachers:

Yesterday as [América] passed Miss Gable and Miss Williams in the hallway, she heard Miss Gable whisper, “She’s an illegal.” How can that be—how can anyone be illegal! She is Mixteco, an ancient tribe that was here before the Spanish, before the blue-eyed, even before this government that now calls her “illegal.” How can a girl called América not belong in América? (n.p.)

Miss Gable’s racist and xenophobic comments dehumanize América and the use of the word “illegal” suggests that she occupies a space that is not available to her. Miss Gable’s words attempt to erase América’s subjectivity and revoke her claim to any form of

citizenship. However, the narrator's rhetorical question calls attention to the tensions and contradictions of an American identity. The question points out the irony of someone named América not belonging in the country she is named after. It is important to note, however, that the accent on América's name signals a history of difference in the United States and establishes América's claim to both American and Mexican culture. The tension in the classroom begins to shift when Mr. Aponte, a Puerto Rican poet, visits América's class, though Miss Gable's prejudice becomes even more evident when she "tells him they are a 'difficult' class" (n.p.). Through the use of poetry, Mr. Aponte helps América assert her subjectivity by encouraging her to write in Spanish about her homeland to express the displacement she feels in Pilsen. Poetry begins as a private act that gives her access to a language and agency that she did not have before; the impact of her poetry shifts when she writes poetry at home.

América's home is a site of tension due to the discrimination the adults feel in the public realm and the ways it permeates the privacy of the Soliz home. The private space of the Soliz home demonstrates the many racial, economic, and social violences that Chicano/Latino immigrant families face. Rodríguez writes:

When América gets home, she hears her dad yelling. He has been laid off from the factory. The family gathers for supper around a wooden table in the small kitchen. Her mother tells her father angrily: 'I was called a wetback at the market today. No matter what we do—we don't belong.' Tio Filemon comes in the room, drunk and loud. 'Never say you don't belong,' he says. 'We belong anywhere, everywhere. Once you believe you don't belong, you'll be homeless forever. Maybe we'll go back to Oaxaca, maybe we won't. For now, this is home.' (n.p.)

The adult's common struggle is their incapability to access cultural and legal citizenship despite their participation in society through employment and daily activities. Ironically,

the drunken Uncle is the one who challenges the marginalization that the parents face by suggesting that they belong “anywhere, everywhere.” That the discrimination the adults experience in public spaces negatively affects their private world is especially obvious when América’s father reprimands her for writing. While she’s sitting at the kitchen table her father asks:

‘What are you doing, mija?’ he asks. ‘I’m writing,’ she says. ‘Writing? Is this for school?’ ‘No, papi, it’s for me—I’m writing a poem for me.’ ‘Don’t waste your time. Where are you going to go with writing? Learn to clean house, to take care of your brothers and sisters. Writing for yourself won’t pay the bills. (n.p.)

Mr. Soliz’s reaction is indicative of their class struggles and citizenship status that are not often reflected in traditional *künstlerromane*. He attempts to confine América to traditional gender roles that do not recognize writing as labor, profitable, or legitimate “women’s work.”

The illustrations of the text also demonstrate the gender ideologies enforced at home. In the first image of the Soliz home América sits at the kitchen table to write while her father stands over her counting money. América is outlined with a yellow glow which resembles the mandorla of the saint hanging on the calendar behind her. The mandorla is commonly reserved to represent the piety, holiness, and pureness of Jesus Christ and the Virgin of Guadalupe. The association between América and the saint in the illustration depicts the gender expectations that América must abide by while living in her father’s home. Sandra Cisneros speaks to the contradictions of the gender roles the Catholic Church upholds. She writes:

La Virgen de Guadalupe [is] my culture's role model for brown women like me. She was damn dangerous, an ideal so lofty and unrealistic it was laughable. Did boys have to aspire to be Jesus? I never saw any evidence of it. They were fornicating like rabbits while the Church ignored them and pointed us toward our destiny—marriage and motherhood. The other alternative was *putahood*. (48)

Cisneros argues that Catholicism sets up a double standard that reproaches women's sexual practices but turns its head when men "fornicat[e] like rabbits." The double standard further implies that if Chicanas do not follow the expectations of marriage and motherhood set by the church they are deemed less than. América's illustrated connection to the saint strongly suggests that she is virginal and pure and therefore a "good girl." Notably, the glow around América is present in other illustrations throughout the story particularly when she writes. The repetition of the glow resembling the saint's demonstrates a tension between the self-empowerment that writing provides for América and the gender binaries that oppress her. However, América is not satisfied with her father's or the Virgin's expectations and seeks to transform them and in doing so also changes the significance of the glow.

As an attempt to resist the expectations set on her, América questions her reality: "Will this be my life?" she wonders. "Not to write. To clean houses, get married, have children [...] They all seem trapped, like flowers in a vase, full of song and color, yet stuck in a gray world where they can't find a way out. 'Will this be my life?'" (n.p.). América's use of metaphors to describe her situation is poetic and is an indicator of how her creativity impacts how she understands her surroundings. América's poetics give her a language to express the economic and gendered oppressions that plague her community. The moment of reflection marks the importance of creativity and

imagination in América's identity and her question serves as a catalyst for the contrast between the "flowers in the vase" and a "gray world." The scene pinpoints América's *conocimiento* process and echoes Esmeralda's struggle with the grayness of the border. The gray world represents the realities both characters attempt to transform with their creativity and imagination. América's poetry allows her to see the different oppressions that surround her family and community and recognize that she does not want to be trapped in that gray world.

América's new awareness and refusal to submit to oppressive ideologies pushes her to create alternative epistemologies that allow her to shift her reality. Despite her father's disapproval, América continues to write and in a greater form of resistance involves her mother and younger siblings in her creativity:

Every day after school, Nayeli [her mother] and América sit around the table and write. Nayeli writes about long-gone days in the rancho, about the tall grasses and burly oxen. About her many cousins and other family who always visited. América smiles as her mother struggles with the words. They share their stories with each other. Soon América's older brother is taking part, and even the little ones join in. (n.p.)

The scene highlights the women and children of the Soliz family using imagination to challenge the patriarchal rule of their home. It is important that América's older brother, the next patriarch of the family, participates in the exercise because in doing so he directly challenges his father's power. For América, the moment she shares with her family is also a form of putting Coyolxauhqui together in order to "repair and heal, as well as rewrite stories of loss and recovery, exile and homecoming, disinheritance and recuperation, stories that lead out of passivity and into agency" (563). The act of writing

allows América to directly challenge patriarchy and in doing so she transforms her reality.

The book concludes with América coming home and sharing the news that she “got a hundred on [her] writing assignment. [And] even Miss Gable liked it” (n.p.). Her father also shares in her excitement and is more open to having a “poet for a daughter.” América’s closing words suggest that there has been a change or transformation in the oppressions that surround her. “Even Miss Gable,” who called her an illegal at the beginning of the story, recognizes América’s transformation. While América is still undocumented at the end of the story she finds that her poetry gives her a sense of belonging that she did not feel at the beginning. She says: “A real poet. That sounds good to the Mixteca girl, who some people say doesn’t belong here. A poet, América knows, belongs everywhere” (n.p.). While her poetry does not provide América legal citizenship, it nonetheless breaks down the various borders that impact her subjectivity. América’s imagination helps transform her and those around her and this is evident when Miss Gable and Mr. Soliz’s attitude toward América’s writing changes. Their shift in perspective also suggests that they are now aware of América’s gained agency.

Becoming Naomi León: Carving Identities

In Pam Muñoz-Ryan’s *Becoming Naomi León* (2004), fifth grader Naomi Soledad León Outlaw journeys to Mexico in search of her father and ends up finding the voice for which she longs. At the beginning of the novel, Naomi’s world is disrupted when Skyla, her violent and alcoholic mother who abandoned her and her brother, returns for her. After a traumatic abandonment by her parents, Naomi develops selective mutism and

learns that soap carving is a means through which she can transcend her trauma. Naomi explains:

When Owen and I first came to live with Gram, I had slipped into being silent and my hands shook all the time. I was too young to remember what caused it all, but Gram's practical solution was to keep my mind and hands busy. Soap carving had been Bernardo's idea, and he said I was born to it. [...] It was art from his city, Oaxaca, far away in Mexico. And I would sit next to him with a bar of soap and carving tool. (13)

Bernardo, Naomi's next door neighbor and her father's friend, shares with her a history and a culture that allows her to see the world differently while also bringing her closer to her father and her Mexican heritage—both of which she has lost connection to since she was abandoned by her parents and left with her white great-grandmother. Carving becomes a metaphor throughout the novel for Naomi's desire to find agency and empowerment. Naomi's craft depends on her creativity and strength in order to carve out something that does not yet exist and her father is the one that makes this relationship clear to her. After finding him in Oaxaca, Mexico, he tells her that, “Each piece has a personality. Sometimes you can look at the wood and see exactly what it might be. The promise reveals itself later. Other times you must let your imagination dictate what you will find” (219). In a way, Naomi's father encourages her to let carving lead her to alternative epistemologies that will help find her *conocimiento*.

The process Naomi goes through to find her voice and her identity make *Becoming Naomi León* a *conocimiento* narrative. The word “becoming” in the title itself highlights that Naomi must undergo various stages to learn about her cultural subjectivity. One of the underlying issues of the novel is Naomi's disconnect with her father and in turn her Mexican heritage. After finding her father she feels more like a

León; that is, she considers herself a part of the León family and their traditions, but she also feels more like a lion, a strong and powerful creature. However, before getting to that point Naomi first deals with the *arrebato*, or rupture, that silenced her in the first place—her parent’s abandonment. Throughout the novel, so much of Naomi’s identity is tied to her parent’s unexplained departure that it impacts other aspects of her life.

Naomi’s situation with her family impacts her identity at school where she feels like “nobody special” and, like América, struggles to belong (10). She finds solace at the library with the other “leftover kids” and Mr. Rable, who serves as a mentor figure for her (57). Naomi’s personal struggles throughout the novel are highly influenced by her desire to have a family with a mother and a father. The romanticization of the traditional American nuclear family further adds to the isolation and marginalization that Naomi’s character feels. Because neither Naomi’s home nor mother meet the imagined standards of the American family, she is ashamed of living in a trailer park, of her disabled younger brother, and of her white great-grandmother. In *The Way We Never Were: American Families and the Nostalgia Trap*, Stephanie Coontz explains that there is rhetoric of nostalgia for a romanticized and idealized American family and home that might have never existed but can instead serve to reinforce dominant power structures. The preservation, however, of an American family ideal is further complicated in the novel when the state intervenes on Skylá’s behalf and attempts to remove Naomi from her great-grandmother’s custody. The court dangerously assumes that because Skylá is their mother, her children will be better off with her. However, this is not the case, and at this point in the novel Naomi does not know how to negotiate that contradiction. Her angst

becomes evident when Naomi narrates her list of “Possible Moms”: “Over the years, the top three on my preferred list of ‘Possible Moms’ were 1) Volunteer, 2) Business, and 3) Nursery. [...] But right off the mark, Skyla didn’t match my list or fit the pictures in my mind” (40). Naomi’s disillusionment with her mother leaves her unsure of her identity, and Skyla’s wavering affection for her daughter only worsens the situation. Naomi’s fondness for her mother also begins to change when she overhears her teachers talk about her mother and learns that Skyla had “been in and out of rehab hospitals and halfway houses for years. Severe alcohol abuse and irrational behaviors that go along with it” (73). Naomi recognizes these behaviors when Skyla slaps her across the face for talking back later in the novel. Her desire for a mother and a family shatters even further when Thanksgiving dinner is ruined by Skyla’s new boyfriend, Clive. Naomi explains, “I wanted us all to sit down and have dinner like those families in Gram’s lady magazines. The ones in the photos, passing the food with smiles on their faces and oozing politeness” (90). Instead, Naomi and Skyla argue and Skyla walks out on their dinner. These traumatic moments force Naomi to see her world differently. And, while painful, her gained insight is a significant part of her *conocimiento* process. Naomi must first recognize the epistemologies that oppress her in order to then transform them.

As an attempt to keep Skyla from taking Naomi, Grams decides to take Naomi and her brother to Mexico and search for the children’s father. Naomi uses carving as a way to construct her story and that of the León family. When she participates in “La Noche de Rabanos,” a carving competition in Oaxaca, Mexico, Naomi takes part of a 100 year León tradition and the family wins second place with Naomi’s lion figurine. The

lion carving becomes the symbol that allows Naomi to put her family history together and gives her an opportunity to see herself as part of this trajectory. Her newfound connection with her extended León family gives Naomi the sense of belonging that she has been searching for. After Naomi returns to California she attends a custody hearing between Grams and Skyla. At this moment Naomi uses her agency to stand up to her abusive mother and protect her family. She narrates:

A sensation came over me, as if someone had unlatched a gate that freed a herd of lunging wild animals. [...] It was as if the stampede crashed through the wall in front of me. ‘No,’ I said, and slowly began telling the story from the beginning. [...] I kept talking, louder now. [...] As if a dam had burst, I couldn’t stop the rush of words. (235-6)

Naomi’s description of her new strength resonates with the theme of animals that threads the novel and represents a connection to her carvings. She experiences a visceral reaction to a power that allows her new self to come forward and challenge Skyla’s lies in the court room. Naomi’s description of a feeling of breaking through and revealing what is really inside is comparable to the way that she approaches her carvings. The unlatched gate that frees, the stampede that crashes through, and a dam that bursts signals a pressure that built up inside of Naomi and a necessity to release “the rush of words” she kept inside. Naomi’s account is a beautiful articulation of the relationship between carving and her *conocimiento*. Her use of active verbs further suggests the real impact that creativity and imagination can have in Naomi’s world. At the end, the judge realizes that Skyla is not a fit mother and allows Naomi to remain with Grams.

Upon returning to school, Mr. Rable, the school librarian, asks Naomi to display her lion carving for the school open house. Naomi considers this opportunity a great

honor because Mr. Rable only displays the best and most interesting items. Mr. Rable comments on Naomi's transformation: "I can already tell you are different girl since you went to Mexico. Before you were a mouse, but now you have the countenance of a lioness'" (243). While the comparison between a mouse and a lion is meant to be a compliment, it also suggests a binary between silence and speech; between powerlessness and power; and between invisibility and visibility. Naomi refuses this binary at the end of the novel when she describes herself as "a mouse with a lioness voice." Her refusal suggests that she recognizes that being a "mouse" or who she was has its own strengths and values, but that she also benefits from her newfound "lioness" power. As with Anzaldúa's mestiza consciousness, Naomi develops a "tolerance for contradictions, a tolerance for ambiguity [...] nothing is thrust out, the good the bad and the ugly, nothing rejected, nothing abandoned" (101). Mr. Rable's validation of Naomi's art and different outlook is not as imperative as the visibility she gains by displaying her lion figurine. The approval that Naomi receives from her teacher, similar to Miss Gable and América, does not dismiss the political work and healing that her carving offers. Instead, the display of the lion marks Naomi's shift from using art as a private act and turning it into a public one or in Anzaldúa's words, Naomi is "taking that story to the world." And doing so is a significant part of shifting realities and creating alternative epistemologies that challenge existing oppressive ideologies.

The novel concludes with Naomi making the connection between her carving and her identity. She says, "I hoped my father was right, that like the figures we carved from wood and soap, I was becoming who I was meant to be, the Naomi Soledad León Outlaw

of my wildest dreams” (246). Naomi’s insight suggests that, like her figurines, an identity can be carved out and, more broadly, that there is a possibility for creating different ways of knowing.

Nilda: Drawing on Alternative Epistemologies

Nicholasa Mohr’s *Nilda* (1973/2011) follows ten-year-old Nilda Ramírez as she grows up in New York City at the wake of World War II. As the youngest and only female of five children, Nilda is frequently limited by the gender expectations her Puerto Rican family upholds. Throughout the novel, she also experiences a variety of struggles including discrimination at school, trouble at home, and the loss of both her parents. Through it all, Nilda uses drawing as a medium to change and transform the world around her. The 2011 edition of the novel, republished by Arté Publico Press, includes illustrations that were not in the original text, and which are seemingly intended to be examples of Nilda’s drawings. Reading the illustrations in conjunction with the written text demonstrates the role that art plays in the novel. Drawing gives Nilda an opportunity to represent herself and her community as having authority in situations where they generally do not. Toward the beginning of the novel, Nilda is sent to her room by her frustrated mother and finds comfort in her art:

As she often did when she was upset, she took her ‘box of things’ out from under the bed. Nilda loved to draw; it was the thing that gave her the most pleasure [...] Drawing a line and then another, she had a sense of happiness. Slowly working, she began to divide the space, adding color and making different size forms. Her picture began to take shape and she lost herself in a world of magic achieved with some forms, lines and color. (43)

The above narration reveals that at the beginning of the novel drawing is a private act for Nilda and that is why she most likely she keeps her drawings “under the bed.” Although

Nilda is described as being very outgoing child, her decision to keep her drawings private suggests that her art might hold a part of her that she is not ready to make public. Her creative act provides her with the safe space she needs to develop her subjectivity and search for her *conocimiento* in private. The passage above also demonstrates a process that gives her pleasure from her imagination. Through the use of lines, forms, and color she constructs a different world for herself—a world that she understands. At the same time, drawing functions as a form of resistance for her. After completing an art piece the narrator describes:

She finished her picture feeling that she had completed a voyage all by herself, far away but in a place that she knew quite well. “At last,” she said. “All finished.” Sticking out her tongue, she thought, I’m not showing this to Mamá. She put her things away under the bed. Glancing in the mirror, she looked at herself with some interest. She was going out now; she wasn’t so angry anymore. (44)

That Nilda purposefully does not show her mother her drawings is a signal that creativity gives her agency and an alternative way to challenge existing structures of power and the disruption implies that she is aware of this when she glances at herself in the mirror and is ready to rejoin her mother outside. The explication of Nilda’s drawing as a process, in which she needs to first take the box of things from under the bed, draw line by line, divide the space, and then add color, suggests that *Nilda* is a *conocimiento* narrative because Nilda participates in the creation of said process that eventually allows her to access *conocimiento*. Nilda is continuously thrown into a state of “*nepantla*” by the discriminations and oppressions she bears and witnesses. Drawing gives her an opportunity to make sense of these situations and also challenge them.

For the most part, Nilda's drawings capture her experiences and surroundings. The opening illustration, for example, depicts a hot summer day when Jacinto, the neighborhood store owner, opens the fire hydrant for the children of the community. Nilda captures the event with contour drawings which suggests a fluidity or connection between her city, her community, and her neighbors. Her depiction centers her community members as flat figures being enveloped by the water. New York City buildings are drawn in the background in a variety of depths and sizes. There is also a clear and significant contrast between the city and the community that points to an existing power tension between the two entities. Nilda represents her neighbors occupying the most space on the picture plane because it suggests a claim to agency. The illustration captures a moment of relief from the heat before the police arrive to close the fire hydrant and ask people to clear the streets. The exclusion of the police in the picture demonstrates a challenge to authority and a creation of a counternarrative. Nilda's imagination allows her to visualize a space where her neighbors have access to power and control of their own community. The rest of the illustrations in the novel also use contour drawing and challenge a variety of oppressions in a similar way while attempting to highlight the stories of her community. Contour drawing captures the entirety of an image rather than focus on the details and the perspective that this style of art uses suggests that Nilda must be able to see a larger picture if she is to represent an alternative narrative.

In "Subverting Stereotypes: Rejecting Traditional Gender Roles," Trites employs *Nilda* as an example of a feminist children's novel that encourages young girls to challenge traditional gender roles. She argues that Nilda's "artwork is a means for her to

express herself in a community that continually represses her, and her art also provides her with a way to reject the stereotypical role of *señorita* that terrifies her” (21). While I agree with Trites that Nilda’s art permits her to challenge some of her oppressions, it is also important to clarify and elaborate on which “community...continually represses” her. Most of the discrimination that is depicted in the novel is due to racial and ethnic differences and oftentimes Nilda experiences the most discrimination from those outside her Puerto Rican community. For example, upon her return to school after her father’s funeral she gives her teacher a note explaining her absence and Mrs. Fortinash replies in a demeaning and racist way exemplary of the public feeling against (im)migrants:

No wonder you don’t get anywhere or do anything worthwhile with these kinds of customs. People pass away every day—you are not the only ones, you know! That does not mean that one stops meeting responsibilities! Your mother will have to come in and explain that custom and what tribe you belong to! [...] Irresponsible, that’s what you people are. Then you expect the rest of us here to make it easy for you. Well, you are not the first ones to be allowed into this country. It’s bad enough we have to support strangers with our tax dollar [...]. (180)

Mrs. Fortinash’s comments resemble Miss Gable’s xenophobic attitude toward América because both teachers marginalize and other their students and do not recognize either girl as belonging to an imagined American community. Mrs. Fortinash’s anger signals an underlying issue that has taken a backseat in Nilda’s world but is very present in the politics of WWII—who can be considered an American. While Nilda lacks the authority to directly oppose Mrs. Fortinash, her silence should be understood as a form of survival and not surrender. Nilda explains that she is at least grateful she was not held back a grade (178). This strategy of negotiating different oppressive institutions is something that Lydia, Nilda’s mother, is quite familiar with and that Nilda has learned from her.

After a trip to the welfare office Lydia screams at Nilda, “I had to say what I did, that’s all. I have to do what I do. How do you think we’re going to eat? We have not money, Nilda. If I make that woman angry, God knows what she’ll put down on the application” (62). Lydia and her family are subject to the authority of the woman in the welfare office, who determines if they receive the assistance they need. Lydia must do what she has to do in order to maneuver within a system that is designed to marginalize her. In the same way, Nilda must negotiate the racism she encounters at school in order to continue her education. It is precisely these negotiations and contradictions that often push her character into *nepantla* and is forced to contend with the larger implications of her actions.

Understanding the different oppressive forces impacting Nilda’s subjectivity further lays out the role her creativity plays in transforming them. Not only does Nilda use her drawing as a way to reject stereotypical gender roles, as Trites suggests, but it also permits her to imagine a counternarrative to the oppressions around her. On her death bed Mrs. Ramírez says, “Do you have that feeling honey? That you have something all yours...you must...like when I see you drawing sometimes, I know you have something all yours. Keep it...hold on, guard it. Never give it to nobody...not to your lover, not to your kids [...]” (234). Mrs. Ramírez further explains that while she has loved being a mother she lost herself in the process and it is now too late to do anything about it; however, she provides an alternative for Nilda and encourages her to do otherwise. While Nilda does not seem to understand her mother’s warnings they are nonetheless important because they challenge the gender roles set up throughout the

novel. But once again, Lydia's advice sends Nilda into a state of confusion and uncertainty because she believes her mother is giving her contradictory information. Lydia's warning, however, suggests a balance that does not encourage the sacrifice of the self in order to be a wife and a mother. Instead, Lydia offers that drawing becomes an option through which Nilda can preserve her identity but also challenge certain gender expectations that hindered her own mother.

For the majority of the novel, drawing is a private exercise that allows Nilda to connect with her family. Her parents encourage her to draw and her brothers constantly ask her to draw something for them. It is not until her mother passes away and she is forced to live with her aunt that her art becomes a public act. Trites explains that, "Nilda shows her artwork to [her cousin] Claudia [and] Nilda's willingness to share her artwork with an admirer indicates that Nilda is coming into her own as an artist and that her salvation from her grief and from gender stereotypes lies in using her artistic talent" (23). The novel concludes not only with Nilda showing her drawings to Claudia but with Nilda telling the story of the secret garden she found a few years back while at camp. Earlier in the novel Nilda describes the secret garden as the place where she experienced the most happiness and it is important that those are the stories and drawings that she chooses to share with Claudia because it signals a transition from a private to a public creative act. The intimate moment with Claudia is related to the scene where Nilda refuses to show her mother her drawings at the beginning of the novel. In both instances Nilda has agency. Keeping her art private was a form of resistance against her mother's punishment and sharing her art—making it public—suggests that she is moving through the different

stages of *conocimiento*. More importantly, her decision to show Claudia her art allows Nilda to transition from the rather painful *nepantla* stage and into a site of empowerment.

Conocimiento Narratives: Troubling the End

While the ending of *künstlerroman* novels often suggest that the protagonist has fully embraced his/her art and been recognized by his/her respective communities as an artist, providing such a simplistic ending for Latina/o children's texts is complicated by the larger implications that such endings have on young Chicano/Latino audiences. Herrera, Rodríguez, Muñoz-Ryan, and Mohr present stories that are not commonly captured in children's literature. Their work speaks to lived experiences of Chicano/Latino children in the United States and, therefore, the resolutions have more at stake. Phillip Serrato argues that this is the contradiction with which Latina/o authors for children must contend. He explains in "Conflicting Inclinations: Luis J. Rodríguez's Pictures Books for Children" that Chicano Children's Literature attempts to capture the lived experiences of Chicano/Latino children but often falls short at representing real conclusions to the problems presented. Rodríguez's two children's books, for example, *América is Her Name* and *It Doesn't Have to be this Way* (1999), both have abrupt endings to the complicated experiences that América and Monchi endure. By the end, América declares that a "poet belongs everywhere" and her father and teacher, both of whom opposed her craft at the beginning of the story, are now her advocates. Monchi decides that he will not join a gang per his uncle's advice and Dreamer, the cousin who was shot at the beginning, survives her injuries. The resolution of both of these texts do

not fully deal with the facts that América remains undocumented and that it is likely that Monchi will continue to feel peer pressure to join the local gang. Serrato further argues:

Rodríguez's two texts embody Maria Nikolajeva's inspiring ideas that 'fiction is not a direct *reflection* of reality but an artistic *transformation* of it' (190). Even with this in mind, [...] these endings seem acutely ironic because whereas the new realist features of his books nurture resilience, their conclusions seem at odds with the development of resilience. With no fully satisfactory way out of this predicament, it seems that Rodríguez and other similarly ambitious writers for youth are left to continue to wrestle with and work out their conflicting inclinations. (201)

This tension is also clearly seen in Herrera, Muñoz-Ryan, and Mohr's work. In *Super Cilantro Girl*, Esmeralda wakes up to realize that she had been dreaming and did not really break her mother out of the detention center but she, nonetheless, does find her mother back home the next morning. Naomi is allowed to remain with her great-grandmother and returns to school to be accepted by her peers after showcasing the carved figurines. Nilda, despite the death of her parents and the loss of her brothers to war or prison, is happy to share her art with her cousin and live with her aunt. However, the resolutions of these texts do not undermine the work that is done throughout the book because understanding these texts as *conocimiento* narratives further complicates how to conceptualize the responsibility of realist Latina/o children's literature.

Again, *conocimiento* is a constant process and the stages are never fixed. Instead, "Zigzagging from ignorance (*desconocimiento*) to awareness (*conocimiento*), in a day's time you may go through all seven stages, though you may dwell in one for months. [...]" Together, these stations constitute a meditation on the rites of passage, the transitions of life from birth to death, and all the daily births and deaths in-between (545-6). The fluidity of this kind of healing allows for the happy endings of the texts I analyze to be

part of this process. The character's happiness or the author's resolutions are indicators that *conocimiento* has taken place and the different stages the characters go through are probably the most significant aspect. In other words, the happy resolutions can be understood as a stage of a *conocimiento* process instead of reading them as fixed endings. Reading these children's texts as *conocimiento* narratives suggests that the conclusions of the texts are not guarantees of a better future but instead offer Chicano/Latino children the possibility to create alternative ways of knowing and existing. Herrera, Rodríguez, Muñoz-Ryan, and Mohr present characters that use their creativity and imagination to construct alternative realities where happy endings are part of a much larger process.

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Chapter 2

“You wanna be a chump/or a champ?”: Constructions of Masculinity, Absent Fathers, and Conocimiento in Latina/o Children’s and Young Adult Literature

Thirteen- year- old Andy Lopez died on October 22, 2013 in Santa Rosa, CA after receiving seven gun shots by police who suspected him of carrying an AK-47 when in reality he was in possession of a toy replica. According to news article “Toy Guns, Deadly Consequences,” when Deputy Erik Gelhaus asked Lopez to slowly turn around the toy replica moved and Gelhaus suspected Lopez was readying to shoot and instead Gelhaus shot first and proceeded to shoot seven more times. The community of Santa Rosa marched and protested the injustice against Lopez and shone light on a larger issue of discrimination by the police against boys and men of color. While the Lopez family filed a federal civil rights suit, no charges were filed against Gelhaus.

³ Among many things, Lopez’s murder demonstrates the precarity of black and brown lives. While the Lopez’s family lawyer attempted to demonstrate that Gelhaus fired at Andy without a valid reasonable cause, Andy’s deviant appearance and behavior in a town that is 60% Latino was enough to warrant his death. In ““You Don’t Know How Much He Meant’: Deviancy, Death, and Devaluation,” an article about her cousin’s death and the value of Latino lives, Lisa Marie Cacho explains, “Young men of color are not very sympathetic subjects if they don’t want to work 9-5 jobs, if they use their expendable income on recreational activities, or if they take risks with their lives” (196).

³ Shortly after, the shooting of Michael Brown in Ferguson, MO by Officer Derek Wilson further garnered national attention to police brutality and the increasing deaths of black and brown people at the hands of police.

On October 22 Lopez was on the street being seemingly unproductive and that made him an unsympathetic subject and, therefore, suspicious and criminal. Lopez may have unknowingly taken a risk with his life by walking around with a toy replica of an AK-47; however, he took a risk every day by simply existing and inhabiting public space. The photo that circulated in the media and that was used at his memorial was of Lopez wearing a black sweatshirt and black beanie with a diamond stud earring on each earlobe. Although Lopez's attire is typical of youth of color culture it has also been misappropriated as a signifier for criminality. The media coverage of the shooting focused on the toy gun and on why Lopez carried it out in public in the first place and how Gelhaus could have shot a child that carried only a toy gun. An article on CNN.com argued that Lopez was possibly on his way to play and show off the weapon replica to a friend. Another newspaper claimed that Gelhaus fired because he feared for his life and as a response to his police training. The media coverage portrayed Lopez's death as a "series of unfortunate events" in which Lopez and Gelhaus were trapped in circumstances out of their control. In this way, the media underplays the racial politics at work that cost Lopez his life. Lopez died not because of the toy replica alone but because he was a brown youth on the street presumed to be up to "no good." The history of violence that black and brown young men have experienced in the United States suggests that if Lopez had not been killed at age thirteen it is very likely that his life would have been threatened at a later time.

Lopez's unfortunate death reminds us that the lives of brown and black youth are vulnerable. Their innocence goes unacknowledged because of the color of their skin.

Given the constant threat under which young men of color live it is important to discuss the ways in which they construct their masculinity and the roles that healing can play in their lives. Through an examination of Juan Felipe Herrera's *Downtown Boy*, Rene Colato Lainez's *Waiting for Papá*, and Torey Maldonado's *Secret Saturdays* I discuss how absent fathers inform the young protagonists' understanding of masculinity and the impact these fathers have on their sons' *conocimiento* process. The texts in question complicate representations of absent fathers by pausing to examine the causes of their absence. This particular attention to fathers is significant because it presents an opportunity to also understand the systemic oppressions that make it difficult for fathers to parent. Herrera, Colato Laínez, and Maldonado create narratives that investigate the possibilities and limitations of Latino masculinity. Protagonists like Juanito, Beto, and Sean struggle with their father's absence and as a result have a difficult time understanding their masculinity and their healing processes. I take my theoretical cue from Phillip Serrato, for example, who argues in his foundational essay "Transforming Boys, Transforming Masculinity, Transforming Culture: Masculinity Anew in Latino and Latina Children's Literature" for a practical application of Latina/o children's and young adult texts in the lives of Latino boys. Serrato suggests:

Perhaps above all else, this literature invites boy readers in particular to think about the examples of masculinity surrounding them, to reflect upon the pressures that they themselves have faced or will face as they grow up, and to figure out what kinds of men they want to become. (154-5)

Serrato's vision for the potential that Latino children's literature offers Latino boys is one that speaks to their very livelihood. Serrato further explains that while plenty skepticism exists on the reality that books like these will be accessed by the children that need them

or that these books could even stand a chance against the bombardment of negative messages that children receive from society and the media there still remains hope for an opportunity to change existing ways of knowing. Similarly, Cacho explains that reading the lives of young men of color through Chela Sandoval's "hermeneutics of love" provides an opportunity to see their lives as valuable. In other words, Serrato and Cacho demonstrate the need for a lens or space that understands Latino boys as having the potential for healing and for being loved. Through their texts, Herrera, Colato-Lainez, Hernandez, and Maldonado engage in a dialogue where the lives of Latino boys are valuable and worth saving. Therefore, throughout this essay I demonstrate the ways in which the protagonists understand their father's absence, how that absence impacts their notions of Latino masculinity, and how they participate in a *conocimiento* process that allows them to reconcile the absence. By focusing on the father/son relationship in these texts I also highlight the ways in which the fathers are involved in their son's *conocimiento* process.

Downtown Boy: "The water will heal you"

Juan Felipe Herrera's *Downtown Boy* tells the story of ten-year-old Juanito Palomares and the distress he feels at not having his father near. For majority of the young adult novel written in verse, his father's absence haunts Juanito like a ghost. The absence becomes more palpable for Juanito at moments when his masculinity is tested by those around him. While he recalls his father's advice on how to be a man and what kind of man he wants Juanito to become, Juanito cannot reconcile his father's advice with his absence. Instead Juanito is left feeling conflicted and lost. Interestingly, much of Mr.

Palomares's absence has to do with his desire to find healing due to his struggle with diabetes. Throughout the novel he insists that water has healing capabilities and tries to impart this knowledge on Juanito. However, Mr. Palomares falls short in explaining the significance of healing to Juanito because for majority of the novel all Juanito understands is that his father is not there. The father/son relationship in *Downtown Boy* suggest that father and son are in search of very similar things—a sense of belonging, a home, and healing. Though, their searches do not seem to bring father and son together but instead separates them. In this section I read Juanito's struggle with his absent father as the reason that he is caught in "nepantla" and I examine Mr. Palomares as what Sara Ahmed terms a "melancholic migrant." Reading these characters in these ways further allows me to explore their father/son relationship and consider how their individual healing processes contests Latino masculinity. Furthermore, I elaborate on the complicated ways that Juanito's *conocimiento* process is linked to Mr. Palomares's desire to find happiness.

Juanito is well aware of the impact that his father's absence has had on their family; therefore, it is difficult for him to comprehend his father's search for healing as a necessity or urgency. Juanito expresses, "At Patrick Henry Elementary, my new school, sometimes it looks like he's standing under the black clock by the door, waiting for me, wearing his straw white hat and his favorite blue coat. If he was here Mami wouldn't have to work so hard" (61). Mr. Palomares's absence has meant that his family has had to move around often and that Juanito's mother has had to work more to sustain the family. At this moment, Juanito sees his father's role, and by extension the role of men, as the

provider. In this way, searching for healing is not recognized as a productive act because it is not providing for the family. Furthermore, his absence is felt as more of a form of abandonment rather than a necessary journey toward healing. Juanito's view signals that men have limited access to healing because of certain gender expectations. That Mr. Palomares has abandoned his masculine duties—that of father, man of the house, and provider—in search for water that will heal him threatens his masculinity. Mr. Palomares's absence further threatens their family dynamics because the mother having to work more to make up for the lack of contribution from her husband also means that she cannot be the mother she's expected to be. It is telling that while at his new school Juanito imagines his father picking him up from school but in reality since his father is not there and his mother is at work it is probable that no one is there to pick him up. Juanito, then, finds himself isolated and without a real sense of belonging.

In “now let us shift...the of *conocimiento*...inner work, public acts,” Gloria Anzaldúa explains *nepantla* as the second stage of *conocimiento* that serves as a “[...] liminal, transitional space, suspended between shifts, you're two people, split between before and after. *Nepantla*, where the outer boundaries of the mind's inner life meet the outer world of reality, is a zone of possibility” (545). Anzaldúa explains that *conocimiento* is the process of using knowledge for healing wherein one navigates seven fluid stages that lead one out of *desconocimiento*. *Nepantla* is the stage where one can evaluate the multiple possibilities and knowledges available. Juanito is in a constant state of *nepantla* throughout the novel. His father's unexplained absence positions him in an in

between space where Juanito must contend with the various expectations placed on his gender in order to construct his own understanding of Latino masculinity.

Understanding Mr. Palomares as what Sara Ahmed calls a “melancholic migrant” figure allows me to demonstrate how his focus on healing is at odds with Juanito’s own *conocimiento* process for various reasons including how his “melancholia” limits his ability to father. In other words, Mr. Palomares is so invested in his own search for healing and happiness that he neglects his son and his needs. In *The Promise of Happiness* (2010) Sara Ahmed discusses the phenomenon of happiness and its complicated relationship to constructions of citizenship and subjectivity and argues that “[...] we are directed by the promise of happiness, as the promise that happiness is what follows if we do this or that” (14). In this way, happiness serves as the driving force that dictates one’s actions. Mr. Palomares is convinced that the right water will cure his diabetes and therefore travels in search of it because a cure might mean he can live longer and be happy for a longer time. In a discussion about British Asian migrant experiences, histories of empire, and the promise of happiness Ahmed reads the film *Bend It Like Beckham* (2002) as a way to explore how migrants disrupt the idea of “happiness in imperial history.” Ahmed explains that colonization and imperialism are understood as necessities for the improvement and civilization of natives which serve as reasons for happiness; in this way, unhappy migrants disrupt nation building projects because they are a reminder of the atrocities and violences of colonialism and imperialism. She writes, “[...] the figure of the melancholic provides ‘us’ with a wound; by providing a sore point, the melancholic might allow us to keep what is sore at that point. This is how the

melancholic migrant *comes to figure*: if the migrant is a sore point, then soreness can be attributed to the migrant” (141). Migrants that are unable to assimilate or prosper in ways imagined by the nation represent and become sore points in these larger histories of empires that make it difficult to progress. Ahmed reads *Bend It Like Beckham*’s Jess’s father as a “melancholic migrant” figure because of the tension he creates for his daughter around her desire to play football (soccer) despite it being something that will make her happy. While considering one of the father’s speech acts in the film Ahmed argues:

The figure of the melancholic migrant appears as the one who refuses to participate in the national game. Suffering becomes a way of holding to a lost object. We can certainly see how the father’s idea of himself, or his ideal self, is threatened by the experience of racism (“I was the best fast bowler in our school”). Racism becomes an explanation for the failure to live up to an ideal (“when I came to this country, nothing”). (142)

The father suffers over a potential “ideal self” that becomes unattainable after migrating; furthermore, the father’s suffering signals the ways in which the nation has failed its migrants. In this way, pointing out the racism that has made it difficult to achieve his “ideal self” signals the “sore point” that exists within nation building projects. Ahmed further argues:

The melancholic migrant appears as a figure in this translation from experience to explanation. Racism as an explanation of migrant suffering functions to preserve an attachment to the very scene of suffering. Bad feeling thus originates with the migrant who won’t let go of racism as a script that explains suffering. (143)

This way, the father’s lack of attainment is understood as an individual problem rather than a larger systemic issue. His suffering then becomes an obstacle for the nation’s own happiness and progress. The “melancholic migrant” is a threat to the nation because this

figure challenges notions of national progress by being a constant reminder that the system is fraught or even broken.

In *Downtown Boy* Mr. Palomares's search is often described with longing and nostalgia. Juanito is not aware that his father searches for a cure to his diabetes and thus the longing and nostalgia are also for his father. Mr. Palomares refuses to look for medical treatment and instead puts his faith that the power of water will heal him; as a result, Juanito often associates his father with water. Juanito recalls his father and his mother arguing, "The water will heal you," he says. "Why don't you go to a doctor?" Mami says. "All they know is knives and pills! Water, you drink it and it cools you, warms your heart. Cleans your liver. Water is...Precious" (171). Mr. Palomares's obsession with water throughout the novel is linked to a desire for a home and a sense of belonging. He wanders looking for water but even Juanito has an inkling that he searches for so much more, "Maybe that's why Papi looks for water. Water that will cure him. So he can feel at home" (77). Mr. Palomares's suffering, physical and spiritual, indicates larger systemic oppressions in place that make it difficult for him and his family to move forward, begin healing, or find happiness. Ahmed continues to argue that, "It is important to note that the melancholic migrant's fixation with injury is read as an obstacle not only to his own happiness but also to the happiness of the generation to come, and even to national happiness" (Ahmed 144). Mr. Palomares's fixation on water and what water represents interferes with Juanito's own healing including Juanito's desire to have a united family and a stable home. Because of this, Juanito finds himself in nepantla unsure of what he needs to do in order to pursue his own healing separate from his father's.

Ahmed further explains that “[...] the second generation children are the ones who desire their own happiness. The nation must intervene to protect the second generation from the first, those who have failed to let go of their past attachments and who hence can only suffer and transmit their suffering, which easily gets turned into terror and rage” (148). Juanito and Mr. Palomares are part of a greater system of oppression that seeks to pit them against each other. The tensions between father and son extend beyond generational differences wherein the first generation (Mr. Palomares) represents “past attachments” and the second generation (Juanito) stand in for progress and mobility. Ahmed argues that the nation has the second generation’s interest in mind precisely because they symbolize the futurity of the nation and if the first generation’s “terror and rage” get passed on to the second generation then that impedes the progress of the nation. The passing on of “past attachments” is clearly present in Mr. Palomares’s relationship with Juanito. His teachings on the importance of water tell Juanito something about Latino masculinity, *conocimiento*, and citizenship.

Juanito remembers that while they lived on a farm in central valley California he spilled a pitcher of water and his father made him refill it in order to learn the value of: “Water is life, son! It can heal you! Now you take this empty bucket and walk through the forest until you get to town. And when you get there, find a way, a faucet, fill the bucket with water. Bring it back full. Maybe, then you’ll learn how precious water is” (43)! Mr. Palomares expects to teach Juanito the value of water by correlating it with manual labor. In this way, water is precious because the journey to acquire it was difficult. Later in the novel when Mr. Palomares briefly returns to the family he insists on

taking Juanito to the ocean: “‘Let’s go to the ocean,’ he says, ‘tomorrow, very early. And I’ll show you how to drink water from the ocean’” (192). Mr. Palomares’s desire to show Juanito to drink from the ocean is an attempt to share part of him with his son. It is an effort to bridge the gap that exists between them. By asking that Juanito trek to refill the bucket of water Mr. Palomares teaches his son about hard work and providing for a family—which are traditional values and expectations often placed on Latino masculinity. However, teaching Juanito about drinking from the ocean is a more personal lesson about sensitivity and connection with something greater than one’s existence. In this way, Mr. Palomares further challenges traditional norms placed on their gender and ethnicity. Mr. Palomares’s desire to teach Juanito about the water is also a need to teach his son about their culture.

Juanito does not seem to know much about his father’s past nor does he really understand his father’s obsession with water. He does understand, though, that his father is absent. However, the relationship between the water and their Mexican heritage is significant because it helps to clarify the “past attachments” that make Mr. Palomares a “melancholic migrant.” Juanito assumes that his father travels a lot because he searches for water but does not really know where he goes. He says, “I think of Papi, somewhere in the desert in Chihuahua, swimming in an *ojo de agua*. Why doesn’t he write” (37)? For Juanito Chihuahua is a distant and vast place to which he does not feel a personal tie. The desert, Chihuahua, and *ojo de agua* are strange places that have taken his father and keep him from writing. Again, Juanito does not understand that he too is somehow connected to these places and spaces but knows that his father is absent. Later in the

novel Juanito shares similar sentiments at not having his father near: “Papi’s somewhere in Mexico or New Mexico—I forget which Mexico—looking for water that will cure him. Why does he need water? What’s wrong with him” (62)? That Juanito does not know in which Mexico his father is located is a further indication that he does not have all the information. This lack of knowing serves to distance him from his father and to keep him in a state of *nepantla*—an in-between space where he is mad at his father but still wants his affection. Mexico or New Mexico, in this case, continues to represent far off places to which only Mr. Palomares has attachments. Mr. Palomares’s search for water is indeed a search for home as Juanito points out earlier in the novel. That home is somehow connected to Mexico and is a reminder that such home was not attainable in the United States. Like in *Bend It Like Beckham*, the father suffers over a lost home or lost self; he is fixated on the life he had or on the life he did not get to live in the new country. Mr. Palomares’s suffering is definitely for his health but it could also be for the better life for which his family (im)migrated in the first place. Mr. Palomares suffers because he has been failed by the American Dream and the promise of happiness and as a result his family suffers as well. The novel opens in 1958 a few years after the legal implementation of “Operation Wetback,” a strategy intended to deport undocumented Mexicans after the influx of (im)migrants during the Bracero Program. Operation Wetback was a discriminatory and violent tactic that targeted and uprooted Mexicans in the United States; as a result, many U.S. citizens of Mexican descent were also deported. While the operation is not directly addressed in the novel it is not far-fetched to suggest that the Palomares’ could represent a family impacted by it. The anti-Mexican sentiment

further marginalized Mexican populations which made it increasingly difficult to utilize resources and services available such as public schools and medical centers. Mr. Palomares's refusal to visit a doctor for diabetes treatment could be rooted in the long history of discrimination and violence against people of color by medical facilities which certainly were not improved by policies like Operation Wetback. Mr. Palomares feels the full effect of this discrimination when his leg must be amputated because of the diabetes. I argue, in light of Ahmed's explanation, that his amputation can be understood as a way the nation contends with the "melancholic migrant" which in a painful twist results in Mr. Palomares staying home like Juanito wanted.

While at the hospital Mrs. Palomares explains to Juanito that Mr. Palomares's leg must be amputated:

"That means that they are going to have to cut off/ his leg. A terrible infection. Gangrene./ His diabetes is so bad that his blood/ reaches his feet very slowly. He can't heal well./ But he never listens. And he never visits the doctor./How's he going to walk?"/ But how's he going to go to the Plazita every morning?/ How's he going to find water? (225-226)

Mr. Palomares's loss of mobility does not end his suffering but it does impede his search. It is the process of searching, after all, that symbolizes his melancholia and unrest. The act of searching was the threat to the nation, the nation's happiness, and the second generation's happiness. The loss of his leg almost serves as a warning to stop searching and to accept the powers that be—the power of the hospitals, the doctors, and the state. Mr. Palomares "can't heal well" because of his diabetes and because of his "past attachments" to Mexico and now that his leg has been amputated his healing must take a different form. That is, Mr. Palomares can no longer define healing as something that can

be reached via water and/or his past attachments instead he must heal within the systemic structures that most likely wounded him in the first place. Although Mrs. Palomares is concerned with her husband's ability to walk because, among many reasons, it threatens his ability to work and provide for the family, Juanito is concerned with his father's inability to search for water.

After his father comes to stay with the family Juanito has a difficult time understanding his father as stationary. Despite Juanito's insistence throughout the novel that he wants his father near he is also disappointed with the father he gets after the amputation. His father is depressed and Juanito notices: "Papi says he's going to build himself a leg out of plywood. But he won't. He just says things now and stares out the window. He doesn't go anywhere anymore. No Plazita, no fountain. No water. Papi doesn't even shave anymore" (228). Mr. Palomares's depression keeps Juanito in nepantla because although he wanted his father to stop searching for water now that he has stopped his father still does not seem to be fully present and Juanito remains unfulfilled. As the novel progresses Mr. Palomares reveals that he has more children and that they are also a reason why he has been away. His other children are also a part of his "past attachments" and are also representative of his shortcomings and serve as more reasons for his melancholia. Mr. Palomares's focus on his own healing and happiness, however, came at the cost of Juanito's own *conocimiento*.

Although Juanito spends the majority of the novel in a state of nepantla he eventually confronts his father and moves out of nepantla and into the fourth stage of *conocimiento*, the call to action. Almost in tears Juanito yells "I don't want to be a

chump/ like Chacho said!” [...] / “But that’s all I am!” (267). Juanito recalls the beginning of the novel where his cousin Chacho encourages him to box despite Juanito’s own reservations and hesitations about the sport because his father always warned him against fighting. His cousin taunts him and poses the question, “You wanna be a chump/ or a champ?” (7). The question asks Juanito to decide what kind of man he wants to be. His cousin’s taunts and his father’s advice set up a binary for what masculinity can look like—a fighter and not a fighter. Juanito relates his father as not a fighter; however, that understanding of masculinity is also connected to his father’s absence. Therefore, not fighting threatens his masculinity. Even though Juanito agrees to box, which is a result of his anger at his father’s absence, Juanito still feels like a chump. He does not feel like a man and he associates that with not having his father there. After hearing his son call himself a “chump,” Mr. Palomares explains, “It wasn’t you, *hijo*;/ it was me...I am/ so sorry, Juanito/ I love you, Son;/ you are my only one now./ And I promise/ never to leave you/ again” (268). Mr. Palomares’s apology challenges the champ/chump binary on masculinity by suggesting that masculinity, and being a father, is more complicated than that. By taking the blame Mr. Palomares recognizes the impact his absence has had on Juanito and further propels Juanito on his *conocimiento* journey. Juanito could not move on with his *conocimiento* process until he reconciled with his father and his absence. By the end of the novel Mr. Palomares is in positive spirits and there is a sense of family unity. Mr. Palomares’s focus on his family allows Juanito to better understand his father’s fixation with water and what the water represents—i.e. healing, happiness, and culture. As the novel closes Juanito is seen filling paper cups with water for “precious

Papi,/ precious Mami,/ precious every moment—/ precious, like water” (293). That Juanito is the one that gathers water for his parents is symbolic of what he has learned from his father and suggests that he is now the man he wants to be— a “champ” not unlike his father but more like himself.

Waiting for Papa: “To the Best Papá in the World”

René Colato Laínez’s children’s illustrated text *Waiting for Papá* (2004) tells the story of eight year old Beto and his journey to bring his father to the United States from El Salvador.⁴ Beto and his mother migrated to the U.S. with visas after losing jobs and their home to a war torn country. As a class assignment Beto writes a letter to his father that is read by a local radio personality who proceeds to invite Beto to the radio station and share his story. The radio segment prompts an immigration lawyer to call the station and offer legal services to bring Papá to the U.S. By the end of the story, Beto reunites with his father. In this section I examine Beto’s relationship with his father as essential to his conceptualization of masculinity and I trace the ways that Papá serves as a catalyst for Beto’s *conocimiento*. In conversation with Central American Studies scholars Ana Patricia Rodriguez and Leisy Abrego, I analyze how Beto’s desire to be reunited with his father marginalizes his mother; furthermore, I read this marginalization as an example of how heteropatriarchy reproduces violent knowledges.

⁴ There are many similarities between *Waiting for Papá* and the Juan Felipe Herrera’s *Super Cilantro Girl* analyzed in chapter 1. In both texts the Latino children protagonists wish to rescue their parents from unjust immigration policies that separate their families. Both Beto and Esmeralda use the resources around them to reunite with their parents and find *conocimiento*. While the immigration issues that separate the children from their individual parents are historically different and culturally specific they nonetheless serve to represent the ways that Latina/o children can find empowerment and *conocimiento* in the face of adversity.

In “Refugees of the South: Central Americans in the U.S. Latino Imaginary” Ana Patricia Rodríguez addresses the social, cultural, and economic conditions of the civil war in El Salvador that displaced many Salvadorans. Rodríguez explains that “Central American refugees represent contradictions of U.S. policies and politics in the region. Victims of the disorder and violence in their homelands, they seek safe haven in the United States, only to be received as depoliticized labor migrants, rarely granted the status of political refugees” (388). Rodríguez elaborates that despite the United States’s involvement in the civil war in El Salvador Salvadorans rarely received political asylum in the U.S. and often times found themselves needing to traverse the dangerous Mexico and U.S. borders in hopes of escaping the violence in their home country. Moreover, “Although they leave their homelands as political martyrs, in the United States they are forced into a labor migrant narrative, in which they become depoliticized, dehistoricized, and deterritorialized economic seekers, searchers for the ‘American’ way” (390). Rodríguez explains that Salvadorans, and Central Americans at large, become invisible when they come to the United States because they get homogenized into Mexican and Latino imaginaries that erase the cultural specifics of their Central American experiences. It is also important to note that while the civil war was a crisis that impacted everyone gender definitely played a role in migration patterns. Leisy J. Abrego argues in her book about Salvadoran transnational families *Sacrificing Families: Navigating Laws, Labor, and Love Across Borders* (2014) that “Contrary to long held assumptions and patterns in other countries where most migrants are men, the Salvadoran migration stream includes women who lead the way and migrate almost as often as men” (16). Abrego continues to

elaborate in her book that oftentimes mothers found themselves needing to immigrate in order to ensure their children's survival. In this way, immigration serves as a means to protect the role of motherhood whereas for men immigration is a strategy to preserve their masculinity. Abrego argues that "In El Salvador, motherhood is venerated as idealized form of womanhood, while fatherhood is only one of several acceptable forms of masculinity" (10). In this way, motherhood defines gender roles for women while men have more options for defining their masculinity aside from fatherhood.

These tenuous understandings of gender roles in El Salvador as impacted by the Salvadoran civil war and immigration are evident in Colato Lainez's children's illustrated text. The story opens on Beto's birthday where he is depicted seated in front of a large chocolate cake with a number eight candle on top. Despite the cake in front of him Beto looks distraught. His birthday reminds him of the years he has gone without his father. Beto explains, "I have not seen Papá for three years. When I was five years old, Mamá and I had to leave El Salvador. The detergent factory where Mamá and Papá worked was bombed during the war. Two days later our house caught on fire. All my toys, all my clothes and even Papá's favorite boots were burned" (n.p.). The bombing and the fire represent *arrebatos* in Beto's life because these traumatic events shake the foundation of what he understood his life to be. Gloria Anzaldúa maintains that *arrebatos*

—a violent attack, a rift with a loved one, illness, death in the family, betrayal, systematic racism and marginalization—rips you from your familiar 'home' [...]. Cada *arreatada* (snatching) turns your world upside down and cracks the walls of your reality, resulting in a great sense of loss, grief, and emptiness, leaving behind dreams, hopes, and goals. You are no longer who you used to be. As you move from past presuppositions and frames of reference, letting go of former positions, you feel like an orphan, abandoned by all that's familiar" (547).

Beto feels the loss of his home, his belongings, and even though he is not dead, of his father. That the story opens on his birthday suggests that Beto is aware of his own development and maturity. His recollection of his father further proposes that Beto might be thinking of his own masculinity; thus, Beto's determination to bring his father to the U.S. is then a tactic for him to construct his own masculinity. Additionally, it is interesting that Anzaldúa describes an *arrebato* as feeling "like an orphan" because it seems to represent Beto's understanding of his father's absence. Beto is represented as feeling incomplete without his father almost as if he was orphaned. The feeling of being orphaned is further reaffirmed by the Beto's mother's silence and the silencing she experiences throughout the text. Beto and his mother were able to travel legally to the United States because his maternal grandfather was able to get visas for them. Upon arriving to the U.S. Beto's mother found employment in the garment industry. Despite being able to provide for Beto, both economically and emotionally, motherhood cannot fulfill his needs for a father figure that will assist with the construction of his masculinity. In other words, regardless of Beto's mother stepping outside of traditional gender norms, by working in the public sphere and being a financial provider, such characteristics are no longer recognized as masculine traits but instead as motherly responsibilities. Because his mother is a woman it stands to assume that Beto cannot learn how to be a man from her even though his mother has taken up the role of both parents for most of the text. The "gender devaluation of domestic work" has made it so that the work that women do, in and outside the home, become ways to evaluate motherhood rather than acts that traverse gender norms and as sites of empowerment. That is, Beto's mother's work outside of the

home is not recognized as transgressing gender boundaries from which her son can learn but as behaviors that women need to adopt in order to be considered good mothers. Abrego corroborates that because “Fatherhood, on the other hand, regardless of social class standing, is closely tied to authority, protection, and guidance of the family through participation in the public sphere” (10). Again, even though Beto’s mother exhibits “authority, protection, and guidance” she is not valued in the same manner as if a man were to practice these traits. Beto’s search for *conocimiento* is complicated by the reproduction of heteronormative patriarchal knowledges wherein his desire to be reunited with his father reveals the gender marginalization his mother experiences.

As part of a class assignment Beto decorates a white t-shirt with his father’s face with the phrase “The Best Papá in the World” and writes a letter expressing his love for this father. In addition, he draws a picture depicting their home in El Salvador on fire and “[he] also drew Mamá screaming and Papá holding [him] in his arms while [he] cried” (n.p.). The t-shirt, the letter, and the drawing represent Papá exhibiting masculine qualities including the role of protector. There is an extra romanticization in the text around fathers because it is also Father’s Day and this holiday probably adds to Beto’s feeling of desolation because his family appears incomplete. Beto’s sadness around his father is certainly a real representation of the way that unjust immigration policies separate families. Beto’s family was separated by a civil war in which the United States had a hand in and it is now U.S. immigration policies that continues to separate his family. While the unjust immigration system is not directly addressed in the text it is apparent that the larger history of U.S/El Salvador relations impacts Beto’s family.

However, Beto's family does benefit from the privileges of having visas that allow them to legally stay in the U.S. Abrego explains that "[...] legal statuses matter because they help determine both the economic and emotional well-being of all members of transnational families" (71). That Beto's family can legally stay in the U.S. warrants them certain protections that undocumented families do not have. While she is certainly vulnerable to a broad range of exploitations as a garment industry worker a visa allows Mamá to work without fear of persecution and deportation. Moreover, "the comparison across legal statuses demonstrates that greater legal stability has the potential to foster opportunities and upward mobility for immigrants in the United States and their families" (98). The visas that Beto and Mamá have grant them access to resources they might not have been able to utilize otherwise. It is likely that one of the reasons that Beto can go on the radio and share his story in the first place is because he is protected by the limited privileges of his visa. Their visas provide them with a certain visibility that allows them to break the silence around the violence in the El Salvador. By telling their story they were able to connect to a lawyer that helped them bring Papá to the United States. This visibility allows Beto to be proactive during his father's absence by having him be the one to tell his story to several people.

Beto's proactivity is akin to what Anzaldúa describes as a "call to action" and the "clash of realities" in her theorization of *conocimiento*. Beto quickly moves from his *arrebato* to a "call to action," the stage that moves one to act. He uses the pain he feels over the absence of his father as a motivation to act and be reunited with him. By taking his "story out into the world" Beto risks being disappointed or hurt by the world outside

him (545). Anzaldúa explains that the “clash of realities” is an opportunity to test one’s story and in Beto’s case it proves to be a positive experience. His ability to move through the various stages of *conocimiento* is also a part of Beto understanding his own masculinity. While he paints the t-shirt, writes the letter, and goes on the radio to reunite with his father in order to share in the construction of his masculinity Beto inevitably ends up participating and reproducing gender norms. By talking to his teacher, the radio personality, and the general radio audience Beto participates in the public sphere and has gained agency traditionally reserved for men. Even though “After a year of work, [Mamá] had saved enough money to go see Mrs. Barrios, a lawyer who could help us apply for Papá’s immigration papers” it was not until Beto spoke up⁵ that Papá was actually brought to the U.S. (n.p.). That Mamá is silenced again is another example of the ways that a masculinity rooted in heteropatriarchy can recreate violence. Beto continues to exemplify traits associated with masculinity when he is able to financially provide for his family. He wishes to buy work boots as a gift for Father’s Day and proceeds to collect cans and trade them in for money in order to be able to afford them. Beto participates in an alternative economy in order to provide for his family. Even his school friends offer to help: “Within a couple of weeks, we had collected a lot of cans. On a Saturday morning, all my friends and I went to the recycling machine. We had about twenty-five large trash bags full of cans. Everyone in class helped, including Miss Parrales” (n.p.). Beto is then able to purchase the boots and give them to his father when he arrives to the U.S. Abrego

⁵ By no means do I intend to minimize the empowerment that Beto gains from speaking up about his experiences with the violence in El Salvador. That Beto gains a voice at all is important because it allows him to challenge the systems of violence that seek to separate his family.

explains that “For some [fathers], migration and new sources of economic stability provided for the first time in their lives opportunities to fulfill their roles as providers to their children and partners” (115). Being able to provide for the family is a way that men traditionally assert their masculinity. By being able to purchase the boots for his father Beto partakes in a larger economic system that reaffirms his masculinity. That an eight year old can provide for his father by participating in a capitalist system in the United States while his father in El Salvador cannot provide for his family further situates the United States as a world power. And if financial stability is equated with masculinity then Beto and the United States emasculate his father and El Salvador. In writing about a Salvadoran man named Ramón that immigrated to the United States Abrego explains that “Being able to provide sufficiently for his family—to noticeably improve their living conditions through his earnings—raised his own sense of masculinity and self-worth [...]” (115). Ramon’s raised sense of his masculinity and self-worth motivated him to be a sensitive husband and a caring father. While Beto is obviously not a father his understanding of masculinity stems from what he knows about his father. Being able to provide Papá with a replacement set of boots that were lost in a fire in El Salvador represents Beto’s ability to nurture, protect, and provide. These are qualities that he values in his father, which he captures in his letter, and is now able to recreate.

The story closes with an illustration of Papá, wearing his “Best Papá in the World” t-shirt, embracing Beto and with the box of new boots at their side. At this point Beto is represented as extremely happy and eager to make his father proud. Beto describes: “When Papá opened the box, he gave me a big hug. ‘Papá, these are your

favorite boots,' I told him. 'Will you always stay with me?' 'I will be with you forever,' he said" (n.p.). Papá's promise to remain with Beto forever is similar to Mr. Palomares's promise to Juanito in *Downtown Boy*. These moments are significant because they break stereotypical images of absent Latino fathers. The closing image in *Waiting for Papá* is meant to be cathartic and emotional in order to invoke Beto's struggle and as an attempt to capture a special father/son moment. However, it is difficult to ignore that Mamá is not in the closing image. While the Beto's journey is about reuniting with his father the closing image only reasserts that something about the kind of masculinity being practiced marginalizes Mamá. In "*La conciencia de la mestiza/ Towards a New Consciousness*," Gloria Anzaldúa calls for a new kind of masculinity that liberates men as well as women. She explains that "Today's macho has doubts about his ability to feed and protect his family. His "machismo" is an adaptation to oppression and poverty and low self-esteem" (105). Abrego's comments about financial security providing men with a raised sense of masculinity and self-worth resonate with Anzaldúa's concern that larger systems of oppression contribute to the violence that heteropatriarchy (re)creates. Anzaldúa further argues that "[...] as long as men are taught that they are superior and therefore culturally favored over *la mujer*, as long as to be a *vieja* is a thing of derision, there can be no real healing of our psyches" (106). That is, there "can be no real healing" because reproducing a masculinity that depends on the devaluation of women and women's work hurts both men and women. It is for this reason that Mamá is silenced throughout the text. Heteropatriarchy does not need to be blatantly violent in order to be understood as threatening.

The closing image of *Waiting for Papá* demonstrates the complications of Latino boys' construction of masculinity. Papá is represented as showing affection throughout the text which challenges many stereotypes about Latino men and Latino fathers. It is also important to Beto's *conocimiento* process and his own understanding of masculinity that he be reunited with his father. Papá's return certainly represents a shift of realities wherein civil wars and immigration systems cannot separate families. Beto's love for his father and his diligence helped him overcome his father's absence and work towards reuniting with him. The boots he gifted his father represents the love they have for each other while simultaneously speak to the construction of Beto's masculinity. That Mamá is marginalized and silenced throughout the text highlights the insidious ways that heteropatriarchy infiltrates lives and identities. Mamá's marginalization is not inconsequential but instead suggests how gender norms get reproduced in the construction of masculinity. Beto is able to find *conocimiento* at the end of the story because his *arrebato* was being far from his father but once they are reunited Beto feels better and while he was able to some extent challenge immigration policies that sought to separate his family he was not able to transform gender norm. Beto's sensitivity and demonstrations of affection, however, are important signals that a new form of masculinity that does not oppress women or men can be possible.

Secret Saturdays: "It makes me so mad I want to pop"

Secret Saturdays (2010) by Torrey Maldonado follows Justin and Sean as their relationship changes after Justin learns that Sean takes secret trips with his mom and refuses to speak about them. Sean begins to act out and lie to his friends after several trips

to visit his father in the Clinton Correctional Facility. *Secret Saturdays* is narrated by Justin and centers his feelings about Sean's secret. The majority of the novel is spent on Justin attempting to figure out Sean's secret and on his anger and frustration at what he perceives as a betrayal of their friendship. Justin and Sean are both sixth grade students of African-American and Puerto Rican descent and live in Red Hook, a borough in Brooklyn, New York. Red Hook is represented as a low-income urban area with high crime rates. Most of the young characters in the novel live in single-parent households. The didactic style narration of the novel places much emphasis on ensuring that young boys do not follow in their fathers' footsteps and end up in jail. In this section I trace Sean's *conocimiento* process as he deals with his father's incarceration and examine the ways that he reproduces and challenges definitions of masculinity. I employ scholarship by Lisa Marie Cacho to discuss issues of deviancy and criminality in order to better understand the ways that the young men of color in *Secret Saturdays* are read as future criminals and therefore in need of preventative care.

Sean is described as being more popular, better dressed, and smarter than Justin. His friends admire him for his ability to "dis" other students. Justin explains that "Dissing is like boxing. There's a winner and a loser. Winners leave smiling. Losers end up sorry looking and deflated like a popped balloon. To dis someone, you need to find something wrong with them. Nothing was wrong with Sean [...]" (3-4). Sean's ability to outwit his fellow classmates sets him apart because he rejects physically fights and instead uses his words. His refusal to fight at the beginning of the novel defines his masculinity as one that is beyond brawn and instead admires smarts. Because Sean can dis better than

anyone in his grade he considers himself very manly. By choosing to measure his manhood via disses Sean devalues physical fights and because of this he is highly criminalized by his school and his friends when he does resort to violence toward the end of the novel. Lisa Marie Cacho's differentiation between being stereotyped as a criminal and being criminalized in *Social Death: Racialized Rightlessness and the Criminalization of the Unprotected* (2012) is useful here as a way to understand how Sean is further criminalized because of where he comes from and because his father is in jail. Cacho writes: "To be stereotyped as a criminal is to be misrecognized as someone who committed a crime, but to be criminalized is to be prevented from being law-abiding" (4). When Sean turns to violence he is no longer regarded as a good "law-abiding" student and instead threatened with a future (or lack thereof) like that of his father's. In this way, *Secret Saturdays* reveals a common rhetoric about "at-risk" youth where their failure and success in life is measured by the choices they make without taking into account that some populations are already set up by various systemic and institutional oppressions to fail. It is for this reason that schools, like the one in this novel, use "scared straight" tactics as an example of failure in hopes that the present youth will change their paths and not end up in jail. Because Sean's behavior later in the novel is read as deviant he is policed, isolated, and punished without anyone ever attempting to discuss with him why he is upset in the first place. It is obvious to the reader that Sean acts out aggressively the more he goes to visit his father in jail; however, there is no signal that any adult in the novel attempts to even outreach to Sean about this issue. Instead, he is warned that his deviant behavior will spiral and he will wind up like his father. Because crime and being

criminal is already read into Sean's future, and that of his peers, the adults in the novel attempt to sway him from this life by attempting to provide alternatives that further mark deviant behavior. Consequently his mother talks to him about using his words to fight and why his teacher brings in a former gang member to talk to the class. Sean tells Justin his mother's "four things to remember about fighting":

"First, people fight when their feelings are hurt. Second, you can fight with your hands or your mouth. Third, people who fight with their hands are too dumb to beat up somebody with their words [...] That's the fourth thing" Sean said. "If you beat up a kid with your words, do it so other kids watching get scared of you. If they are they will leave you alone." (16)

Sean's mother's advice is meant to steer him away from fighting, which in this novel is understood as a gateway to much larger crimes, and it is also an attempt to redefine masculinity as far away as possible from the kind of masculinity that puts men like Sean's father in jail. However, dissing remains grounded in dominance, abuse, and hypermasculinity which become more evident as Sean's dissing changes over time from witty banter to verbal abuse. It is necessary to note that the advice Sean receives from his mother accepts that Sean will need to protect himself. Fighting with words, however, seems to be safer than physically fighting because the assumption is that words will not get him arrested. Furthermore, the advice that Sean receives stems from a place where "otherness" and marginalization is felt and understood. It is likely that Sean's mom advises what she does because she does not want her son to go to jail; however, her advice also suggests that Sean needs to protect himself because society will not. Cacho explains, "Certain vulnerable and impoverished populations and places of color have been 'differentially included' within the U.S. legal system. As targets of regulation and

containment, they are deemed deserving of discipline and punishment but criminalized as always already the object and target of law, never its authors or addressees” (5). It is as if Sean’s mom understands that the law is not on their side but maintains a desire to survive and to see her children survive anyway. In this way, dissing serves as an alternative form of fighting that allows Sean to protect himself on a daily basis while simultaneously protecting his future.

Sean is well aware that dissing protects him and he attempts to impart this knowledge on Justin, who is more likely to get bullied. Being able to protect himself is a significant aspect of Sean’s *conocimiento* process. Sean spends majority of the novel in what Anzaldúa describes as the “Coatlicue State.” Anzaldúa explains that “When overwhelmed by the chaos caused by living between stories, you break down, descent into the third space, the Coatlicue depths of despair, self-loathing, and hopelessness. Dysfunctional for weeks, the refusal to move paralyzes you” (545). Sean expresses his Coatlicue state through anger, verbal abuse, and physical fights. Because the novel focuses on Justin, Sean’s character never really gets an opportunity to express his feelings about his father’s incarceration instead Sean becomes a cautionary tale of what could happen to youth of color if their behavior is not policed. *Secret Saturdays* attempts to promote a different kind of masculinity through Justin where young men of color should be allowed to express their feelings without fear of being harassed because of it. However, the novel sets up a dichotomy between sensitive men and men in jail wherein being sensitive is obviously preferred to being in jail. Because Sean’s rage is understood as him moving away from the ideal form of masculinity he is scrutinized so much that

even dissing is no longer acceptable. Justin quickly points out Sean's shift in attitude and is the first to unknowingly marginalize him: "Sean wasn't always the usual Sean. Sometimes, he was mad different and took his meanness to a whole other level. When he acted that way, it was hard for me to feel normal with him" (58). As the novel progresses and Sean is actively deviant his difference and meanness no longer help him stand out above the rest but are instead markers used to measure his deviancy. Justin's comments signal that there is an appropriate and acceptable level of meanness; however, when coupled with Sean's other deviant behavior like lying, getting low grades, and keeping company with other students recognized as deviant his meanness becomes a problem. Furthermore, Justin feels discomfort around Sean because Sean does not perform the right kind of masculinity. Similarly, Cacho explains when analyzing her cousin Brandon's death that the performance of the right type of masculinity applies value to a person's life:

Although race may signify who is 'worthless,' becoming 'worthy' demands assimilating to US norms of gender, sexuality, and domesticity [...]. In other words, clearly degrading stereotypes about young Latino men, like Brandon, are only degrading because these racial and racist assumptions rely upon patriarchal and homophobic logics and languages [...]. This is why we could not talk about Brandon as valuable; he was not only marked as 'deviant' by his race, but he also did not perform masculinity in ways to redeem, reform, or counter his (racialized) "deviancy." (184)

Brandon's and Sean's deviant behaviors are marked as deviant because they do not fit into the image of a productive citizenship. In Sean's case, he performs the masculinity that the novel suggests will send him to jail and because of this he is criminalized and less valuable. Sean was more valuable when he received good grades and refused to fight because he was an example of a productive citizen—the opposite of a criminal. But when

his behavior begins to change and he is criminalized not even his anger can be recognized as part of his *conocimiento* process. Meaning that, because his behavior is read as deviant his anger is not understood as an appropriate response to his circumstances but instead marginalizes him. Sean is criminalized during his “clash of realities,” his public displays of anger at this father’s incarceration, which suggests that healing is limited or not available when one is marked as deviant. In this way, anger is then understood as a deviant behavior so that any expression of this feeling is also associated with deviancy. Cacho explains that “Historically, law has criminalized the recreational activities, survival economies, and intimate relationships of people of color so the status of ‘being of color’ was inseparable from conduct assumed to be ‘criminal’” (*Social Death* 40). Sean’s background and his assumed closed proximity to jail because of his father make displays of anger close to criminal conduct.

While sensitivity and expression is encouraged as the preferred form of masculinity in *Secret Saturdays* Sean demonstrates that some expression is regulated and policed. Because Justin is the protagonist of the story much emphasis is placed on his journey toward being able to express his feelings. Like Sean, Justin’s “father is ghost too” and has a relative in jail (8). Throughout the novel Justin’s mother encourages him to express his feelings as an attempt to further distance him from the type of masculinity his absent father and jailed uncle performed. Justin recalls his mother’s advice:

“Guys out here get taught from little to act hard,” she would say. “They’re supposed to pretend nothing is wrong with them. They think they can’t ever be sensitive because that’s considered soft or gay. So these boys and men out here bottle in their real feelings. Wearing armor and fronting. But being hard only leads to trouble. Feelings explode out and lots of guys are in jail, hooked on drugs, and dead for being hard.” (48)

Justin's mom's advice is another moment where masculinity is (re)defined within the novel. While similar to what Sean's mom advises, because both mothers intend to distance their sons from a form of masculinity that will put them in jail, Justin's mom highlights the issue of sexuality and homophobia as it relates to masculinity. Throughout the novel, in general, there are several homophobic references, mainly the use of the word "gay" as an insult. Manny, the student whom Sean fights, calls Sean's father gay and "fruity" and that is what ensues the fight between them (116-117). Sean and Justin call each other "faggots" as a way to suggest that one is more cowardly than the other (24). Showing emotion, affection, or concern for a fellow man is often associated with being "soft," "gay," or "homo." Justin's mother does not challenge the explicit homophobia in suggesting that expression of emotions is "gay" but she does signal, to an extent, that homophobia is present. However, her allusion to emoting having to do with being "soft" or "gay" also suggests that there is a way to be a man and show emotion without being gay. In this way, there is a reaffirmation that masculinity needs to be heterosexual. Furthermore, Justin's mom suggests the not being to express their feelings will lead boys and men to a moment when their feelings will erupt and consequently get in real trouble. Sean's verbal abuse and physical fight with Manny can be recognized as an example of how an eruption of emotions is a gateway to more trouble including crime and jail. The school principal corroborates this logic when he warns Justin about Sean's behavior:

“There are reports on my desk that all say the same thing. Putting someone down is verbal abuse. Kids who do this become adults who start verbal conflicts. Adults who verbally abuse are more likely to have problems with the law because they put the wrong person down and that person either responds with violence or they get the police involved. ” (105)

The principal quickly criminalizes students like Sean who put other students down because he posits that their deviant behavior as children is an example of their future behavior. Interestingly, the principal’s skewed logic signals that there exists a power dynamic between those who “have problems with the law” and those whom the law favors. He contends that in violent situations there is clearly an aggressor and a victim and it is likely that because of how children like Sean are read by society that Sean will always be assumed to be the aggressor. Again, like the other adults in the novel, there is a desire to protect children like Sean by attempting to control or cure their deviant behavior. In the above passage, the principal’s concern is not why Sean is verbally abusive in the first place nor does he attempt to learn the root of Sean’s conflict; he does, however, imply that children like Sean, because of their race and their community, are more likely to engage with the law in some negative way. The principal’s suggestion is to remain quiet because speaking up can lead to confrontations and confrontations can result in jail time. In this way, students like Sean have little to no space to express their anger or frustration because their racialized bodies and policed communities render them always already criminal and as a result their activities and expressions are also understood as criminal. It is for this reason that Sean’s anger is not understood as part of his *conocimiento* process but instead as potential aggressive criminal activity. Sean gets criminalized because it is assumed that his race, class status, and his relative in jail will

inevitable result with Sean in jail as well. Such logic impedes his healing process. Cacho elaborates that, “[...] the criminal, the illegal alien, and the terrorist suspect are treated as obvious, self-inflicted, and necessary outcomes of law-breaking rather than as *effects* of the law or as produced by the law” (*Social Death* 4). In this way, Sean will be a criminal because he breaks the law and not because the law is written and enforced to criminalize him. It is for this reason that the Principal and other parents attempt to find different ways to cure their children’s deviancy. Because if the children do not exhibit deviant behavior then they will not be criminalized and end up in jail; however, as Cacho points out, daring to exist as a young man of color is always already deviant.

While the public sphere is clearly not supportive or understanding of Sean’s *conocimiento* process Sean does find a sense of healing in the rap lyrics that he writes. Anzaldúa calls the fifth stage of *conocimiento* “putting Coyolxauhqui together...new personal and collective stories” and she explains that “In the fifth space your desire for order and meaning prompts you to track the ongoing circumstances of your life, to sift, sort, and symbolize your experiences and try to arrange them into a pattern and story that speak to your reality” (545). Rap lyrics serve as a way that Sean makes sense of his circumstances by putting on paper what he cannot yet express in public. Justin and his friends read the lyrics after stealing the notebook from Sean’s room. Sean writes: “I haven’t spoken to no one about these trips/ And it makes me sick,/ Seeing my dad ill like this,/ Then coming back to my friends/ And keeping Dad’s secret from them” (135). In the longer version of the rap Sean does not explicitly state that his father is in jail but instead represents the situation to an illness. Given the ways the deviancy functions in the

novel and how the adults understand deviancy it can be argued that Sean's father is ill with deviancy. Deviancy is an illness and because Sean's father was not cured of it or reformed he wound up in jail. Furthermore, keeping his father's secret makes Sean sick which reveals that when a family member is in a jail everyone involved is impacted. Sean's rap lyrics continue by talking about the money that Justin found in Sean's drawer: "I told him it's Puerto Rico dough my pops be sending/ But it's really money that I don't be spending./ I add that to Ma's money so she can buy my dad some things./ I don't do it for my dad. I do it for Ma. It feels good/ helping" (135). Throughout the novel Sean lies about his father's whereabouts by saying he is in Puerto Rico. Sean's desire to protect his father, by protecting his reputation and his manhood, and his mother, by providing financially for her, discloses that Sean (re)defines his masculinity through these qualities. Like for Juanito in *Downtown Boy* and Beto in *Waiting for Papá*, Sean understands the ability to protect and provide as essential qualities of masculinity. Sean also reveals that his relationship with his father is tense and it is likely that it is this way because there seems to be little investment in Sean processing his feelings about his father's incarceration. In another rap Sean writes: "Manny could talk about anybody in my family but/ bot my pops./ God, when I think about my father,/ It makes me so mad I want to pop./ And I've dropped my grades/ And in my attendance./ Every day I'm late./ Why? Ma doesn't care so neither do I" (139). Sean feels both protective of his father and hurt by him. His desire to protect his father's masculinity is what prompts a fight between the Manny and Sean. But Sean also writes about the pain he feels because of his father. The

matter worsens when Sean feels that his mother's priority becomes her husband and not her son's welfare.

By the end of the novel after several months have gone by Sean raps with Justin and says: "I got caught up for a minute and didn't like the/ aftermath./ Being suspended, getting punished. That crap was/wack./ I spent a lot of time thinking, and from now on I'm/ chillin'" (177).

It is not clear in the novel what exactly happened to help Sean get to this moment or if he continues to visit his father in jail.⁶ However, his last rhyme suggests that Sean has achieved some level of *conocimiento* and has decided to perform the type of masculinity that will not result in jail. His resolve to return to the Sean he was at the beginning of the novel proposes that Sean is reformed or cured from his deviant behavior. The adults in the novel make it evident that the form of masculinity that allows the children to perform a productive citizenship is preferred because it will protect them. Because the racist system within which the characters function, and which they are meant to represent in real life, is not designed to protect their children they must find ways to survive. The form of masculinity represented at the end of the novel is a result of the different violences they experience and which they must maneuver in order to stay alive.

⁶ That Sean does not get a reconciliatory reunion with his father like Juanito and Beto do at the end of their respective stories further suggests that not all oppressions are experienced in the same way and cannot be overcome with the same strategies. Sean is the only character analyzed that is actively criminalized because of his race and class status. The additional oppressions that Sean experiences because of his subjectivity make it more difficult to participate in a *conocimiento* process and to create a healthier father/son relationship.

Conclusion: “You wanna be a chump/or a champ?”

Juanito, Beto, and Sean demonstrate that while a new kind of masculinity where boys and men are encouraged to show emotion is desirable there are, nonetheless, several systemic and institutional oppressions that make this new masculinity almost impossible to achieve. Juanito, Beto, and Sean are able to reach various levels of *conocimiento* and construct a masculinity through their relationships with their fathers mostly because it all takes place in the private sphere. While all of the characters in question must traverse the public realm as part of their process the stories reveal that many of the “shifts in reality” occur in their private lives. Such shift is definitely still important and needed in the lives of Latino boys. Furthermore, the definitions of masculinity created by the characters gesture at the significance of being able to express themselves in a safe space. Sean’s character, however, makes clear that such spaces are difficult to come by because of the systemic violence and racism that explicitly targets youth of color. In writing about the importance of having children’s literature that represents an alternative masculinity Serrato argues that “A compelling means by which children’s understanding of masculinity can be broadened beyond dominant definitions is through the dramatizations—and thus validation—of emotional vulnerability in boys” (158). I agree with Serrato that more representation of masculinities “beyond dominant definitions” is necessary in order to encourage “emotional vulnerability” in young men of color. Still, these representations might also challenge dominant stereotypes of Latino boys and men where they are not always already thought of as “other,” “deviant,” “illegal” or “criminal.” Being able to recognize the vulnerability, for example, in Andy Lopez might

have saved his life. After his death Andy was described in many ways by the media, his family, and his friends. The photos that were circulated depicted Andy as clearly a participant in youth culture from the beanie and loose clothes he wore to the diamond studs on his ears. Based on how Andy was read by the deputy that shot him and by society at large it is difficult to imagine that Andy could have been read any other way. But what if instead of the toy gun the Deputy would have seen Andy's smile? Andy smiles in the main picture that was circulated of him in the media. Photographs and youtube videos of the memorial and protest also show more pictures of Andy smiling. But on that tragic day the Deputy, and dominant society, could not see or even imagine a boy like Andy smiling. Larger histories of oppression, including the systems and institutions that continue to reproduce that violence today, have made it so that Latino boys are not recognizable as vulnerable, emotional, innocent, or even valuable. It is for this reason that many Latino boys and men resort to surviving the best way they can. They exist in a society where being a chump or champ can be the difference between life or death. Stories like those written by Herrera, Colato Lainez, and Maldonado create young Latino male characters that imagine them as vulnerable and valuable.

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Chapter 3

Latino and Queer: Challenging Homonationalism in Latino Young Adult

Conocimiento Narratives

Alex Sanchez's *Rainbow Boys* (2001) has received numerous accolades for its diverse representation of LGBTQ youth and for addressing a breadth of LGBTQ issues, including a discussion about HIV and AIDS. As the first of a three part series, *Rainbow Boys* introduces the unlikely friendship between high school students Jason Carillo, Kyle Meeks, and Nelson Glassman. Nelson is an openly gay youth who is not afraid to express his opinions but is often chastised by his peers for his unconventional fashion sense. Kyle is Nelson's best friend on the swim team and is more conservative about his gay identity. Jason is the popular jock with the beautiful girlfriend and promising future; however, all of this is threatened as he comes to terms with his sexuality. The three teens cross paths at a community "Rainbow Youth" meeting which disturbs Jason and heightens his fear that others at school will begin to question his sexuality. As the story unfolds it becomes evident to Jason that he is attracted to Kyle and this new knowledge leads to several violent confrontations with his schoolmates and his father. I utilize *Rainbow Boys* as an opportunity to complicate the imagined gay community introduced to Jason's character as a safe and acceptable form of gay identity and to further question the ways that "homonationalism" erases his ethnicity in favor of his sexual identity. Throughout the novel, Jason's construction of his gay identity is juxtaposed to straight and hypermasculine violence—usually that of other Latino male characters. Jasbir Puar

explains in *Terrorist Assemblages: Homonationalism in Queer Times* (2007) that

homonationalism:

is a form of sexual exceptionalism—the emergence of a national homosexuality [...] that corresponds with the coming out of the exceptionalism of American empire. Further, this brand of homosexuality operates as a regulatory script not only of normative gayness, queerness, or homosexuality, but also of the racial and national norms that reinforce these sexual subjects. (2)

In other words, homonationalism establishes a dominant form of homosexuality that dictates which sexual subjects have access to national and cultural citizenship and which subjects are outside of this national imaginary and, therefore, disposable. Furthermore, this dominant sexual discourse makes certain gay experiences complicit to the violent erasure and marginalization of “other” racial and ethnic gay identities. Such forms of sexual exceptionalism are evident in *Rainbow Boys* despite its attempt to capture multicultural gay experiences. Throughout the novel, Jason’s Latino background is represented as violent and homophobic, and it is only once his abusive and alcoholic Latino father leaves that Jason can accept his queer identity. I begin my analysis of queer Latino young adult novels with *Rainbow Boys* and a teasing out of homonationalism because I am interested in unfolding the larger relationship between “conocimiento⁷,” queerness, and violence. Through an examination of Alex Sanchez’s *Rainbow Boys* (2001), Charles Rice-González’s *Chulito* (2010), and Benjamin Saenz’s *Aristotle and Dante Discover the Secrets of the Universe* (2012) I demonstrate how homonationalism

⁷ Gloria Anzaldúa explains in “now let us shift...the path of conocimiento...inner work, public acts” that *conocimiento* challenges existing oppressing epistemologies by recognizing and acting on different ways of knowing. In the first chapter I explain that when I refer to “*conocimiento* narratives” in Latina/o children’s and young adult literature I mean to highlight how knowing is a healing process captured within the stories and exemplified through the characters. *Conocimiento* is an opportunity to recognize the oppressions that direct the characters’ existence and provide a means to challenge and transform them.

plagues the lives of the queer Latino youth characters and how each characters' conocimiento process allows them to challenge homonationalism.

One of the many factors that connect these three novels is the use of violence to assert heteronormative structures. In Sanchez's, Rice-González's, and Saenz's novels there is a moment when the gay male protagonist is physically attacked by the lead heterosexual counterpart. These instances of violence not only reveal much about the constructions of queer identities in Latino communities but also make clear the tension between heteronormative Latino masculinities and Latino queer identities. In other words, similar to Jason's experience, the gay male protagonist in these novels cannot fully accept his queer identity until he has prevailed over the straight Latino character. In "If I turn into a boy, I don't think I want huevos": Reassessing Racial Masculinities in *What Night Brings*," Lisa Marie Cacho explains that "reevaluation of queerness, femaleness, and nonnormativity [is] dependent on positioning the Chicano patriarch as the devalued other" (72). In the queer young adult novels that I examine such positioning is the case.⁸ Moreover, the pitting of straight Latino characters against queer Latino characters further suggests that Latino communities are inherently homophobic which means that if the queer character cannot be triumphant over the straight Latino male then he must leave the community in search of a safer queer space. For gay protagonists their homes, communities, and/or schools are not safe spaces and many of them must leave entirely. I investigate these moves because it seems that part of accepting one's queer identity for these characters requires a removal from oppressive and hypermasculine

⁸ While none of the protagonists in the aforementioned young adult novels identify as "Chicano," Cacho's argument is nonetheless a relevant lens through which to understand the construction of Latino masculinity.

Latino cultures. Through my analysis I demonstrate how this tension is a consequence of homonationalist ideologies.

Rainbow Boys: “The Jock”

One of the main reasons that *Rainbow Boys* has been on many recommended reading lists addressing LGBTQ teen issues for teachers and librarians is due to its attempt to articulate the experiences of multicultural LGBTQ youth. However, this multicultural approach instead universalizes queer identity and minimizes the racial and ethnic identities of the novel’s characters. In other words, foregrounding Jason’s sexuality makes his Latinidad ambiguous and secondary to his identity. Thomas Crisp points out in “The Trouble with *Rainbow Boys*” that Jason’s ethnic makeup is implied by his last name and that this allusion is stereotypical (254). The real trouble with Jason’s character is not that he does not have cultural markers by which he can be identified or read as Latino by others (aside from his last name) but that his Latinidad is linked to a hypermasculine and violent Latino masculinity through his father and fellow classmate Jose Montero.⁹ In this case, the trope of the violent Latino man is a dangerous stereotype that does not allow either straight or gay Latino characters to access any type of citizenship; instead, both are further criminalized and marginalized. Lisa Marie Cacho explains in *Social Death: Racialized Rightlessness and the Criminalization of the Unprotected* (2012):

Racial stereotypes are not degrading because race is devalued. Stereotypes are degrading because they link race to other categories of devaluation, just as race is

⁹ It is also unclear what specific Latino ethnicity Jason identifies with. In *Rainbow Boys* “Latino” becomes a homogenizing term that erases cultural specificity.

redeemed when linked to other properties of personhood universalized as socially valuable, such as heteronormativity or U.S. citizenship. (3)

In other words, Jason's association with stereotypes of violent Latino men is degrading because the straight and violent Latino characters are further associated with criminality. Jason's character is redeemed through homonationalism and his acceptance of a white or dominant homosexuality that marginalizes his Latino culture.

Throughout the novel, Jason's preoccupation with coming out has a lot to do with his concerns as to how his sexual orientation will impact his parents. He worries that his sexuality will be an unnecessary burden on his already dysfunctional family: "Jason thought about his own mom. She already had enough to handle with his dad. And his dad would surely finish what he'd once started—if he knew where his son was" (8). The opening description of Jason's family reveals that Jason feels responsible for his mother's wellbeing and he also fears his father's violent behavior. Jason's concern also highlights his mother's own sense of responsibility for her husband and alludes his father's previous violent behavior. Jason's sense of parentification is significant because it is one of the factors that makes it that much more difficult for him to come out. In "La Mujer y La Violencia: A Culturally Based Model for the Understanding and Treatment of Domestic Violence in Chicana/Latina Communities" Yvette Flores-Ortiz explains that

certain children in dysfunctional families are consciously and unconsciously picked by the parents to fulfill the role of assistant parents and become responsible for meeting the previously unmet psychological needs of the adults. It becomes the child's responsibility to parent the parents. (174)

Jason's sense of responsibility to care for his mother stems from the cycle of abuse caused by his father and enabled by his mother. Throughout the novel, Mrs. Carrillo

continues to buy her husband alcohol not because she supports his habit but out of fear which nonetheless enables the abuse in the household. Flores-Ortiz further explains that substance abuse in these cases can lead to physical abuse and “because children are fundamentally loyal and dependent on their parents for their very existence, effort to change learned patterns of abuse invoke feelings of disloyalty (174).” Despite his father’s physical and verbal abuse, Jason has a sense of loyalty to his father at the beginning of the novel. Coming out would betray that relationship because his queer identity challenges the figure of the Chicano patriarch and the structures of the Chicano family. Much research exists on the politics of the Chicano family (see Alfredo Mirande) and feminism (see Alma Garcia and Vickie Ruiz) and queer identity (see Cherrie Moraga and Richard T. Rodriguez). It is telling that Jason’s character is the one character that is confronted with these family issues. Kyle’s father is represented as apathetic to his son’s sexuality and while Nelson’s father is not supportive, he is also not represented as a violent and uncontrollable man. Later in the novel, Jason expresses an attempt to understand his father’s behavior but also begins to question his loyalty to their relationship. The narrator explains that, “The arguments gave Jason different clues to his dad’s rage—his drinking, the war, career disappointments, family resentments. But just because his dad had suffered a hard life, did he have to make everyone else miserable” (153).¹⁰ In this passage the narrator signals a variety of problems Jason’s dad harbors, but

¹⁰ It’s not clear what “war” Mr. Carrillo was a part of; however, I find it interesting that “the war” is also something that separates Aristotle, from Benjamin Saenz’s *Aristotle and Dante*, and his father. Both fathers are represented as suffering from some form of PTSD due to their time spent at war. The symptoms of PTSD make it difficult for father and son to relate to one another. In other words, an act that represents civil responsibility, patriotism, and allows one to perform citizenship only adds further trauma for these Latino families.

these issues are not given enough attention and instead focus on Jason's own turmoil. Minimizing Mr. Carrillo's problems, in this case, creates a larger disconnection between Jason and his father and further suggests that Mr. Carrillo's history is not related to Jason's struggles. Severing Jason from his father's own history of abuse is an example of how homonationalism attempts to separate othered queer identities from their cultural histories. In this way, it appears as if Jason is alone and unsupported when, in fact, his father may also know something about feeling displaced.

Jason's relationship with his father and the abuse the family experiences demonstrates how the emphasis on separating Latino identity from queer identity is a project of homonationalism. Throughout the novel, Jason is essentially asked to choose one identity over the other. Cacho further explains that systems of value are set in place uphold forms of power in society. Jason's cultural identity is devalued because it is represented as abusive, oppressive, and patriarchal—conditions that are not very conducive to coming out. The Carrillo's parenting skills are implicitly compared to Kyle's and Nelson's white parents, the representation of each set of parents is significantly different. For example, at a parent/teacher meeting to discuss the creation of a Gay and Straight Alliance organization in the high school Nelson expresses that, "Not every gay teenager has a mom like mine. Most teens don't. Most aren't even out to their parents, or anyone else. There's a reason for that. As you just heard, it's dangerous being gay" (182). Nelson is right when he points out the real fear involved in coming out and being openly gay, and he is also correct when he says that many gay teens often cannot expect the support they need from their parents. However, within the context of this text

the parents represented as the most homophobic also happen to be the only Latino family. The use of the word “dangerous” at this meeting refers to the bullying that Nelson faces on a daily basis at school. Nelson and Kyle are bullied by other young adults; however, Jason is mainly bullied by his father. The narrator explains that:

Jason had tried, but there seemed to be no pleasing his father. Even when he did what his dad told him [...] his dad still called him names: Stupid, Dummy, Fairy-Boy, Pansy. His anger seemed more than just a ‘Latino temper,’ as his mom called it. Jason had given up trying to understand what made him full of rage. (27)

This scene clearly links Mr. Carrillo’s abusive behavior to his ethnicity by playing on his “Latino temper.” There is no moment of redemption for Jason’s dad anywhere in the novel nor does he get to plead ignorance. In fact, he leaves the family because he cannot imagine living in a house with a gay son.¹¹ I would further argue that Jason is also represented as a bully because of the connection made between his Latino identity and hypermasculinity. This hypermasculinity gives Jason access to safety that Kyle and Nelson don’t have access to—like the protection of the baseball team, or the assumed fraternity of belonging to the “jocks.” However, this false security further threatens Kyle’s and Nelson’s queer identity. Throughout the novel Jason know he benefits from some sort of protection but is also aware that that can be lost if he comes out. He also fears that he will lose his baseball scholarship if he comes out and, therefore, lose his ticket out of his father’s home. In *Rainbow High*, the second book in the series, the reader learns that he does lose his scholarship.

¹¹ In Saenz’s and Rice-Gonzalez’s novels, the parents are more supportive of their son’s identity. In Aristotle and Dante, Aristotle’s father actually helps him come out. But in these other novels the other main queer characters are not white either. Later in the chapter I will discuss how these parent figures challenge homonationalism and create spaces for Latino and queer identity to be possible.

Jason feels isolated as he begins to explore his sexuality because of the violence he experiences at home and because of his fear that he will be treated as poorly by his peers at school. However, he still

needed to talk to someone about his queer confusion—but who? He couldn't go back to the meeting, not with Nelson—or Debra—there. His dad? His dad would kill him. And his mom had enough to deal with. Coach Cameron never talked with him, just bellowed. His counselor only talked about class schedules. His teachers were...just teachers. And his friends made fag jokes. Who else was there? (33)

Because he does not have the language to articulate what he feels or to understand his identity Jason's own knowledge of what is happening to him sends him into a state of confusion. Gloria Anzaldúa explains that in the *conocimiento* process confusion is part of what she calls the "Coatlicue stage." It is in this stage, as Anzaldúa elaborates, that one realizes the "cost of knowing." Jason knows that he is different and that he does not feel the same way about Debra, his girlfriend, as how he begins to feel for Kyle. He is also stunted by the fear of how others will react but only because the people around him have made it unsafe for him to ask for support. Anzaldúa says:

You look around, hoping some person or thing will alleviate the pain. [...] Overwhelmed, you shield yourself with ignorance, blanking out what you don't want to see. [...] The last thing you want it to meditate on your condition, bring awareness to the fore, but you've set it up so you must face reality. Still, you resist" (551).

Jason is indeed in a state of despair and extreme isolation. He might want someone to provide some clarity for him or to merely provide support but the cost of knowing at this point is too great for him. He does not want to burden his mother, he fear his father will hurt him, and that his friends will not understand. As the novel progresses, Jason begins

to further isolate himself from his current life until it becomes too much to keep everything bottled up inside.

Jason begins to find refuge in Kyle and it is through a shared intimacy about coming out that a romantic relationship flourishes. In the novel, Kyle is the quintessential representation of homonationalism because his type of queerness is not read as excessive. Nelson, on the other hand, is read as excessive because his clothes, his hair styles, hair colors, and his speech are traits that are read as over the top. In other words, Nelson is outside of what can be considered “sexual exceptionalism.” Nelson’s visibility as a queer male makes him more susceptible to violence than either Kyle or Jason. Nelson has been bullied by Jack and Jose Montero, the school jocks and Jason’s former teammates because of his public expression of his queerness:

Jack bullied Nelson since middle school—calling him names, knocking the tray out of his hands in the cafeteria, punching him as he passed in the hall. Nelson fought back but usually got creamed. [...] Then last year, Jack and his thug friends cornered Nelson in the boys’ bathroom, kicked him down, and shoved his face into the toilet. (21)

Jason and other students at the high school are aware of the violence that Nelson experiences because of his identity and his courage to express it. Kyle believes that the best way to avoid getting physically assaulted for being gay is to not flaunt it: “By staying in the closet and keeping to himself at school, [Kyle] managed to avoid things Nelson went through every day. Now homophobia seemed to be confronting him every direction” (130). While the homophobia that Kyle is confronted with is not at the same level as Nelson, this quote reveals another cost of knowing for queer teens. It is significant that Kyle and Jason begin a relationship because Jason and Nelson do not get

along very well throughout the novel since Jason also reads Nelson's queer identity and expression as excess. Furthermore, Jason also fears that any association with Nelson might mean or reveal something about his own sexual identity. Nelson is in love with Kyle but Kyle rejects him because Kyle is in love with Jason. Nelson is also the main character that has an HIV scare after engaging in sexual intercourse with an older man. In the limited spectrum of what can be considered normative homosexuality, Kyle is the acceptable type of gay, while Nelson is not and it is because of his deviant sexuality that why his character is presented with the possibility of having been infected with HIV. Therefore, the only possible person to teach Jason how to be gay is Kyle. Jason also reveals that one of the reasons that he is attracted to Kyle is because he does not look like he could be gay.

Jason's major struggle is in moving from his Coatlicue state to what Anzaldúa describes as the "call to action." There are many factors that complicate Jason's identity as a queer Latino and he feels an internal pressure to come to terms with who he is. The internal turmoil he feels about coming out is due to the external violence on queer bodies that he witnesses at home and at school. This tension leaves him in a state of despair—the Coatlicue state—which he has a difficult time moving past. His relationship with Kyle helps him feel comfortable with being gay, but constant confrontations with hypermasculinity make it difficult to fully embrace his identity. Jason's friendship with Kyle, as it is talked about at school and at home, and his breakup with Debra spark rumors about his sexual orientation. This leads to physical confrontations with his peers and his father. When Jason fights his teammates it is because Jack and Jose have attacked

Nelson and Kyle. Jason comes to their rescue and when Jack taunts him by asking, “What are you [...] a fag lover?” Jason proceeds to punch him in the face. At this point, Jason is leaving the Coatlicue state of self-pity and self-loathing and entering a call to action. Anzaldúa explains that “a call to action pulls you out of your depression. You break free from your habitual coping strategies of escaping from realities you’re reluctant to face, reconnect with spirit, and undergo conversion” (545). Kyle and Nelson represent a part of Jason’s identity and he also felt attacked when he saw them being pummeled by Jack. The fight was Jason’s call to action. Jason was forced to make a choice—join Jack and Jose on the attack or stand up to them and defend Kyle and Nelson. While this moment is extremely significant for Jason’s *conocimiento* it also forces Jason to identify with white queerness and further marginalize Latino culture, of which Jose and Jason’s father have become representative.

Jason’s call to action allows him to stand up to the likes of Jack; however, Jack was only the beginning. Jason’s real test comes when he must face his father. Upon returning home with Kyle and Nelson after their fight with Jack, Mr. Carrillo berates the group. It is during this altercation that Jason comes out to his father. Mr. Carrillo becomes infuriated and attacks Jason:

Without warning, his dad swung a fist toward him. Jason blocked the punch, but his dad came back at him with his other arm. ‘Stop it!’ his mom shouted. His sister grabbed his mom’s dress, screaming. Unable to restrain himself any longer, Jason jabbed his fist into his father’s jaw. [...] Jason stared at his fist, disbelieving what he’d done. (199)

In this scene, Mr. Carrillo is described, yet again, as a violent Latino man because he is the first to strike while Jason tries to protect himself. This particular moment of physical

engagement is symbolic of the larger battle with patriarchy that Jason has faced and will continue to face. That Mr. Carrillo stands in for patriarchy in Jason's world is telling of the ways Latino masculinity is articulated in the novel, but also how structures of power define queerness as needing to be outside of Latino identity. The fight sets up binaries between Mr. Carrillo and Jason such as heteronormativity versus queerness, criminal versus innocent, and aggressive versus passive. The fight ends when Mr. Carrillo storms out of the house and with Mrs. Carrillo comforting her children. While the scene is meant to represent Jason's triumph over his father's violence, over patriarchy, and over everything else that has stood in his way of embracing his queer identity it also depicts Jason as a violent Latino man. Through homonationalism the fight scenes, against both Jack and Mr. Carrillo, are read as scenes of empowerment wherein the gay character triumphs over the oppressive nature of patriarchy and as a result Jason, Kyle, and Nelson have bonded and inherently created a community of their own. Because Jason is read first as a gay character the violence he inflicts on Jack and Mr. Carrillo is not recognized as violent but as a necessity and, therefore, deserving of redemption. In other words, Jason's violent behavior is acceptable because he fought to defend queer identity over an oppressive patriarchy. Jason can stand in as the hero, in this case, because he is not automatically read as Latino. Jose Montero, Mr. Carrillo, and Jason are represented as inflicting violence at various moments throughout the novel and while Jose and Mr. Carrillo are criminalized for their violence, homonationalism makes it so that Jason does not have to be.

Jason and Mr. Carrillo's relationship worsens after the first fight to the point that Mr. Carrillo never returns home. While Jason is described as feeling hurt and assuming responsibility for his broken family his father's departure is also meant to mark Jason's future ability to embrace his queer identity. In other words, now that Mr. Carrillo is gone there should be nothing standing in his way of being openly gay and this is in fact the case. By the end of the novel Jason and Kyle are intimately involved and despite his fear of losing his baseball scholarship Jason walks in to the first LGBTQ meeting at their high school. By the conclusion of the novel Jason has reached *conocimiento* and is able to embrace his queer identity. The fight represents his clash of realities wherein he must fight to defend his renewed sense of being and by prevailing over patriarchy he has shifted his realities. These fights scenes are indeed very empowering for the characters that have been abused and silenced by the patriarchal figures. Jason is able to come out and even Mrs. Carrillo has gained some agency. However, that there is no moment of reconciliation for Mr. Carrillo at the end of the novel suggests a real tension between homonationalism and *conocimiento*. Through the lens of homonationalism there is only enough space for Jason's search for healing and because of this, men like Mr. Carrillo must be punished and marginalized. Mr. Carrillo is indeed a real representation of the violence that queer Latino young men experience from their fathers; however, homonationalism as seen in *Rainbow Boys* makes it appear that these relationships are not mendable because one identity needs to triumph over the other.

Chulito: “Pato Exile”

Charles Rice-González’s *Chulito* shares the struggle of remaining part of his community as sixteen-year-old Puerto Rican Chulito comes out as gay. Chulito has dropped out of high school and is dealing drugs for Kamikaze, the leader of their posse. Despite being young, he is well respected by the other members of his crew for his street smarts and is also very popular among the young women in his neighborhood. At the beginning of the novel, Chulito is represented as a typical “cholo” by the manner in which he speaks and dresses. Chulito’s world is threatened when Carlos, his old high school friend, returns from his first year away at college. Carlos is openly gay and in the past has been harassed many times by Chulito’s crew. Their friendship ended when Chulito threw a glass bottle at Carlos and his white boyfriend as they walked around their Hunts Point neighborhood. While trying to make amends with Carlos, Chulito falls in love with him and decides to come out to his community. Similar to *Rainbow Boys*, *Chulito* also centers several physical fights between the gay protagonist and hypermasculine straight men. Chulito’s understanding of queerness is also filtered through homonationalism; however, his desire to remain part of his community pushes for a queer Latino identity in ways that *Rainbow Boys* does not. The aim of this section is twofold. First, I read Chulito’s desire to bridge his queer identity and his community as part of what José Esteban Muñoz describes as “disidentification.” Secondly, I trace Chulito’s *conocimiento* process to demonstrate how he challenges homonationalism.

I use Muñoz’s understanding of “disidentification” because I am interested in the way he describes it as a “survival strategy” and for many of the queer Latino characters

examined in this chapter, surviving is their only possibility.¹² Furthermore, disidentification is a means to decode and code existing knowledges in order to construct more empowering and inclusive ones. In other words, existing codes or definitions about being can be transformed as a means to create new ways of being. In *Disidentifications: Queer of Color and the Performance of Politics* (1999) Muñoz explains that, “Disidentification is meant to be descriptive of the survival strategies the minority subject practices in order to negotiate a phobic majoritarian public sphere that continuously elides or punishes the existence of subjects who do not conform to the phantasm of normative citizenship” (4). In this way, disidentification allows minority subjects to maneuver through an oppressive public space while simultaneously challenging these spaces and creating new ones. Disidentification and *conocimiento* have in common their desire to transform existing knowledges in hopes of constructing knowledges that embrace one’s difference. Thus, disidentification and *conocimiento* give Chulito the survival strategies needed in order to reconcile the hypermasculinity in his Latino community and the type of queerness presented by homonationalism. Throughout the text, Chulito learns to challenge the “phantasm of normative citizenship” by attempting to be both inside and outside of the spaces that seek to oppress his various identities. By the end of the novel, he realized he can create his own space that includes both his Latino and queer identities. Muñoz further explains that:

¹² I am intent in distinguishing between “surviving” and “living” as it pertains to the queer characters in the novels being examined. “Living” suggests a privilege and access to citizenship that is not always granted to marginalized and othered queer people. “Surviving” indicates that there are systems of oppression in place that make it difficult for queer people of color to “live.”

disidentification is *not always* an adequate strategy of resistance or survival for all minority subjects. At times, resistance needs to be more pronounced and direct; on other occasions, queers of color and other minority subjects need to follow a conformist path if they hope to survive a hostile public sphere. But for some, disidentification is a survival strategy that works within and outside the dominant sphere simultaneously. (5)

Disidentification is a significant strategy for Chulito because it gives him the space to figure out his identity without completely putting him in danger or asking that he leave his community. I find this negotiation extremely important because many of the queer youth texts in question make leaving one's community a part of the coming out process. Leaving is usually due to the violence that queer youth may experience and also suggests that queer youth cannot co-exist with their Latino communities. Chulito's decision to attempt to function within both worlds is influenced by how he sees queer and transgender people being treated in his community—especially by those he calls his closest friends. Chulito is a bystander in the violence against the other queer characters in the novel—Carlos, Brick, Julio, and Lee—and the only transgender character in novel—Puti. His decision to not come out as gay and decide to out in other spaces is informed by this knowledge.

Throughout the novel, Carlos serves as an example of a queer youth who is harassed by the hypermasculine men in his community and is in favor of leaving his community in order to find a place where he belongs. At the beginning of the story, Chulito takes part in making Carlos feel marginalized because “It was just what he had to do to be correct with the fellas. Carlos tried to stay connected, but he was placed in pato exile—no one looked at him or talked to him” (3). Being put on “pato exile” is what Chulito is afraid of and, therefore, does not want to come out to anyone or even admit it

to himself.¹³ Because Carlos feels marginalized by his community he instead finds refuge away at college with queer white youth. When he returns to visit his mother in Hunts Point he is able to be openly queer in the Village, a well-known queer district in New York City. The Village is also the place where Carlos takes Chulito to experience and be part of a queer community. For Carlos, leaving Hunts Point seemed like his only option but Chulito is not satisfied with this being the only option for himself. The tension that builds around whether Chulito should leave Hunts Point in order to be openly gay becomes more palpable when his crew learn of his relationship with Carlos. Chulito's position indicates that there is a clear question about whether one can be Latino and queer in Hunts Point. For Carlos queer identity seems to distance him from his community and threatens to separate him from Chulito. As an attempt to protect Carlos, Chulito visits him at his school and asks him to "stop fagging out." In return Carlos says, "There's nothing wrong with me, Chulito. There's nothing wrong with not wearing drooping pants and Timberlands all the time. Look around, people dress all different kinds of ways. And I'm still the same Carlos. It's the neighborhood that's fucked up" (4). At this moment, Carlos points out the nuances of what it means to belong to Hunts Points and the ways in which he belongs and does not belong. Outside of Hunts Point, the "drooping pants and Timberlands" mark Chulito and his friends as a certain type of Latino man—the baggy clothes criminalize them. Carlos's style, fitted polo and straight legged jeans, however, makes him stand out in Hunts Point. It is significant to point out that when Carlos signals that there is a diversity of styles they are at a college campus and not in their

¹³ The term "pato" is Puerto Rican slang (and derogatory term) for gay or queer.

neighborhood. Carlos's remarks suggest that difference is possible, and maybe even accepted because of where they are; difference (and accepting difference) may not be possible in Hunts Point and if difference is not accepted in Hunts Point then Carlos (and later Chulito) will not be accepted either. Carlos further reinforces this separation by exclaiming that there is nothing wrong with him but rather that there is something wrong with Hunts Point. Carlos's affirmation about his queer identity is indeed an empowering one; however, his empowerment stems from discarding or further marginalizing his community. Carlos's devaluation of his community is rooted in the ways that dominant structures of power have defined his identity for him. Homonationalism dictates that the only way Carlos can exist is through white queerness. Throughout the novel, Carlos serves as a reminder of how homonationalism affects queer youth of color.¹⁴

Chulito is aware of the dangers that Carlos's queer identity poses for Carlos and himself. He is aware of the unspoken and ingrained expected behaviors for men in his community. Asking Carlos to hide his identity and by refusing to accept his own, Chulito is disidentifying in order to survive. Disidentification provides Chulito a safe enough space to process his feelings for Carlos and decide what he will do next. The narrator explains that:

Chulito had stayed away because Carlos didn't hide being a faggot. And the code of their neighborhood was that if you hang out with faggots then you must be one—as true now that Latinos and Blacks lived [in Hunts Point] as it was when Jews, Italians and Irish folks first came. It was as if that code was mixed into the concrete and asphalt that was used to build the neighborhood. It was also why, in order to be open, they had to leave Hunts Point. (169)

¹⁴ I do not make this analysis of Carlos in order to create a binary between him and Chulito or to suggest that there is a correct way to come out and live as a queer person of color. Rather, pointing out how homonationalism seduces queer youth of color allows me to question why this is the case and to consider alternative modes of existing.

The fear of being associated with queerness, which Chulito expresses in this passage, is similar to Jason's concern in *Rainbow Boys*. The characters' fear indicates a larger fear of queerness present in their communities. The "code of their neighborhood" protects heteronormativity and associates that protection to ethnicity. At this point in the novel, Chulito's desconocimiento asserts the flawed connection between heteronormativity and ethnicity but only because he wants to survive. He wants Carlos to survive as well which is why he asks him to hide his identity but Carlos knows differently. Chulito's fear also suggests that the homophobia that has been passed on from generation to generation in Hunts Point makes it unsafe for them to come out; therefore, if they wish to be openly queer they must leave their neighborhood. Chulito's tracing of his community's ethnic history also suggests that Hunts Point is inherently homophobic. The "code of their neighborhood" is the existing oppressive knowledge that does not allow Chulito to exist as a queer Latino man. The existing code inscribes his community and its community members as a violent, however, as the novel progresses Chulito learns that the other queer characters have disidentified with this code and have instead created a space where they can exist as both queer and Latino.

Throughout the novel, Chulito's negotiation between keeping his sexual orientation a secret or coming out to his community creates great tensions for him. Part of what magnifies his anguish is his own perception of what it means to come out as gay. Because Chulito has been a witness and a contributor to the marginalization of queer people in his community he expects to be treated in the same manner upon coming out. Chulito's disidentification with both of his identities at various moments has been a

strategy to avoid the violence and discrimination he fears will come his way. However, Chulito's struggles with transforming the various definitions he receives about being a Latino man in Hunts point and being a queer youth in the East Village. Chulito struggles with what Anzaldúa explains is the "clash of realities," the taking of "your story out into the world [and] testing it" (545). She further explains that "when you or the world fail to live up to your ideals, your edifice collapses like a house of cards, casting you into conflict with self and others in a war between realities" (545). Chulito has multiple realities in Hunts Point and in the East Village that fail him in one way or another. However, being able to disidentify with the realities that do not speak to Chulito's own allows him to be an active participant in embracing and rejecting the knowledges that will be part of his identity. In this way, Chulito will be able to move through the "clash of realities" into a space where real transformation is possible, a space that Anzaldúa describes as the "shift in realities." This process becomes evident when Chulito is accused by his crew of being gay.

After spending the day together in the East Village, Chulito decides to hold Carlos's hand as they walk into Hunts Point not only because it is dark outside and he assumes that his crew will not be out but Chulito takes risk in order to demonstrate to Carlos that he is serious about their relationship. Unfortunately for Chulito, their display of affection is seen by his crew and ignites a fight between Chulito and Papo, one of the older members of his crew. Papo confronts Chulito and says, "That's the kind of shit that gets to me. You see that? Walking out like it's nothing, and there's little kids around and shit." Papo picked up a beer bottle and dumped out the dribble of beer that was in it

(290). The scene is reminiscent of the beer bottle that Chulito and his crew threw at Carlos and his white boyfriend at the beginning of the novel—an attack in which Chulito participated under the pressure to survive. Papo’s anger signals the fragile public and private divide that Chulito tries to negotiate throughout the novel. By suggesting that Chulito and Carlos are “walking out like it’s nothing,” Papo further reinforces that ingrained homophobia passed on from generation to generation pointed out by Chulito earlier in the novel. Papo serves as the representative of hypermasculinity that uses physical force to placate or to eliminate the threat to the status quo. His protection of heteronormativity is also under the guise of protecting children, which has often served as a corrupted argument against gay identity. Chulito, at this moment, is not recognized as a child deserving of protection despite only being 16 years old. Upon seeing Papo prepare to attack him, Chulito decides that he must confront Papo if he wishes for his reality to change. Chulito’s “clash of realities” with Papo erupts in a major brawl where community members are also forced to choose sides. The fight is a significant moment in Chulito’s *conocimiento* process because it is a moment of confrontation between his previous hypermasculine identity and his queer identity. As Anzaldúa explains, the clash of realities is a necessary turning point before moving into a state of significant transformation. The conflict between Papo and Chulito also serves as a clash of realities and transformation for their entire neighborhood. While Chulito gets beat by Papo, the other gay and queer characters in the novel come to aid. Brick, Julio, Lee, and Puti serve as marginal characters in the novel because of their queer identity but also because they are in the backdrop of Chulito’s story. However, their presence is extremely important to

the formation of Chulito's queer identity because they serve as a support system for him and bring visibility to issues of queerness in Latino communities. Furthermore, they serve as examples that disidentification is a survival strategy that allows them to challenge "the code of their neighborhood" and live by new codes that allows them to be part of Hunts Point and to be queer. In other words, Chulito is not the only gay man of color in Hunts Point and their presence suggests the possibility for the existence of a queer Latino identity that homonationalism seeks to erase. While the group's unity against Papo's chauvinism and violence was not necessarily victorious, it serves to empower them. Julio, who runs out with a gun in an attempt to stop Papo from hurting Chulito, expresses his rage at the fight which he feels is also an attack on his person. He says, "I will kill any of those motherfuckers even if I have to go to jail. They need to know that they cannot fuck with us. We are not a bunch of scared faggots who cower when they flex their macho attitudes" (293). Julio's actions reveal the pain still very present from the discrimination and homophobia experienced in Hunts Park. Even though Brick stops Julio from shooting Papo and the crowd dissipates after hearing the police sirens the fight is a significant aspect of Chulito's *conocimiento* process because it helps him move outside the despair of *desconocimiento* and into a space of transformation. The fight also suggests that Chulito is supported by his community and hints that not everyone believes in the neighborhood code Chulito thought directed his community. Furthermore, disidentification allows him to reject the part of the code that seeks to marginalize him—the patriarchy and homophobia as represented by Papo—and accept the unity the code seeks to build—as seen through the support receives from the other characters in the

novel. The mere possibility of transformation is enough for Chulito to stand up for himself and Carlos. The narrator explains that for Chulito “[...] every punch, shove and kick with which Papo came down on him didn’t keep him down. He fought back. He stood up. And even though it felt like every bone and muscle in his body was bruised, he felt powerful” (297). While the “clash of realities” takes quite a literal form for Chulito, it nonetheless serves as the force that encourages him to accept his identity.

After his fight with Papo, Chulito needs to decide if he will stay in Hunts Point and be openly gay or if he will go somewhere else. Carlos, of course, encourages him to leave when he says, “Sometimes you have to leave your home to grow up, Chulito. To change.” (310). Carlos’s sentiment toward leaving Hunts Point has been clear throughout the novel. One of the main reasons Carlos is able to exist as an out queer Latino is that he has left community. Anzaldúa echoes a similar feeling in *Borderlands* when talking about her own home. She says, “I had to leave home so I could find myself, find my own intrinsic nature buried under the personality that had been imposed on me” (Anzaldúa *Borderlands* 38). It is true, and obvious in the novel, that homophobia and other forms of anti-gay violence are present in Chulito’s community. Leaving one’s community can be understood as another form of disidentification—a way to survive and stay alive. While in her earlier work Anzaldúa reveals that leaving was also an essential part of her identity construction, *conocimiento* provides an opportunity to imagine a different possibility. Chulito’s encounter with Papo was significant not only because it is a part of his *conocimiento* process but because it was also part of his community’s attempt at “shifting realities.” Anzaldúa explains that the “clash of realities” allows for a

confrontation with standing ideologies and creates a space for new ones. The fight with Papo revealed that homophobia and anti-gay violence are not the only (or even the dominant) views in Hunts Point. Chulito explains that he does not wish to leave Hunts Point:

‘This is our ‘hood, Carlos.’ Chulito looked down at the people walking the streets going in and out of the bodegas and shops, the fellas on the corner, the auto glass guys zipping up and down the block and buses and cars making their way up Hunts Point Avenue. ‘This is our history. This is where we’re from.’ (311)

Part of Chulito’s *conocimiento* process includes his community. Throughout the novel Chulito makes clear that Hunts Point is an integral part of his identity. By staying in Hunts Point at the end of the novel, I find that Chulito challenges the homonationalism that invades his queer Latino identity. Through *conocimiento* Chulito negotiates the multiple factors that complicate his coming out experience. In the end, however, his community is not the only force that makes it difficult for Chulito to exist as a queer Latino man. Leaving one’s community also requires some sort of privilege that is not readily available to him. Carlos was able to leave because he had high marks in school and was able to attend college. College as an exit strategy is a problem because it requires further access to resources that are not available to all queer youth of color. Brick, Julio, Lee, and Puti did not leave Hunts Point and their subplots reveal that staying was not the easiest of experiences but that leaving was also not an option; however, these characters were able to somehow exist as gay and transgender in their community. At the closing of the novel, Chulito reveals that he might one day leave Hunts Point (given that he receives his GED) but that for the time being his community is where he chooses to construct his queer Latino identity.

Aristotle and Dante: “Do real Mexicans like to kiss boys?”

Benjamin Alire Saenz’s *Aristotle and Dante Discover the Secrets of the Universe* (2012) is the story of Aristotle Mendoza and Dante Quintana’s unlikely friendship and their journey toward loving each other and openly expressing their queer identity. Set in the late 1980s, Ari struggles with the ghosts that haunt his family including his father’s silence after returning from the Vietnam War and the silence around Ari’s older brother’s incarceration, who is in prison for murder. Ari isolates himself from other youth his age and winds up feeling like he does not have a place to belong. The silence at home frustrates Ari and, retreats from youth his age and, therefore, finds himself very alienated and without a space to belong. Dante is more outgoing and more self-assured than Aristotle. Dante knows that he is gay, while Ari tries to make sense of his sexuality as the novel progresses. Similar to Sanchez’s *Rainbow Boys* and Rice-Gonzalez’s *Chulito*, *Aristotle and Dante* also includes a scene of violence against a queer protagonist by another hypermasculine Latino character. In this last section, I examine the ways in which homonationalism further seeks to give value to queerness at the cost of an “other” and the ways in which access to a higher social class makes that possible. Similarly, I seek to demonstrate how Ari is able to access *conocimiento* at the cost of his incarcerated brother’s *desconocimiento*. In this last section, I focus on Ari’s relationship with his brother as a way to read his love for Dante and argue that Ari is only able to come out once he lets go of his brother’s ghost and ultimately what his brother represents.

Ari’s relationship with his older brother is vexed primarily because he does not know what has happened to him, and his parents refuse to speak about him. Ari is

tormented by the ghosts and silences that surround his everyday reality. Throughout the novel, Ari attempts to put Coyolxauhqui together and create a story with the pieces he has and those that also makes sense to him. Anzaldúa explains that “In the fifth space your desire for order and meaning prompts you to track the ongoing circumstances of your life, to sift, sort, and symbolize your experiences and try to arrange them into a pattern and story that speak to your reality” (544). Throughout the novel, Ari tries to make sense of his masculinity, sexuality, his missing brother, and his father’s silence. Anzaldúa further explains that putting Coyolxauhqui together also entails bringing together a larger story of a community or peoples. In creating a story for himself, Ari also unearths his family’s story (that of his brother’s in particular) in order to give meaning to his own story.

Ari is well aware that he does not exactly fit in with other young men his age. His distance from the culture of boys from his neighborhood is due to the conflict between his masculinity and his sexuality. He feels uncomfortable around other men because he does not see himself reflected in their behaviors. His relationship to men in general also stems from the complex relationship he has with his brother and father. He says, “I think it embarrassed the hell out of me that I was a guy. And it really depressed me that there was the distinct possibility that I was going to grow up and be like one of those assholes” (16). In this particular scene, Ari describes his frustration toward the other young men’s crudeness at the pool; however, his embarrassment and depression can also be applied to how he feels about his brother and father. Bernardo, Ari’s brother, is a ghost in the novel that haunts Ari’s identity primarily because his parents do not want to speak about him

but also expect Ari to be better than him. It is only after Ari hurts a fellow classmate that his parents finally reveal that Bernardo is in prison for killing “someone with his bare fists” (321). Ari, however, also expresses to his parents his disdain for constantly being compared to his brother. He says, “‘I’m *not* my brother,’ I said. ‘I hate that you think that. I hate that I live in his f—’ [...] ‘I hate that I live in his shadow. I hate it. I hate having to be a good boy just to please you’” (318). The silence around Bernardo has set an unspoken binary in the family—the good boy/bad boy—wherein Ari is the good boy and Bernardo has been further criminalized. The dichotomy complicates Ari’s coming out process because queerness and criminality are juxtaposed and homonationalism makes it possible to value one over the other.

In Social Death: Racialized Rightlessness and Criminalization of the

Unprotected, Lisa Marie Cacho explains:

According to literary critic Lindon Barrett, value *needs* negativity. As he theorizes, the ‘object’ of value needs an ‘other’ of value because ‘for value ‘negativity is a resource,’ an essential resource. The negative, the expended, the excessive invariably form the ground of possibilities for values. (13)

Through homonationalism what gets valued in Ari and Bernardo’s case is Ari’s queerness and that is possible by “othering” Bernardo’s criminality. I juxtapose Ari and Bernardo to signal how homonationalism’s white supremacist logic does not allow for the young men to (co)exist and that one must be valued over the other. The valuing of one over an “other” complicates Ari’s coming out process and his *conocimiento* because a queer Latino identity does not fit within this binary. Similar to the other young adult novels being analyzed, homonationalism forces Ari to choose his queerness or everything else that his brother represents. For their parents, however, Bernardo’s criminality is a sign of

“otherness” and shame which is why they choose to not speak about him. The Mendoza’s middle class status also distinguishes them from the other families discussed in this chapter. Mrs. Mendoza is a college educated teacher and Mr. Mendoza is an ex-Marine mailman. In a journal entry, Ari writes:

There are no pictures of my brother in our house [...] Because he’s in prison. No one in my house talks about him. It’s like being dead. It’s worse than being dead. At least the dead get talked about and you get to hear stories about them. [...] Even the dog we used to have gets talked about. Even Charlie, the dead dog, gets a story. My brother doesn’t get any stories. (96)

The guilt the Mendoza family feels is more of a reflection of what Bernardo’s incarceration suggests about the family as a whole instead of how the incarceration affects him individually. As Ari explains, the responsibility of the family falls on the eldest son and since Bernardo failed to meet his designated familial role, he is worse than dead which leaves Ari to take his place. Cacho explains that “To be ineligible for personhood is a form of social death; it not only defines who does not matter, it also makes mattering meaningful” (Cacho 6). In other words, Bernardo does not matter and he has no value because his family does not recognize his personhood; Ari’s position as a “son in a Mexican family” is, therefore, more significant.

Bernardo’s “social death” also represents conflicting views of masculinity—specifically Mexican masculinity—which further complicate Ari’s queerness. Ari’s conocimiento process asks that he figure out what it means to be a man and to be Mexican. The pieces that he has thus far do not leave space to be queer. Throughout the novel, Ari constructs his understanding of masculinity from the men around him; however, the pieces do not seem to make sense to him. Bernardo’s criminality is also

associated with being Mexican—an ethnic identity which both Ari and Dante have a difficult time identifying with. Ari's *conocimiento* involves making sense of what the denial of his brother means for his own identity including his masculinity, ethnicity, and sexuality.

What it means to be a man and what it means to be Mexican are constant struggles that Ari and Dante deal with throughout the novel. Dante feels that he is not Mexican enough while Ari feels differently. Ari and Dante tease each other about being Mexican and eventually confront one another about it. Ari asks Dante: “‘It bothers you that you’re Mexican, doesn’t it? ‘No.’ I looked at him. ‘Yes, it bothers me.’ [...] ‘You know what I think, Ari? I think Mexicans don’t like me.’” (40). At this point in the novel Dante’s feeling that he does not belong to a Mexican/Mexican-American community stems from him being second generation, not speaking Spanish, and his parents’ professions.¹⁵ Dante reveals a bigger issue when he asks Ari a pertinent question toward the end of the novel: “‘Do real Mexicans like to kiss boys?’ ‘I don’t think liking boys is an American invention’” (273). For Dante, feeling like he is not part of a Mexican/Mexican-American community also stems from a sense of marginality because of his sexuality. The Quintana’s class mobility has given Dante access to a variety of information and knowledge that may not have been available to him otherwise. That is, Dante benefits from his father being an English professor and his mother a psychologist by having access to books and travel in a way that Ari does not. Ari and Dante bond over the shared affection for literature but it is Dante who continues to give Ari books to read.

¹⁵ Dante’s dad is an English professor and his mother is a psychologist.

The knowledge that Ari and Dante's class status and mobility provides them does not include knowledge about Latino queerness. Therefore, it becomes more possible to be a Mexican-American English professor than it is to be a queer Latino man. Dante's question and Ari's answer also points out the underlying understanding that "Americans" can kiss boys and Ari's answer only suggests that they did not invent it. However, the answer is not clear and leaves both boys questioning if there is indeed a space to be Mexican and kiss boys. Dante's question and his frustration with Mexican identity throughout the novel suggest that because he likes kissing boys he cannot be Mexican or that Mexicans will not like him. Ari and Dante's conversation points to how homonationalism leaves little room to understand queerness within a cultural and ethnic identity. Ari attempts to challenge that by saying Americans did not invent liking boys which further suggests that liking boys can be a Mexican act as well.

Ari's struggle with his masculinity, ethnicity, and sexuality reach a climactic moment when he fights Julian Enriquez, who sent Dante to the hospital after seeing him kiss another boy. Julian, like the other hypermasculine Latino characters in the previously discussed novels, serves to protect Latino masculinity through physical force. After learning that Julian and his friends were the ones that attacked Dante, Ari goes on a hypermasculine rampage of his own and breaks Julian's nose. He says, "He took a swing at me. That was all I needed. I just went to it. His nose was bleeding. That didn't stop me. I didn't take long before he was on the ground. I was saying things to him, cussing at him. Everything was a blur and I just kept going at him" (315). Ari's moment of aggression against Julian is immediately compared to Bernardo's assault on someone

else. It is at this moment that Ari learns that truth about his brother and is shamed by his parents for his seemingly criminal behavior. Julian's fight with Dante and then Ari's fight with Julian reveal the fears that Ari and Dante previously expressed about being Mexican and kissing boys. Julian's reactions strongly indicate one cannot be a "real Mexican" and kiss boys. At this moment, Dante's Mexicaness is not legible but because his queerness is made visible he is othered and further punished. When Ari reacts in a way he deems fair he is further villainized because what becomes legible is his act of violence as a brown youth. Ari's physical reaction to Dante's attack is what frightens his parents the most because it suggests to them that violence is somehow inherent in their family given that Bernardo is in prison for murdering another man with his bare hands. While Ari's fight with Julian cannot be read the same as Bernardo's violent act against someone else they are nonetheless read in the same light because of how criminality is understood.

The Mendoza's revelation about Bernardo's story proves to be a cathartic moment for everyone. Their disclosure allows the family to move on and let go together. Mrs. Mendoza shares photographs of Bernardo with Ari and they decide to hang up a picture of both of them as children in the living room. Ari states: "That was the day that my brother was in our house again. In a strange and inexplicable way, my brother had come home" (324). The photograph represents Ari and Bernardo as children—a moment before Bernardo committed a crime and could still be read as a person. Talking about Bernardo also permits Mr. Mendoza to talk about the trauma he suffered during the Vietnam War. While the chosen photograph glosses over the fact that present Bernardo continues to not

exist it is the gesture of placing the photograph in the living room that allows Ari to continue his *conocimiento* process and come to terms with his sexuality.

Ari's *conocimiento* required that he make sense of what the different men in his life represented about masculinity and Mexican identity. Ari's *conocimiento* process allowed him to put these different pieces together in order to make sense of the turmoil he undergoes throughout the novel. After opening up to his son about his own trauma, it is finally Mr. Mendoza who reveals to Ari that his pain will end once he comes to terms with being gay. He says, "Ari, the problem isn't just that Dante's in love with you. The real problem—for you, anyway—is that you're in love with him" (348). Mr. Mendoza's insight gives Ari the final piece he needs to find a comfort with his *conocimiento*. After ignoring Dante while he figured out what he was feeling he finds Dante to tell him he loves him. Ari reflects on his journey and says:

This is what was wrong with me. All this time I had been trying to figure out the secrets of the universe, the secrets of my own body, of my own heart. All of the answers have always been so close and yet I had always fought them without even knowing it. From the minute I'd met Dante, I had fallen in love with him. I just didn't let myself know it, think it, feel it. My father was right. And it was true what my mother said. We all fight our own private wars. (358)

Ari's desire to "figure out the secrets of the universe" can serve as a metaphor for his desire for *conocimiento*. Putting Coyolxauhqui together entailed that he find the different pieces of himself in others in order to create a different story for himself. That Ari's parents were the ones that helped him come out challenges the push from homonationalism to say that Latino communities are inherently homophobic as was evident in *Chulito*. The parents' involvement in their child's coming out process is another aspect that distinguishes *Aristotle and Dante* from the other two novels. Their

presence alone, while extremely complicated, plays a meaningful role in Ari and Dante's relationship. While homonationalism continues to make it difficult for Ari and Dante to be queer and Mexican it is their parents' support that makes it possible for them to stay in their community. Ari and Dante do not feel pressured to leave their neighborhood in order to be openly gay as Jason and Chulito do. Ari's *conocimiento* gives him the opportunity to provide healing for himself and those around him.

Conclusion: Latino and Queer

Alex Sanchez's *Rainbow Boys*, Charles Rice-González's *Chulito*, and Benjamin Alire Saénz's *Aristotle and Dante Discover the Secrets of the Universe* demonstrate the difficulties of coming out for Latino young men. The main characters of these novels traverse the daily realities of oppression marked on their bodies atop making sense of their sexuality. While the three novels depict varying experiences and degrees of complexities it is evident that there are not enough resources available to queer Latino youth to make their coming out less painful. Jason, Chulito, and Ari all express a sense of confusion and loneliness as they attempt to understand their sexuality. The novels also demonstrate how homonationalism makes it extremely difficult to identify as queer and Latino because homonationalism depicts a "sexual exceptionalism" that is read as white and queer, therefore, making it legible and with the possibility of benefiting from certain protections and rights. Homonationalism others and erases Latino identity in favor of a queer identity that often times forces youth to leave their communities under the guise of protection and survival. That is not to say that homophobia does not exist in Latino communities because it does; however, the three novels suggest that homophobia can be

challenged and that spaces can be created where one can exist as a queer Latino. Homonationalism, in general, erases the possibility of intersecting identities in order to uphold white supremacist logic. As the novels further suggest, this can be detrimental to queer youth of color. Reading these novels as *conocimiento* narratives is substantive way to understand the process which queer Latino youth undergo to find *conocimiento* from the violence of homonationalism and construct a gay Latino identity. These novels affirm that being Latino and queer are possible. That these stories exist is already a challenge to the real consequences of homonationalism. *Conocimiento* can be a way to transform existing knowledges like homonationalism and create new ones that allow, for example, a straight father and his gay son to search for healing together.

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Chapter 4

“Fierce and Fearless”: Dress and Conocimiento in Rigoberto González’s

The Mariposa Club Trilogy

In 2002, Gwen Araujo was brutally murdered in Newark, California by three male friends, two of whom she had been sexually intimate with, after they discovered that she was biologically a man. While her family supported her, public spaces, like her school, were unsafe for Gwen. The 17 year-old transgender Latina had previous encounters with bullying and harassment for wearing makeup and women’s clothing to school. Linda Heidenreich’s “Learning from the Death of Gwen Araujo?—Transphobic Racial Subordination and Queer Latina survival in the Twenty-First Century,” examines the intersectionalities between race, sex, and gender in relationship to Araujo’s murder and the trial of her three perpetrators. She claims that “[...] much of the violence that transgender and transsexual women of color experience is due to hetero-patriarchal violence asserted by white and Chicano men seeking to protect their masculine privilege” (57). Heidenreich further argues that violence against transgender people is rationalized and rendered invisible in certain aspects of society, the media, and the law. In other words, violence is used to preserve the supremacy of hetero-patriarchal masculinity and becomes a medium through which to control gender and sexuality; furthermore, the violence becomes codified, for example, when these violent acts are not recognized as hate crimes by legal and/or public institutions.

The tragic murder of Gwen Araujo, and the lives of other transgender and transsexual Latinas, prompts my investigation of dress (i.e. clothing, makeup,

accessories, etc.) and its relationship to the construction of identity and *conocimiento* as it pertains to young queer Latina/os. In this chapter I focus on the sixth stage of Anzaldúa's theory of *conocimiento*¹⁶, “the blow up...the clash of realities,” in order to highlight the difficulties and dangers of challenging existing oppressive epistemologies. Through an examination of Rigoberto González's *The Mariposa Club* trilogy¹⁷, I argue that certain types of dress— as employed, for example, by Trinidad Ramos, a transgender Latina teen that often dresses in drag— serve to disrupt hetero-patriarchal structures and can also function as a way through which the novel's characters create and assert their queer identity.

The Mariposa Club (2009) tells the story of the “Fierce Foursome,” Maui, Isaac, Lib, and Trini, and their attempt to create the first GLBT club at Caliente High School in southern California. Through Mauricio “Maui” Gutierrez, the reader gets an insight into the lives of each member of the group and the various forms of homophobia and discrimination they each face at school, the local mall, and their homes. As high school graduation approaches, the “Fierce Foursome” share a strong desire to be remembered. Their fear of being forgotten or erased from Caliente High history motivates them to organize a GLBT club; however, the task proves to be more difficult because the high school principal is not supportive and their peers and other community members discriminate against the club. The “Mariposa Club” becomes a catalyst through which the

¹⁶ In chapter 1 I explain that *conocimiento* is theory that allows for the employment and transformation of knowledges for the purposes of healing. In “now let us shift...the path of *conocimiento*...inner work, public acts,” Gloria Anzaldúa explains that there are seven fluid stages of *conocimiento* that trace one's path toward individual and communal healing.

¹⁷ Gonzalez's trilogy includes *The Mariposa Club* (2009), *The Mariposa Gown* (2011), & *Mariposa U* (2015).

“Fierce Foursome” begin to examine not only their individual histories but also their very near future of adulthood. *The Mariposa Gown* (2011) follows the now “fierce trio” through their senior year and their plans to attend prom in drag. Maui, Lib, and Trini prepare for their future after Caliente High and begin to realize that not everyone around them is afforded the same possibilities especially now that their community is undergoing an economic crisis. The last book in the trilogy, *Mariposa U* (2015), centers Maui’s experiences as a freshman at the University of California Riverside. Maui struggles with his transition into full independence and making the best choices for his future including how to deal with an abusive and dependent romantic relationship.

Rigoberto González’s *The Mariposa Club* trilogy is one of the few texts aimed at Latino young adult audiences that break the silence around issues of queerness and transgender identity in Latino homes and communities. Furthermore, it is the only young adult series that features a Latina transgender character. Trini is described as wearing loud, walking louder, and talking loudest (González 56). Her character straddles a thin line between visibility and invisibility; additionally, her use of make-up and use of women’s clothes makes her the character that poses the most threat to the hetero-patriarchal masculinity in her high school and predominantly Mexican community. Ultimately, her dress makes her visible; that is, her community and peers have to look at her and have to recognize her existence because she challenges normativity. However, this visibility also poses a potential danger to her life as those around attempt to make her invisible through the use of violence in order to preserve dominant gendered structures. While the rest of the queer protagonists in González’s trilogy also challenge

heteronormativity simply by existing as gay Latino men I find that Trini experiences an extra vulnerability that the other characters do not—a vulnerability that often threatens her life in a way that Maui and Lib, for example, do not face. Thus, I examine the complexity Trini’s dress presents as she constructs and claims a Latina queer identity as part of her larger *conocimiento* process and the ways in which her “clash with reality” threatens her life.

Dress and Ornamentation: Using Style for Identity Construction

In *Accessorizing the Body*, scholar Cristina Giorcelli defines dress as “(understood not only as clothing but also as mental and behavioral attitudes and rhetorical and linguistic modes) [and that it] can be used as a mask to deceive others as well as a way to protect one’s inner freedom” (2). I agree with Giorcelli that dress is connected to attitudes and expression, mainly as it relates to identity; however, I would argue that even though dress “can be used as a mask” it can also be used consciously to reveal what may hide behind the “mask” and demand public freedoms. In this vein, Chicana scholar Catherine Ramirez offers a similar understanding of dress through her articulation of “style politics.” In *The Woman in the Zoot Suit: Gender, Nationalism, and the Cultural Politics of Memory* (2009) Ramirez argues that “by ‘style’ [she] refers to a signifying practice, in this case, the display of the zoot subculture’s codes via clothing, hair, and cosmetics. And by ‘style politics’ [she] refers to an expression of difference via style” (56). Ramirez’s theorization of style and style politics explains the cultural and gendered significance of dress that can provide insight to why Trini’s use of women’s clothes and makeup challenge gender normativity in her high school and community.

Largely, Ramirez suggests that clothing, hair, and makeup have very specific cultural and gender codes; pants, for example, signal masculinity, while a dress, points to femininity. Style politics then suggests that using clothing, hair, and makeup can be a way to assert difference and ultimately identity. For example, the Pachuco draped pants and the pompadour hair, which Ramirez examines in her book, indicate a very specific type of Mexican-American masculinity and femininity that stood outside of normative white society (68). It is only once such difference is visible, as Ramirez further elaborates, that Pachuco style stopped being merely about fashion and more about a political identity. Because of this politicization, Mexican-Americans that donned Pachuco dress were othered and criminalized for not conforming to the dominant gendered dress codes.

A discussion of the rhetorical differences between “decoration” and “ornamentation” is important in order to understand how dress can challenge hetero-patriarchal structures of oppression and how it can then be understood as a means through which to express an identity. Vorris Nunley’s explication of decoration and ornamentation as employed in his book *Keepin’ It Hushed: The Barbershop and African American Hush Harbor Rhetoric* is productive here. Nunley argues:

decoration in a simplistic sense could be thought of as adornment that is self-referential or object referential in that it seems to function in, of, and for its own sake, disconnected from an ordering, framing, or epistemic function desutured from social hierarchy or social distinction. Ornament then can be considered more thoughtfully as scriptings, motifs, patterns, visual tropes, and other verbal commonplaces and visual images that order, frame, distinguish and enhance the meaning of an entity. (90)

In other words, decoration only calls attention to itself and does not disrupt or change normative or dominant structures of power; ornamentation, however, serves as a way to

challenge such structures by also calling attention to that outside of what is being ornamented. Laura Pérez's (2007) discussion of body and dress in *Chicana Art: The Politics of Spiritual and Aesthetic Altarities* provides an example of the important potential of ornamentation. Pérez argues that the domestic or nanny dress as used in *The Nanny*, an installation piece by Chicana artist Yolanda López, brings "into view the power differentials among women of different classes and ethnicities" (52). She explains that the dress brings up a particular image of a woman of color, suggesting that the domestic dress is not only gendered but also raced. López's display of the nanny dress as art transforms the dress into ornamentation because it is no longer referring to itself but instead makes visible the class and ethnic differences among women by disrupting its original significance. While Pérez does not necessarily articulate the productivity of López's work as ornamentation it nonetheless serves that purpose. I employ Ramirez's, Nunley's, and Pérez's analysis and theorizations not only because they explain the multifaceted ways that dress and ornamentation are productive means for understanding identity formation but because these scholars and their analysis also demonstrate how knowledge can be transformed and function as a more empowering tool.

Reading dress as ornamentation proves beneficial when grappling with Gwen Araujo's death and Trinidad Ramos's dress as means of constructing a queer Latina identity. The makeup and women's clothing that Araujo wore to school were not mere decoration; they did not only call attention to themselves, but they also disrupted the assumed heteronormativity of their high school and community. In other words, her dress rendered her visible and also reflected the homophobia and discrimination present in the

school which became explicit through the students' reactions of bullying and harassment. The same makeup and clothes on a female student would not have caused the same response and therefore would have been read as decoration. Similarly, Trini helps demonstrate how reading her dress as ornamentation can serve as a useful way to discuss the construction of her identity. Trini's use of makeup and women's clothing makes her susceptible to a violence that her queer friends that do not dress in drag can escape. In this way, Trini experiences the clash with reality differently because her life is on the line.

Furthermore, ornamentation requires an examination of what is being ornamented and that which it stands in opposition. For Cherríe L. Moraga (2011),

There is no critique of the "normal" without the queer. The beauty of the queer is that s/he requires society to question itself, its assumptions about desire, about masculinity and femininity, about power. Of course, the majority culture turns away en masse from the real depth of such inquiries; but the inquiry exists, nagging nagging nagging until it one day erupts into revolt. (188)

In other words, Trini's ornamentation calls out the "normal" by standing in contrast to it. Her dress forces "society to question itself." She is a "nagging" force that challenges hetero-patriarchal powers in her community. This "nagging" and "questioning," however, while an essential part of shifting realities, makes those that are being nagged and questioned feel uncomfortable, and as the Mariposa trilogy demonstrates, this uneasiness can often result in violence. I pay particular attention to this stage of *conocimiento*, the class of realities, in the Mariposa trilogy because I am interested in discussing whose bodies are more vulnerable and likely to be sacrificed for the sake of shifting realities. The Mariposa trilogy suggests that Trini—a transgender body—is the most impacted.

Clash of Realities and Trini's Dress: *The Mariposa Club*

At the beginning of *The Mariposa Club*, Maui reveals that Trini was forced to transfer high schools because she was brutally attacked for attending the Homecoming dance dressed in drag. Maui later explains that “Trini, fierce and fearless, decided to run for Homecoming court, and no one caught that the gender-ambiguous name, Trinidad, was not a girl but that queer kid who walked around the school in eyeliner and dressed in girl’s sweaters, until it was too late to do anything about it” (23). Trini’s gender-ambiguous name allows her to momentarily pass for a young woman in the eyes of her classmates because they do not read her name as a threat to the gender norms their Homecoming court upholds. It is only once the school jocks, the quintessential representations of masculinity, see Trini in her homecoming dress that she is no longer able to pass and is subjected to violent consequences at the hands of her peers. Passing practices are used throughout the novel in different forms by some of the characters and suggest that these practices serve as strategies for resistance and survival in a heteronormative society. In the introduction to *Passing: Identity and Interpretation in Sexuality, Race, and Religion*, Linda Schlossberg (2001) explains that passing can be a contradictory notion because at the same time that it seeks to provide visibility to an individual it can also serve to uphold “larger social hierarchies in place” (3). She further argues that “passing can be experienced as a source of radical pleasure or intense danger; it can function as a badge of shame or a source of pride” (3). Whether Trini is explicitly attempting to pass for a woman or not it is precisely because she does not that she poses the most threat to gender normativity and it therefore subjected to more violence. Maui,

on the other hand, attempts to pass for straight in order to avoid the harassment and bullying normalized in their high school setting. It is this form of passing in order to survive that often causes Maui to lash out at Trini for being so “fierce and fearless.” For the majority of the novel, Maui is uncomfortable with Trini’s inability to fully pass for a woman because it puts in danger his own survival and forces him to question his own queer identity. As the trilogy develops, Trini’s transgender identity is used as a source of empowerment by the other queer characters in a way that I think minimizes Trini’s own transgender experiences. Trini’s experiences as a transgender Latina will serve as a site of comparison for the other queer protagonists that will allow them to take greater risks with their own identity because as long as Trini is around the violence will always be less for them.

Trini’s homecoming dress serves as ornamentation that makes clear what is inside and outside of normativity. Similarly, Judith Butler (1993) argues that “drag is subversive to the extent that it reflects on the imitative structure by which hegemonic gender is itself produced and disputes heterosexuality’s claim to naturalness and originality” (125). In other words, Trini’s ornamentation through drag highlights her high school’s construction of heterosexuality as normal and at the same time stands in opposition to these gender constructions. Because Trini’s homecoming dress and style politics disrupts the structure of her high school it further signals the importance dress plays in her queer identity construction. However, this construction did not come without consequences. Maui continues to describe the harassment that Trini faced when she ran for Homecoming queen. According to Maui:

It became a joke that all the other outsider and popularity rejects enabled as an affront to the jocks and school princesses. Everything had been engineered all the way up to the announcement of the king and queen, when Trini would walk up to the stage in an evening gown. But as soon as the jocks got wind of it, they cut her catwalk short by rushing her behind the stage and breaking her arm and two ribs. (23)

Trini at this point is further marginalized by the high school's outcasts when she becomes the joke meant to challenge "the jocks and school princesses." The "outsiders and popularity rejects" represent those that "nag" or disrupt the hetero-patriarchal masculinity preserved by the jocks and princesses; however, it is important to point out that even within this community rejection Trini represents excess and is, therefore, more vulnerable to bullying by those within normative society and those rejected by it. Trini's excess acknowledges that according to high school ideology there is an acceptable form of otherness. Because Trini seems to stand outside of both groups she is seen as the most threatening candidate. Wearing an evening gown appears to be the ultimate threat to heteronormativity because the jocks then violently attack Trini as they discover that she will be their Homecoming queen. Such a response points to what Heidenreich (2005) argues preserved white and Chicano male privilege. Trini disrupts the dominant structure of power when elected as queen, which is a position of ultimate femininity often relegated to the young female who best represents that. Maui's description suggests that the "school princess" is an accepted high school figure setting the standard for feminine gender performativity. Allowing Trini to take the position of homecoming queen would suggest that she is an accepted representation of the "school princess" and, therefore, that her challenge of gender is also acceptable. However, it is made clear that this is not the case when the jocks violently attack her at Homecoming. The narrative of the novel does

not indicate that the jocks face any consequences, but instead Trini is forced to leave her high school entirely and the gender structure of the school goes back to the way it was.

The Homecoming incident is an example of “the clash of realities” that Anzaldúa explains as essential to the *conocimiento* process. In “now let us shift...the path of *conocimiento*...inner work, public acts,” Gloria Anzaldúa describes a healing practice that utilizes knowledge as a source of empowerment and transformation. Anzaldúa details seven fluid stages that lead one out of *desconocimiento* and into a more enlightened state of *conocimiento*. Anzaldúa explains that after the *arrebato*, the moment of trauma, one goes into a liminal space that is followed by severe depression and/or self-loathing but that there is a call to action that forces one to reassemble and face the world again in hopes of inciting social change. The clash of realities is the sixth stage where “[...] you take your story into the world, testing it. When you or the world fail to live up to your ideals, your edifice collapses like a house of cards, casting you into conflict with self and others in a war between realities” (545). In Trini’s case the war between realities is represented by the fight between her transgender identity and the school jock’s heteronormativity. Being able to attend Homecoming in a dress, and much less serve as Homecoming queen, would suggest that Trini and what she represents are accepted and safe; furthermore, it would signal that transphobia and homophobia are not the main forces that seek to oppress her. However, the jocks’ violent reactions serve as a literal clash and attempt to silence Trini and preserve dominant heteronormative structures.

Throughout the novel Trini’s dress continues to serve as a site of tension and proves to be far more complicated as she also encounters cultural resistance from some

members in her community. When the “Fierce Foursome” are asked by Mr. Gutierrez to wear ballet folklorico male costumes and serve food at a Latino Caucus banquet Trini instead chooses to wear one of the Jalisco female dresses and is confronted by a male banquet’s guest. Maui describes:

The grey-haired gentleman dressed in a conservative three-piece suit is pissed that Trini’s in drag and Lib’s wearing makeup. Trini, wearing a pair of thick braids with orange ribbons, is pissed that the shoulders on her colorful Jalisco dress are a bit too wide for her frame and she looks like she’s wearing shoulder pads. (102)

Even though Las Cazuelas, the restaurant that Mr. Gutierrez manages, “is a stereotype of a restaurant—garnish red and green colors, piñatas and wagon wheels, mariachi music, and lovely señoritas in white skirts and embroidered blouses” (95) Trini’s dress still stands out and creates anxiety for the Latino Caucus. Her dress is ironically excessive in a space that depends on the overuse of Mexican decorations to identify itself as an authentic Mexican restaurant. The juxtaposition of Trini’s Jalisco dress with the gentleman’s three-piece suit also points to the power dynamics at play at the restaurant. In “Men’s clothing and Masculine Identities,” Diana Crane (2000) explains that the business suit has been a staple “uniform” for indicating social class; she further argues that the business suit becomes a sign for success and power (173). The confrontation amongst Trini, Lib—who is wearing Goth makeup¹⁸ — and the gentlemen suggests that class is also a determining factor for asserting heteronormative Latino masculinity and that class in this scene is visible through the characters’ dress. Because the gentleman

¹⁸ I would argue that Goth make-up and clothes in this case serve as a form of ornamentation because they are disrupting the “normalcy” of the Latino banquet. In *Goth: Undead Subculture* Lauren Goodlad and Michael Bibby demonstrate how the Goth subculture can serve to challenge heteronormativity through dress, make-up, and the use of the body. See Goodlad, Lauren and Michael Bibby, eds. *Goth: Undead Subculture*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2007. Print.

pays for the banquet and Trini is just a server he feels entitled to remove Trini from the event. Mr. Gutierrez, who throughout the novel does not seem to understand Trini's identity but nonetheless respects her choices and the friendship she has with his son, would not have asked Trini to leave if the gentleman would not have requested it. The gentleman's class privilege, as represented by the cultural context of the three-piece business suit, serves to establish his male dominance over Trini and Mr. Gutierrez. And while the gentleman does not resort to physical violence to preserve gender codes and structures of power like the jocks did at Homecoming, his actions can be understood as another example of the microaggressions¹⁹ that Trini and the rest of the "Fierce Foursome" endure.

The incident at Las Cazuelas is another example of the clash of realities where Trini stands to lose the most. While there are several characters in this scene that represent various forms of difference—such as Lib's gothic outfit, Maui's queer identity, and Mr. Gutierrez's class status—it is Trini that is read as the most visible and as the easiest target. These moments of confrontation are an integral part of Trini's *conocimiento* process because they force her to decide if she wishes continue fighting for her identity while simultaneously revealing who in her community will stand by her.

¹⁹ Tara Joy Yosso (2000) defines microaggressions as "subtle, stunning verbal and non-verbal put-downs of People of Color, often done automatically or unconsciously. Microaggressions are layered insults, based on notions of race, gender, class, sexuality, culture, language, immigration status, phenotype, accent, and surname. Microaggressions are cumulative and cause undue stress to People of Color privileging Whites" (44). I wish to further complicate Yosso's definition to by suggesting that people of color can also inflict microaggressions on other people of color and that that may not necessarily "privilege whites" but can privilege dominant ideology as in the case the Gentleman and Trini. See Yosso, Tara Joy. *A Critical Race and LatCrit Approach to Media Literacy: Chicano Resistance to Visual Microaggressions*. Diss. University of California, Los Angeles, 2000. Los Angeles: UCLA, 2000. Print.

Making Face and Going to Prom: *The Mariposa Gown*

The second book of the Mariposa trilogy, *The Mariposa Gown*, focuses on the group's senior year. The "Fierce Foursome" has now become a fierce trio because Isaac ran away to Los Angeles and lost contact with the rest of the mariposas. While the group was not able to establish an official Mariposa Club at their high school they nonetheless continue to meet unofficially. Additionally, this novel introduces a new character, Sebastian Sandoval, who serves as a representation of upper class privilege and is Maui's new love interest. As the novel develops, the Mariposa Club decides they will demand that same sex couples be allowed to attend Prom and to be elected as Prom King and Prom Queen. The group votes that Trini will be nominated as Prom Queen and wear a gown to Prom and that Sebastian will be nominated for Prom King. *The Mariposa Gown* does not show much improvement in Trini's life as a transgender Latina. Trini continues to experience a similar level of violence as she did the prior school year; however, this novel provides more insight to her emotional stability as it relates to the violence she endures in particular from her father. In this section I focus on Trini's strategies for surviving and combatting the effects of the clash of realities on her person. Throughout the series it is clear that Trini is proud of her identity and confident in whom she is; however, the assertion of her transgender identity has brought her many violent confrontations. Despite these attacks, though, Trini has managed to continue her being her fierce and fabulous self. I read Trini's resilience during the clash of realities as a form of what Anzaldúa describes as "making face."

Gloria Anzaldúa's concept of "making face" is key for assessing dress as ornamentation as it pertains to Trini and the Mariposa trilogy. In the introduction to *Making Face, Making Soul, Haciendo Caras: Creative and Critical Perspectives by Feminist of Color*, Anzaldúa says that "Making faces" is [her] metaphor for constructing one's identity" (xvi). She argues:

Among Chicanas/Mexicanas, *haciendo caras*, 'making faces,' means to put on a face, express feelings by distorting the face—frowning, grimacing, looking sad, glum or disapproving. For me, *hacienda caras* has added the connotation of making *gestos subversivos*, political subversive gestures [...]. 'Face' is the surface of the body that is most noticeably inscribed by social structures, marked with instructions on how to be a *mujer*, *macho*, working class, Chicana. (xv)

A literal translation from Spanish suggests vulnerability because one's feelings are literally expressed on one's face; while it may also serve as a sort of mask to hide one's true feelings. A theorization of the term includes *gestos subversivos* which can disrupt or transform larger structures of oppression through the strategic use of one's face. In a similar vein, scholar LuMing Mao argues in respect to Chinese Americans and Chinese American rhetoric that:

As border residents, we look different and we may choose to act differently, too—so that we can better claim allegiance to our face and to what our face represents (that is, to our ancestral home and culture). Our face becomes both a liability—we get "recognized" because of it—and an asset—we are a "model minority" in spite of it. (37)

For Anzaldúa and Mao, "face" becomes an indicator of difference and can also serve as a form of empowerment. Both explanations of face suggest that it is a method through which to create an identity or form an "allegiance [...] to what our face represents" (37). Both authors also signal to impact that faces can have because of the particular responses they produce. Anzaldúa's and Mao's theories about face are applicable for how bodies, in

general, are visible and how that visibility can create a meaning and an impact through which identity is articulated. For example, Trini's face and body are read as that of a Latino man because of her body structure and her facial features which further suggests that there are specific gender codes which she must follow; however, she disrupts the socially constructed meaning of her face and body when she ornaments them with makeup, accessories, and women's clothing. For Trini "making face" is a subversive act because she is challenging white and Chicano heteronormative expectations.

Understanding that "face" is both an asset and a liability helps further elaborate the constructions of an identity. In *The Mariposa Gown* it is more apparent that Trini uses various forms of making face to handle the violence she experiences from her father while also attempting to continue expressing her identity.

In *The Mariposa Club* Maui revealed that Trini was constantly physically abused by her grandfather and father and was sent to live with her Aunt Carmen and become her caretaker. This second novel, *The Mariposa Gown*, demonstrates that while the rest of the mariposas prepare for a future away from Caliente by attending college Trini's options for a different future are very limited. Maui expresses his concern:

But she keeps saying, *But don't worry, I'll be free soon*, as if the end of high school is also the end of some jail sentence. I don't quite understand it. In June, once we all graduate, Aunt Carmen will still be bedbound, Trini will still be living with her parents, and, based on how Mr. Ramos is able to control Trini's wardrobe so severely, it's also doubtful that he'll loosen up about that within the next six months. Unless Trini plans on running away. Just like Isaac ran away. The thought brings a pang of hurt to my chest and I lower my head. (48)

Maui's pity reveals the reality of Trini's circumstances. Trini does not have the good grades required for college admission and she does not have the financial means to leave

home alone. As it stands, it is likely that Trini will remain in the same violent situation that she currently experiences. That Trini's current situation is compared to a jail sentence suggests that she is currently being punished for committing a crime. In this way, Trini is read as criminal and deviant and such criminality and deviancy warrants punishment and violence. A jail sentence also suggests that her punishment is temporary. The violence inflicted on Trini by her father is temporary only if Trini is able to leave home; unfortunately, it is very likely that she will continue to experience various forms of violence from other people, institutions, and systems because of her transgender identity. While it is not necessarily Trini that understands her future as limited she is nonetheless aware that she must at least make face until she can find herself in a different and less violent situation.

The deteriorating economy of Caliente Valley has meant that people have lost their jobs and families have had to make concessions including Trini's family; they have been forced to move in with Aunt Carmen so that they can rent out their own home in hopes of earning additional income. With Mr. Ramos now living with Aunt Carmen Trini experiences more abuse from her father. Aside from physically abusing Trini, Mr. Ramos also forces Trini to wear clothes traditionally assigned to men. The bruises and the change in wardrobe indicate to the rest of the Mariposas that Trini is obviously going through a painful time at home. However, her desire to protect her family forces Trini to make face and minimize the violence she endures. After the rest of the Mariposas notice a bruise on her arm, Trini responds:

“Look, you two. Don’t even breathe a word about this anyone! I’ll take care of this, all right. But mind your own damn business. My family can’t afford these kinds of problems.” “But it’s your father who’s creating them,” Lib chimes in. “I said, zip it! It’s not really about me, you know, it’s about the hard times we’re going through. He just doesn’t know how to deal with it, that’s all.” (Gown 43)

Trini’s anger reveals the intersectionality between the violence her father inflicts on her because she is transgender and the violence the family experiences because of their class status. Unfortunately, Trini is in a disenfranchised position where the multiple oppressions she experiences cannot be addressed at the same time. Trini makes clear that her concern is the financial position in which her family is in and how much worse it could get if it comes to light that her father physically abuses her. Although the position that Trini takes is clearly problematic because it puts her in danger, I read this moment as a form of making face, a *gesto subvertivo*, because in doing so Trini attempts to challenge the economic burdens that plague her family. For various reasons Trini feels it is her responsibility to help her family survive and if keeping quiet about the violence can protect her family then she will do what she must. Trini’s *gesto subvertivo* also functions as an attempt to decriminalize Mr. Ramos and in doing so Trini highlights that the various violences they experiences are far more complex than Lib and Maui understand. Mr. Ramos represents the real violence that many transgender and queer Latino youth experience from their families. However, Trini’s desire to protect him suggests that the oppressions that Latino queer youth and their families feel are multifaceted. Because Trini and her family lack the resources to heal together they are left to survive as best as they can. Trini’s behavior is a reflection of her desire to live and she cannot be blamed for that.

Trini's fraught relationship with her father continues to intensify as their economic situation worsens. Because the family needs space for their belongings in Aunt Carmen's house Trini moves her possessions into a shed outside which she dubs the "Glamorous Grotto." After finding a popular magazine in their grocery purchases, Mr. Ramos furiously tears down all the superfluous decorations in the Glamorous Grotto and leaves Trini in tears. The destruction of the grotto is another example of Trini's desire to protect her father despite the violence he inflicts on her. Maui finds Trini crying and confronts Mr. Ramos who quickly retorts: "'And *he* is not a *she*, young man,' Mr. Ramos says. 'You and the fat kid have been cheerleading this act from the beginning. Do you understand that you're making my son susceptible to hatred'" (Gown 74)? Mr. Ramos seems to justify his violent behavior by pointing out that Trini's identity puts her in a yet more dangerous position. Mr. Ramos's comment is the first moment where he reveals concern for Trini's wellbeing and, while misguided, he also reveals his desire to protect her. Furthermore, Mr. Ramos's accusation signals the vulnerability that Trini incurs because of the dress choices. Simultaneously, he indicates the male privilege that he benefits from by claiming and performing a heterosexual masculinity. In "Toward a Mariposa Consciousness: Reimagining Queer Chicano and Latino Identities" Daniel Enrique Pérez argues, "Like racism and the privileging of whiteness, the invention and privileging of masculinity has real and dire consequences" (102). The privileging of masculinity provides Mr. Ramos with a type of security and power that allows him to exert violence on others. It appears that he wishes to pass on that power and protection to Trini but the only way that can happen is if she acts like a son. However, what Mr.

Ramos cannot see is that the protection from violence that he benefits from privileging masculinity is tenuous for various reasons including that he comes from a lower class status. Consequently, the privileging of heterosexual masculinity that has already harmed Trini will eventually fail Mr. Ramos because of his ethnic and class background.

Trini is more sensitive to this failure than Mr. Ramos and Maui. After Maui's verbal attacks Trini responds: "I love him, Maui. As imperfect as he is he's still my father," Trini says. "You have no right to insult him like that" (Gown 75)! Trini's declaration of love takes Maui aback because he does not yet understand how she can love someone that abuses her. The tone of this scene is particularly painful because Trini sees a potential beyond the clash of realities between her and her father while Mr. Ramos cannot. Trini is aware of the various oppressions that inflict her family and is also mindful of the negative impact that her expression of her transgender identity has on their emotional bonds. Nonetheless, she loves them and hopes that they will love her too. Throughout the novel, Trini will continue to make face and stand by her father despite Maui's and Lib's objections.

Trini's ability to make face, her resilience, and her fierceness has allowed other character's to practice some resistance of their own. Aunt Carmen and Mrs. Ramos eventually stand up to Mr. Ramos and put an end to the physical abuse he inflicts on Trini. Because of this, "Mr. Ramos has kept his temper on the down-low, and [Maui] noticed that Trini has quietly crept back into her blouses—the more conservative ones, anyway" (Gown 113). The change in Mr. Ramos's attitude also has to do with the fact he found employment and the family is slowly gaining financial stability again. However,

Mr. Ramos is still far from accepting Trini's identity. While Mr. Ramos has stopped beating Trini he does not allow her to Prom in a gown after he is called into the principal's office to discuss a fight that broke out between Sebastian, Trini, and other students. Because Trini can no longer attend Prom in a dress Maui is asked by the Mariposa Club to go in her place as a way to continue their political plan. Maui, who since the first novel has been more conservative than Trini, is hesitant to wear a gown to prom but begrudgingly agrees. Sebastian, who was also in the fight, has not lost his prom privileges. Maui explains:

Sebastian mentions how Mr. Sandoval had negotiated not to revoke those privileges, and how Mr. Ramos stepped in and decided that this was an appropriate punishment for his son, who should know better than to fight in school. "It was so humiliating," Trini says, sobbing. "Like anyone didn't know that the real lesson I was being taught was not to cross-dress." (182)

Trini is clearly aware of her positionality and the risks she takes by being out and open about her transgender identity. Allowing Maui to wear the gown she designed and sewed is another example of Trini making face in light of the clash of realities she experiences. The fight that broke out in the library between the students demonstrates the various levels of privilege and oppressions occurring at the same time. Trini explains that she needs to defend herself while Maui can sit on his hands and while he refuses to "antagonize those guys and get [his] ass kicked" he argues that Trini can defend herself because she is a "trannie." He continues to argue that "you girls are fierce fighters. I'm just your average gay boy who likes his face the way it is" (174). Maui's comment minimizes the transphobia that makes Trini susceptible to violence. Maui benefits from a safety that Trini cannot access because her identity is literally on her face and draped on

her body. Sebastian, on the other hand, steps in and helps Trini fight because he benefits from the protection of his father's money. Sebastian's class status allows him to be openly gay in a way that the other mariposa's cannot be. Maui's and Sebastian's privileges are what ultimately make way for them to go to prom. Trini, however, can only make face and keep the Mariposa Club's larger goal in mind and give her gown to Maui.

Trini's fierceness gives the Mariposa Club the courage and confidence to attend prom in drag and to face whatever clash of reality might come their way. It turns out that while there were a few stares and whispers from fellow students directed at Maui, who is in full drag and makeup, there are also students who are supportive. That Maui expects to get attacked "a la Carrie" style at prom and does not speak to the impact that Trini has had on her community. Maui can wear a gown because Trini had already experienced the bullying and harassment of being the first to dress in drag. Furthermore, Trini's ability to make face has made way for there to be a shift in realities in their high school and community. Trini's *conocimiento* process has helped those around her also heal.

Dressing as Gangsters and Jocks: *Mariposa U*

While Trini has utilized her dress to express her identity and as a part of her *conocimiento* process there are two characters, in particular, in the Mariposa trilogy that have used their dress to protect their queer identity. Tony Sanchez in *The Mariposa Club* and Diego Manrique in *Mariposa U* employ a certain dress or persona associated with a certain dress in order to garner protection. Tony Sánchez (a young Chicano who has not come out) uses his dress to pass for straight as a means of survival. Tony is a member of Los Calis, Caliente's local gang, who wears "the tell-tale baggy pants and oversized

jacket of our Caliente Valley gang members” (125). Maui says that, “Tony’s trying very hard to pass himself off as a tough guy among Los Calis, and as a straight boy in front of me. It must be hard to pretend to be who he wants people to believe he is” (127).

According to Maui, Tony uses the Los Calis gang dress as a way to hide his identity and instead perform a hetero-patriarchal masculinity and to deceive those around him as a form of survival. Even though Tony does not say much throughout the novel he does share some intimate moments with Maui which Maui uses to provide his own reading of Tony. And while it is problematic to impose a queer identity on someone that does not yet identify that way, Maui’s reading points to the ways that dress and identity can fluctuate. To return to Giorcelli (2011), dress can also function as a mask to protect one’s “inner freedoms.” Because the novel does not reveal a lot about Tony’s life, his dress is the main signifier for how his identity is constructed. In contrast to Trini, Tony’s Los Calis dress does not function as ornamentation because it only makes reference to itself and does not challenge existing structures of power. That is not to say that the baggy pants and the hooded sweatshirt²⁰ can never be ornamentation but in the space and place of Caliente Valley and Caliente High where this dress is typical of a particular group, Tony’s dress does not challenge prescribed gender codes in the same way that Trini does. Instead, his dress offers him a “mask” through which he can remain invisible and, to a certain extent, safe from homophobic violence. However, this tension with his identity and his dress escalate when Los Calis demand that Tony be the one to put a stop to the

²⁰ The hooded sweatshirt can be further analyzed as ornamentation and having presence after the unfortunate murder of Trayvon Martin in 2012. After his murder and during Zimmerman’s trial, the hooded sweatshirt was used in popular culture as a way to point out the inherent racism and hate not only demonstrated through Zimmerman’s actions but more broadly against youth of color in the United States. During the peak of Zimmerman’s trial, the hoodie was racialized, gendered, and classed.

“Fierce Foursome’s” attempts to recruit members for their new club. While marketing their club at the mall, the “Fierce Foursome” gets accosted by several shoppers whom misunderstand the group’s efforts and instead react in a homophobic manner. Among the attackers are Los Calis who suggest that Tony put an end to the “Fierce Foursome.” This moment is significant because Tony is forced to choose between a group that better represents his true identity and a group that has offered him, among other things, protection. The relationship between dress and identity is made clearer for Tony when he is expected to behave a certain way because he wears the Los Calis uniform. As a result from the conflict he feels in the chaos ensuing at the mall, Tony pulls out a gun and instead of inflicting more violence on the “Fierce Foursome” he takes his own life.

Tony’s suicide further signals the various structures of violence and oppression that make it difficult for youth of color to “come out.” His use of dress as a means of survival can be understood as a way of “making face.” In Anzaldúa’s words, Tony “distorted” his identity to remain alive as long as possible. Toward the end of the novel, Maui describes Tony’s multiple ways of “making face.” He says, “Tony Sanchez will live in my memory having three faces: the hateful one he wore to survive among Los Calis, the sad one looking at me from the corner of the library, and the defeated one I saw when I lifted the white sheet at the mall” (212). In a way, Maui theorizes the complexity of Tony’s identity by recognizing that Tony lived with “three faces.” The juxtaposition of Tony and the “Fierce Foursome” indicates that there is a tension in the relationship between dress and identity. Maui later explains that Tony’s suicide is “reduced to a headline, another cautionary tale of youth gone astray” because of his alliance to the Los

Calis gang (211). Popular media has erased Tony's sexuality by focusing on his dress as a "gang member" and his legibility as a brown man. In a similar vein, Heidenreich argues that Araujo's "death sent a message to all of us who are queer, but especially to those of us who are queer and Latina, queer and raced, queer and mixed race—we are not safe—even when loved and embraced by our families [...]" (52). Tony's suicide and Trini's abuse serve as a reminder of those real lived experiences. Queer Chicana playwright and performer Adelina Anthony adds to the conversation by responding in a letter to the media coverage of the multiple queer teen suicides that have occurred within the last few years. She writes that "It's dangerous to come out. And, if some of our youth continue to stay in the closet because of the very real and historically grounded fears of taunting and persecution, I am just as proud of them for surviving as best as they can" (41). Both Heidenreich and Anthony explain that the inherent violence in mainstream society against queer youth of color, in particular, can make death an imminent consequence for affirming that identity. In other words, given the violence that is articulated throughout the novel against Trini and the "Fierce Foursome" it is not coincidental that Tony committed suicide. The Caliente Valley community and Caliente High School have demonstrated to not be safe spaces for queer youths of color. Schools are one of these institutions that teach youth their role in larger society at the same time that they seeks to reaffirm existing ideologies. It is arguable that Tony learned to hate himself enough to commit suicide because of the displacement he experienced and witnessed. Tony's death is an indicator that there is still a great need for spaces that empower queer youth and

further highlights the significance of Trini's resistance through dress and presence to dominant structures that seek to erase her.

Interestingly, Tony is mentioned again in *The Mariposa Gown* as a reminder of the struggles that queer youth face. After Trini's grotto is damaged and Maui confronts Mr. Ramos Maui reflects on the situation:

When the bus arrives and takes me away, I turn around the way I did that time when I left Tony sitting there, looking at his girlfriend's picture. I see him on the bench again, in peace now, maybe even happy, because his troubles are over. It's the rest of us, those he left behind, who still have to battle the hard times. (Gown 76)

It is significant that Maui recalls Tony after the incident with Mr. Ramos because it suggests that Trini has some proximity to death. Tony's suicide is an indicator of the vulnerability that Trini experiences and a real possibility for her future. Maui's reflection on death as a site of peace and happiness further indicates the severity of the violence they experience as queer youth. In other words, it appears to be easier to die than it is to exist as a transgender and/ queer person of color.

Maui's relationship with Diego Manrique in *Mariposa U* is in some ways a reflection and an extension of his relationship with Tony. Even though Maui and Tony were not in a romantic relationship Diego and Tony share many similarities which could stand in for the type of relationship they could have had. Because Diego is not out as gay to his family and friends he asks Maui to keep their relationship a secret in order to protect himself. As the novel develops Maui's and Diego's relationship grows but eventually Diego becomes emotionally and physically abusive. Diego is represented as quintessential college jock who likes to party and drink too much. While Diego does not

explicitly use his dress choices to protect his queer identity he does adopt a personality or “mask” that allows him to also pass for straight around his family and friends. Passing for straight around his roommate Josh, for example, has meant that he has had to echo his roommate’s hypermasculinity which includes vulgar language, homophobic remarks, and dominance over others. Diego feigns to find solace in Maui and takes advantage of Maui’s naiveté. Maui, on the other hands, finds himself conflicted by his desire to be with Diego, his instinct to protect himself, and his responsibility to support another queer Latino youth. In regards to Diego, Maui rationalizes that, “[...] I am not one to judge. Not all of us can walk right out of the closet. A prickling on the back of my neck reminds me that I too am keeping it on the down-low with Che and La Raza. The whole thing seems unfair. I left Caliente Valley to be the person I want to be. But it’s not as easy as I thought” (Loc 327). Maui expected that college would afford him the freedom to be out and openly gay but instead he discovers that he is hesitant to express his queer identity for fear that he will be further marginalized. It is for this reason that he seems to be more compassionate to Diego’s hesitation to come out as gay as his need to keep their relationship a secret. Maui’s understanding further suggests that coming out as a gay requires a certain privilege that not all gay youth access equally. There are various reasons why some queer youth can “walk right out of the closet” while others cannot—including access to security, safety, resources, and the like. Diego feels he lacks the security and family support to comfortably be out as gay. However, even though Diego is not out as gay he is sexually active and expects, and later demands, that Maui be intimate

with him. Diego is surprised to learn that Maui is still a virgin and does not seem to be very interested in pursuing a celibate relationship. Maui explains:

[...] I insisted on remaining celibate until the right time. I have no idea where I got this into my head, but it has stayed there all the time. I'm not just going to put out. You only have sex the first time once. After that, who the hell cares? I've certainly seen that attitude in both Sebastian and Diego—it's so meaningless once it becomes part of their sexuality. Why is it wrong that I don't want to follow that route? (Loc 884)

Two seemingly distinct definitions or understandings of what it means to be gay arise between Maui and Diego at this moment. For Maui being gay is more than having sex with someone of the same gender; however, Diego seems to understand his sexuality through sex with men. Maui's decision to remain celibate serves as another aspect that differentiates him from Trini. *Mariposa U* focuses on Maui's experiences in his first year of college and much emphasis is placed on him keeping his good morals by not doing drugs, not consuming alcohol, and not having sex. While this representation is didactic it nonetheless serves to construct Maui as an upstanding citizen and to position him as far from deviancy as possible. This contrast is made clearer when he instant messages with Trini and she alludes to her sexual behavior. Trini's assumed sexual experience is also closely related to the violences she endures. The focus on creating Maui as a "good" person suggests that he deserves protection and further assumes that to some extent he will receive it. To some degree, Maui also believes that good behavior will be rewarded by positive outcomes so he lowers his guard and does not expect to be treated poorly by Diego.

The first night that Maui and Diego spend together is after one of Diego's house parties and while Maui makes it clear he has no intentions in engaging in intercourse with

him a belligerently drunk Diego proceeds to attack and rape Maui. The following morning Maui reflects on the incident:

On the slow trek home I try to reconstruct the evening, how I went from worrying about a stupid dance to worrying about an STD. All this time I held back, I saved myself for a special someone, and then it all goes to ruin in a matter of minutes, given up to a guy I had been crushing on for only a few weeks, who finally noticed me a few days ago. I feel like nothing. (Loc 923)

Maui initially decides to visit Diego's apartment as an attempt to make new friends and socialize more. He is uncertain about attending the campus's LGBTQ club's dance and instead joins Diego. Maui's reflection does not show indication that he is fully aware of what took place at Diego's apartment. He does not consider the attack as rape until much later in the novel after Diego accosts an underage student. Maui's sense of worthlessness indicates his struggle to reconcile the loss of his virginity with being raped. Maui's immediate reaction hints that he blames himself for the incident and that he "gave" his virginity rather than seeing it as something that was "taken" from him. Being attacked by Diego sends Maui into a "Coatlícue State," which Anzaldúa describes as being "dysfunctional for weeks, the refusal to move paralyzes you" (545). Maui does not tell anyone what happened to him that night and instead goes inward and focuses on his studies. Diego continues his self-destructive and violent path and attempts to drag Maui with him.

Diego comes from a more privileged background than Maui in the sense that he has access to more resources because his family is well off and his father is a lawyer. In contrast, however, to Sebastian, who can express his queer identity in any way he desires because he benefits from his father's protection, Diego is likely to lose his father's

financial and legal protection if he comes out as gay. Diego's use of a hypermasculine and straight persona becomes more of a problem than a strategy for survival when he increases his alcohol consumption. In an attempt to apologize and set his life back on track Diego invites Maui to his new studio apartment and Maui agrees. The evening quickly escalates into a similar situation as the first time they visited with each other. This time, however, Maui speaks up before it goes further:

“You’re attacking me again!” “Attacking you? What are you on, dude, this is passion. We’re Latinos!” “Don’t give me that bullshit,” I say. “You’re forcing yourself on me.” “Forcing myself?” Diego bursts into laughter. “You’re not a girl. You’re a guy. You’ve been watching prison porn or something?” (Loc 1266)

Diego's attempt at a justification depends on ethnic stereotypes, sexism, and homophobia. While Maui explicitly indicates that he is being hurt Diego minimizes the violence taking place. Diego's conflation of “passion” and “Latino” recalls the stereotype of the “Latin love” and further suggests that Latinos are innately violent because even the way they love is violent. While Diego clearly does not understand what passion is he attempts to hide his attacks by employing a hypermasculine representation of straight Latino masculinity. In this way, he can also protect his own persona as a straight Latino male because at this moment he needs to be able to pass for more masculine than Maui. Diego continues to minimize the violence by suggesting that men cannot be raped and because Maui is read as male then what happened between them was not rape. Diego's skewed rationale is grounded in homophobic and sexist stereotypes about who can experience violence. Furthermore, Diego attempts to question Maui's masculinity by pointing out that he is a “guy” and claiming to have been attacked would somehow make him less of a man. Finally, Diego's accusation of “watching prison porn” hinges on

violent stereotypes about prison male relationships. His mention of prison, however, is another example in the series of the paralleling of the violence experienced by queer bodies and prison. It is interesting that the young characters make this connection because it speaks to the severity of the violence they feel. While the prison industrial complex is an entirely different form of violence the youth are able to relate to the idea of imprisonment, criminality, deviancy, punishment, and death. Diego's hypermasculine and homophobic performance is also an attempt to protect his queer identity as much as it is also an effort to avoid legal interventions and actually end up in prison. Maui and Diego's relationship grows more violent as the novel progresses. Maui ends up in the hospital and Diego flees the state. Even though Diego did not have the same tragic fate as Tony, Diego is also not able to reach *conocimiento* and embrace his queer identity. Diego's dress of the hypermasculine jock serves to protect him from any perceived violence he might receive for being openly gay; however, his dress is also his downfall because he is unable to ask for help and spirals deep into *desconocimiento*. Characters like Tony and Diego are emblematic of the ways that systemic violence against queer youth can lead to various forms of death. Through the support of his family and friends Maui was able to break the silence around his abusive relationship with Diego, receive counseling, and even begin another relationship. The lack of support, though, leaves Diego and Tony without the possibility for healing.

Because *Mariposa U* focuses on Maui's experiences Trini and Lib become minor characters and very little is known about the progress of their *conocimiento*. From what is revealed about Trini, though, it appears that by the end of the *Mariposa* series she is in

this liminal space between the tragedy that comes of Tony and Diego and the many possibilities laid out for Maui and Lib. While Trini's outcome is not as tragic as Tony's and Diego's she is left in a similar position as she was in the first novel. During Maui's trip back to Caliente Valley for Thanksgiving break Trini and Maui have a brief confrontation where Trini reveals how she feels about remaining in Caliente:

She shrugs and scrapes the bottom of her ice cream cup with the small plastic spoon. "Don't let me stop you, Mr. College Education. Go on with your bad self and stuff and learn and date. Just let me stay here all by my lonesome self, wasting away, and getting fat on Donkey Balls." [...] "No. Go! Soar, blossom. I'm the one you all left behind remember? You don't owe anything, especially not your time." (Loc 2012)

While Maui and Lib attend college Trini finds employment in a boutique in Palm Springs where she designs dresses and window displays. It is certainly empowering that Trini, the character whose dress has had the most impact in the Mariposa series, designs dresses and displays them for the public; nevertheless, Trini feels like she has been left behind. Although Trini does find a queer community that is more supportive than her family in Caliente Valley she remains trapped in the cycle of violence that threatened her life throughout the entire Mariposa series. I find that in this way Trini is more closely related to Tony's and Diego's narrative. That Trini's character remains alive throughout the series is significant and powerful. Trini's dress, transgender identity, and overall fierceness makes her the character most susceptible to death so that she lives at the end of the novel is an important contribution to the experiences of real queer youth lives. However, her position by the end of the series unfortunately reveals she continues to be limited by society because of her dress and identity. Tony, Diego, and Trini share these limitations and further reveal that the clash of realities that queer youth of color face do

not always have a positive or transformative outcome and that more needs to be done to support them in shifting realities where they are allowed to live and succeed.

Fierce and Fearless: Creating a Political Identity

In this final section I briefly return to the “Fierce Foursome’s” desire to create a GLBT club at their high school in order to articulate how dress can be catalyst for “shifting realities.” *The Mariposa Club* demonstrates the dangers and complexities of coming out as seen through the violence against Trini, Tony’s suicide, and various moments of discrimination against the “Fierce Foursome.” While families and other adults can be a supportive space, as it is for Lib and for Maui, homophobia is very much present in their communities which means that they are always already in danger. The novel also signals to the importance of a collective political identity, one that can demand change to their current situation. The Mariposa club represents that identity for the “Fierce Foursome.” When Trini and Maui go petition the school principal for the club, Maui declares:

We feel it’s time our beloved high school to address the reality of the times, that gays and lesbians are everywhere, including in our halls, and that we need to have an organization in place for future generations of queer teens to meet, socialize, feel safe, and advocate for their right to be who they are without fear or resistance. (51)

Maui points out in his speech that there needs to be a presence of gays and lesbians at Caliente High that lets other GLBT students know that they have a safe space to turn to. A strong enough presence of GLBT students can indeed counter the heteropatriarchal ideologies that dominate the school. As Maui further makes clear, right now “fear” has a stronger presence and so students and teachers alike do not feel comfortable publicly

coming out at Caliente High. I do not suggest that a club would have saved Tony's life, but changing the discourse of homophobia at their school could have potentially had an impact on Tony and those around him.

Not only is it important for the "Fierce Foursome" to establish a GLBT club on campus but they have made a political decision to use Spanish in the club's name, the "Mariposa"²¹ Club, and broadly invoke Latino culture and history. Moreover, Trini warns Maui that:

If you're going to be a fag of the twenty-first century, your frame of reference needs to expand to include all knowledge of fag culture from the ancient twentieth century. Otherwise you're without history, context or queer lineage. Furthermore, you have twice the responsibility because you're a brown fag—a *queena*—so your sissy savvy needs to encompass the entirety of the Americas. (118)

Trini's speech to Maui is powerful because it lays out an understanding of a "history, context or queer lineage" that crosses the Americas and calls for a transnational grounding of queer Latino identity and community. Trini also speaks to the intersectionalities of race, gender, and sexuality by arguing that it is not only difficult to be queer but that identity is further complicated by their Latino culture. Her articulation of the responsibilities of being a "brown fag" also suggests that they will be confronted by oppressions from the dominant society and their Latino culture. While the establishment of the Mariposa Club at Caliente High would have created a productive presence it is ultimately Trini's dress and own presence that frightens the principal from

²¹ Alma Lopez makes the connection between a viceroy butterfly and queerness when she says, "In my visual vocabulary, the fact that the Viceroy mimics the Monarch but is different means that it is 'queer.' The Viceroy is part of the butterfly communities of Monarchs, Queens, and Soldiers, and yet she is different. The Viceroy is queer. I too am different. As a Chicana, as a lesbian, and as an artist, I am different, I am queer" (275). See Gaspar de Alba, Alicia and Alma Lopez, eds. *Our Lady of Controversy: Alma Lopez's Irreverent Apparition*. Texas: University of Texas Press, 2011. Print.

allowing the club to happen. The principal reads Trini's dress and presence as excessive and too much for their school to handle. He argues that the visibility the group wants might bring them more harm than good and that it might be better for everyone if the situation remained the same. At the end of the novel, the group has informally established their club and meets outside of campus dedicating their first meeting to their "honorary member," Tony.

The conclusion of the novel suggests that political identities are not always, if rarely, accepted by public institutions. Instead, gathering at Trini's home for the first club meeting empowers the youth to remain "fierce and fearless" despite the discrimination they each face (222). It is also important to note that the novel does not end by resolving the "Fierce Foursome's" problems but instead leaves with the hope that change can be possible. Avoiding the traditional "happy ending"²²—endings that provide final resolutions to the protagonist's problem—that is often common of Young Adult narratives is important in a novel that speaks to queer and transgender/sexual youth of color because it steers clear of the "It Gets Better"²³ rhetoric that surrounds this identity in popular culture. Trini's abuse and Tony's death complicates the notion that queer youth just have to get through their adolescence in order to find acceptance. Instead,

²² See Trites (2000) for a broader discussion of YA narratives that includes a conversation about endings and resolutions. I would argue that a happy ending for *The Mariposa Club* might involve getting the group's club established at Caliente High and Trini being accepted by her community. In the field of Children's Literature, there is a large conversation about the purpose of "happy endings" to children and their development.

²³ The "It Gets Better" campaign was created by Dan Savage and his partner through a YouTube video trying to give young queer teens hope for a better adult future. The goal of the campaign is to "show young LGBT people the levels of happiness, potential, and positivity their lives will reach – if they can just get through their teen years. The It Gets Better Project wants to remind teenagers in the LGBT community that they are not alone — and it WILL get better" (itgetsbetter.org). I argue that the campaign does not take into account the intersectionalities of race and sexuality and that the characters of Trini and Tony challenge who it can get better for.

Gonzalez's novel presents the realities of constructing a queer Latino identity by creating Trini's character. Trini is one of the few, if not only, transgender characters in Latina/o Children's and Young Adult Literature and her character continues to be pivotal since many stories like hers remain marginalized, silenced, or unacknowledged²⁴.

Her presence transcends the page in a very productive manner that has a lasting impact on her readers and, more broadly, adds to an archive of queer Latino youth cultural productions. Trini is unapologetic, fierce, wears loud, and is proud. At the end of the novel, it is Trini that seems to be the most confident and clear about her identity. Her dress, ornamentation, and presence have allowed her to construct an identity that challenges her current heteronormative community while also creating a political identity that can speak to future generations of GLBT youth of color. Although her character's plot line is not as central as the series progresses Trini remains the character on whose back the other queer characters can learn, exist, and heal. Trini's constant clash of realities serves to open up opportunities for the queer youth around her. Because Trini is the only transgender character in the series she feels the brunt of the violence more often than those around her; still, her resilience in the face of several clashes with reality reveals the many ways can survive and can access *conocimiento*.

²⁴ There is a large archive concerning Queer Children's and Young Adult Literature but very little that focuses primarily on Latino youth experiences. See Abate, Michelle Ann & Kenneth Kidd. Eds. *Over the Rainbow: Queer Children's and Young Adult Literature*. Michigan: University of Michigan Press, 2011. Print.

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Conclusion

While “Conocimiento Narratives: Challenging Oppressive Epistemologies through Healing in Latina/o Children’s and Young Adult Literature” creates conversations about the significant relationship between healing, by way of *conocimiento*, and Latina/o children’s and young adult literature, there is still much research to be done in this field and on the topic. In contemplating future directions for this project I am interested in addressing the ways that young protagonists’ *conocimiento* process is oftentimes at odds with their parents’. This tension comes up in Pam Muñoz-Ryan’s *Becoming Naomi León* between Naomi and Skyla wherein Skyla’s search for her own identity complicates her role as a mother and as a result hurts Naomi. My analysis in Chapter 2 pays particular attention to this conflict by addressing heteronormative father/son relationships; however, I was unable to find a primary source that depicted both father and son accessing *conocimiento* (that did not also marginalize the mother’s own *conocimiento*). This conflict is most apparent in the relationships between the parents and the queer and transgender characters I analyze. Aristotle and his father, in Benjamin Alire Saénz *Aristotle and Dante Discover the Secrets of the Universe*, are probably the relationship that comes the closest to having both adult and child reach *conocimiento*. Furthermore, I am interested in addressing the connection between *conocimiento* and disabilities. Books like David Hernandez’s *Suckerpunch* (2007), Benjamin Alire Saénz’s *Last Night I Sang to the Monster* (2012), and Cindy L. Rodríguez’s *When Reason Breaks* (2015), for example, highlight the ways that depression, addiction, and suicide affect Latino youth. In these novels, the protagonists

need to find ways to transform the oppressions that surround them and to deal with their mental illnesses. In this way, notions of *conocimiento* need to be expanded to include how Latino children and young adults approach their mental and physical disabilities. Finally, I am also interested in the new directions that science fiction and fantasy are taking Latina/o children's and young adult literature. New technologies like memory erasing machines as seen in Adam Silvera's *More Happy than Not* (2015) and access to new magical powers like shadowshaping as represented in Daniel José Older *Shadowshaper* (2015) push *conocimiento* to new limits where healing can be achieved via machines and through magic. Science fiction and fantasy texts further allow me to contemplate *conocimiento* narratives outside of realist fiction.

Furthermore, I recognize that by choosing to focus on healing in realist fiction with Latina/o characters written by Latina/o authors I have created a very specific niche within Latina/o children's and young adult literature that I refer to as "*conocimiento* narratives." Because there is not yet a complete monograph that historicizes or contextualizes or even characterizes this genre I had to define Latina/o children's and young adult literature in my own terms. This is not to say that *conocimiento* narratives cannot be found outside of these parameters. However, it is important to me that I highlight the voices of Latino authors and their Latino characters. While there are several texts written by non-Latinos that feature Latino characters or texts written by Latino authors with non-descript characters, I am more invested in addressing the histories of oppression that continue to plague the existence of Latino children today than I am in contextualizing these experiences within post-racial conversations on diversity and

multiculturalism. In other words, the specificities of Latina/o experiences are significant and deserve to be centered.

For example, in researching queer Latino young adult novels for chapter 3 I was intent in also including Latina lesbian experiences. I came across Mayra Lazara Dole's *Down to the Bone* (2008) about a young light-skinned Cuban American lesbian and E.E. Charlton-Trujillo's *Fat Angie* (2013) about an outcast known as "Fat Angie" who attempted suicide in front of her entire school. However, because I could not find any cultural descriptors that marked Angie as a Latina character I decided to not include the novel and so as to not tack on Latina lesbian experiences via *Down to the Bone* I decided to not include that text either. I could have dangerously assumed that because *Fat Angie* was written by an author of Latino descent that the main character was also Latina. I could have read Angie's struggle with depression, her sister's death in the war in Iraq, her parents' absence and absentmindedness, and her lesbian relationship with KC Romance through a lens that includes race and ethnicity. However, I would be inscribing race where there was intended to be none. Rhetoric around diversity and multiculturalism in children's literature often leans toward the necessity to remove a character's race or ethnicity in order to reach a broader audience or leans to the idea that a character's race or ethnicity should not be central to the character's identity. While this approach to diversity is meant to push readers to think outside of race and place them in a more multicultural framework—i.e., Angie's race should not matter but instead readers should focus on the myriad, and more relatable, traumas that impact her existence—I would argue that it instead supports that non-descript characters are always read a white.

Furthermore, I was more convinced that Angie's character could be read as white when I saw the book trailer that depicted Angie as having blonde hair and blue-eyes. That is not to say that she could not be a Latina character because of her hair and eye color.

However, in the end, I decided that *Fat Angie* did not fit within all the parameters with which I attempted to write.

Throughout my dissertation I have also made it a point to connect the literature I analyze to stories about real Latino children and young adults. As I mentioned in my introduction, I am invested in finding ways to keep Latina/o children alive. My personal experiences and academic learning have made me aware of the precariousness of the lives of Latina/o children and young adults in the United State. I have tried to make it clear in my dissertation that books like the ones I read in each chapter have the potential to transform the lives of these children. As Walter Dean Myers explains in his opinion piece, "Where Are the People of Color in Children's Literature?," simply feeling represented at all can make a world of difference to a child who learns from a very young age by the society around her or him that they do not belong. One of the ways that I have been able to bridge my academic scholarship on this genre to the audience for whom this literature is written has been through my teaching. Throughout the course of this dissertation project I had the opportunity to teach at the City of Riverside's Youth Opportunity Center where I engaged weekly with young adults about their experiences with various oppressions including racism, sexism, classism, and homophobia. I do not pretend that the brief time I taught at the center saved anyone's life; however, my classroom was always a safe space where young adults at any reading and writing level

could hear stories about people like them and communities like theirs and learn to share their own stories. Because allowing children and young adults of color to find their own voices and to learn ways to challenge existing oppressive knowledges can save their lives. Conocimiento narratives alone will not end the real violence that Latino children experience on a daily basis but they can provide understanding and paths toward healing.

Lastly, I focused on realist fiction that dealt with violences experienced due to immigration, racism, homophobia, transphobia, sexism, and the like because these are the very violences that continue to threaten Latino children's lives today. I am well aware that these are not the experiences of all Latino children in this country and I do not intend for my analysis of these stories to universalize those experiences. However, it is also not my purpose to define conocimiento narratives by their proximity to violent experiences. In other words, conocimiento narratives do not always depict violent or traumatic moments. For example, I would read Jorge Argueta's illustrated text *Moony Luna/ Luna, Lunita Lunera* (2005), the story of five-year-old Luna and her fear that there will be monsters at her new school, as a conocimiento narrative. Throughout the novel, Luna participates in a process, with the help of both her parents, to understand that she will be safe at school because there are no monsters there. Through conocimiento, Luna's *arrebato* is having to attend school for the first time because that moment changes what she previously understood about her life before she was a student. Luna also enters the Coatlicue state of despair when her fear gets the best of her and refuses to get dressed for school. However, Luna's call to action comes when her parents reassure her that she will be fine because they love her. By the end of the story, Luna decides to enter her new

classroom and find that there are no monsters but instead many children she can befriend. In doing so, Luna has shifted her reality and found healing in knowing that there are no scary monsters at school. I provide this brief reading of Argueta's text to highlight that *conocimiento* narratives are not about the violence but about the ways that *conocimiento* can challenge existing ways of knowing and create new knowledges that allow Latino children and young adults to participate in a healing process meant to transform them and the world around them. In this way, *conocimiento* narratives center on the lives of Latino children because their lives are important.

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