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Lengua Latina: Representations of Sex and Gender in Latina Literature

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**Lengua Latina:
Representations of Sex and Gender in Latina
Literature**

*A Project Submitted in Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree of
Master of Liberal Studies*

*by
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July 2016*

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Table of Contents

Introduction: Analyzing Language Barriers in Sex and Gender 3

I: The Horrors of Being a “Real” Woman in *The Skin I Live In* 14

**II: Woman Versus Woman: Examining the Dichotomy
of La Virgen de Guadalupe and La Malinche** 36

III: Comadres and Hermanas: Relationships within Sisterhoods 59

Parting Words: An Epilogue 81

Bibliography: 87

Introduction:

Analyzing Language Barriers in Sex and Gender

I think the main question that arises and often circulates in my mind is: “why would a *gringa* choose to write a thesis on sexuality and gender in Latina literature?” The question certainly is valid for one apparent reason: I’m not Latina. This project did not develop through any one avenue but begins with an understanding that I have lived in Florida for the entirety of my life.¹ Florida has grown and changed in various ways, some I would have never expected and while others would make sense over the course of time. One such expectation comes through diversification of Orlando, incidentally where I was born and raised. Orlando is a location where the Latina/o population continues to grow since it is geographically close to Cuba, Puerto Rico and the Dominican Republic. Experiencing and seeing this evolution with my own two eyes became inspiring and led me to push my boundaries beyond the dated writings of Shakespeare, Dickens or Austen, into a modern realm that yearns to be studied and appreciated further.

Looking to Latina Writers

Throughout researching this project I found I wanted to explore language, not Spanish-language per se, but the words used to describe gender and sexuality in Latina literature. Throughout this journey, I’ve come to rely on a small network of Latina writers to guide the way. At the helm stand, Gloria Anzaldua and Sandra Cisneros, accompanying authors include Julia Alvarez, Ana Castillo, and Judith Ortiz Cofer. Each of these women speaks of their relationship with heritage, familia, sexuality, and gender in ways that connect with their homeland or divide them from the outside world.

¹ I’m thirty years old at the time of writing this.

Chicana writer Gloria Anzaldua is a continuous inspiration; her writing became a tool in deciphering the given literature in each chapter. Anzaldua's theories on language and creativity served to understand Latinas in varying ways, for instance, her discussion on Coyolxaugqui: "Ultimately, with this story, as with all creative work, you, like all artists, want to alter, however slightly, the way you look at the world. You want to change the reader's sense of what the world is like. You want to make a difference, if only for one other person" (95). The ability to be creative with writing guided the process in deciding which works to put together, while negotiating the message conveyed. Anzaldua's words also ring true in the importance of creativity and making a difference in society. One way to help others develops through learning about other cultures and using creative methods to convey that message. Writing/reading novels and poetry, making/watching films are ways of creating and getting a message out there. Ultimately, this would become my tool to examine Latinas sex and gender through different lenses and to play with the focus in new and exciting ways, while hopefully changing someone's perception in the end.

Another way of analyzing language came through Chicana writer Sandra Cisneros. Cisneros became a guiding force at the beginning of the project through her book of poetry *Loose Women* and continued with her memoir *A House of My Own*. In one of the passages entitled "Marguerite Duras," Cisneros discusses the effect *The Lover* had on her: "I had read the novel in Spanish, the language of my lover, the language of my father. And now the last sentence, in Spanish, reverberated inside me like a live thing. I wanted to slide the dusty bus windows down and shout in that language to all the savage beauty of the world—'He said he would love her until death, did you hear? *Hasta la*

muerte!” (55). The powerful connection Cisneros feels toward Duras’ work is akin to what I felt when reading *Loose Women* and speaks to the power language holds and its positive lasting effects. The ability to discuss and analyze the wordage, not to mention the use of Spanish language, adds another layer of enjoyment while discovering what makes these words have a lasting effect.

I encountered Julia Alvarez’s novel *How the Garcia Girls Lost Their Accents* years ago while working on my undergraduate degree and quickly began appreciating her work. Alvarez’s vibrant and honest depiction of immigrant life in her novels, poetry and memoir serve to define the struggles that come with leaving your family and past in another country. In her poem “In Spanish,” Alvarez discusses the complexities of being bilingual: “Sometimes it touches me more when I hear/ a phrase in Spanish rather than English (lines 1-2). I think Alvarez’s ability to effect her reader with the difficulty that often comes with being bilingual shows how your brain not only lives in two languages but within two worlds. Later in the poem she brings up the guilt she feels while writing in her second tongue, English: “It’s puzzling then that I write in English,/ as if I have to step back from myself/ to be able to say what I’m feeling” (lines 21-3). Alvarez admits that English is not what she feels, but uses it as a tool of expression. Finally, she ends the poem with Spanish words as a way of embracing her Latina heritage and giving into her native tongue: “Que escribo lo que siento de verdad” (line 30). Each of these lines serves as an example of what it means to live in two different worlds, to have two languages and juggle both on a continuous basis.

Ana Castillo is a writer I was not aware of until the start of this project. I was excited and eager to delve into her essays in *Massacre of the Dreamers* and her novel *The*

Mixquiahuala Letters, and her honesty and insightful opinions were refreshing. In her essay “Toward the Mother-Bond Principle,” Castillo discusses the positive changing view of the body by Chicana women and the embracing of who they are: “Currently older and younger women are learning about, caring for, and regarding their bodies in such an ancient way it seems radically new. We are learning to accept ourselves: our Nahua straight black hair, our Olmec lips, our Mongoloid skin color and fold in the eyes, Nayarit protruding tummies, and our Chichimec bottoms” (194). I think her statement goes along with the stereotypes and body challenges discussed in chapter one and two, while also exploring the need for discussion among women in comadre relationships or sisterhoods as a way of feeling body-positive and accepting the heritage of Latina women.

Last but certainly not least is Judith Ortiz Cofer’s collection *The Latin Deli: Telling the Lives of Barrio Women*. Cofer is another author I picked up when taking a Women’s literature course during my Bachelor’s degree and she has stuck with me. Her chapter “5:00 A.M.: Writing as Ritual” spoke to me not only as a writer but the various ways in which women must be practical about their writing. In the essay Cofer expresses the realization of her love for writing: “There was something missing in my life that I came close to only when I turned to writing, when I took a break from my thesis research to write a poem or an idea for a story on the flip side of an index card” (166). I can certainly identify with her statement, not only as a woman working on her thesis but in the love and fulfillment that comes with writing and satisfying the desire to write those ideas down. After completing her thesis, Ortiz would “discover” that she “needed to write” (166). The need that comes with writing a poem or “an idea for a story” becomes a necessity, a way of exploring creativity and imagination as Anzaldua describes above.

Language unravels once the words have been written down, and the stories reveal themselves to the reader.

In reading these women, the heightened importance of Latina/o issues in the news resonated with me based on the changes I was noticing within Florida and the growing diversification of population. Between the debt-crisis in Puerto Rico,² the lifting of Cuba's embargo,³ the Olympics taking place in Rio,⁴ not to mention the topic of the Mexican border,⁵ and building a wall. Each event showed how prevalent these issues continue to be as they stay cycling through the news. These questions speak to the politics often involved with sex and gender issues, while dealing with debt, immigration or daily responsibilities and how they affect Latina/os. These issues are a key into comprehending how Latinas and society view femininity, sexuality and the ways gender plays a role in their lives. Understanding the politics of what occurs in Latin America not

²Backiel discusses how the country came to be under America's rule and how it has been a hindrance rather than assisting the country: "Puerto Rico had great strategic value for the United States. After 1961, this was reinforced by its propaganda value as a showcase for the benefits of capitalism to a Latin America charmed by the Cuban revolution. So the United States promoted investment, although at terms favorable to those with capital and outside of Puerto Rico (14).

³ Karl Vicks raises the point that Cubans are excited for these changes to take place, however, reservations remain based on what these changes mean for the future: "For Cubans, the U.S. rapprochement clearly raises hope in a very material sense. 'Let them bring stuff so we can have stuff' is how Díaz puts it, drinking his beer. But the same opening makes visitors nostalgic in advance, launching into paeans to Old Havana that sound like eulogies" (34).

⁴ Writer Merritt Kennedy lists the other issues Rio faces during the Olympics: "The financial emergency is just the latest crisis to hit Brazil. The country's president is facing impeachment proceedings and the country is in the middle of an economic recession. A security crisis and the Zika virus have also rattled Brazil" (Kennedy).

⁵ Mexicans were seen as a positive concerning immigration since they benefitted agriculture: "in part because of the agricultural lobby: farmers in the U.S. Southwest argued that without Mexican migrants, they would be unable to find the laborers needed to sow and harvest their crops." (Steinhauer). In some aspects this still remains true as Mexicans continue to be a large part of the agricultural business, however, they are often negatively seen as "stealing" jobs.

only leads to a greater knowledge of the history of the women living in these countries but also impacts Latinas role in the future.

The Debate of *Latina/o* vs. *Hispanic*

Other ways to decipher language come in the discussion over the use of “Latino” or “Hispanic” as a way of categorizing Spanish speakers. Throughout my reading, it became apparent how contentious this subject can be. One reason for disagreement in terms comes from the notion that they are interchangeable:

The use of the terms Hispanic or Latina/o is problematic not simply because of the immense differences they obscure but also because there is no common agreement by scholars or activists as to what the unifying thread among the groups really is or should be. (Ascencio 3)

I realized early on there would not be an easy answer and ultimately with each reading, a different answer would appear. Some Spanish-heritage people categorize as Latina/o, while many take issue with Hispanic, and other individuals do not consider either classification for varying reasons.⁶

Each scholar or author has his or her notions of each term, though consensus defines the terms based on location. Gender and Latina scholar Juana Maria Rodriguez, further describes Latina based on geography, stating: “The most common response to the question ‘Who is Latina?’ relies on a geographic reference. Contemporary maps of Latin America begin with Mexico and end with the islands at the tip of Chile, with the Antilles cradled between the land masses of the north and south” (10). I think Rodriguez brings up

⁶ Consider individuals who do not speak Spanish, but are Latino by birth, they or other might not view them as Latino or Hispanic. Others might consider themselves “white” or “white/Hispanic” as anyone who has filled out an application, census, or survey can attest.

a valid point in understanding Latina/Hispanic regarding location, although she forgets to include Cuba, Puerto Rico, and the Dominican Republic in her definition. Though the islands are not technically a part of South America, it remains important, as a way of, broadening the understanding of Latinas and developing a clearer picture⁷ when understanding sex and gender.

Finally, illustrator and blogger Terry Blas builds on the construction of Rodriguez's definition in his comic, explaining how he came to realize the difference between *Latino* and *Hispanic*. Blas describes how his Mexican-American heritage led him to find an answer: "I feel like in my case, with my dad being from the U.S. and my mom being from Mexico, the terms apply to me. **I'm Latino** because of where my mother is from and **I'm Hispanic** because that country is somewhere where **Spanish** is spoken primarily" (Blas). Blas' explanation comes from a particular location and whether Spanish is the first language, thereby giving further depth to the terms.⁸ For these reasons, I will refer to women as Latina, when talking about women of Latin American descent, while referring to female characters as Hispanic when the case fits (such as *The Skin I Live In*). The difference between Latina/o and Hispanic is merely one example of how wordage and language come into play when analyzing race, sex, and gender.

⁷ Rodriguez goes on to discuss the differences between tribal members and Latina/os who would ultimately be known as Chicana: "What about the Indigenous tribes of the southwestern United States? Many tribal members (including those with Spanish surnames) reject a Chicano identity in favor of a Native one" (10).

⁸ Blas also goes on to further define Rodriguez's definition of Latino when incorporating Caribbean nations: "Latino means: from Latin America. Latin America refers mostly to everything below the United States of America, including the Caribbean. Hispanic means: from a country whose primary language is Spanish. But not every country in Latin America speaks Spanish primarily" (Blas).

Breaking Down Language

In this project, I look to define ways language is influenced by gender, sex/sexuality, and sisterhood through different forms of Latina/o literature. Doing so, I think allows for new perspectives as I described above, while melding various pieces of literature and media one might not expect together. Thereby, a new and exciting picture is developed showing the complex ways Latina women deal with life, family, and love.

In the first chapter, “The Horrors of Being a “Real” Woman in *The Skin I Live In*,” I examine Spanish director Pedro Almodovar’s film; beside Chicana playwright Josefina Lopez's *Real Women Have Curves*. Both show a way to understand the female characters view of their bodies and how society impacts those ideas. Gloria Anzaldua’s *Borderlands/La Frontera* acts as a tool for exploring conceptions of “Other” and the ways in which these issues intersect with one another. Language becomes a way of deciphering these messages giving content and meaning to the words used in Latina sex and gender, while also discovering what lies in the outer realms.

The Skin I Live In deals with the terror Vicente faces, as he is forcibly molded into Vera. Ultimately, they face the difficulty of deciphering gender/sex and the lengths Vera is forced to go through to evade her captor. The body, sexuality, and gender intersect in varying ways to form Latina dynamics, showing Vicente’s mental and physical metamorphosis into Vera. Throughout the film, Almodovar is asking what qualities make a woman real? *Real Women Have Curves* also deals with Latinas and their relationship with the body. Ana must come to terms with her curves in order to deal with society’s notion of “real.” Discussions of body, weight, and desire for food connect with conversations of race, ethnicity, and language.

Testing boundaries and living outside the realm of normal pushes the female characters in these stories as they deal with accepting their body. The topic and the questions asked in the film and play, are similar in nature to Anzaldua's work *Borderlands*, both as a way of discussing women's relationship with body and homeland. Each of the women's sexuality and gender identity coincides with the body while serving as an inspiration as they deal with the terrifying nature of their sexuality and gender, bringing truth to the hardships that women endure. Language develops through the conversation of gender and sex, with words and concepts acting as the building blocks.

In "Woman Versus Woman: Examining Sexuality and Gender in the Dichotomy of La Virgen de Guadalupe and La Malinche," I discuss how La Virgen and La Malinche dichotomy becomes a stereotype in television, movies, and Latina literature. The stereotype works as a way of generalizing Latinas either to materialize as the Virgen de Guadalupe or Malinche, a woman who aided Cortes. Since the stereotype has become so reinforced within the culture, reevaluating makes the crossing of boundaries difficult. Therefore, language is the ultimate tool in destroying stereotypes for Latinas.

In this chapter, I look at two poems, in particular, Chicana writer Sandra Cisneros' "You Bring Out the Mexican in Me" and Puerto Rican author Judith Ortiz Cofer's "Vida." The poems represent the passionate sexuality and virginal tropes, while further examination shows how the poems can depict women in realistic terms. In Cisneros' poem, the narrator discusses desire and passion for the unnamed lover, while using Mexican heritage as a way of expressing what she feels for her partner, using Spanish language becomes a way of putting these feelings into words. Cofer's poem "Vida" depicts the ways Catholicism becomes a representative for Latina/o norms and

how religion impacts sexuality and gender. Cofer uses sexuality as a way of showing the narrator's devotion to her lover. The question becomes, "Are these characters part of the Malinche/Virgen dichotomy?"

In "Comadres and Hermanas: Relationships with Sisterhoods" I discuss how sisterly bonds become significant outside of the intimacy of a romantic relationship. The nurture and love found among women in sisterhoods, whether they are biological families or connections made outside the home prove to be powerful as a way for Latinas to deal with their home, sexuality, and gender. Language, therefore, marks an important tool within sisterhoods as a way of connecting sexuality, femininity, and building familia in Latina culture.

In this chapter, I examine the sisterly bonds in two novels, the first being *How the Garcia Girls Lost Their Accents*. Julia Alvarez's novel shows how the Garcia Girls' parents refer to their daughters as "the four girls" impacts the way they and those around them see themselves as an amalgamation, signifying the deep bond they have developed. Alongside is Cristina Garcia's *Dreaming in Cuban*, an example of the broken sisterhoods brought on by new homes and different views in lifestyle. Lourdes and Felicia's sisterhood is broken and lost based on sexuality and misconceptions. Both novels show the various ways sisterhoods are dealt with and the lasting impact it has on these female characters, whether they are living in the Dominican Republic, Cuba or the United States. In "Comadres and Hermanas," I look to examine the ways Latinas become known as "Other," and how it influences the sexual choices Latinas make.

I'm not going to pretend that I fully understand Latina women and their plight since I'm a *gringa*, and even as I write this plenty of research has managed to go

untapped. For instance, I have mainly stayed away from Latino writings as a way of sticking to Latina narratives and their contemplations and feelings about sex, gender, and race. This project is merely the tip of the iceberg in regards to examining the intimate relationships Latinas hold based on their sexuality and gender, which brings up the central ideas that need considering as a way to adapt and change in the future. This text looks to explore a particular and finite community with the hope of making a difference while realizing the need to go back.

I: The Horrors of Being a “Real” Woman in *The Skin I Live In*

Spanish director Pedro Almodovar’s *The Skin I Live In* is apt to be labeled a “scary, sexy and terrifically twisted horror film” as critic Peter Travers describes in *Rolling Stone Magazine*. Throughout this chapter, I will examine the ways in which *Skin* realistically portrays fear for its female characters, namely its protagonist Vera. The film accomplishes intensity in a few interesting ways such as, the horror that comes from the patriarchal world and the effect it casts on inhabiting a female body, forcibly becoming a woman and all the terror that comes with it. I will discuss the difficulty of deciphering gender/sex/body and the lengths a woman must go through to wade the waters of misogyny regarding gaze. Analyzing the intersections of body, sexuality and gender and the ways in which they cross to form Latina dynamics could lead to a further understanding of what would drive a Latina to reclaim her voice.

As a way of delving into these deeper intersections, I will use Chicana playwright Josefina Lopez's *Real Women Have Curves* as a tool in examining the issues the female characters hold with their bodies and their assumptions of how society thinks they should appear. Alongside Lopez’s play I look to Chicana writer and feminist theorist Gloria Anzaldua’s *Borderlands/La Frontera* as a device for feminist theory and as a way of delving into conceptions of “Other.”⁹ Ultimately, language is an important tool in deciding how the words sex and gender intersect with body and Latina, as an opportunity to comprehend the ambiguities that lay in the outer realms.

⁹ I will also be looking to other Latina/o writers; scholars in the fields of feminism, sociology, and Latina/o history; along with bloggers and other first hand accounts to inform this chapter.

The question becomes why a Spanish film when discussing Latina literature? Because Almodovar has shown a fondness for telling women-centric stories,¹⁰ where women test boundaries and live outside the norm. Though *Skin* is “Hispanic,” based on location (the film takes place in Spain), the story and the questions raised are similar to those Anzaldua and Lopez, discuss in their writing on women’s relationship with their bodies and their homeland Mexico. Latina/o diaspora¹¹ plays a part in this movement from Spain¹² and Latin America as a way of relating and getting back to a family. The need to leave Latin America or Mexico plays a large part in sexuality and gender identity (or because of) which can play a role in body issues as Lopez, Anzaldua, and the character Vera show; proving to be inspiring and at times terrifying, while bringing truth to the hardships that women endure. The conversation over gender and sex comes down to wording and the concepts built on the development of those words.

The words we as a society opt to use become important when deciphering messages of how a Latina (read: body) should appear. Writer, Gloria Anzaldua explains the complexities that unfold based on differing cultures, such as the ones she faces when using Spanish and Chicana languages:

¹⁰ Films such as: *Julieta*, *Broken Embraces*, *Volver* and *All About my Mother* to name a few.

¹¹ In regards to Latina/o Diaspora sociologist Ruben Hernandez-Leon states: "We call this phenomenon a diaspora not only because people are moving from the Southwest, but also because people are joining that flow from Latin America, mainly women and children. These destinations are becoming sites for family reunification" (Yeomen).

¹² Diaspora has been a driving issue for natives and emigrants in Spain beginning after the 2008 recession: “Native-born Spaniards tend to emigrate to traditional countries of destination and, to a lesser extent, to emerging economies or faster-growing middle-income countries. The most popular destinations for the native born are the United Kingdom, France, the United States, Germany, and Switzerland” (Arango 5).

For a people who are neither Spanish nor live in a country in which Spanish is the first language; for a people who live in a country in which English is the reigning tongue but who are not Anglo; for a people who cannot entirely identify with either standard (formal, Castilian) Spanish nor standard English, what recourse is left to them but to create their own language?" (77)¹³

Vera/Vicente too must create a new language and a different way of interpreting words based on the surgeries that occurred to his/her body; much in the same way Anzaldua's words intersect between her Chicana heritage and the reality of living in Texas with English speakers.

There are some similarities in Vera's intersections with ethnicity, not being Anglo or Latin American, but still Spanish; thereby setting her apart even within the majority. Gender scholar Juana Maria Rodriguez further explains her interpretation on the intricacies of language: "Subjects are continually involved in negotiating the accumulated narratives of identity that circulate within these localized 'horizons of meanings' and the contradiction revealed within their articulations" (7). Deciphering language is not an easy

¹³ When discussing creating of language: "These texts often inhabit English to establish a relationship between inside and outside, dominant and subaltern, familiar and alien, marking English with Spanish and sometimes indigenous Caribbean or African concepts, phrasing, and rhythms. In terms of coloniality, the language most ostensibly represented is that of the colonizer of the colonizer—the Anglo colonizers of the Hispanics who colonized the Amerindians and the Africans. The majority of the Anglographic texts I examine by their very nature raise the question of whether it is possible to write resistantly in English, the language of the colonizer of the colonizers. If so, how and to what effect" (DeGuzman 70).

feat;¹⁴ neither is gender or the body. As this chapter shows these subjects are not black and white, plenty of gray areas lay within the spectrum and horizons, while often language can be “borrowed and flawed” (Rodriguez 2) the point becomes to try and make sense of them.

Almodovar’s film is remarkable in the way it challenges norms of sexuality, specifically asking what makes a woman a woman? What is the fundamental difference between gender and sexuality? Does Vera’s horrific sex change make her a woman or does she teeter the spectrum between male and female because she was not born a woman? Should Vicente/Vera be classified as transgender since Robert makes the choice for Vicente, rather than it being Vicente’s choice? These questions come down to wording and the muddy definitions that often fail.¹⁵¹⁶ As sex and gender intersect with race, ethnicity, and culture, the answer may not be so easy to come by as Anzaldua points out in her discussion of the multiple languages she has learned through the years based on the place and community she inhabits.

In what ways do these questions become important in the viewers understanding of whom Vicente/Vera is at the end of the film? In this chapter, I will refer to Vicente/Vera as he, she or they depending on the context of Vicente's life before his

¹⁴ For example, Texas can identify with this problem as the Texas Republican Party accidentally said, “homosexual behavior ‘has been ordained by God in the Bible’” (NPR), in the 2016 party platform.

¹⁵ What does it mean to be a woman: “If one ‘is’ a woman, that is surely not all one is; the term fails to be exhaustive, not because a pregendered ‘person’ transcends the specific paraphernalia of its gender, but because gender is not always constituted coherently or consistently in different historic contexts, and because gender intersects with racial, class, ethnic, sexual, and regional modalities of discursively constituted identities” (Butler 278).

¹⁶ Further comments on what woman and man mean: “To be a man or a woman was to hold a social rank, a place in society, to assume a cultural role, not to be organically one or the other of two incommensurable sexes. Sex before the seventeenth century, in other words, was still a sociological and not an ontological category” (LaQueur 8).

abduction, Vera if she self-identifies as such, or the combination when gender is left ambiguous. The distinction between sex and gender and the pronouns used remain relevant, as gender and women's studies scholar, Juana Maria Rodriguez points out: "Subjects mobilize identities and are in turn mobilized by those identity constructions" (6). In other words, gender is a fluid construct that can be influenced by the individual or society, while a person's sex *may*¹⁷ be mapped out at birth;¹⁸ gender identity can be "mobile." Therefore, the choice of pronouns will reflect who Vicente or Vera is in that particular moment.

Beyond the discussion of sex, lies a question for gender and whether Vicente should be considered transgender? Humanities and Philosophy scholar Maria Ochoa discusses one way of defining the term: "'trans' is a category that encompasses many terms used to describe living, dressing, or identifying—or some or all of these—as a member of a gender with which a person was not assigned at birth" (230). Since Vera was not assigned the female gender when she was born, she could be considered trans under Ochoa's definition, but much of the film points out gender is not easily pinned down. Theories on sex and gender can be quite complex in their conceptions, therefore leaving plenty of gray areas to examine. As I analyze theory and other literature I hope to deepen the fictional world of *Skin* and show the complex nature of the issue at hand.

¹⁷ Look to a discussion of hermaphrodites and sex.

¹⁸ Mobility means looking at a spectrum in gender, rather than the finite choices offered from sex: "Researchers should make note of all gender categories that exist in a given social formation and avoid the tendency to see gender as a binary system anchored to the categories 'men' and 'women'" (Ochoa 241).

Sex and Gender Confines

The Skin I Live In zeroes in on the desires people have and their elaborate attempts to fulfill them. The wanton desire to be something else shows in nearly all of the characters: Zeca wears the tiger costume, Marilia wants to be a mother to Robert (though not Zeca), Robert longs to once again be the husband/lover he once was before his wife's accident and death, while Vicente/Vera desires to escape imprisonment and to return home. Part of the horror of the movie comes from the depths these characters will go through to obtain their heart's desire, specifically the price female's pay, with Vera having the most to lose.

The notion that these actions quietly occur between Robert and Vicente/Vera, take a significant amount of time and remain intrusive is truly horrifying; for instance, Vicente's transformation into Vera takes six years. Literature and Film Scholar Xavier Aldana Reyes points out the horror of reality: "the film is a direct descendant of timely discourses surrounding beauty and the commodification of bodies in Western societies; woman is seen here as a direct victim of male desire and its concomitant culture" (820). The clinical setting and Vicente's at times, lackadaisical attitude, though one could argue he has no choice towards his transformation; make Almodovar's vision all the more horrific as Vicente is left to deal with the "commodification his body" is undergoing. The violence in the film (i.e. Vicente's surgeries, rape, murder) is subdued, while remaining alarming for the viewer both subconsciously and visually in their quietly unassuming and hidden muted tones as Robert tries to appear loving and caring. Vicente/Vera are "victims of Robert's desire" as he confidently takes Vicente's masculinity. All the while, Vera is left to remain submissive under the male gaze.

The question that continues to establish itself becomes, “what does it mean for Vicente to inhabit Vera or how does a man live in a woman’s body?” Part of inhabiting a body means performing, something each of the characters does in a particular way; however, it appears that women are worse off, with Vera being the most extreme case. Donna Haraway comments on the effect and power of gaze: “Vision is *always* a question of the power to see—and perhaps of the violence implicit in our visualizing practices. With whose blood were my eyes crafted” (90). Vera is meant to perform at all times as she is continuously watched or monitored by Robert¹⁹ to prevent her from leaving the mansion. Therefore “vision” plays a large part in Vera’s life in the mansion with Robert even going so far as to sedate Vera with opium to keep her quiet and subdued. Vera’s greatest performance though comes with her supposed bond with Robert and the idea that she loves him, even while he is holding her hostage and performing violent surgical acts on her. The “violence” is Vera’s eyes are “crafted” from Vicente’s eyes while metamorphosed from Robert’s hand.

The ability to perform for Robert is an important role for Vera as she works to maintain a status quo. In “Salma Hayek’s *Frida*: Transnational Latina Bodies in Popular Culture,” Isabel Molina-Guzman, a scholar in various fields of Latina film and gender studies; discusses the Latina body and how Salma Hayek was able to make Frida Kahlo come to life through performing ethnicity. In the essay, Guzman discusses Hayek’s ability to stay within the space of ethnicity: “Latin American hybridity is best characterized as liminality, as the border space where stabilized homogenous notions of

¹⁹ Further discussion of vision and the power of “eyes”: “The ‘eyes’ made available in modern technological sciences shatter any idea of passive vision; these prosthetic devices show us that all eyes, including our own organic ones, are active perceptual systems, building in translations and specific *ways* of seeing, that is, ways of life” (Haraway 88).

identity and culture are decentered and negotiated” (124). Portraying “Hispanic” woman becomes a matter of walking a fine line, something Vera is learning all too well as she is forced into performing the act of love with Robert in an attempt to escape his captivity. Inhabiting the femininity of Vera becomes a coping mechanism for Vicente as a way of giving Robert what he so desires as a way to a greater goal, whether that means Vicente returns to his old life or forms a new one. For the time being it remains one of negotiation regarding satisfying male desires and societal beauty until Vicente/Vera gains agency.

The ability to inhabit another identity continues to be of great importance for Almodovar especially considering how much effort and time Robert puts into changing Vicente to Vera. First, I would like to list the steps needed for Vicente’s transition into Vera: kidnapping, starving, isolating, shaving his beard, removing genitalia and performing of vaginoplasty, using dilators (as a way of later having sex with Vera), creating breasts, wearing a body stocking. All this time and effort are needed to turn Vicente physically into Vera, which does not even include the steps required for performing the feminine acts. In order to truly be seen as a feminine woman, Vera must begin wearing dresses, makeup, and high heels (“to practice in”) all in an effort to appease “the male gaze.”

The transformation ends up taking Robert six years to complete, which shows his level of commitment to revenge towards Vicente and the desire to have his wife back. One way to put Vicente’s sex change in perspective is a real world example, the best one being Olympian and reality television celebrity Bruce Jenner’s choice to physically be a woman, becoming Caitlyn. While Caitlyn ultimately chose to become female the fictional character, Vera has no choice and is subjected to these actions against her will.

The film shows the level of work and maintenance required to fulfill Robert's (read: men's) desires. The time put into the transformation also exhibits the need to "be" feminine according to society, as Reyes states: "Firstly, it points to the horror endemic to the ordeal of now routine cosmetic operations, and, secondly, it intimates that under Ledgard's tyrannical rule of gender representation, Vicente's identity as woman can only be formed once the surgeon decides he looks like one" (822). It is Robert that will ultimately name Vicente as Vera, establishing not only the time and effort he put into the transformation but also the ways in which Vera is now indeed a woman based on patriarchal societies' view of her finally being prepared. In this final act, Vera has been morphed and molded into what Robert has so chosen her to be.

One way to define the transformation that has taken place comes from Anzaldúa. She describes Vera's metamorphosis in terms of "los atravesados:" "Los atravesados live here: the squint-eyed, the perverse, the queer, the troublesome, the mongrel, the mulato, the half-breed, the half-dead; in short, those who cross over, pass over, or go through the confines of the 'normal'" (25). "Los atravesados" is a way for Vera to journey to normality with the ability to be accepted beyond "Other." It will ultimately be up to Vera to make the transition into normalcy, within these new confines, and find acceptance for the person she has emerged as. In this case, it would need to come in the form of spiritual/emotional/mental favor, not the desire to be accepted from a societal standpoint, but an act that might never occur unless Vera takes action.²⁰ Choosing to murder Robert

²⁰ Action could mean different things, such as: "I would like a doctrine of embodied objectivity that accommodates paradoxical and critical feminist science projects: feminist objectivity means quite simply *situated knowledges*" (Haraway 86).

becomes the catalyst in the ultimate way for Vicente/Vera to take back agency, take on patriarchal norms and embrace “los atravesados.”

By the end of the film, Vera takes on the role of femme fatale²¹ telling Robert, “I lied,” before shooting him and solidifying her sexual power over him. Taking on the “femme fatale” role not only allows Vera to accept her womanhood but develop it on her terms, thereby living in the space of “los atravesados²²” Embracing who she has become allows Vera to escape Robert’s captivity. The film finally comes to an end with Vera reuniting with her mother only to give hints at the shocking twists her life has taken, by stating: “I’m Vicente,” while standing in front of her physically as a woman. In making this final statement, Vera is admitting to her mother who she is and reclaiming sexuality and gender as a former male. The distinction of accepting her previous identity compared to what she told Fulgencio shortly before escaping is significant: “And I was always a woman.” Though Vera is saying this as a way of complying with Robert, doing so gives further weight to the truth of how Vicente views the Vera persona concerning sexuality, while still seeing some aspect of his identity as masculine.²³

Living in “los atravesados” might lead to drawbacks as Vera opts to venture outside the norm, just as it might in reality. Doing so could do more harm than good as Vicente/Vera lives within the fluidity of male and female: “Instead of loosening

²¹ One definition of femme fatale is: “A very attractive woman who causes trouble or unhappiness for the men who become involved with her” (Merriam-Webster).

²² One defining aspect of femme fatale and “los atravesados” is: “An important source of pleasure for female spectators must lie in its construction of the female body not only as strong but also as capable of being shaped and defined by women themselves” (Kuhn 403).

²³ An open-minded view of identity: “People must be allowed to be themselves, however they define themselves, and they owe the world no explanation of it or excuse for it. They have to be reminded that the only choices they need to make are to choose honesty and safety. Attraction is attraction, and it doesn’t always wear a label” (Blow).

constraints and opening borders, the tough girl may inadvertently reinforce the very false binary oppositions she seeks to obliterate" (Tolchin 196). In this case, Vicente/Vera isn't trying to destroy binary oppositions, but they are riding a fine line while rediscovering and defining their sex, gender, and identity. Throughout the transformation, Vicente/Vera places stock in sex and gender based on the circumstances whether it be reassuring Fulgencio or returning to their mother. Being a sexual enigma at the end of the film allows Vicente/Vera to adapt to conditions in ways "Other" may not, thereby breaking binary oppositions in an inadvertent way. Vicente/Vera is neither male nor female by the end of the film despite outside appearances, but their gender becomes fluid, as they are both male and female. When Anzaldua describes the courage needed for Mexicans to cross the border into a "closed country" she states: "Trembling with fear, yet filled with courage, a courage born of desperation" (33). Anzaldua's description is similar in the ways Vera becomes closed off while being held by Robert until she becomes a "femme fatale." Developing the "femme fatale" persona is a means of escape and only once executed will she become free of the fear she had while being held in the mansion by Robert²⁴ over the course of six years.

Defining "Real"

In Josefina Lopez's play, *Real Women Have Curves* the idea of femininity arises through body image and the ways in which gaze impacts how women view themselves, similar in the ways Vera must cope with the transformation of a female body. Weight can

²⁴ The openness that comes from redefining identity: "But it seems more younger people are liberating themselves from this thinking and coming to better understand and appreciate that people must have the freedom to be fluid if indeed they are, and that no one has the right to define or restrict the parameters of another person's attractions, love or intimacy" (Blow).

often be a crucial aspect of how Latinas see themselves as a make or break idea in beauty. The female characters (Ana, Estela, Carmen, Pancha, and Rosali) work in a garment factory, spending much of the two-act play discussing the relationship they have with their body, weight, and their desire for food and how they define beauty. These five characters struggle to come to terms with the realness of their bodies; similar in the ways Vera searches for body/gender resolution throughout the film and the horrific acts taken against him with accepting the transformation his body undergone. Putting the film and play together show the various ways Latinas/Hispanics must come to terms with “male gaze.” Though the movie is a horrifying depiction of femininity, the play is lighter with touches of realistic drama, while both are representing women subverting norms.

In Act II, Scene III Ana undermines standards by owning her current weight. Ana tells the other women she doesn't want to be thin because society tells her she should: “How dare you try to define me and tell me what I have to be and look like!’ So I keep it on. I don't want to be a sex object” (58). Ana a teenager and high school graduate does not feel the need to be boxed in by her weight and inability to fit into societies' notions of sex appeal, whereas the other characters feel she should maintain an attractive or thin body to obtain a man. Ana, much like Vera does not fit the norm, though Ana remains confident in her womanhood whether she is overweight or thin. Shortly before Ana's defining answer to her mother, Carmen, asks her: “Why don't you lose weight? Last time you lost weight you were so thin and beautifuller” (58). Carmen would rather have Ana conform her body to be thin and “beautifuller” as a way to fit into society's norm and “male's gaze.” Meanwhile, Carmen makes up the word “beautifuller” as a way of

embracing her new reigning English-speaking culture,²⁵ while also conforming to a more American view of the body (i.e. thin). While Carmen creates a “new” language, she also buys into the concepts of her “new” culture.

Teetering between old and new customs of language and culture leads to judgment and critical views for Ana. The discussion of her losing weight and Carmen’s view of Ana’s body is similar to Robert’s work on Vicente, as Reyes states: “the surgeon decides he looks like a [woman]” (822). Carmen and Robert base their views on beauty and how a woman should appear based on patriarchal notions, but both Ana and Vera resist the norm and establish their values on beauty and how to maintain life. Ana confirms this by remaining confident with her weight, while Vicente/Vera remains fluid on the gender spectrum, all the while moving through binary oppositions and deciphering intersections. Teetering between language and culture can be an opportunity at times while discovering possibilities, but can lead to falling back into old conceptions of sex and gender. Ultimately it needs bold and revolutionary ideas to stand out and be strong to withhold pressure.

The characters in *Real Women* further establish their femininity through control, similar in the ways Vera attempts to. The women accomplish this feat by taking off their constrictive clothing near the end of the play; Carmen states at this point: “Pero que bien se siente. It feels so good to be rid of these clothes and let it all hang out” (61). The desire and need to rid themselves of the clothing becomes overwhelming and in shedding their restrictive clothes the women gain a sense of freedom. The mixture of Spanish and English adds further depth as the women live in Los Angeles, but still keep their lives in

²⁵As Anzaldua suggests with the various strains of learned language described previously.

Mexico alive and reestablishing their immigrant story. Latina actress and writer Euridice Arratia discusses the use of Spanish and English language in Latina/o plays: “One of the most complex problems of identity with which the Latin/ U.S. theatre-makers are actively dealing is language. To name just one difficulty: although the oldest generation preserve the use of Spanish, the majority of the youngest are not able to speak it fluently” (177). Arratia's comment speaks to the changing dynamics many immigrants faced after coming to live in the United States, much in the same ways Anzaldua and Rodriguez discuss the difficulty in finding a language through race, gender, and sex. Though Norma still has the power to speak her native tongue throughout her life, the need to shed clothes also rings true when she tells Vicente in the garden: “Clothes make me feel claustrophobic. I wish I could stay naked all the time.” The women in both instances feel a desperate need to lose restrictions to be in their skin and not be inhibited by men.

Both the women in the factory and Norma take control of their body and sexuality by losing their restrictions and taking off their clothes, thereby gaining agency through the use of persona just as Vera opts to. They also manage to find language by mixing Spanish and English in an attempt to hold onto their given culture, while embracing the cultivation where they reside. Another example of establishing control comes when Ana tells the women: “We have the right to control our bodies. The right to exercise our sexuality. And the right to take control of our destiny. But it all begins when we start saying...Ya Basta! No More!” (34). Again the scene ties into Anzaldua's discussion of creating a new language and the various forms of Spanish/Chicana she has come to learn to fit in with certain groups. Tying Anzaldua's discussion of language with *Real Women* and *Skin* show the complex nature of the situation when women in particular are finding

ways to express their sexuality and describing their bodies, not only in one language but at times two or more.²⁶ The repetition of the subject shows the fundamental ways in which it needs to be continually brought up for change to occur.

Finally, the women in both *Skin* and *Real Women* can confront and find control through sex in and of itself, even though the film and play depict them as terrifying events. At various times sex is an act demanded (i.e. rape), rather than being an intimate and loving act; while at other points in *Skin* sex is painful, rather than pleasurable. Arratia discusses how sex impacts the women of the factory: "On one end of the continuum is Dona Carmen, the embodiment of the Latin matriarch. The focus of cohesion in her family and a wage earner, she nevertheless has no say in her sexual relationship with her husband" (180). Even though Carmen should have gained some respect and ability to voice her opinions she must still answer to her husband. What Dona Carmen faces is not unlike what the female characters in *Skin* are facing when it comes to men and the lack of agency in saying no to sex.

Sex becomes a physical ritual, rather than intimate act, as is the case for Norma out in the garden during Nico and Casilda's wedding. The few sexual encounters Vera experiences involve her being sexually abused, rather than given an option, a vast difference from Vicente's sexual act where he takes, rather than ask. Vera's sexual encounters are frightening not only because Zeca rapes her, but also when she can consent, the sex is shown to be painful even with the previous use of dilators. Throughout the movie, sex appears to be something to be taken from women, regardless of consent or desire, while men are free to feed their lustful fantasies, as Zeca does. Vera's rape by

²⁶ More as a way of creating new language as Anzaldua describes doing in the above quote.

Zeca is especially alarming when considering Vicente was thought to rape Norma. Even though Norma is consenting, in the beginning, Vicente does not readily quit the act when Norma becomes uncomfortable. Further alluding to the concept women do not have a say over their bodies, made even more apparent when women are not attracted to men. When Cristine explicitly states during a conversation before Vicente's transformation, "Because I don't like men," Vicente laughs off her comment and continues to flirt.

The physical act is not the only terrifying aspect; also sex regarding being male or female becomes an issue as well. Because women are seen as objects to please men, they are rarely taken seriously or listened to, as the example with Cristine establishes or even when Vera tries to escape Robert's mansion where she ultimately attempts suicide by slitting her throat. During this episode, Robert tells Vera while holding the knife to her throat: "If you wanted to die, you would cut your jugular." Robert's inability to take her seriously even though the threat to do bodily harm shows the flippant way male characters treat females. What is fascinating in this case is how Vera loses credibility in the eyes of men (namely Robert) even though she used to be a man, thereby solidifying the dominance and hold men have on these Latina characters.

I would argue that the audience could alter this thinking as they watch *Skin* and *Real Women* and learn from the male characters mistakes. In the essay, "Hey Killer: The Construction of a Macho Latina" Karen R. Tolchin explains how Latina gender can be seen under a different gaze: "The emphasis may still be on the classic parts of breasts and buttocks but by eyes, brow, jaws, and fists. The character's mirror—long a torture device for women—becomes a tool for gauging punching technique, not physical imperfection" (188). Though Tolchin is ultimately discussing *Girlfight* and "punching technique" does

not pertain to these works, the general message is the same; Latina women can and should be seen beyond their sexuality and have the ability to do so. By embracing their bodies in *Real Women* and Vera's ability to admit she is Vicente, the female characters alter how they are perceived and moving them beyond physical perfection/imperfection. Juana Maria Rodriguez suggests that identity is about storytelling, rather than self, stating: "Within this conceptualization of language, identity becomes an act of storytelling constructed through memory, naming, and shifting language practices" (29). In the moments of removing their clothes in *Real Women* and Vera telling her mother she is Vicente, the women create an identity of who they want to become and the bodies they want to inhabit, thereby creating a new language where one accepts who they wish to be beyond the physical landscape.

Where might Vera go from this point forward, since there are so many factors setting her apart from "the ideal woman?" Reyes too brings this question up among others in his essay: "will he live his life as a lesbian woman, as the last scene seems to suggest? Or is this going to be a much more nuanced case of a man desiring a woman through a woman's body? Perhaps a lesbian man? Or a man who will need corrective surgery to embody masculinity again?" (829). It is not merely a matter of how Vera/Vicente will view their identity, but how others will view them and how that will impact their sexual demeanor and desires. The open ending of the film allows for any number of possibilities concerning Vera/Vicente's sexual orientation and whether they will ultimately be lesbian, heterosexual, or live along a spectrum of bisexuality. As I pointed out before Vera can admit that she was once Vicente, therefore opening herself up to her masculine past. But once again analyzing Ochoa's comments of looking beyond

the binary is most important rather than seeing male or female. Whichever path Vera/Vicente chooses it is evident that it will not be one easily arrived at considering the horror they have endured mentally, emotionally and physically. Both *Real Women* and *Skin* show the realities, though at times exaggeratedly so, of the harsh societal norms beauty and sex place on Latinas and how they navigate what makes a woman regarding psychology and physiology.

Coming to Terms With Labels

Though Almodovar does not offer a concrete answer to where Vera/Vicente's life will go on living through this horror for six years, one thing remains clear: they will have to find acceptance and peace in what has taken place. Gloria Anzaldua discusses the disappointment in living between the intersections of Mexico and the U.S. borders: “if we can make meaning out of [disappointment]—can lead us toward becoming more of who we are. Or they can remain meaningless. The Coatlicue state can be a way station or it can be a way of life” (68). When the film ends Vera/Vicente is at a way station stuck between the lives chosen for her and the life lived before, it is unknown which way Vera/Vicente will go. The question becomes: How will Vera/Vicente deal with the circumstances that occurred and will they be able to persevere despite the horror that has taken place?

There is no actual way of answering this question since Almodovar does let the story head in that direction. However, I feel that answer lies in the middle, as Ochoa explains in her trans-Latina research: “Although there is a growing body of work that addresses Latina/o transpopulations, such work is heavily weighted in favor of trans-Latina visibility, to the near exclusion of FTM Latinos. Major gaps exist, and more work

is certainly required” (241). More work is certainly needed, but I remain hopeful since work has been done, especially in the area of the MTF trans-Latina community. The landscape is rather hopeful for the future as Ochoa states:

The conditions of visibility for trans people—Latina/o or not—are different in the United States from those in Latin American contexts, owing to differences in the configuration of public and urban spaces, the prevailing forms of homo- and transphobia, and the regulation of public space and behavior in general. (236)

Although, Vera/Vicente is Hispanic and does not live in Latin America, the chances for open-mindedness concerning their transgender body would lead to greater opportunities outside the U.S. If Vera/Vicente moves outside of the town he once lived, his chances of being accepted would be more imminent, compared to staying in the small town.

Ultimately the viewer can only hope that Vera/Vicente finds inner peace, regardless of community acceptance after the mental and physical ordeal they have undergone. Anzaldúa discusses the concept of *La facultad* as: “The capacity to see in surface phenomena the meaning of deeper realities, to see the deep structure below the surface,” (60) while relating to “Other:” “As we plunge vertically, the break, with its accompanying new seeing, makes us pay attention to the soul, and we are thus carried into awareness—an experiencing of soul (Self)” (61). Regardless of choosing to be male, female or somewhere in between the awareness of soul and self would be found since it would be the greatest reward for enduring such pain. Though it might not appear this way, Almodovar's ending is a great beacon of hope, even though it does not give a final decision in Vera/Vicente's gender, it allows for an opportunity of what could be.

Compared to having a set answer, leaving Vera/Vicente's decision allows the viewer to experience awareness and sense of self through their choice of where their identity could lead. Juana Maria Rodriguez points out the fun and joy of identity in sexuality: "And identity as an 'art form' always remains open to reinscription and reinterpretation" (29). Even though Vera/Vicente has gone through this traumatic experience, their greater understanding of "being" woman and a commodity has developed and evolved allowing for a reinterpretation of the masculine persona. Vera/Vicente truly is an "art form" by the end of the film, not because Robert has made them into one, but because they are a blank canvas and can choose an identity with further resolve. Similar to Ana's ability to yell: "Ya Basta! No More," (34) concerning her weight at the end of *Real*, Vera must be able to accept and embrace her form.

The important aspect to take from *Skin* and *Real Women* is a sense of acceptance in "los atravesados." Feminist writer Joshunda Sanders discusses sexual labels in "Questioning Continuum: Seeking Sexuality as a Lifelong Process." In the essay, Sanders speaks of coming to terms with her bisexuality regardless of other's beliefs:

I realized that I might not have a single team to join, but perhaps more than one, maybe one was beyond language, beyond the acceptable parameters of longing prescribed by my Catholic upbringing, my Baptist family, or anyone else who was already looking to exclude me from the normalcies of daily life. (Bitch Magazine)

Sanders acceptance of who she is and her choices beyond societies norms provides a real life space, even when considering fictional characters because applying fictional concepts could help when embracing reality.

Conclusion

In Anzaldua's essay "How to Tame a Wild Tongue" she discusses Chicana language and how it makes her feel different from other Spanish speakers and especially other Latinas. In one passage she describes how "Other" pushes Chicanas away from one another, just by language: "If a person, Chicana or Latina, has a low estimation of my native tongue, she also has a low estimation of me. Often with *mexicanas y latinas* we'll speak English as a neutral language... We oppress each other trying to out-Chicana each other, vying to be the 'real' Chicanas, to speak like Chicanos" (80). Anzaldua's "low estimation" of herself based on language is an issue I think the majority of women can relate to, not necessarily through language, but body image. The desire to be "vying for 'realness'" compared to other women, means needing to "out-do each other." Vera encounters this issue through the camera lens as Robert keeps a constant gaze on her, not only to make sure she stays in the mansion, but also to keep an eye on his "prize." The female characters in *Real Women Have Curves*, especially Ana, must also come to terms with "real" and the pressure weight places on women.

Anzaldua finally comes to terms and finds acceptance in her language, regardless of what "Others" might think. As a form of recognition, she boldly conquers her Chicana heritage stating: "I will no longer be made to feel ashamed of existing. I will have my voice: Indian, Spanish, white. I will have my serpent's tongue—my woman's voice, my sexual voice, my poet's voice. I will overcome the tradition of silence" (81). Anzaldua breaks down all aspects of heritage, sex, gender, and personhood to give herself a voice and break down the silence that has been holding her back. Both of the main female

characters in *Skin* and *Real Women* also come to terms with their bodies and what ultimately becomes “real” for them.

Finally, the act of language comes through in the stories Latinas tell, whether it be finding voice or body acceptance. Juana Maria Rodriguez uses storytelling as a way to examine language, stating: “Conceptualization of language, identity becomes an act of storytelling constructed through memory, naming, and shifting language practices” (29). The ability to alter and shape these stories is what ultimately sets these Latina characters free or gives voice to the silent as Anzaldua claims. Constructing “memory, naming, and shifting language practices” can only be acceptable when the individual is willing and able to gain agency, all of which develop their own story.

II: Woman Versus Woman: Examining the Dichotomy of La Virgen de Guadalupe and La Malinche

Founder and CEO of Latinas Think Big, Angelica Perez-Litwin writes:

Latinas have been silenced by circumstances or lack of a sociocultural podium. Who she is and what she wants have been defined by caricature archetypes constructed by traditional mass media. She has no diversity on television and print, often existing as either a sexy, loud and passionate girl or an older, submissive, heavy-accented woman.²⁷ (HuffPost Latino Voices)

The “La Virgen/La Malinche” dichotomy pops up on television and movies, but also in Latina literature, as a way of generalizing Latinas either to appear overtly sexual or void of sexuality. Though one could not blame women for continuing to reinforce this stereotype since it is so engrained in the culture, ultimately reevaluating allows changing of boundaries in new areas. Language is the ultimate tool in destroying stereotypes within sexuality and femininity in Latina culture, while poems become one creative way of showing the various aspects of Latina sexuality and gender as fluid and plural.

As readers, viewers, human beings we need to be questioning the stereotypical views not only of women but men, to fully understand sexuality. Though I will be focusing on Latinas in this chapter, it remains imperative to keep machismo stereotypes in mind as men influence the ways women are perceived. Besides Perez-Litwin’s statement on Latina stereotypes, how men have viewed women plays a crucial role, as well: “maybe you just envision large booties, swiveling hips, and sweltering heat? Or do

²⁷ Stereotypical examples on television include: Gabrielle Solis (*Desperate Housewives*), Gloria Delgado Pritchett (*Modern Family*), April Ludgate (*Parks & Rec*).

you picture brutish ‘macho’ men and passive women on welfare who cannot or do not want to control their fertility?” (Ascencio and Acosta 1) Where do these tropes develop? How do they influence Latina women? How are they changing? By examining poems²⁸ written by Sandra Cisneros and Judith Ortiz Cofer, I look to understand how readers can stray from these stereotypes and grasp the complexity involved in Latina characters. To do that, I’ve gathered a collection of Latina/o writers, sociologists, bloggers, feminists and other experts in the field.

I will begin this study by examining Sandra Cisneros’ “You Bring Out the Mexican in Me,” for the purposes of the chapter is a poem representative of the overtly sexual. The narrator openly discusses her desire and wanton feelings for the unnamed lover. The poem stands out for the narrator’s openness with the partner bringing out her inner Mexican heritage, thereby allowing her sexual desire to blossom through her use of language. The second poem is Judith Ortiz Cofer’s “Vida” as the “virginal” trope. Though Cofer is Puerto Rican, I include her work as a larger part of the Chicana dichotomy discussion as a way of showing the narrow scope of womanhood in various Latina cultures. Cofer’s Catholic upbringing likewise represents Latin norms and the roles religion plays on sex. Sexuality is depicted through the narrator’s devotion to her lover, while ultimately appearing virginal and saintly, as she dies in Gabriel’s arms. Gabriel’s love and devotion for “Vida” come from the care she shows in watching over

²⁸ Literature professor Maria DeGuzman explains the purposes of poetry and what she aims to accomplish with it: “Poetry is language intensified to an incantatory degree designed to transform how readers experience meaning and perceive the relationship between things. The poetry I am about to examine is designed to re-orient readers: to transmit a different sense of orientation with regard to the main preoccupations of these poets and the larger questions posed” (71).

him as he waits for her, the narrator bringing orange blossoms to Gabriel's grave, and spreading flowers across his gravesite. Are these characters part of the Malinche/Virgen dichotomy? I argue no, just as women in real life are complex human beings so too are these characters.

Rather than merely focusing on the stereotypes of Malinche or the Virgen de Guadalupe a realistic depiction of Latinas will be discussed. A conversation about diversity and fluidity can occur when we realize: "We need to theorize pleasure, empowerment, taking control, taking the lead, in ways that highlight the agency of Latinas. We must remember that sexuality is one of the passions people pursue for a sense of health, well-being, collaboration, trust and play" (Decena 285). Sex is neither deviant nor innocent, like most occurrences in life, it is an act that lies within the spectrum. A discussion of what is real and how spirituality relates to sexuality is needed to broaden constructs. These two poems serve to represent various aspects of Latina sexuality through passion, commitment and devotion to one's love. Chicana writer and feminist Gloria Anzaldua discusses the need for participation in life: "You could say that the writer, through her interactive participation, merges herself in the conscious/unconscious processes and gains possession of her characters by allowing them to possess her. Imagination is active, purposeful creativity" (36). Both Cisneros and Cofer actively engage their imagination through their creative work by taking the lead and engaging agency for their characters.

La Malinche

In this chapter, I look at the ways the *La Malinche* stereotype has turned tropes on their head in Latina culture. The term Malinche stands as an insult in Chicana culture and has become a female archetype in the literature. Basing Malinche on a real woman who, “aided Spanish conquistador Hernan Cortes, with whom she had a child” (Garsd). Being labeled as Malinche is an act of going against the grain and the “traditional” norms by not marrying, having children or being a disrespectful woman in one way or another. Religion also plays a large part, as Catholicism is the moral basis for Latin Americans. Going against the values of the church not only makes one a sinner, but a traitor to the family and the community.

In “Chicana’s Feminist Literature: A Re-vision Through Malintzin²⁹/or Malintzin: Putting Flesh Back on the Object” Chicana feminist and author Norma Alarcon explains the importance of Malinche and how she remains an influence. Alarcon describes Malinche’s story regarding a gendered perspective: “Where many male members often prefer to see her as the mother-whore, bearer of illegitimate children, responsible for the foreign Spanish invasion; and where female members attempt to restore balance in ways that are sometimes painfully ambivalent” (182). Malinche is seen both positively and in negative ways according to who examines her tale, an aspect that remains relevant within the culture since one can quickly label offensive. The stereotype can be damaging and hurtful to Latinas, especially to those who are young and impressionable: “Many Latinas are told from a young age to deny or repress the kind of blatant sexuality we saw in La Malinche. If we don’t we run the risk of being called a whore, a woman asking for it”

²⁹ Malinche is also known as Matlitzin or Marina as she was later named. Malinchista is another insult that can be used alongside Malinche as a way of describing: “someone who prefers a foreign culture over his own” (Garsd).

(Finney). Therefore, it becomes of the greatest importance to act and be seen innocently and desexualized or risk being seen in a profoundly negative way.

Looking at Malinche's story through the negative lens proves to condemn how women view their sexuality, even in modern society, thereby enslaving them and ultimately causing self-hatred (Alarcon 183). Generating a sense of self-hatred in Latinas becomes harmful mentally and emotionally as Latinas divide from family or friends based on sex. The self-hatred stemming from disobedience often appears when labeled Malinche, as Alarcon discusses: "When we are disobedient, hence undevout, we are equated with Malintzin; that is, the *myth* of male consciousness, not the *historical* figure in all her dimensions doomed to live in chains (187). Being considered disobedient leads to a sense of self-hatred brought on by the gendered perspective. Rebellious perspectives brought on by religion and "male consciousness" is not constructive, nor a full view of Malinche or the life she lived.

Malinche has a similar story to another woman; one most would not equate with, the Native American Pocahontas. In an article for NPR, Jasmine Garsd asks why Pocahontas is seen favorably (enough to have a story told in a Disney movie), while Malinche remains a traitor. Garsd details the little information known of Pocahontas' legendary tale: "Pocahontas was raped during captivity. She was married off to John Rolfe, a widower nearly twice her age...she was already married to an Indian warrior, with whom she'd had a child. In any case, she was renamed Rebecca Rolfe and taken to England" (NPR). Pocahontas' story is not far off from Malinche's as both women were given to men by other men, while their stories were told by men and made into a myth. In the article, Garsd goes on to state a further distinction between the two women:

“characterizing Malinche as a traitor and Pocahontas as a heroine gives the women a free will they didn't really have. Becoming a savior or a villain, taking on a lover or rejecting him — these are choices. Neither woman had much say in her fate” (NPR). So why then does Malinche continue to receive such criticism when her tale is not far from Pocahontas? One answer appears through religion.

Guadalupe is a religious symbol, while Malinche is as well, though it differs through the lens of *familia*; rather than merely being about the importance of reproducing offspring. Chicano scholar Ramon A. Gutierrez points out the contradiction in culture based on if a man or woman is the one being sexually active: “The seduction of a woman, even if she was married, was a sign of a man’s virility. A man’s urge to dominate was deemed a natural impulse of the species. Adulterous women were considered shameless or *sin verguenza*” (30). In this case, women could be seen as *sin verguenza*, while men appear as sexual heroes for their sexual conquering of women. The definition of *familia* has changed over time while its origins remain clouded: “what constituted family was the relationship of authority that one person exercised over another. Specifically, familia was imagined as the relationship of a master over his slaves and servants” (28). This authority over one another has not eased over time, even as the definition of *familia* and marriage have changed, men are still able to have sex with as many women as they can, while sexually active women receive the classification of Malintzin. *Familia* and honor are tied up in religion, namely Catholicism, as a way of showcasing how far a man has come in life. When a wife or daughter dishonors the family by having sex, it reflects poorly on the father, brothers or other male relatives.

La Virgen de Guadalupe³⁰

In this chapter, I look at Guadalupe as a stereotype of sexual innocence and the ways in which she keeps women from discovering different aspects of their identity. Guadalupe's characteristics are situated in appearance and acting pure. By living within "traditional" norms of abstinence, marrying, having children and being respectful Latinas live in Guadalupe's form. Catholicism and faith stand as a moral basis in Latin culture, while living a pure life gives comfort and hope for the afterlife. Living within the values of the church may not make for a saintly Latina, although it ensures honor for the family and community.

To appreciate La Virgen, one would need to understand how women are viewed in Latin culture. Sociologist Gloria Gonzalez-Lopez explains the differences between *machismo* and *marianismo* two stereotypes in the Latin community: "Machismo's heterosexual partner marianismo seems to be used less often (and at times it is not known) in Latin American academic circles examining the lives of women (105). Though *marianismo* is used less often than its partnered machismo, it is a tool in learning how women can be viewed within La Guadalupe's scope since it explains what role they can play compared to men. *Marianismo* remains a trope of the submissive female, one living under a man's rule. Gonzalez-Lopez further explains, marianismos connections to La Virgen: "As an idea, Evelyn Stevens coined this term in the early 1970s while arguing that women of Latin American origin internalize values represented by the Virgin Mary"

³⁰ Guadalupe is seen as the woman of greatest importance in Latin, Catholic culture, she like the Virgin Mary is: "the mother of God and the saint we pray to when our loved ones are on their deathbeds, or after we have just purchased a lottery ticket. In her form we are told that this is the impossible standard to which we should hold ourselves to" (Finney).

(105). By internalizing these values and thoughts Latina women keep their sexuality and gender in check comparatively to “machismo” or men who are allowed to exhibit their sexuality freely.

The values of La Virgen can ultimately have an adverse effect as women begin to see their body in negative ways. In “A History of Latina/o Sexualities” Gutierrez notes the changing of mentality over time: “discourse of the body had its own notion of a properly ordered polity, which likewise was writ large on the human body, proscribing its own ideals about the physical body, about procreation, and about its pleasures, desires, and pains” (15). When women begin to view their body under a finite microscope, they not only change their mindset but how they act and what they naturally feel for self also evolves and morphs. At times physical change can be a positive metamorphosis; while at others can be emotionally and mentally destructive.

By creating a strict and narrow definition of sexuality Latina women living under “La Virgen” dichotomy weaken their passion and ability to experience the same pleasure and desire as *machismo*. Ultimately, the stereotype comes down to the right or wrong time for procreation, as Gutierrez states: “When couples channeled their sexual desires toward the explicit aim of procreation, they fulfilled God’s natural design” (16-7). When sex was merely about being marrying and having children one could say that La Virgen trope made the slightest bit of sense; however these notions evolved with time as marriage became about love, thereby altering marriage to a fulfillment of erotic desires and personal need (33), compared to singularly based on procreation. When this alteration took place, the stereotype should have died out, when it failed some Latina

women were left powerless, although some women found empowerment by subverting the Malinche label.

Embracing Malinche and Mexican Womanhood

In “You Bring Out the Mexican in Me” Sandra Cisneros sets up the stereotype of “deviantly hypersexuality” as the narrator opens with the desire she feels for her lover. In Cisneros’ memoir *A House of My Own: Stories from My Life* she is open about her sexuality and the negative impact because of it: “I was no better than La Malinche, Hernan Cortes’s Mexican mistress, who aided the Spaniards in conquering Mexico. I had betrayed my culture, they said, and I was young enough to believe them...I was behaving just like those white women with loose morals, loose drawers, and loose ideas (135).

Cisneros’ poetry in *Loose Women* deals with the whore stereotype in a direct way just as her memoir does. In this statement, Cisneros is honest about the effect her sexuality has to her family, community, and self, in this instance a negative view that equates her with white women who see her as having low values and standards.

Cisneros uses the poem to showcase her sexuality in positive and negative ways while being a tool in defining her Mexican heritage. At the end of the poem Cisneros pleads with her lover that she longs for: “Love the way a Mexican woman loves. Let/ me show you. Love the only way I know how” (73-4). It becomes imperative for the narrator to blend her sexuality and ethnicity together as a way of fully exploring her love for the partner. Cisneros seamlessly shows how one can serve the other by making her Mexican heritage stand out from other ethnicities in the negative and positive ways she feels passion for her companion. Cisneros’ “Mexican love” is thereby special not only because it is “the only way [she] knows how,” but also empowers her as a “Mexican woman” who

embraces the Malinche qualities of passion. Adopting a “Mexican woman” attitude of love parallels with machismo allowing a sense of dominance and empowerment unobtainable in the Guadalupe stereotype: “There is a silencing of female sexuality in our culture; we are often afraid of being even casually sexual, a fear I believe is perpetuated through the idealization of La Virgen de Guadalupe” (Finney). The narrator can subvert this trope by embracing the various qualities of “Mexican love.”

The narrator’s ability to stand out regarding her ethnicity continues throughout the poem by the distinctions in culture. Cisneros uses these bits of Mexican culture to play with and help define whom she is, but also as a way of further defining her sexuality with her personality. Throughout the poem, she uses music, an actress, and food to help establish and define her sexuality, such as her use of: “*mariachi* trumpets of the blood” (19), “Delores del Rio³¹” (22), “[eating] *barbacoa taquitos* on Sunday” (34). The use of *mariachi*, Delores Del Rio and *taquitos* are specific items that contribute to a greater picture of which the narrator is as a woman and a person, but more important they define her as a Chicana. Cisneros’ ability to play with these cultural icons benefits the poem through a tongue-in-cheek approach as a way to offset her exoticness. One reason for the exotic, sociologist in feminist studies Deborah R. Vargas points out is the need to show her uniqueness concerning other women: “Exotic sexuality has been represented in roles that reinforce a sense of sultry beauty rooted in some distant land, signified by the dark primitive Other” (123). Cisneros’ narrator is certainly exotic when seen through the lens of defining items such as *mariachi* and *barbacoa taquitos*, items atypical in other cultures. Labeling specific things establish who the narrator is within the context of being Chicana,

³¹ Delores del Rio born Lolita Dolores Martinez Asunsolo Lopez Negrette was a Mexican actress who was typecast in American film and would later return to Mexico (TCM).

whether it is in the messy aspects of blood, acting out, or the simplicity of eating on a Sunday. These items set her apart by establishing her uniqueness by developing her personality and quirks inside and outside of love.

Cisneros further develops her Mexican heritage by invoking the use of Spanish language. When the reader arrives at line 45, Cisneros breaks from English or “Spanglish” moving to full on Spanish: “Me sacas lo Mexicana en mi” (45). Doing so proves her knowledge of the Spanish language on a basic level legitimizing her Mexican heritage while showing another way she embraces her Latina culture as her lover brings out the Mexican in her, both good and bad. Furthermore, the line helps her ability to live up to the title of the poem “You Bring Out the Mexican in Me” by literally putting her in the position of speaking Spanish to prove her loyalty to her heritage and her lover as she stands by the good and bad aspects of that love. Scholar of Chicana studies Ana Sanchez-Munoz explains the importance of language hybridity in Chicana literature: “In a way, the use of Spanglish creates another level of meaning where the hybridity of the Chicana/o experiences are negotiated. In this sense, Spanglish is a way to construct and reconstruct a third space of Chicano/o identity, a linguistic *nepantla*” (440). Being *nepantla* proves the narrator’s ability to be listened to not only as an English speaker but also as a Spanish speaker and even more so as a Chicana woman. Bringing in her Spanish language and building this hybridity of Spanish and English, the narrator proves that she is more than one aspect of her culture and manages to create layers to her personality; further relying on her sexuality, ethnicity and deepening the definition of her gender.

Distinctly different from Cisneros and Cofer’s poems lies Julia Alvarez work “Love Portions.” A poem that unlike Cisneros or Cofer’s work lacks the use of Spanish

or even the hybridity of Spanglish within the poem, as well as no instance of Alvarez's Dominican Republic culture. Contrary to Cisneros, Alvarez does not play with Spanish/English language, in this poem, rather than adding another layer to her narrator. Wall demonstrates the benefit of playing with language through another of Alvarez's work, "Bilingual Sestina": "The bilingual title of the collection similarly alludes to the myriad borders that mediate the complementary facets of Alvarez's composite identity as a Latina writer: English and Spanish, the United States and the Dominican Republic, the present and the past" (131). Once again Alvarez fails to live up to her typical writing persona in "Love Portions" by eliminating these borders between English and Spanish and the U.S. and the Dominican Republic, which is entirely different to the ways Cisneros' passion and love are a product of her Mexican heritage. Rather than being a neutral poem concerning embracing feminine Latin sexuality and bilingual culture, Cisneros distinguishes herself through positive and negative attempts as a way of embracing her culture and self.

It is not just her sexuality and ethnicity that sets Cisneros apart from women or men for that matter, but it comes down to her passion. By the fourth stanza Cisneros has worked through her differences and has moved into the fiery passion that exists for the one she longs for, the narrator states:

I claim you all mine,

arrogant as Manifest Destiny.

I want to rattle and rent you in two.

I want to defile you and raise hell. (39-42)

The ability to “claim” is of particular importance since the narrator becomes a dominant woman in charge and in doing so highlights her ability to be “deviantly hypersexual,” whereas *marianismo* women are not empowered to enact these types of personas. Though doing so can be quite freeing, as Gloria Gonzalez-Lopez points out: “Many of the self-identified heterosexual women who have confided their sex lives to me dream of becoming *mujeres libres*, free women who are able to overcome their fears and concerns while enjoying sex. They aspire to become ‘happily heterosexual’” (114). Though the narrator remains unfulfilled as she wishes to dominate her lover by “claiming” him, even going so far as labeling herself in the process “arrogant.” Making these claims of dominance and arrogance shows the negative aspects of the narrator’s love.

The dominance and arrogance shown in this stanza speak to the stereotypes of Malinche and the problems with strong women. Vargas discusses how the sexual stereotype developed over time: “In a U.S. context, then, representations of Latina sexuality as hot-blooded and excessive become the markers of what is morally wrong, set against the good morals and hegemonic U.S. citizenship values of non-Latino whites” (121). An important difference becomes apparent as the narrator says she longs to be “arrogant as Manifest Destiny,” since it was white men created the deal, she too wants to enjoy and profit from their audacity, while also having the level of empowerment that she may not obtain as a Chicana. Though this only goes to show further her “hot-blooded and excessive” side leading back to her Latina sexuality and further buying into the problems of Malinche and the “whore” stereotype.

Part of this could bring up the question of exploitation of which the narrator portrays herself as, not necessarily in how she views herself, but how culture

continuously typecasts the narrator. Alarcon once again discusses the power of Malintzin and the Malinche trope: “Because Malintzin aided Cortez in the Conquest of the New World, she is seen as concretizing woman’s sexual weakness and interchangeability, always open to sexual exploitation” (184). Cisneros shows weakness through domination of her lover, which does not lead to interchangeability within her personality or her lover’s,³² so the question posed is she sexually exploited or is she the one doing the exploiting? I would say she is not being used within Alarcon’s context since she wants to “rattle and rent,” “defile,” and “raise hell” (41-2) with her lover, leading one to believe that this is all on her accord. The reader would also assume that the partner is an active participant with the “defiling” and “raising hell” since we do not hear their voice within the poem. If anything it shows within the Malinche stereotype Cisneros/the narrator has the power to make her sexual choices, living up to the title of the book *Loose Women*. A connotation of sexuality, the idea that she is “loose” to do as she deems fit, not the negative view that Cisneros discusses in her memoir.

Though “You Bring Out the Mexican in Me” is not perfect in the liberation the narrator feels at times, the poem is a depiction of messy love. Love at times is possessive or arrogant while also an embracing of heritage and language. In her memoir, Cisneros discusses the effect religion had on her sexuality: “La Lupe 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 women toward our destiny—marriage and motherhood. The other alternative was *putahood*” (164). Though Malinche may not be the ideal either, the

³² Though it should be noted this is only her point of view.

embracing of sexuality allows for options not afforded to other women, while pointing out the double standard of men's sexuality. Cisneros furthermore brings up another problem religion has with Latinas and their body: "Religion and our culture, our culture, and religion, helped to create that blur, a vagueness about what went on 'down there'" (161). By not being married, by being able to conquer a lover of her choosing, the narrator has the independence and willpower to make her path and her choices, thereby building her way as she deems fit.

Devotion and Spirituality in "Vida"

In Puerto Rican author Judith Ortiz Cofer's poem "Vida," serves as a saintly caretaker for her lover, Gabriel. In doing so, she becomes the virginal depiction for this chapter, as their closest encounters happen through lying in each other's arms. The poem asks: what is reality and does truth even matter in this instance? In her essay "Flights of the Imagination: Rereading/Rewriting Realities," Chicana writer Gloria Anzaldua discusses reality and how we as people perceive it: "The stories she believes shape her perceptions of reality. She lives her life according to these stories, and according to these stories she shapes the world. Creation is really a rereading and rewriting of reality—a rearrangement or reordering of preexisting elements" (40). The narrator has developed a story based on her virginal longing, whether created or real remains in the mind of the narrator. Should it matter since she believes, she has found love, what remains vital is her innocence and devotion to a man.

Reciprocated love does not appear between the two until the end of "Vida," which could indeed beg the question "Is this reality?" In her final moments, the narrator states: "He will take me into his arms and call me *Mi Vida*:/ my life, *his* life" (38-9). Not only is

the instance of Gabriel taking the narrator into his arms, as she has previously been the one holding him, but it shows that he cares and loves the narrator, as she is his “Vida.” The narrator explains the distinction between “my life” and “*his* life” to establish the connection that has grown as she served to take care of him, allowing him to reciprocate back, even if she can only “stay with him/ until the sun rises” (39-40). The parting lines of the poem illustrate the delicate relationship between Gabriel and the narrator as they can only be together “until the sun rises,” though this does not interfere with their relationship it shows how their bond has always been on his terms, leading to a machismo and marianismo relationship.

An important distinction made is when Gabriel calls the narrator “mi Vida,” the only instance of Spanish used in the poem. The only chance to establish Cofer’s Puerto Rican culture visualizes at this moment, as opposed to Cisneros’ repeated use to show her Chicana heritage. It is also interesting that the only instance comes from the male character rather than the narrator; one could assume is female. I think it shows the machismo dominance of Gabriel as he calls the narrator: “his life” (line 39). One reason for this might be as Teresa Derrickson argues: “[Ortiz Cofer’s response]³³ rejects facile definitions of cultural identity, definitions based almost exclusively on linguistic proficiency, but more importantly, because it challenges writers and scholars to adopt a more nuanced approach in their investigation of Latin peoples” (121). Though Cofer could have put more of her Puerto Rican culture and Spanish language into the poem, Derrickson would argue that Cofer is trying to subvert the way Puerto Rican’s are recognized within the culture and in doing so acts as a way of subverting the stereotype.

³³ In an interview with Rafael Ocasio, Cofer states: “There is not just one reality to being a Puerto Rican writer. I am putting together a different view” (Derrickson 121).

Granted there is no way of knowing for sure without discussing the issue with Cofer, but maybe the reality lies in the sexuality of the poem.

I would argue that as the Spanish dwindles the desire decreases within the scope of the poems. While Cisneros use of Spanish is at a higher level as she is living within Malinche and is willing to give into her Mexican culture, whereas in “Vida” the narrator is submissive or “La Virgen” as she takes cares of Gabriel. It is only at the end when he is taking her “into his arms” that Spanish is performed. However, Derrickson argues the importance of borders and the space created: “Unlike the concrete land border that divides Mexico and America,³⁴ the US-Puerto Rican border is a seeming gap, a stretch of water whose shifting consistency and apparent intangibility masquerades in the human psyche as a gulf of space, a void not easily traversed” (125). Gabriel’s love and devotion for “Vida” come from the care she showed by watching over him as he waited for her, her picking flowers, and the spreading of orange blossoms over his grave. It is in this sense that the gap between Gabriel and *his Vida* made is apparent since they cannot be together at all times, merely at dusk, and in this respect, it is understandable that Cofer uses Spanish and “linguistic nepantla” sparingly. As Derrickson suggests it is a “void not easily traversed” for both geographic reasons and the relationship discussed in “Vida.”

“Vida” does not hold the sexuality Cisneros’ does, but instead shows the power of caretaking and innocence. Before the narrator ends up in Gabriel’s arms, the reader finally can view him welcome her. In these lines, he is already deceased but has come back to her: “Now he is waiting/ to welcome me with wine and flowers” (36-7). Finally, the shoe is on the other foot as the narrator is the one being taken care of; showing that

³⁴ Derrickson is alluding to Gloria Anzualdua’s work *Borderlands/La Frontera*.

Gabriel does indeed care about our narrator and that her time spent with him has paid off. With Gabriel welcoming the narrator, the gap between them closes if even for a short time, as he takes care of her by preparing wine and flowers and later holding her in his arms. This image is in contrast to an earlier line where she is taking care of him: “When I hold this old man in my arms,/ his thin body light as bird bones, I feel/ as if I were warming a wounded sparrow” (13-15). Showing both instances of Gabriel and the narrator being taken care of and holding one another establishes the deep connection each holds for one another. Although they may not have passionate love as Cisneros’ poem does, these lines show a connection and companionship that exists beyond lust.

The reader can also see the narrator as being submissive or being *marianismo* based on her devotion to Gabriel. La Virgen de Guadalupe is a symbol of the mother looking over son, the narrator is dutifully watching over a man, as Vargas points out: “Positive representations of Latina/o sexuality tend to rely on reducing Latina sexuality to that of the dutiful, sacrificing mother figure” (127). Though the narrator does at one point, play the mother figure as a way of taking care of Gabriel, the dynamic changes when he finally reciprocates what she had previously done for him. Though this does not initially appear to be love, it shows a deep respect and appreciation between Gabriel and the narrator. Bringing in the instance of Gabriel holding the narrator is the only opportunity for the reader to “see” how he cares for this individual making it a powerful moment between the two characters and for the reader.

The *machismo/marianismo* relationship subverts through the use of *Nepantla*. Gloria Anzaldúa discusses the symbol of *Nepantla* as a bridge between two worlds, a bridge that Gabriel and the narrator eventually end up crossing as he comes back to her

and holds her. In the essay, Anzaldua discusses perception and the reality of nepantla: “Perceiving something from two different angles creates a split in awareness that can lead to the ability to control perception, to balance contemporary society’s worldview with the nonordinary worldview, and to move between them to a space that simultaneously exists and does not exist” (28). Anzaldua describes Nepantla as an in-between space; in the case of “Vida,” it is between the living and the dead. Gabriel’s coming to the narrator, holding this character and calling them “*mi Vida*” shows how that space has finally crossed over. Anzaldua continues to explain the spirituality involved in nepantla, as a: “bridge between the material and the immaterial; the point of contact y el lugar between ordinary and spirit realities; the midground in the vertical continuum of spirit/soul that places spirituality at the top end (heaven) and the soul at the opposite end (underworld)” (28-9). Whether this is a question of reality or not these two characters have moved on to another plane of existence together. Their devotion and love for one another are otherworldly and to finally be together they must cross the bridge to another place. The act of meeting once again sets “Vida” apart from the wild and passionate emotions of Cisneros’ poem, through this otherworldly devotion and love; the characters truly are each other’s “Vida.”

Nepantla appears throughout the work with the use of nature and the life it allows the characters while becoming acutely aware through the invisible bridge between the two at the end. One instance is through the narrator’s picking of flowers for Gabriel: “I will pick/ flame-of-the-forest, the fire orange blossom/ he likes to see in my black hair” (22-4). Though it appears to be a mild act, it proves to be much more about the choices of flowers she chooses to pick for him, such as the “flame-of-the-forest”, which is an exotic and vibrant red plant. Her second choice is also dynamic and unique, the “fire orange

blossom.” Both plants establish the completing of an act for him by picking and putting them in her “black hair,” while subtly implying the fire/flame in the flowers name is the desire each holds for one another. A sense of complexity adds to the Guadalupe stereotype; thereby fleshing out her character in delicate ways, while showing her real sexuality. Midway through “Vida” the narrator states: “I will spread these flowers/ over the square of earth he has chosen” (25-6). It is this spreading of flowers and desire that ultimately brings him back to life and allows for them to be together once again, if even for a little while. It is her love and devotion that keeps him alive for her, making each other “*Mi Vida*” for the other partner.

Alvarez’s poem “Love Portions” similarly shows love, care, and devotion to one’s partner. Throughout the poem, the narrator, and her husband show passion through their desire to look after their spouse: “Briefly, the scales balance between us:/ food for the body, nurture for the soul” (29-30). They manage to find harmony and “balance the scales,” even as their passion for taking care of one another takes precedent. The equality that brings them closer together can also serve to drive them apart at times. Two lines before the conclusion the narrator shows how each partner works to take care of their spouse: “Finally, you call me down to your chef d’oeuvre:/ a three-course meal! I hand you mine, this poem” (27-8). Each partner is always working to do for the other: while the husband perfects “a three-course meal,” the narrator “cooks up” a poem that will ultimately serve to satisfy the spouse’s hunger albeit in a different way. Alvarez’s poem shows the care taken by a partner just as Cofer’s “Vida” does in the acts one accomplishes for their spouse. Though the narrator might have been upset because the husband would allow her to serve him, both manage to work through their fight and end

the poem in a better place with both being emotionally and physically full. Alvarez's narrator can bridge the gap, just as Cofer's characters do.

Finally, taking a step back to Gloria Anzaldua's discussion of spirituality and having faith shows the impact on characters in positive ways. Anzaldua discusses the power and need for spirituality: "Spirituality is a symbology system, a philosophy, a worldview, a perspective, and a perception. Spirituality is a different kind and way of knowing. It aims to expand perception; to become conscious, even in sleep; to become aware of the interconnections between all things by attaining a grand perspective" (38). The symbols that appear in "Vida" and even "Love Portions" show the positive bonds that remain capable when interconnections happen between people. Though these are not perfect characters, they remain involved, as the narrator in "Vida" blindly devotes herself to a man; her spirituality and belief that it would benefit her pay off. The narrator's tale is similar to Guadalupe's in her innocence, love, and devotion to another.

Conclusion

Throughout this chapter, I've briefly touched on Julia Alvarez's work "Love Portions" as a way of highlighting the differences between the two poems. In "Love Portions" a married couple argue not because chores were uncompleted, rather that their spouse is completing the household duties. In the beginning, Alvarez describes each task the couple fights over: "both wanting to fix dinner, mow the lawn,/ haul the recycling boxes to the truck,/ or wash the dishes when our guest's depart" (3-5). An interesting aspect of these three lines and the message of the poem shows that even though they are fighting it still manages to stay about "both or our" chores; rather than focusing on

“his/her/I/me” pronouns. Though they are fighting, they do so for the right/positive reasons; rather than being negative in their quarrel.

Compared to the other two poems, “Love Portions” remains neutral, compared to Cisneros’ open sexuality and Cofer’s innocence. An important question remains about love, especially since the word exists in the title. Gutierrez discusses the churches view on marriage from a historical perspective: “The Church maintained that marriage was the normative institution that assured the regeneration of the species, the peaceful continuation of society, and the orderly satisfaction of bodily desires” (16). Love in the poem is hardly distinguishable from this definition: first, the couple in question is childless, so they have not married to procreate or “continue society.” Second, there is hardly a “satisfaction of bodily desires” going on in this section of the poem, compared to Cisneros’ or Cofer’s poems. If anything it is quite the opposite since they are fighting over the banal rather than participating in loving or passionate acts.

I bring up “Love Portions” to show a more realistic view of love, something not often mentioned in this essay. Throughout I have concentrated on the language of hypersexuality along with a passion for a lover seen in Cisneros’ poem. I have also analyzed devotion to another in a spiritual, otherworldly sense in “Vida.” But it is in “Love Portions” that another form of sexuality is shown, as a down to earth portrait of marriage, and a couple fighting over which of them will cook dinner. These three poems serve to represent a spectrum of sexuality within Latina literature through passion, commitment and devotion each of the female characters exhibits to the one they love; while breaking down stereotypical notions. Each of these Latina writers shows different

ways to combat and play with the language and concepts of sexuality and how women can drive influential work.

III: Comadres and Hermanas: Relationships within Sisterhoods

Nora de Hoyos Comstock, the founder of Comadres³⁵ Para Las Americas, an organization that connects women, describes the need for female bonds:

The concept is deeper than family, in a way. A person may not always be close to her siblings, but we all have best friends whom we know we can count on, regardless of what is going on in our lives or even if we no longer see them because we don't live close by. The memory of the comadre, and the relationship, is forever. (Lilley)

The need for sisterly bonds becomes significant outside the intimacy of a romantic relationship, ones based on love and nurturing between women through the formation of sisterhoods within biological familias³⁶ and outside them. The bonds built through sisterhood; be it through familia, friendship or intimate relationships, influence the ways in which Latinas deal with their home and sexuality. Language, therefore, marks an important tool within sisterhoods as a way of connecting sexuality, femininity, and building familia in Latina culture.

In this chapter, I will be analyzing the female relationships in two books; the first is *How the Garcia Girls Lost Their Accents*. In Julia Alvarez's novel the Garcia Girls' parents constantly refer to their daughters as "the four girls," showing the ways the girls

³⁵ Ana Castillo defines comadre as: "having others sometimes care for us—even in small ways—it replenishes our energy and positive feelings about ourselves that we need as mothers" (191).

³⁶ In Alvarez's "Author's Note" for *A Wedding in Haiti* she refers to the journey through Haiti while visiting a friend's wedding as: "an opportunity to discover my neighbor country, who was and still is 'the sister I hardly knew.'" Sisterly bonds to country of origin would also be another way to look at human connection.

have become an amalgamation, signifying the deep bond they have developed. Alongside Alvarez's novel is Cristina Garcia's *Dreaming in Cuban*, an example of how broken sisterhoods impact the transition to new lifestyles and homes. Lourdes and Felicia's relationship becomes fractured due to overt sexuality and assumed mistakes. Both books show the different ways women deal with their sisters and the impact it has on their lives inside the Dominican Republic and Cuba and outside their home countries in the United States. First, I will concentrate on existing sisterly bonds and the role they play while the second sections examine the ways sexuality can negatively affect sisterhoods. I look to analyze the ways Latinas become known as "Other," and how that influences the sexual choices Latinas make based on sisterly bonds.

One aspect of the concept of comadres derives from what Gloria Anzaldua describes as "nos/otras³⁷" or a way of describing how "Other" can bond women together in a variety of ways. "Others" can find mutual affinities through one another based on being "nos/otras," thereby making connections with other women and developing family-like relationships. Bringing familia into the picture is the beginning of understanding female relationships, as Anzaldua describes: "One ends up living in a different physical and symbolic environment while retaining the former 'home' culture and position. After leaving the home culture's familiar cocoon, you occupy other ideological space, begin seeing reality in new ways" (71). Which is all entirely true, but there always remains a safety net to return to those relationships and to go home as a way of dealing with "nos/otras" and the feelings of "Otherness." Comadres and hermanas make that return

³⁷ Anzaldua defines nos/ostros as: "The Spanish word "nostros" means "us." I see this word with a slash (rajadura) between "nos" (us) and "ostros" (others), and use it to theorize my identity narrative of 'nos/otras'" (79).

possible, in ways such as maintaining relationships when living as “Other” or outsider, when at times other options might not be possible, especially when strained relationships between mother/daughter or father/daughter exist. Even times when being away from the “home culture’s familiar cocoon” allows for a continued bond beyond romantic or friendly relationships.³⁸

Another aspect of “nos/otras” derives from identity and how we interact with our environment. Anzaldúa describes personality as a continuum, which remains in flux as aspects with constant modifications: “Identity, as consciously and unconsciously created, is always in process—self interacting with different communities and worlds. Identity is relational. Who and what we are depends on those surrounding us, a mix of our interactions with our alrededores/ environments, with new and old narratives” (69). Since “identity is relational” sisterhood works as a way of stabilization and grounding for the obstacles of daily life, as well as a way of dealing with “nos/otras.” Language and identity are ways of putting self into perspective with our “alrededores” as Anzaldúa points out, just as this can be about dealing with the new and the old. Hermanas and comadres become a tool for dealing with these various aspects.

Beyond blood-related hermanas come comadres as a part of Latina sisterhood. As Comstock describes comadres are relationships that run deeper than sisterhoods, they become more like female partners and are alliances built outside of family roots. Chicana writer Ana Castillo discusses in her essay “Toward the Mother-Bond Principle” different

³⁸ Not only in good times, but in the bad as well, such as when families might not be a resource: “Lesbian and bisexual minority women face tremendous prejudice and discrimination and often violence both in society at large and within their communities of color, mainly owing to homophobic beliefs” (Arevalo 86).

types of familial bonds women can have throughout their lives, some of these include relationships with mom or dad, other times when motherless daughters or motherless mothers are involved other circumstances occur. In these situations, relationships and relying on other women becomes imperative, which is where comadres develop: “The comadre has often served as a confidante and social ally. She is loyal to you in your ongoing struggles with lover, family, society, and that is a special relationship to have indeed. Sometimes she is the only person in our lives who understands us” (191). The relationship with a comadre moves beyond merely a friend as a “confidante and social ally” this is someone who has your back on all fronts. As a woman who becomes “the only person...who understands us” the bond between sharing and giving grows stronger than other familial or friendly ties, even those of a romantic nature.

Castillo continues to illustrate the imperative character of the comadre relationship by showing the absolute power the links between these women has on one another. When it comes to depths of what a comadre will do for her sister, Castillo describes the far-reaching extent one will go to: “our ideal source for sensitive demonstrations of affection and concern. A comadre can massage your feet, wash your hair; she can read out loud to you from a novel or poetry. She can come over and cook a meal or rock you to sleep” (192). A comadre is a woman you can lean on, she will be there for everything as Castillo points out, not just having your back, but “massaging your feet” to “rocking you to sleep” at the moments when “affection and concern” are needed most. A comadre is a woman who is there for all the intense moments and is willing to do all to be supportive of her sister.

English and Women Studies scholar Helena Michie takes the analysis of why bonds with sisters differ through the use of feminism to understand father/daughter relationships. When sisters and comadres choose the female bond over a father/daughter relationship, a cause can be: “Sisterhood projects a series of daughters who usurp the function and privilege of the father by reproducing themselves. In choosing sisterhood over daughterhood, feminists have turned their gaze horizontally and have chosen—or tried to choose—to mirror each other and not the father³⁹” (55). Though this problem does not derive from feminism, the issue remains that a father/daughter relationship may not hold the same weight as the female/female bond could, one that even mother/daughter may not withstand (especially in instances where the mother is not present for whatever reason). Michie’s theory establishes the ways women bond against patriarchy through feminism: “Perhaps more fundamentally, motherhood and the maternal body have been seen as the location of language and self, the place where the female subject and the female narrative ‘I’ are produced and reproduced” (56). But moving beyond the familial ties can alter a Latina by subverting machismo or marianismo. At times, transcending the male/female relations, with father/daughter or even male/female romantic relationships can lead to empowerment through female bonds and camaraderie.

One example of this mentality developed in Esmeralda Santiago’s memoir *When I Was Puerto Rican*, where she discusses the disappointment found at times in the relationship held with her father. In one instance, Esmeralda states how she has come to view the pinnacle of masculinity in her life: “Men, I was learning, were *sinverguenzas*,

³⁹ When discussing Maureen Murdock, Castillo describes the difference in father/mother/daughters relationships as: “Somehow mother’s approval doesn’t matter as much; father defines the feminine, and this affects her sexuality, her ability to relate to men, and her ability to pursue success in the world” (189).

which meant they had no shame and indulged in behavior that never failed to surprise women but caused them much suffering” (29). Even from a young age when Esmeralda discusses her dad, she does so in a negative way because he disappears for days with no word, leaving her and her mom alone with her siblings. Though young Latinas may not have a fully formed basis for sex, they learn how disappointing men can become, serving as a type of lesson in what to expect from sexuality. Though this is again living up to the stereotype, it shows the importance of bonds between women, as they share and deal with the problem at hand, while experiencing affection and understanding in a form that might not otherwise be available to them (i.e. the men in their life). Therefore the comadre and sisterhood relationship remains paramount to a woman’s life.

Finally, the ways in which women can define language and communication amongst themselves can differ in positive ways. Sociologist Gloria Gonzalez-Lopez refers to creative ways for women to subvert the norms of female sexuality in Latina culture.⁴⁰ Changing of language can help women find expression of desire: “My activist friend then explained that while she had been in heterosexual relationships in the past, she was in a lesbian relationship at present, and accordingly, she used the conjugation of *estar* in the first person while stating, “Ahora yo estoy lesbiana” (113). The women are effectively altering grammar to fit their needs. Gonzalez-Lopez continues discussing the distinction in grammar usage: “*Estas* and *eres* come from stem verbs *estar* and *ser*, respectively, and while both mean ‘to be’ in English, Spanish-speaking people use them selectively according to grammar rules that identify the temporary or permanent nature of

⁴⁰ The ability to subvert norms is important especially when dealing with machismo: “Latino men with more traditional gender role beliefs are more likely to engage in sexual coercion and less likely to feel comfortable communicating about sexual matters” (Arevalo 85).

the condition that is described in the sentence” (113). Therefore, Gonzalez-Lopez analyzes how women play with grammar as a benefit to altering their language as a way to fit their own needs in expressing sexuality⁴¹ on their terms. Doing so allows for outsiders to express and play with their confines and broaden what could be nominal boundaries.

Keeping Close Ties

To positively appreciate Hermana and comadre relationships, I will analyze the ways sisters connect over sexuality and gender in *How the Garcia Girls Lost Their Accents*. Alvarez’s novel sets up the Garcia family’s journey to America in a nonlinear way beginning with Yolanda’s adult trip back to the Dominican Republic. The story moves through their childhood life in New York and ends with their exile from the Island. Doing so shows Yolanda on her own, growing up with her sisters in New York and the building of their relationship as the book descends in time. The shared venture of moving from the Dominican Republic to America bonds the girls throughout their lives helping them to express and share their stories together. I will analyze the different ways sexuality and sisterhood present itself through the novel.

The relationship between the girls establishes the beginning of the book, even though Yolanda has reached adulthood. On a return trip to the Island, an adult Yolanda is encountered with questions about her family: “So how are *you four girls?*” Lucinda asks, a wink in her eyes. Back in their adolescent days during summer visits, the four girls used to shock their Island cousins with stories of their escapades in the states” (7). Lucinda’s

⁴¹ In Gonzalez-Lopez’s essay she refers to this practice as “heterosexual imaginary” or “a belief system that relies on romantic and sacred notions of heterosexuality in order to create and maintain the illusion of well-being” (113).

comment shows how the family has become accustomed to referring to the girls as one set with “you four girls” being the ultimate question. While Yolanda’s narration explains the excitement felt with “the girls” on the Island since they relate over gossip. Telling their stories as a group puts them together, but the fact that they associate with the states serves as a way of showing their differences from those on the Island. Thereby, displaying how they are “nos/otras” in New York compared to their home country the Dominican Republic. The sisters act as a group serving to protect themselves since they are close and continuously seen as the “the four girls,” rather than having individual identities as females.

Years before Yolanda’s trip to the Dominican Republic the girls are treated differently again not only by other Islanders but their family as well. Loss of identity after being away for so long has altered who Yolanda has become and the ways her family views her as American. Alvarez points out the differences between U.S. life and life on the island: “When he’s in the States, where he went to prep school and is now in college, he’s one of us, our buddy. But back on the Island, he struts and turns macho, needling us with the unfair advantage being male here gives him” (127). Lack of authenticity is not only Yolanda’s story but her cousin Munding’s as well. His need to create different identities as a way to fit in establishes in the duality from his home country and the one he now lives.

Munding’s willingness to shun his cousins becomes a way of dealing with “nos/otras” when he is around his male relatives while separating himself from the Garcia girls based on sex. Munding’s method of dealing with the issue harkens back to Anzaldúa’s previously described discussion, as well as Castillo’s. Double identities or

identities in flux prove to be helpful with race and sexuality as a way of deciphering differences in cultures, though they can also hinder relationships by dividing male and female, further separating an already small community. Continuing the connection of “the four sisters” allows them to remain insiders within their group, even when family turns against them, reinforcing Castillo’s theory of comadres and viewing them as a support system “you can lean on.” Developing the relationship between the four girls becomes highly important, especially when away from the Island and the stakes change.

Sexuality influences the sisterhoods in different ways for each of the girls; Yolanda and Fifi depict various aspects in opposite ends of the spectrum. Yolanda is virginal and romantically idealistic in matters of sexuality, even as she develops her independence while away at college she sees herself modestly compared to her boyfriend Rudy:⁴² “I was a virgin; I wasn’t one hundred percent sure how sex worked. That anyone should put all of this into a poem, a place I’d reserved for deep feelings and lofty sentiments” (93). At this stage in her life, Yolanda withholds her sexuality, whereas Rudy an American is more than willing to be bold about his sex. Yolanda being the third born has not entirely broken away from her families’ values or explored her sexuality, compared to her sister Fifi who is rebellious in nature, and can be practical about romantic notions concerning sex.

What does Yolanda’s lack of sexual knowledge say about how Latina’s perceive sexuality? Researchers Sandra Arevalo and Hortensia Amaro discuss in their article “Sexual Health of Latina/o Populations in the United States,” the impact of machismo on

⁴² Speaking to exoticness the sexual differences between Yolanda and Rudy: “the Latina body offered a tempting alter/native: an exotic object of imperial and sexual desire. Gendered, raced tropes framed debates about immigration, territorial expansion, and nationhood” (Mendible 8).

Latinas: “measuring of men’s masculinity by the number of sexual conquests and degree of sexual risk taking and the placing of full responsibility on women both to satisfy their male partner’s sexual requests and to avoid unwanted pregnancies—all while women are expected to be ignorant about sex facts” (81). Though Rudy is not Latino, he lives up to the ideal sexual male by exhausting his efforts to get Yolanda in bed. Yolanda lives up to the stereotype of “expecting to be ignorant about sex facts,” but is lucky that Rudy does not push further.

Parental communication plays a significant role in how teenagers view sex and in this case, it appears there has been a lack of discussion based on Yolanda’s ill-informed notions of sex. Whereas Fifi communicates with her sisters about concerns and interest in men, Yolanda remains quiet and subdued. Part of the reason being background and Catholic upbringing in Latina/o families: “For women from traditional Latina/o backgrounds, discomfort may stem from their observance of cultural norms,⁴³ which dictate that proper women should be ‘silent’ about these issues” (Romo 64). The desire to keep silent on sexual matters influences Yolanda’s naiveté towards the issue, limits her ability to voice her concerns with Rudy. Since Yolanda is not “one hundred percent sure” how sex works it is apparent she has not discussed the issue with Mami, her sisters, or other female relatives.⁴⁴ Having the ability to review the issue with other women

⁴³ “Latina mothers were unenthusiastic about communicating information beyond merely biological facts to their daughters; their communication was more moralistic and restrictive, which seemed to discourage daughters from confiding in them,” (Arevalo 81) another important reason for girls to engage with other females for safe sex discussions.

⁴⁴ One reason for Yolanda’s inability to talk about the matter is based on: “Infrequency or absence of discussion of sexuality topics can also stem from the adolescent’s hesitation to discuss these issues. Latina girls report that they sense their mother’s discomfort, which in turn makes daughters feel ashamed about asking questions” (Romo 64). The statement

increases knowledge while allowing for a safe space to communicate, as families remain the prime place for girls to have thorough discussions.

On the other side of the sexual discussion is Yolanda's sister Fifi, who the sisters are drawn together to keep her from making a mistake while on the Island. In this instance, the sisters force Fifi into using condoms as a way of protecting her since they realize she will have sex with her boyfriend, Manuel: "We keep warning her and worrying over her until she promises us—on pain of our betrayal: 'We'll tell on you, we will!'—that she won't have sex with Manuel unless she gets some contraception first. Which is highly unlikely" (123). Though the sisters are forceful with Fifi, it remains in her best interest as a way of keeping her from getting pregnant and marrying at a young age. Communicating with Fifi about safe sex practices remains important: "Another reason that the mothers are satisfied with knowing that their daughters discuss these topics with other relatives—for example, aunts, sisters, and cousins" (Romo 64). Sisters and comadres look out for one another;⁴⁵ in this case, Fifi was kept from trouble or a mistake because of her sisters, illustrating the importance of female communication concerning sex.⁴⁶ Keeping Fifi from making this mistake becomes a way for the sisters to subvert machismo and empower the girls by standing up for the right to say no to sex if needed.

also shows why it remains important for girls to have someone to discuss the issue with, even if it cannot be the mother.

⁴⁵ "A broader range or a greater number of sexual topics discussed between parents and adolescents was shown to be linked to fewer adolescent sexual episodes, increased efficacy of condom use, and more consistent contraceptive use," (Romo 65) though it is not parents in this case, but sisters, it holds true that communication about sex helps.

⁴⁶ The idea that the girls brought up safe sex and condoms remains very important: "Teens who discuss condom use with their mothers before their first sexual intercourse are more likely to use condoms than those who did not have such discussions or had them after becoming sexual active" (Arevalo 80).

It is Fifi who later ends up married and pregnant to Otto after leaving home and her sisters who remain by her side. At one point Mami tells the story of Fifi and Otto's meeting, she states: "Anyhow she meets this German man Otto in a Peruvian market, who can't speak a word of Spanish but is trying to buy a poncho. She bargains for him, and he gets his poncho for practically nothing. Well, just like that, they fell for each other...and here they are, parents" (59). Mami's story is a glossed over version of the details that paint her daughter in a good light. Whereas the conversation changes when Fifi discusses meeting Otto with her sisters, Carla comments: "And [they] made love the first night," Carla teases. The four girls laugh. "Except that part isn't in Mami's version" (62). Though Mami may appear accepting of her daughter's husband and her grandchild, her lack of the full story or naïveté to what occurred once again show the need to hide or not discuss sexuality between mothers and daughters. At the same time, it shows Fifi's acceptance of her sexuality and ability to discuss the subject with her sisters a group who often speak more freely about sex.

The discomfort that often comes from a frank discussion of sex and sexuality can be overwhelming for Latina mothers, but not sisters. Yolanda points out the feelings most Latina mothers have about sex: "And she knew her mother did not believe in sex for girls" (46). Researchers Laura F. Romo, Erum Nadeem, and Claudia Kouyoumdjian found in their study of parent-adolescent communication that women should remain confused concerning sex as a way of appearing chaste (66). The Garcia girls' confusion and lack of information (or Mami's unwillingness to admit her girls have sex) on sexuality is, unfortunately, typical in Latina/o homes. For instance, Esmeralda Santiago's lack of sexual knowledge in *When I Was Puerto Rican* shows in the discussion held

between Santiago and neighbor Gloria: “But until Gloria asked, I’d never put it together that in order for me and my four sisters and two brothers to be born, Papi had to do to Mami what roosters did to hens, bulls did to cows, horses did to mares. I shuddered” (121). Again Esmeralda’s lack of information makes sense since Mami does not openly broach the subject with her daughter, but having another female to discuss the issue with opens her eyes, much like the *Garcia Girls* do with one another.

Similar to *Garcia Girls*, comadre comes through in Ana Castillo’s *The Mixquiahuala Letters*, a novel that uses a set of letters from Teresa to Alicia to express life and love, with the ability to read the letters in different sequences based on “mood.”⁴⁷ In the letters, Teresa tells of her bond with Alicia and how much she has come to mean to her: “Our first letters were addressed and signed with the greatest affirmation of allegiance in good faith passion bound by uterine comprehension. In sisterhood. In solidarity. A strong embrace. Always. We were not to be separated (24). “Letter Three” speaks to the bond Teresa feels towards Alicia because they are women and joined through “uterine comprehension.” What Teresa and Alicia have goes beyond what Teresa feels for her husband, which becomes disconnected even though they are legally bound to one another. Just as the Garcia sisters are an amalgamation, even when they are apart, Teresa views her relationship with Alicia as sisterly or a comadre relationship, based on solidarity and embrace.

The sisterly relationships in both novels can be tumultuous at times, as all sisterhoods are apt to being. At the end of “Letter Three,” Teresa points out the rocky

⁴⁷ For the purposes of this essay, I read the sequence “For the cynic.” The order of the letters affects the story. The relationship between Teresa and Alicia has peaks and valleys like all intimate bonds.

moments within the relationship: “We begged for the other’s visit and again the battle resumed. We needled, stabbed, manipulated, cut, and through it all we loved, driven to see the other improved in her own reflection” (29). So how does all of this relate to sisterhood? Teresa has found a *comadre*, a partner, in Alicia that is beyond a typical female friendship; theirs is a relationship tested by the good and bad, thereby making it stronger. Teresa has found somebody she can inherently trust through good times and bad, which has brought them closer together and created a loving, lasting bond. It is the negative actions—needled, stabbed, manipulated, and cut—that show the value in the good. Teresa points out that the “other improved in her own reflection” as a way of self-evaluation and lesson towards what is lacking and beneficial in each other. Ultimately, the positive outweighs the negative bringing them closer together as they maneuver through life’s obstacles.

Another example is Alvarez’s poem “Sisterhoods,” in it she dreams that her sisters have voted to throw her out of the family. When she has awoken from the dream Alvarez muses on what being disconnected from the sisters would mean: “what redeeming purpose can there be/ when my own sisters disinherit me?” (lines 18-9). Ultimately, in *Garcia Girls* and *The Mixquiahuala Letters* the answer is there are no “redeeming purposes” for the sisters disinheriting her. The Garcia sisters and Teresa/Alicia’s relationships are similar through the need and power that forms with intimate female connections. Though it may be rough at times, the empowerment and strength through female relationships helps in deciphering issues of sexuality, love, and life.

The Cost of Separation

In her memoir, *A House of My Own*, Sandra Cisneros discusses the loneliness of growing up without sisters. In her essay, “Only Daughter” Cisneros shows the difference in life without sisters: “I was/am the only daughter and *only* a daughter. Being an only daughter in a family of six sons forced me by circumstance to spend a lot of time by myself because my brothers felt it beneath them to play with a girl in *public*” (91). By not having the sisterly bond Cisneros kept to herself when friends were unavailable or her hermanos often developed, as boys do, a group of their own. “By circumstance” growing up with brothers left her alone majority of the time, similar to Lourdes’ daughter Pilar, in *Dreaming in Cuban*. In the novel, Pilar is an only child and is left to play by herself.⁴⁸ Though having solo moments has its positives and negatives, the time without sisters apparently left its mark.

Though *Dreaming In Cuban* does not allow the reader to “see” the sister’s relationship in the same ways Alvarez’s novel does, Garcia still manages to identify the ways in which Lourdes and Felicia struggle how the environment affects their relationship. One of the ways the sisters’ lags in relationship develops through assimilation. Lourdes’ negative view of Cuba, based on her life in New York, alters her view of her home country and family, at one point she states: “Immigration has refined her, and she is grateful. Unlike her husband, she welcomes her adopted language, its possibilities for reinvention...She wants no part of Cuba, no part of its wretched carnival

⁴⁸ Her current opinion of sex also helps considering the reaction Lourdes holds in calling Pilar a “whore” when she doesn’t answer her phone while away at college (168). In this instance, Lourdes tries to diminish Pilar’s sexuality, similar to how she has shut off her own feelings. This also speaks to Pilar’s life as an only child and her inability to share these feelings and stories with her sisters; Pilar’s story is similar to Cisneros’ real life desire to express herself with a Hermana or comadre.

floats creaking with lies, no part of Cuba at all, which Lourdes claims never possessed her” (73). In this instance, Lourdes has become so attached to New York and the culture that she cannot see herself moving back to the island, even if that means being there for her family and her sister Felicia. By creating this mentality for herself, Lourdes feels like an insider, rather than “nos/otras.”⁴⁹ Therefore, Lourdes is willing and able to cut herself off from the ties of comadre and power of hermanas by severing the connection with Felicia and her mother, Celia.

One of the reasons Lourdes and Felicia share a strained relationship progresses through sex and how each views sexuality. Lack of discussion leads to confused feelings toward desire as Lourdes and Felicia advance in life. Instead of dealing head-on with the issues placating her, Lourdes uses sex and food as a way of coping. While her father is on his deathbed Lourdes sexual appetite becomes unquenchable: “Rufino’s body ached from the exertions. His joints swelled like an arthritic’s. He begged his wife for a few nights’ peace but Lourdes’s peals only became more urgent, her glossy black eyes more importunate” (21). In this instance, Lourdes uses sex as a way of dealing with her father being on his deathbed and his “arching from the exertions” becoming the emotional pain she takes on. Not having Felicia or another female to discuss this loss with causes Lourdes to find unhealthy ways of dealing with the grief.

Lourdes need to use sex as a tool for pain relies on stereotyping. Professor of Ethnic Studies Deborah R. Vargas establishes in her study of Latina sexuality in popular culture: “In a U.S. context, then, representations of Latina sexuality as hot-blooded and excessive become the markers of what is morally wrong, set against the good morals and

⁴⁹ An interesting perspective since others might not perceive her as an insider, so how much does this perception cost Lourdes?

hegemonic U.S. citizenship values of non-Latino whites” (121). Though Lourdes has good morals and values, the display of excessive sexuality plays into the stereotype, thereby establishing her as “Other,” an amusing irony based on her perception that she is an insider. Her inability to discuss her problems with her sister allow for “excessive” sexuality to be the answer, rather than looking to female empowerment and consoling.

Lourdes inability to communicate with her sister is about subverting the *mariansmo* stereotype. Lourdes longs to be seen as strong because she was raped while living in Cuba, by not dealing with it, she views herself as resilient and strong willed. Consistent with Vargas, Castillo discusses stereotypes and generalizations in Latina sexuality: “A sexual woman was a woman begging rape, begging vulnerability to society, begging to be treated as nothing more than as what she was born: a female who merits no respect for her emotions, her mind, her person” (123). As a way of combating the “female who merits no respect” notion, Lourdes refuses to communicate with the women she needs most: her mother, daughter, and her sister. Rather than being seen as weak, Lourdes would prefer to push her greatest assets away, preferring to speak with her dead father and put all of her energy into the bakery.

Not dealing with her grief forces Lourdes to move to the other side of the spectrum, reverting to her old ways of bottling her emotions inside. After spending time being overtly sexual, Lourdes participates in abstinence: “She hasn’t had relations with Rufino since her father died. It’s as if another woman had possessed her in those days, a whore, a life-craving whore who fed on her husband’s nauseating clots of yellowish milk” (169). Lourdes develops such a negative depiction of sexuality after her father passes away. Her reaction to sex becomes a radical aspect of how she was acting before,

the problem alleviating itself through a comadre or Hermana relationship. As opposed to being “nos/otras” Lourdes could be an insider within her close circle of female relationships, allowing for open communication and healing to take place, as these links allow for “confidantes and social allies” (Castillo); allowing for confidence in sexuality. Lourdes once again points out the negative aspects of lack of communication, which can also be seen in *Garcia Girls*, although in this case has a greater effect.

On the opposite end of the spectrum, Felicia is a free spirit concerning her sexuality, not beating herself up over sex like Lourdes, although she continues to lead herself into dangerous sexual situations. After meeting Hugo for the first time, Felicia openly engages in sex with him and does so in a violent matter: “Felicia learned what pleased him. She tied his arms above his head with their underclothing and slapped him sharply when he asked. “You’re my bitch,” Hugo said, groaning. When they met again late in hurricane season, Felicia was seven months pregnant” (80). What does this say about Felicia and her sexuality? What does it mean that she ended up pregnant and irrational? That she tried to kill Hugo? Asking these questions helps understanding why Celia says: “I’m very worried about Felicia. She’s left high school and wants to work. She takes the bus to Havana every afternoon and doesn’t come back until late at night. She tells me she’s looking for a job. But there’s only one job in the city for fifteen-year-old girls like her” (164). Felicia disregards her own health and well-being because she does not communicate with other women.⁵⁰ Felicia’s situation is similar to Yolanda and

⁵⁰ Because Felicia and Hugo have a dysfunctional relationship and also fail to communicate and end up pregnant after their first sexual encounter is: “the norms of *respeto* and *confianza* that should exist within a couple would be violated if the woman asked her partner to use a condom” (Arevalo 84).

Fifi's, whereas they remain a positive image of female communication; Felicia and Lourdes' toxic relationship show the reasons why the discussion is imperative.

To help understand Felicia's actions one must realize how "Other" has been deemed exotic. Deborah R. Vargas once again discusses stereotypes in Latina culture: "Exotic sexuality has been represented in roles that reinforce a sense of sultry beauty rooted in some distant land, signified by the dark primitive Other" (123). Making Latinas exotic is nothing new as Vargas also discusses actress Rita Moreno⁵¹ or the depictions of Barbie,⁵² both illustrate the ways Latinas are molded as exotic based on "Other."

Understanding these generalization makes more sense when comparing Lourdes and Felicia differing and at times daring views on sexuality. In one instance, Lourdes describes the ways Felicia's passion has become extreme: "Nothing Felicia ever did would surprise her. Since they were children, her sister would do anything to be the center of attention, even take off her blouse in front of the neighborhood boys and charge them a nickel apiece to touch her breasts" (224). Felicia has always been on the extreme side of sexuality as a way of dealing with her "Otherness," whether it is through showing her breasts, going off to work as an escort or becoming pregnant by Hugo after their first sexual encounter. Either way, both sisters use sex to deal with the various obstacles they face, most likely because they did not have open conversations about sex with Celia or

⁵¹ Rita Moreno was: "the first Latina to win an Academy Award—consistently had to work against a publicity machine that subsumed her under such descriptors as 'fiery love machine,' 'Puerto Rican firecracker,' and 'Rita the cheetah'" (123).

⁵² When choosing ethnic Barbies Mattel chose to be stereotypical: "In the Travel Adventure set, the dolls are dressed in stereotypical folkloric Mexican fashion—Barbie wears a traditional tehuana skirt, and Ken is incongruently dressed in full charro attire, not unlike souvenir dolls typically sold in tourist shops and airports" (Goldman 266).

other females when they were children as Romo, Nadeem and Kouyoumdjian have pointed out.

Even though *Dreaming in Cuban* is a fictional tale one can only wonder how Lourdes and Felicia would be different if they embraced their sisterly connection. Cisneros reiterates the drawbacks of having brothers instead of sisters. In the essay, “Straw Into Gold” Cisneros speaks of her brother Henry (AKA Kiki) and the relationship they shared: “He played a major role in my childhood. We were bunk-bed mates. We were co-conspirators. We were pals. Until my oldest brother came back from studying in Mexico and left me odd woman out” (78). Though they shared a dynamic and close bond as soon as her older brother came home, Cisneros was once again left out. If she had sisters, in this instance, the lost connection with Henry would have been different and less jarring. Though her brothers are still family, their relationship is quite distinct from the one between the Garcia girls and their close bond.⁵³

One can only guess how different life would be if Cisneros had sisters or developed comadre relationships sooner. Lack of hermanas or comadre relationships can have varying effects on women as *Dreaming in Cuban* points out with sisters Lourdes and Felicia. Their inability to connect and share their lives has a lasting negative effect, totally opposite to the relationship between “the four sisters.” Unfortunately, Lourdes loses the ability through her own stubbornness when Felicia dies, leaving her stuck with the bakery and discussing her problems with her dead father. *Dreaming in Cuban* shows

⁵³ Cisneros also discusses the lackadaisical feelings her brothers have when talking about their alleged half-sister in “Natural Daughter.” In the essay, she muses over who her sister turned out to be, how she grew up and why her father never discussed her existence: “The face of this girl, my natural sister, traveled back to me, *una paloma blanca*, fluttering across the expanse of forty years” (247). Lack of answers and familial communication haunt Cisneros.

how language and communication go hand-and-hand and how lacking in either furthers the divide in “nos/otras.”

Conclusion

In her poem, “Sisterhood” Julia Alvarez ponders a dream where her sisters disinherit her. In the poem she wonders what life would be like without her sisters: “So I lay/ in darkness wondering what becomes of us/ when we’re beyond the pale of human love?” (lines 24-6). *How the Garcia Girls Lost Their Accents* and *Dreaming in Cuban* show two very different sisterhoods, with *Dreaming* a depiction of strayed female relationships. Having hermanas and comadres means not having to live without sisterly bonds, just as Alvarez realizes when she wakes from her dream. Though difficulties arise, sometimes all a sister needs is a reminder of the remaining connection, which at times requires a little creativity.

In “Geographies of Selves—Reimagining Identity” Gloria Anzaldua spends time with her “favorite tree, what I call La Virgen’s tree” as a way of finding “strength, energy, and clarity to fuel este trabago artistico” (67). Being in nature and next to the tree empowers her to “este trabago artistico” or a means of finding creativity and recharging her batteries. Doing so leads Anzaldua to describe the ways in which trees represent life, family, and sisterhood: “Roots represent ancestral/racial origins and biological attributes; branches and leaves represent the characteristics, communities, and cultures that surround us, that we’ve adopted, and that we’re in intimate conversation with. Onto the trunk de mi arbol de la vida I graft a new tribalism” (67). Branches not only act as a symbol of “communities and culture that surround us” they are a way of showing sisterhoods developed through comadres and hermanas. The “trunk de mi arbol de la vida,” is a new

tribalism, not only to show the old narratives of family, but the new ones made through close friendships as culture and environment adapt and grow. Having the trunk supports the branches and leaves, which is exactly why comadres and hermanas are in Latina culture: a place of support and comfort.

Though one has family and friends, there is nothing quite like an intimate friendship that thoroughly understands and is always there for you. Ana Castillo describes in “Mother-Bond” the need for a comadre when she was a mother of young children based on alienation she felt from society (191). Castillo discusses the ways in which comadres fill the void in ways other intimate relationships may not: “Nothing in dominant society mirrors our experiences, so even when we have a lover/partner and family in our lives, the loneliness does not entirely go away...sometimes, our only real affirming source is a close friend” (191). A hermana, comadre, or whatever name you would like to give her fills certain aspects in our mind and heart; as a way of nurturing and affirming commonalities (or at times differences). *How the Garcia Girls Lost their Accents, Dreaming in Cuban, The Mixquiahuala Letters*, not to mention the other authors mentioned, show the various ways Latina sisterhoods affect women. They demonstrate the power of language and communication in having a close friend by supporting, comforting, and loving their sisters.

Parting Words: An Epilogue

Working on this project began as a mandate, a necessary element in finishing a master's degree, but ultimately became a love affair with several Latina authors. Granted I might not be Latina, but my affection and admiration for these women have inspired and made it possible to complete this journey. Often it felt unattainable, but writers like Sandra Cisneros, Gloria Anzaldua and Julia Alvarez use of words and language would drive me to push forward. Throughout this thesis, I've looked to examine language and words in Latina literature as a way of understanding sex and gender concerning what makes a "real" female body, overtly vs. virginal sexuality stereotypes and the importance of hermanas and "las comrades." Looking to these Latina authors and their stories allowed me to give birth to this work while maintaining hope for at least one person to see Latinas through a new lens and gaining a different perspective.

Working on this project reinforced the ability to analyze writing in new and exciting ways as an important virtue to gain perspective. Gloria Anzaldua's essay "Putting Coyolxauhqui⁵⁴ Together: A Creative Process," discusses the supernatural and spiritual aspects often acquired in the case of writing. Throughout the writing process, the desire to open yourself up to nature to find words and language becomes apparent: "You become aware of a supernatural being. It shares with you a language that speaks of what is other; a language shared with the spirits of trees, sea, wind, and birds; a language that you'll spend many of your writing hours trying to translate into words" (101). Not only

⁵⁴ Anzaldua tells the Aztec myth of Coyolxauhqui: "the moon goddess, a warrior woman. Making her the first human sacrifice, her brother Huitzilopochtli, the war god, decapitated her, dismembered her body, and scattered the limbs. Organizing the parts into a unified whole and drafting a full version of el cuento is the act of putting Coyolxauhqui back together again" (107). Anzaldua's point being that writing is a process of putting the pieces together, just as Coyolxauhqui was put back together.

does this statement speak to the power of writing, but I think it also ties into the spirituality of Judith Ortiz Cofer's poem "Vida." It allows for the life of nature and poetry to come together while showing the power language has for one's well-being. While Gabriel acts as a spiritual mainstay for the narrator, likewise the power of language and the way it imbues life through all that surrounds us remains crucial, not only as a way through the poem but also in the ways we encounter life. The ability to share oneself with the world opens an individual up to language, words, and self while breaking from stereotypes and tired notions of how people should be.

Another method for looking at the power of language in society comes from writer Sandra Cisneros' memoir *A House of My Own*. Cisneros discusses how Merce Rodoreda⁵⁵ inspires her to write: "Rodoreda writes about feelings, about characters so numbed or overwhelmed by events they have only their emotions as a language. I think it's because one has no words that one writes, not because one is gifted with language. Perhaps because one recognizes wisely enough the shortcomings of language" (123). These imperfections make language imperfect, even when powerful; thereby showing the complicated relationship one has with words. "Emotions as a language" feeds into Anzaldua's comments on nature and style as the individual spends hours working to write the perfect balance of what one experiences. "Because no one has the words" they must take the time to improve and mold them, just as a society must work at learning and growing in understanding the complex stories Latinas have to offer.

⁵⁵ Merce Rodoreda wrote *The Time of the Doves*, when discussing her later in the essay Cisneros describes her as: "naming the unnameable that attracts me to Rodoreda, this woman, this writer, hardly little, adept at listening to those who do not speak, who filled with great emotions, albeit mute to name them" (123), further showing the shortcomings of language.

How Could Perceptions Change?

I think the question that continues to come up is “how have depictions of Latina/os changed in media and literature?” To fully understand who Latinas are, casting a wide net of representation must occur; otherwise, stereotypes become the norm, as the “La Virgen/La Malinche” dichotomy points out. Writer and editor for “TheMarySue.com,” Teresa Jusino discusses Latinx and their representation in media:

When we talk about Latinx representation in American film and television, we should extend the word “diversity” to apply to storytelling as well as to roles and cast. The reason why Latinx are the largest ethnic minority in the country is in large part because more Latinx are being born here. That means the ties to elsewhere might not be as strong as they once were.

Jusino brings up a valid discussion that Latina/os are a significant part of the country, with a growing presence, yet they remain overwhelmingly underrepresented in television and film. Though shows like *Orange Is the New Black*, *Jane the Virgin*, and *Queen of the South* feature multiple Latinas as characters; these shows are merely a drop in the bucket. Their presence does not make up for the hundreds of other shows mainly cast with white actors and actresses. Jusino also gets at an interesting discussion specifically being Latinx men and women who are born here and deserve media representation, along with immigrant stories as well.

Though Jusino discusses part of the problem, not only will Latina/os need to be represented more often in the media, but these stories will also need to be diverse regarding the types of stories examining sexuality and gender, besides race. Scholar of

Women and Latino Studies Carlos Decena discusses the importance of a media presence for Latinas:

More critical attention needs to be paid to the racialization of U.S. Latinos and Latinas in U.S. mass media and to the complicity of Latina/o media workers themselves in reworking and subverting stereotypical portrayals of these populations as well as reproducing normative heterosexuality, traditional family values, and racial hierarchies that privilege whiteness. (283)⁵⁶

Julia Alvarez's *How the Garcia Girls Lost Their Accents* and Cristina Garcia's *Dreaming in Cuban* feed into Decena's point of narratives about family values and racial hierarchies. Shows like *Orange Is the New Black* and *Jane the Virgin* also feature complex and diverse Latinas living complicated lives in both comedic and dramatic ways while showing comadres and the benefits of sisterhood. These are the types of stories that need to become the norm, rather than a rarity.

One particular aspect that needs more discussion is stories about Latina lesbianas, bisexual *mujeres*, and those who identify as trans or "butch."⁵⁷ Hopefully, with visible

⁵⁶ Latina/os make up a large chunk of moviegoers: "according to several studies, no group buys more movie tickets when compared with their proportion of the U.S. population than Latinos. In the Motion Picture Assn. of America's 2014 Theatrical Market Statistics report for U.S. and Canadian moviegoers, Latinos were 17% of the population but "oversampled" at 25% of North American frequent moviegoers" (Becerra). So why are they misrepresented or not represented at all?

⁵⁷ The difficulty with language also appears in labels: "Latina lesbian" must be used with caution for it may, in some contexts, signify mostly as a series of exclusions: not allowing bisexuals, not allowing transgender. For the purpose of this article, we have adopted the terms queer Latina and Latina WSW [women who have sex with women] to begin to account for the variation in the ways the word lesbian is claimed and contested" (Calvo 218).

transgender women in the public eye, such as Caitlyn Jenner and Laverne Cox, those discussions can occur more frequently,⁵⁸ as Decena points out:

It is even more ironic that there is so little research, given how important their contributions have been to the creation of spaces where Latinas and other women of color of diverse sexual and gender orientations can talk about and work through their understandings of sexual desires, gender expressions, and agency. (281)

Examining and discussing Latina sexuality and gender begins with safe spaces, but there must also be a greater desire in the public to have these conversations. Films and television with transgender characters is one way for the situation to become commonplace. Films like *The Skin I Live In* and television shows such as *Orange Is the New Black*, establish a fantastical and terrifying fictional situation to have a safe environment conducive to greater discussions of sex and gender in a realistic sense. Allowing for lesbianas, bisexual *mujeres* or any LGBTQ stories to be part of the discussion offers an opportunity to appreciate the whole picture apart from one based solely on heterosexuality.

Final Thoughts

In a letter titled “I Come with No Illusions,” Cuban writer Mirtha Quintanales, asks the question: “What does it mean to say to myself that only other Latina, bicultural lesbian women can satisfy my needs? What are the implications of separating myself

⁵⁸ In an interview, Shiri Eisner discusses the need for conversations on bisexuality and race: “When you create intersectional spaces, you really have to pay attention to identities, to power and hierarchies, being able and willing to listen to people who are intersectionally marginalized, and center those voices, rather than centering privileged people” (Zak).

from American women and creating a separate community with women I identify as my counterparts” (148)? In the letter, Quintanales is wondering why she must shut herself off to other opportunities not only to learn about others but herself as well. Separating herself will only cut her off from possibilities rather than propel her forward in the community. Shortly after Quintanales answers why this ultimately is the wrong choice, she answers: “It means, for one thing, that I am admitting failure. Failure to adjust, adapt, change, transcend differences” (148). It means that Quintanales will not evolve creatively, through her community, and worse yet her identity will suffer from stagnation.

To turn Quintanales comments on its side forces the reader to ask: What are the implications of separating myself from Latina women and creating an independent community with other females I identify as my counterparts? I finish this project with Quintanales as a way of once again driving home the importance of growth through learning. Not giving up, means moving beyond failure as one works through differences, which is the only way to work through the current events that revolve in the news and dealing with the lack of representation in various forms of media. The ability to learn about people and culture is a way to come together as a worldwide community of comadres. Embracement becomes a way of learning a language and putting words into writing. Embracement becomes a way of “adjusting, adapting, changing and transcending” stereotypes and tired notions of how things should be.

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