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# Border Crossings and Transnational Movements in Sandra Cisneros' Spatial Narratives Offer Alternatives to Dominant Discourse

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FLORIDA INTERNATIONAL UNIVERSITY

Miami, Florida

BORDER CROSSINGS AND TRANSNATIONAL MOVEMENTS IN SANDRA  
CISNEROS' SPATIAL NARRATIVES OFFER ALTERNATIVES TO DOMINANT  
DISCOURSE

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of

the requirements for the degree of

MASTER OF ARTS

in

ENGLISH

by

Raquel D. Vallecillo

2017

To: Dean Michael R. Heithaus  
College of Arts, Sciences and Education

This thesis, written by Raquel D. Vallecillo, and entitled Border Crossings and Transnational Movements in Sandra Cisneros' Spatial Narratives Offer Alternatives to Dominant Discourse, having been approved in respect to style and intellectual content, is referred to you for judgment.

We have read this thesis and recommend that it be approved.

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Martha Schoolman

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Ana Luszczynska, Major Professor

Date of Defense: March 30, 2017

The thesis of Raquel D. Vallecillo is approved.

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Dean Michael R. Heithaus  
College of Arts, Sciences and Education

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Andrés G. Gil  
Vice President for Research and Economic Development  
and Dean of the University Graduate School

Florida International University, 2017

## DEDICATION

In the front matter of her novel, *The Guardians*, Ana Castillo wrote the following:

“To all working for a world without borders and to all who dare to cross them.”

I dedicate my thesis to those who continue the work, continue to speak for the 11 million undocumented immigrants in this country, and to those who defy metaphorical and physical borders.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would like to thank my family, specially my mother, whose courage and love shaped my life and my opportunities. I extend my gratitude to my partner for his generosity and continuous encouragement during my years in graduate school and during the process of writing this thesis.

I'm eternally grateful to my thesis director, Dr. Luszczynska, for her unwavering support, por las ganas, y el ánimo when I could not keep writing nor believed that I could, and my committee members, Dr. Dhar and Dr. Schoolman, for their critical insight, patience, and kindness.

ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS

BORDER CROSSINGS AND TRANSNATIONAL MOVEMENTS IN SANDRA  
CISNEROS' SPATIAL NARRATIVES OFFER ALTERNATIVES TO DOMINANT  
DISCOURSE

by

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Florida International University, 2017

Miami, Florida

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My study aims to reveal how ideologies, the way we perceive our world, what we believe, and our value judgments inextricably linked to a dominant discourse, have real and material consequences. In addition to explicating how these ideologies stem from a Western philosophical tradition, this thesis examines this thought-system alongside selections from Sandra Cisneros' *Woman Hollering Creek* and *Caramelo* or *Puro Cuento*. My project reveals how Cisneros' spatial narratives challenge ideologies concerning the border separating the United States and Mexico, which proves significant as the project of decolonization and understanding of identity formation is fundamentally tied to these geographical spaces. Through the main chapters in this thesis, it is proposed that Cisneros' storytelling does not attempt to counter fixed ideas of spaces and identity or an alleged objective Truth and single History by presenting a true or better version, but offers alternative narratives as a form of resistance to dominant discourse.

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## INTRODUCTION

“The paradox is this: fear unites us, fear divides us. In a post-9/11 United States, with so much vitriol allowed in the media toward people who look like me, I no longer feel at home at home. You shouldn’t feel afraid in your own house.”  
–Sandra Cisneros, *A House of My Own*

“Nobody chooses to be an immigrant — circumstances force you to leave everything and everyone you know behind. And doing so leaves an everlasting mark. In my case, I still fear that I will lose everything in an instant, which is a common feeling among immigrants. I’ve also learned to coexist with my nostalgia for the scents, flavors and scenery of my former home. But the U.S. has offered me opportunities that Mexico couldn’t. These days I live with my arms outstretched, embracing both countries as I hop frequently between them...”  
–Jorge Ramos Avalos, “Reflections on 30 Years in Television,” *Fusion*

“The historical and the theoretical limits are intertwined.”  
–Jean-Luc Nancy, *The Inoperative Community*

The purpose of this project, specifically the introduction of my thesis, is to engage in an analysis of the country’s atmosphere in the aftermath of the 2016 election and examine the ideology publicized and used to define this country and the minority groups that have been vilified and victimized as a result. In addition, I examine the ways in which an anxiety or preoccupation with a pure national identity has, in turn, determined our understanding of what the border achieves, a stronger and safer America through closed borders as presented by dominant structures of power and a more unsafe nation and uncertain future for undocumented immigrants and minorities. Particularly, anxiety about border security has materialized as a result of the U.S. concern with the heavy influx of undocumented immigrants and immigrant communities who reside in the borderlands and metropolitan areas of the nation, which are changing the composition of the country’s population. Consequently, the concern over an enclosed nation and “authentic” Americanness has led to rumination on the past and on what has been lost,



and hence must be regained, e.g., the ideology put forth with the slogan “Make America Great Again.” Additionally, we must consider how our understanding of nationhood has emerged from and led to the subjugation of minorities and, as evidenced, continues to have real and material consequences. For this reason, my thesis is rooted in the material experiences of the Chicano community in the United States, regardless of their legal status, and how those experiences are informed by discourse and political systems that disseminate a particular ideology. A principal goal of my project is to illustrate how these ideologies or thought systems dependent on binaries influence the way we understand the world. In the ensuing chapters, I engage in an analysis of traditional Western metaphysical thought alongside selections from Sandra Cisneros’ *Woman Hollering Creek* and *Caramelo or Puro Cuento* as the spatial narratives contained challenge ideologies concerning the border separating the United States and Mexico.

The results of the 2016 United States presidential election revealed the country’s polarizing views regarding US-Mexico relations, the current immigration system, and the changing demographics and identity of the nation. However, the discord between the two major political parties, marked by the divergent messages and positions on a host of issues, was visible prior to Election Day; differences between the party candidates, Hillary Diane Rodham Clinton and Donald John Trump, surfaced since their respective presidential campaign announcements. During Trump’s campaign announcement in his home state of New York, on June 16<sup>th</sup>, 2015, he laid the foundation for his position and principal goals as a presidential nominee. Using former President Ronald Reagan’s 1980 presidential campaign slogan, “Make America Great Again,” Trump made clear that one of his key objectives was to keep immigrants or foreigners out of the nation. As he

announced his 2016 presidential run, he opened with controversial, critical allegations against people coming from south of the U.S. border with Mexico. He accused immigrants from Mexico and “South and Latin America” of not being the “best” or “right,” but people who come with a handful of problems, including smuggling drugs, bringing crime and being “rapists.”<sup>1</sup> In order to appeal to his supporters, throughout the campaign trail, Trump continued to use the same rhetoric when countering former President Barack Obama’s immigration policies and when speaking about undocumented immigrants living in the U.S. Although Trump’s anti-immigrant rhetoric received a lot of attention during the early weeks on the 2016 general election campaign, it is also important to consider that former presidents have enacted similar executive orders barring immigrants from the U.S. and have stated undocumented immigrants pose a great strain to the country’s economy by taking on jobs that American citizens would otherwise have or benefiting from the resources and aid the U.S. offers. Undoubtedly, the current

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<sup>1</sup> What follows is a section from the transcript published by *Times*, from Donald Trump’s Presidential Campaign Announcement Speech delivered on June 16<sup>th</sup>, 2015 in New York’s Trump Tower; he chose to announce his presidential run with a controversial opening that accused Mexico and other Latin American countries of not sending their “best” to the U.S.:

“When Mexico sends its people, they're not sending their best. They're not sending you. They're not sending you. They're sending people that have lots of problems, and they're bringing those problems with us. They're bringing drugs. They're bringing crime. They're rapists. And some, I assume, are good people.

But I speak to border guards, and they tell us what we're getting. And it only makes common sense. It only makes common sense. They're sending us not the right people. It's coming from more than Mexico. It's coming from all over South and Latin America, and it's coming probably— probably— from the Middle East. But we don't know. Because we have no protection and we have no competence, we don't know what's happening. And it's got to stop. And it's got to stop fast” (“Donald Trump’s Presidential Campaign Announcement Speech”).

immigration system and a possible immigration reform were key topics in most 2016 election speeches.

On the other hand, Democratic Party presidential nominee Hillary Clinton led her 2016 campaign with the slogan, “Stronger Together.” Her slogan signaled towards a nation of inclusivity, and when speaking about her immigration proposals she guaranteed undocumented immigrants a comprehensive immigration reform, with a path toward citizenship. In many of her campaign speeches, Clinton emphasized that American values are founded on diversity and the work of immigrants. At the National Immigrant Integration Conference in Brooklyn, on January 31<sup>st</sup>, 2016, Clinton presented a plan to strengthen immigrant families and maintained her conviction on the importance of immigrant work for the country’s economy:

We are a big country and we should never forget that and we shouldn’t let anybody on the public stage say that we are mean spirited, that we are going to build walls, mentally and physically, or that we are going to shut doors. We are a country where people of all backgrounds, all nations of origin, all languages, all religions, all races, can make a home. America was built by immigrants, and you know so well our economy depends on immigrants. Our future will be always written in part by immigrants. (“Remarks on Plan to Strengthen Immigrant Families at the National Immigrant Integration Conference in Brooklyn”)

The ideas she presented were in line with the rhetoric on immigration during Obama presidency and were more accepted among the present-day Democratic Party supporters. Conversely, while addressing his supporters in Phoenix, Arizona, on August 31, 2016, Trump presented his immigration plan, specifically to secure the nation’s borders and

deter illegal immigration. He claimed that it is the work of immigrants that have placed “working people, our forgotten working people” out of jobs. He expressed that the loss of jobs are a result of the wave of new immigrants, which has additionally impacted “wages, housing, schools, tax bills and ‘general living conditions’” of Americans (“Donald Trump’s Full Immigration Speech”). Trump led a newsworthy campaign as a result of his unconventional platform, even unpopular among the other Republican presidential candidates. The construction of a border wall along the U.S. Southwest, implementation of extreme vetting, withholding of federal grants to sanctuary cities, and increased deportation of undocumented immigrants were among the immigration proposals he advocated in his speeches. Although he had opponents from his own political party early in the campaign, Republicans generally supported his agenda once he became the party’s presidential candidate.

According to a national survey conducted by the *Pew Research Center*, a few months before Election Day, both parties presented significant disparities in their views on immigration, Republicans defended a stronger law enforcement and border security whereas Democrats supported a reform that would lead to a path to citizenship for undocumented immigrants living in the U.S.<sup>2</sup> The consensus of opinion between parties was on the jobs immigrants perform in the U.S., “71% say undocumented immigrants living in the United States mostly fill jobs citizens do not want, while just 24% say they

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<sup>2</sup> “Overall, 69% of Republicans say stronger law enforcement is the bigger priority, while fewer (27%) say the country should prioritize a path to citizenship for immigrants here illegally. Among Democrats, the reverse is true: An overwhelming majority (79%) prioritize a path to citizenship for immigrants here illegally, if they have to choose one approach, while 20% think stronger law enforcement and border security should be the priority” (“On Immigration Policy, Partisan Differences but Also Some Common Ground”).

mostly take jobs citizens want. About three-quarters of Americans (76%) say undocumented immigrants are ‘as honest and hard-working’ as U.S. citizens, while 67% say they are no more likely than U.S. citizens to commit serious crimes” (“On Immigration Policy, Partisan Differences but Also Some Common Ground”). In other words, the general agreement prior to Election Day, on the basis of the findings of this national survey, was that undocumented immigrants perform a necessary task for the country because these are jobs that U.S. citizens do not want, and undocumented immigrants do not steal jobs from them. In addition, the survey showed participants did not believe undocumented immigrants are criminals or a threat to the nation<sup>3</sup>, notwithstanding the facts and statements made by the Republican candidate during his presidential campaign. Months later and in an unexpected and eye-opening election night “Donald Trump won 304 electoral votes to Hillary Clinton’s 227... despite the fact that Clinton received nearly 2.9 million more popular votes than Trump in November’s [2016] election... Clinton won 65.8 million votes (48.25%) to almost 63 million (46.15%) for Trump, with minor-party and independent candidates taking the rest” (DeSilver). The Electoral College map, which depicted Donald Trump’s advantage in the election, revealed the views the majority of the nation and their adherence and support of Trump’s stance in a variety of issues, including immigration.

After a month in office, Trump presented executive orders on immigration that would increase deportation of undocumented persons. The Department of Homeland

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<sup>3</sup> The 2010 American Community Survey (ACS) data show “roughly 1.6 percent of immigrant males age 18-39 are incarcerated, compared to 3.3 percent of the native-born. This disparity in incarceration rates has existed for decades, as evidenced by data from the 1980, 1990, and 2000 decennial censuses” (Ewing et al.).

Security published two memoranda that described the new policies to improve border security and immigration enforcement. The main outcomes from these policies are the hiring of additional Border Patrol and Air & Marine agents to secure the US-Mexico border, hiring 10,000 additional Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) officers to implement the new immigration laws, and the reinstatement of the 287(g) program that would allow local law enforcement agencies to identify “criminal aliens” and act as ICE officers. The most significant part of these memoranda is the expansion of the classes or categories of undocumented people who would now be considered “criminals” and subsequently be at risk of deportation. According to the documents published by the Department of Homeland Security, “all those in violation of immigration law may be subject to immigration arrest, detention and, if found removable by final order, removal from the United States” (“DHS Implementation of the Executive Order”). Most importantly, it was made clear that undocumented people who have a pending criminal charge, committed an act that could possibly lead them to face a charge, possesses a criminal conviction, or committed a small violation, including driving without a license, can place them under the category of “criminals” and be subject to arrest, detention, and deportation. In an article published by *NPR*, “How Trump Criminalized 11 Million With A Stroke of His Pen,” the idea of symbolizing or embodying a criminal in this country just by crossing a border is positioned perfectly: “Because immigrants can technically face charges for entering the country illegally, Trump’s order potentially makes any immigrant in the U.S. illegally a deportation priority just by virtue of being present” (Florida). For this reason, under Trump’s executive order, 11 million undocumented immigrants in the U.S. could be detained and deported.

Executive orders have been placed and followed in the past; however, the 2016 presidential election has given birth to different, more hateful nation for Latinos living in the U.S., regardless of their legal status, U.S. and foreign born. Although former President Barack Obama deported more than 2.8 million undocumented immigrants during his eight years of presidency, more than the president before him, the people who were priority for deportation had committed serious crimes while in the U.S.<sup>4</sup>, and undocumented immigrants had never been vilified as they have during this past election and under Trump's administration. The surge of hate-crimes towards immigrants, notwithstanding their legal status, prior and after the election, is staggering. "Aside from its annual census of extremist groups, the [Southern Poverty Law Center] found that Trump's rhetoric reverberated across the nation in other ways. In the first 10 days after his election, the SPLC documented 867 bias-related incidents, including more than 300 that targeted immigrants or Muslims" ("Hate Groups Increase for Second Consecutive Year as Trump Electrifies Radical Right"). When the president of the United States labels and defines immigrants, specifically people who come from countries south of the U.S. border, as drug-dealers, criminals, and rapists and the source of job loss in the country, he is using his authority to motivate his supporters to ostracize and shut out these groups to "Make America Great Again." Many of the perpetrators of hate crimes since this past election have identified themselves as Trump supporters. Mark Potok, editor-in-chief of the *Southern Poverty Law Center*, quarterly journal, the *Intelligence Report* gave an

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<sup>4</sup> According to the Pew Research Center, former President Obama focused "exclusively on those [undocumented immigrants] who have been convicted of a crime; those deemed a threat to the public safety; and those who have recently crossed the border" (Gonzalez-Barrera and Hugo Lopez).

account on a hate crime that occurred before Election Day and had been instigated by Trump's rhetoric on immigrants:

In August 2015, two Boston men returning home late after a Red Sox game happened upon a homeless Mexican immigrant sleeping outside a commuter rail station. They beat him with a metal pipe, punched him repeatedly, urinated on him and called him a "wetback." Then they high-fived each other as they walked away, leaving Guillermo Rodriguez with broken ribs and fingers and other injuries.

When they were arrested a short time later, one of them, 38-year-old Scott Leader, told arresting officers, "Donald Trump was right. All these illegals need to be deported." Later, but long before they were sentenced to terms of two and three years, they whined that authorities only arrested whites, "never the minorities." ("The Trump Effect")

Guillermo Rodriguez is one of the several victims of hate crimes against immigrants. The number of hate crimes reported after Trump's presidential campaign announcement and after the election validates that this sudden organized hatred may have been emboldened by the language used to describe minorities and may have encouraged his supporters to speak against minorities and act on those views. What these incidents have taught us is that these ideologies of nationalism that are thought to be truths are detrimental to those that we consider Other—usually minorities—because they become victims of transgressions.

For example, in a recent documentary, *Hate Rising*, aired before the 2016 elections, Heidi Bierich, Director of the Intelligence Project for the Southern Poverty



Law Center, introduces Jared Taylor as the most important white nationalist who runs a magazine called *American Renaissance*. As founder and editor, Taylor holds annual conferences to bring extremists from all over nation. In these conferences, he lectures on the ways “white people are superior to black people and brown people.” In the documentary, Jorge Ramos, respected Latino journalist and *Univision* news anchor, interviews him to understand his agenda, now in the age of Trump. The dialogue below shows how ideologies of a national identity are defined by excluding minorities and the undocumented population:

Jared Taylor: All around the world wherever you look if you see conflict, people diligently slitting each other’s throats, whether it’s in the middle east or whether it’s in Africa, it’s because of diversity; diversity of ethnicity, of language, of religion, but primarily of race.

Jorge Ramos: So, you want to live in a white-only country?

Jared Taylor: Not necessarily white-only, but a country that is clearly based on a European model in which whites will basically remain the overflowing majority in perpetuity.

Jorge Ramos: OK. How do you achieve that?

Jared Taylor: Well, that’s an excellent question. Donald Trump has got some first good steps in mind. He wants to make sure no more illegal immigrants come into the country, and he wants to make sure that illegal immigrants here go back. He wants to end birth right citizenship. He wants to put a least a temporary ban on Muslims.

Jared Taylor believes that diversity creates conflict and a border means a secure, safe nation, and Trump's rhetoric and promises before the election fit in with his ideas. Furthermore, Taylor's perception of America, or the America he wants to live in, is based on a European model, which is promoted by constructed binaries of Subject/Other or civilized/uncivilized, which presupposes that those who constitute the Other should not enter our borders.

### The Mythology of America

Almost two years ago, during Trump's presidential campaign announcement, he looked back at a time in which America was once "whole," "secure," and "strong." The America he faced was ridden with crime because of its open borders, surrounded by poverty in inner cities and threatened by terrorist groups; now his plan as president is to make America safe and great again. The theme of nostalgia, common in his speeches, in conjunction with the vagueness of the time to which he refers has made his message successful. The slogan "Make America Great Again" can take on different meanings for different people. However, it's clear that in order to go back to the time in which America was strong and safe, certain groups must be excluded and deported. In order to maintain the essence of what makes America "authentic," its "Americanness," and a communal sense of shared identity, which has allegedly been compromised through immigration, border security is a concern and a system used to keep the "Other" out. In the essay "America," Kirsten Silva Gruesz presents a compelling record of "America" as a metonym of the U.S. despite its ambiguity and inability to define geographical boundaries. "Because the meaning of 'America' and its corollaries—'American,'

‘Americanization,’ ‘Americanism,’ and ‘Americanness’—seems so self-evident but is in fact so imprecise, using the term in conversation or debate tends to reinforce certain ways of thinking while repressing others” (“America” 21). These unclear geographical boundaries also implicitly deny the existence of Canada, Mexico, Central America, South America, and the Caribbean. Additionally, the word “America” has been associated with ideas of Democracy, Possibilities, Progress, and Liberty and has intensified inherent and essentializing notions that have been tied to the nation’s identity since its conception. According to Gruesz, “the Mexican historian Edmundo O’Gorman (1961) influentially wrote that America was ‘invented’ before it was ‘discovered,’ demonstrating that Europeans had long imagined a mythical land of marvels and riches that they then projected onto the unfamiliar terrain” (“America” 23).<sup>5</sup> Nevertheless, inherent notions assigned to “America” have been deemed as natural, concealing the way in which these philosophies have been made factual or have been naturalized.

As a result, the myth of a time in which America was once great appears plausible and credible. For Roland Barthes, myths are messages that function within a signifying system and evolve through social conditions and not from the “nature” of things. “‘Mythologies’ are ‘ideas-in-form’ which have been invested with ideological meaning by mass media publicity, the national press or radio and other ‘rites of communication’ informing social appearances” (Kearney 323). There are two orders of signification, but

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<sup>5</sup> Similarly, in *Identity: Fragments, Frankness*, Jean-Luc Nancy, mentions how national identity claims, particularly from the U.S. are illusory and constructed, “The United States of America was founded on an identity that consisted entirely (at least from a moral and juridical point of view) in its own declaration, a declaration itself drawing from a divine source” (ix).

myths come about when the first is adopted to agree with a “strategic ideological function” (Kearney (325); he refers to them as “hidden persuaders” as the initial meaning is replaced by an illusory, ideological one. The ambiguousness of America’s invention or “origin” has further concealed the way in which the term has been used to signify ideologies of pureness, individuality, and novelty. Barthes maintains that being able to expose or reveal mythologies is significant because “the modern Western society of advanced capitalism” uses them to mask its own agenda or objectives and implicitly claims that they are the “incarnation of ‘human nature’” (Kearney 326). It is an ideology of what America signifies that is later given a particular political content and purpose. In Trump’s America, the nation was once strong through closed borders. In this case, since 11 million undocumented immigrants are assumed to be bringing crime and threatening the safety of America, making America safe again means they must be deported and kept out.

#### Deconstructive Ethics: How the Discursive and the Material Are Intertwined

Within the space of post-colonial theory and discourse, we have come to recognize that the post-colonial project is a deconstructive project.<sup>6</sup> Western philosophy<sup>7</sup> presents the Subject as one unified, rational identity and equated to concepts of scientific empiricism, origin, definition, transparency, history, singular truth and linearity.

Particular ideologies and social institutions have promoted these concepts as natural or

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<sup>6</sup> Deconstruction seeks not only to undermine Western metaphysics or “Western philosophical tradition but ‘everyday’ thought and language as well” (Johnson viii).

<sup>7</sup> From Platonism all the way to contemporary analytic philosophy

inherent, ultimately obscuring how these illusory, cultural and historical constructs work.<sup>8</sup> These terms, according to Jacques Derrida, have been “structured in terms of dichotomies or polarities,” not only opposing one another but arranged in a hierarchical manner (Johnson viii), one essentially better than the other, e.g., colonizer vs. colonized, Subject vs. Other, civilized vs. savage, unity vs. fragmentation, nature vs. culture. Derrida shows how such binary oppositions are illusory. As Terry Eagleton explains in *Literary Theory*, “There is no concept which is not embroiled in an open-ended play of signification, shot through with the traces and fragments of other ideas...[;however,] out of this play of signifiers, certain meanings are elevated by social ideologies...” (114). Eagleton’s assertion explains that although language is embroiled in a “web-like complexity of signs” (114), never self-same, Western metaphysics, as logocentric, has looked for a sign to which all meaning can be fixed or anchored. Our understanding of transcendental signifiers (Freedom, Democracy, Progress) is tied to this process.

The political systems that guide this nation are entrenched in ideologies of national identity, and they come from specific ways of thinking and ways of viewing others in the world.<sup>9</sup> It speaks to the argument that I have extrapolated in previous pages; an understanding of undocumented immigrants, particularly Mexicans, as people who are

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<sup>8</sup> For Derrida, deconstruction is “an ultimately *political* practice, an attempt to dismantle the logic by which a particular system of thought [or meaning], and behind that whole system of political structures and social institutions, maintains its force” (Eagleton 128).

<sup>9</sup> Derrida “labels as ‘metaphysical’ any such thought-system which depends on an unassailable foundation, a first principle or unimpeachable ground upon which a whole hierarchy of meanings may be constructed. It is not that he believes that we can merely rid ourselves of the urge to forge such first principles, for such an impulse is deeply embedded in our history, and cannot—at least as yet—be eradicated or ignored” (Eagleton 114). In other words, our understanding of the world and our engagement with others in it is always rooted in and influenced by Western metaphysical thought.

criminals engages in constructed binaries of Subject/Other, citizen/undocumented, lawful/criminal, and good/evil. Through periods of colonization, by both the West (Spain) and the U.S., Mexico has undertaken the space and place of the Other. According John D. Caputo in *Deconstruction in a Nutshell*, the “self-protecting” and “nationalist” identity that the U.S. embodies can be said to do “everything it can to prevent the other from crossing over ‘our’ borders, from taking ‘our’ jobs, from enjoying ‘our’ benefits and going to ‘our’ schools, from disturbing ‘our’ language, culture, religion, and public institutions. [It] could not be more inhospitable to the coming of the other” (107). Despite the anticipation of “hospitality”<sup>10</sup> or “democracy” from the Subject, the “Other” remains in the peripheries. The material and real life experiences that undocumented immigrants and minorities face in this nation, and will continue to undergo through the new executive orders, are rooted in political structures and ideologies of a shared national identity that is believed to be compromised by the Other.

In *Orientalism*, Edward W. Said clarifies how political structures can disseminate ideologies in such a way that they seem natural thus being easily adopted and not questioned. Principally, his work demonstrates how the Orient, through its contrast to the West, has helped to define Europe. It’s the assertion Derrida makes through deconstruction; the Subject is defined by what it is not and through its resistance and opposition with the Other. Furthermore, his analysis exposes the way the European culture gained control, dominance, and identity through this construct, “setting itself off against the Orient as a sort of surrogate and even underground self” (Said 11). Ultimately,

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<sup>10</sup> Hospitality is the welcoming of the other while remaining “master of the premises,” which is a central part of hospitality (Caputo 110). It is this *aporia* or tension that makes it so.

Orientalism is a discourse created by the West to be able to characterize and label the Orient, and to be able to make rules over it. What is most significant from Said's writings and certainly applicable to the task of deconstruction is his perspective on how particular systems disseminate such ideology. He proposes that these theories that show the depth and power of the Orientalist discourse and its close associations to "socio-economic and political institutions" (15) only validate the control the West has over the Orient, as these ideologies would never be considered part of cultural and historical constructs. These ideologues have, after all, remained unchanged and even "teachable" through "academies, books, congresses, universities..." a substantial "material investment" (Said 15). Additionally, these ideologies are not only present in the political sphere, but they have also made their way into what is considered the "civil" sphere. The civil society is formed of "voluntary" associations, namely schools, families, marriage, and other state institutions (Said 15), including culture; thus, it is this cultural "hegemony" that secures the cementation and continuity of particular systems that appear invisible to the Orient and the rest of the world. Orientalism is another master discourse, and Said successfully reveals the political and civil institutions at work, which appear to enforce these ideas through consent rather than force.

In post-colonial discourse, the narrative of the history of Europe has led to the establishment and perpetuation of the West as Subject. In "Can the Subaltern Speak?", Philosopher Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak insists that this system or ideology which conserves the subject of the West is strengthened through the critiques that have emerged about the sovereign subject. She poses that it is unlikely that French intellectuals understand "the kind of Power and Desire" that the Other of Europe experiences. Thus,

Spivak argues the Subject of the West promotes the invention of the Other. Through this concept, of the “Other as the Self’s shadow” (24), the Other continues to be the economic apparatus that moves the machinery of Europe. She, furthermore, questions how the narrative of reality, of history, from the West was established as normative.

Most importantly, she addresses the place of the subaltern, the Other, in post-colonial discourse. According to both Foucault and Deleuze, if given the space, the oppressed “can speak and know their conditions” (Spivak 25). One key assertion she makes is that even when the subaltern subject (the marginalized, those on the periphery or sidelines, without identity), the European Other, is said to have a space to narrate or to speak, it is done by the elite. Those who represent the Subaltern are actually the indigenous elite; thus, the Subaltern, a heterogeneous group, has no voice. When the elite speaks or engages in dialogue, it does so using essentializing language, the language of the Subject. She maintains, “The postcolonial intellectuals learn that their privilege is their loss. In this they are a paradigm of the intellectuals” (Spivak 28). However, examining and addressing these relations, of Subject/Object and receiver/sender binaries, leads scholars to continue to look for possibilities and avenues to acknowledge the subaltern subject.

Arguably, the textual and discursive ways in which I have positioned or presented these conclusions may seem as if deconstruction does not lead to any type of tangible, material justice, but I argue that deconstruction is not an action or a tool to be used. Deconstruction is not a tool to be used or an action because it already is at work<sup>11</sup>, yet

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<sup>11</sup> In an interview with Jacques Derrida, he was asked a question about deconstruction and ethics and the relationship between the text and action: “After deconstruction, what is



revealing how ideologies operate and dismantling binaries has real-world, material consequences. We understand our world and behave in this world according to particular systems of thought; nevertheless, the result of the trace<sup>12</sup>, the exposure of the logic in ideologies, and the process of undermining and destabilizing binaries, is an ethical act. Deconstruction seeks to reveal the Subject's indebtedness, obligation, and responsibility to the Other. As we deconstruct or destabilize these dichotomies, we come to understand that the deconstructive project is a political one. It's one that seeks to show the logic of traditional Western metaphysical thought and its institutions in creating and summoning a history that devalues the existence of those groups that are claimed to represent the "Other."

#### Spatial Narratives in *Woman Hollering Creek* and *Caramelo* or *Puro Cuento*

In her novels and short story collections, Sandra Cisneros portrays the circumstances of Chicanos living in the borderlands, both physically and metaphorically. It is a connection that first originates from their ancestors, who cultivated and lived on these lands prior to their annexation to the U.S. It is the connection to their land that keeps them in the U.S. Southwest despite wars and conquests that have positioned them

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to be done? How do we act? Derrida answered, "deconstruction is not a philosophy or a method, it is not a phase, a period or a moment. It is something which is constantly at work and was at work before what we called 'deconstruction' started, so I cannot periodize. For me there is no 'after' deconstruction— not that I think that deconstruction is immortal— but for what I understand under the name deconstruction, there is no end, no beginning, and no after"" (Kearney and Dooley 65).

<sup>12</sup> An understanding of meaning as not fully or immediately present in a sign but a "constant flickering of presence and absence together" (Eagleton 111) and in order to understand the meaning of a sign I must at the same time recognize all other meanings that are absent or excluded.

as foreigners. In the following chapters, I intend to show how Sandra Cisneros, through the selections from *Woman Hollering Creek* and *Caramelo or Puro Cuento*, undermines the dichotomies that govern and inform our world. Sandra Cisneros' narratives not only reveal how these illusory constructs work and how political discourse distorts and shapes identities, reminding us how identities are discursively constituted, but also challenges the logocentric<sup>13</sup> views of these political systems. My project is particularly pertinent and timely, as the rhetoric used to describe the nation does not concord with the demographics, especially with the number of minorities living in these borderlands.<sup>14</sup> In the first chapter of my thesis, I aim to show how spaces and identity in selected stories from *Woman Hollering Creek* are stripped of fixed designations and meaning, particularly through border crossing. However, her narratives also call attention to the immigrant experience, forced migration, and marginalization that takes place in these borderlands. In the second chapter of my work, I analyze the footnote to the short story "¡Probre de Mi!" in *Caramelo or Puro Cuento*. Cisneros uses this footnote as a means to reveal how ideas of a purely objective of History and Truth are constructed ideologies and chronicles transnational movements that heighten our understanding of Chicano/Latino border studies.

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<sup>13</sup> Western philosophy has been logocentric, that is "committed to a belief in some ultimate 'word,' presence, essence, truth or reality which will act as the foundation of all thought, language and experience" (Eagleton 113).

<sup>14</sup> According to the Pew Research Center, "in 2014, the U.S. population of more than 318.9 million included almost 55.4 million Hispanics. Half of all U.S. counties had at least 1,000 Hispanics in 2014 (1,579 out of more than 3,100 counties) – up from about four-in-ten in 2000" ("Hispanic Population Growth and Dispersion Across U.S. Counties, 1980-2014")

## CHAPTER I: CHICANO (A) IDENTITY FORMATION THROUGH BORDER CROSSINGS IN CISNEROS' WOMAN HOLLERING CREEK

I would like to begin by sharing a significant passage from *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza* written by Gloria Anzaldua, as an examination of borders demands referencing her revolutionary work in the field of border studies and Chicana feminism. "Borders are set up to define places that are safe and unsafe, to distinguish us from them. A border is a dividing line, a narrow strip along a steep edge. A borderland is a vague and undetermined place created by the emotional residue of an unnatural boundary. It is in a constant state of transition" (Anzaldua 25). These lines illustrate the state of the borderlands as one fashioned by an "unnatural," at times a human-made, border, whose material ramifications are quite real. Anzaldua uses this theoretical idea of the border as a "metaphor for all types of crossings," one that allows the subject to exist in varying linguistic, cultural, sexual, religious, and gender contexts.

The border that I examine, in relation to Cisneros' texts, is both material and discursive. Principally, the border is manifested physically as it separates the U.S. Southwest and Mexico; however, it is present when characters in her short stories not only navigate various geographical spaces, but also straddle multiple languages, cultures, social classes, and sexualities. Similarly, Anzaldua's excerpt defines borderlands as spaces not only associated with the U.S. Southwest but present when "two or more cultures edge each other, where people of different races occupy the same territory, where under, lower, middle and upper classes touch, where the space between two individuals shrinks with intimacy" (19). Thus, living in the borderlands, or "in-between"

states, is characterized by malleability, fluidity, and ambiguity, juxtaposed with an understanding of the border and borderlands as clear and definite.

Similar to the construction of identity as stable, uncontested, and clear, in the text *Extinct Lands, Temporal Geographies: Chicana Literature and the Urgency of Space*, Mary Pat Brady explains that power structures encourage the production of place as “natural or fixed, and thus beyond contestation or negotiation” (112). The border between Mexico and the U.S. Southwest is the physical boundary, a wall, which separates these nations, and it further sustains these ideologies of spaces as unchanging and or permanent. Brady maintains “crossing the border in this logic involves crossing from one temporality to another. Built into the loose term border is a static, modernist concept of difference that depends on the veiled separation of time and space” (50). As a result, the border creates a notion of modernity, and subsequent “progress” or “development,” on one side while the other is understood as less advanced or underdeveloped. Other nations are defined in a similar manner, and always based on a temporal scale of “development” or “progress,” simply termed as modernization. Thus, the border not only separates these nations in terms of physicality but also translated and understood in terms of temporality, with each nation functioning at a “different stage” (Brady 50). Dismantling ideas of places or spaces as natural, and thus unchallenged, allows for alternatives to those imposing and dominant narratives. Once the border does not carry out its function, to define each nation through a temporal-spatial scale and regulate movement, the ideology of spaces can be deconstructed. Ultimately, like border identity, these spaces should be understood as inclusive, mutable, and in process; however, our current, popular understanding of these nations is marked by enclosure. In the following pages, I intend to

show how short stories in Sandra Cisneros' *Woman Hollering Creek* destabilize this dividing line as characters easily traverse the immigrant communities in San Antonio to Mexico City, which further problematizes the borders of these walled nations. Through her work, border crossings affect our perceptions of mobility and the physical border between the U.S. and Mexico, and the stories she tells question and critique the formation of temporality and spaces.

These ideologies or concepts that permeate our understanding of spaces prove significant because they not only inform our perception of settings but also influence “subject formation—on the choices people can make and how they conceptualize themselves, each other, and the world” (Brady 8). Spaces figure prominently in the production or construction of identities; for example, crossing the border between Mexico and the United States or simply inhabiting the borderlands as immigrants can transform people into “*mojados*,” “illegals,” or “aliens.” As a result, people’s ways of thinking or perspective about their place in the world is very much dependent on the designations placed upon them; identities are discursively constituted. In the same manner, the creation of identities based on constructed ideologies about progress or modernity has proven to be dangerous and violent, and is arguably a source of socio-political crises. The intervention to address these concerns has taken shape in the form of spatial narratives, specifically Chicana literature as it has “offered alternative methods of conceptualizing space not only by noting how social change must be spatialized but also by seeing and feeling space as performative and participatory, that is, by refusing a too-rigid binary between the material and the discursive” (Brady 6). Cisneros’ narratives challenge and strip these sites or spaces from their “natural” and “fixed” designations. Space is

important because of the dislocation and displacement of Mexicans. The loss of space or their “homeland” is the product of periods of colonization, particularly the loss and dispossession of the U.S. Southwest. Thus, one can conclude that our understanding of space has not only discursive ramifications but also material ones, and the project of decolonization and understanding of identity formation is fundamentally tied to these geographical spaces.

One of the short stories in Cisneros’ *Woman Hollering Creek* that examines the formation and production of space, as part of a cultural construct, is “Americans.” This short story reveals the position and perspective of American tourists visiting the basilica, a shrine to La Virgen de Guadalupe in Tepeyac, located in Mexico City. These tourists anticipate a fixed and unchanging site, external to the United States both spatially and temporally. Catholics and tourists visit Tepeyac as it is believed to be the site where Our Lady of Guadalupe appeared to Juan Diego Cuauhtlatoatzin, an Aztec man; according to the cultural myth, she spoke to him in his Nahuatl language and advised him to build a church. It was an account used by Spanish missionaries to convert the indigenous people of Mexico to Catholicism. In the short story, the tourists ask to take a picture of the narrator’s older brother, a photograph to take home as a souvenir, and they are surprised when they hear him speak English:

After all that dusk and dark, the light from the plaza makes me squinch my eyes like if I just came out of the movies. My brother Keeks is drawing squiggly lines on the concrete with a wedge of glass and the heel of his shoe. My brother Junior squatting against the entrance, talking to a lady and a man.

They are not from here. Ladies don't come to church dressed in pants. And everybody knows men aren't supposed to wear shorts.

'¿Quieres chicle?' the lady asks in Spanish too big for her mouth.

'Gracias.' The lady gives him a whole handful of gum...

'Por favor,' says the lady. '¿Un foto?' Pointing to her camera.

'Si'

She's so busy taking Junior's picture, she doesn't notice me and Keeks.

'Hey, Michele, Keeks. You guys want gum?'

'But you speak English!'

'Yeah,' my brother says, 'we're Mericans.' (*Woman Hollering Creek* 20)

Through the tourists' transaction outside the church, Cisneros skillfully strips the site of its sanctified status as it becomes as reminder of commercialism, consumption, and indigenous exploitation. Although for the tourists this space is one that is static and stuck in time, just as the photograph they asked to take, the children don't assign the basilica any fixed interpretation based on an understanding of it as a shrine nor a tourist site. The tourists visiting the basilica considered the children part of the backdrop in this commercialized space; the children were expected to perform according to a fixed cultural identity, hence the tourists' confusion when they hear the children speak English. Similarly, the tourists take part in the materialization and consumption of a culture as they ask to take a picture of Junior to take home, founded on their interpretation of Mexican "natives."

On the other hand, for the narrator, Michele, there is no religious connection to this sanctified space; the praying grandmother, sorrowful penitents, "winking saints, and

holy water she describes have a different meaning. The narrator offers a detached description of the churchgoers, and at the same time her account of what happens inside and outside of the church shows her understanding of the rituals the space denotes. “There are those walking to church on their knees. Some with fat rags tied around their legs and others with pillows, one to kneel on, and one to flop ahead. There are women with black shawls crossing and uncrossing themselves. There are armies of penitents carrying banners and flowered arches while musicians play tinny trumpets and tinny drums” (*Woman Hollering Creek* 18). Michele does not romanticize any aspect of the church or the penitents outside, and she is, as Anzaldua would say, “sandwiched between two cultures” (100). Her understanding of the church is informed through cultural formalities or rules and not as inherently sacred. For example, the decorations and rituals taking place in the church distract Michele, and while she kneels next to her grandmother, she makes noise. The grandmother tells Michele to wait outside with her brothers, and Michelle understands the formalities that the church demands. Similarly, she recognizes that the people talking to her brother are tourists because they do not follow the dress code expected of the Catholic Church. “Ladies don’t come to church dressed in pants. And everybody knows men aren’t supposed to wear shorts” (*Woman Hollering Creek* 20). Michele’s understands there are established or “proper” behaviors that take place in this setting and that these are culturally dependent and not necessarily fixed. Thus, as she juggles these two cultures, she is cognizant of the rituals present in them; at the same time, she is aware of her ability to navigate both.

Ultimately, the children understand themselves and these spaces as signifying an in-betweenness, hybridity, and being able to shift from one place to another, just as the



word they chose to describe or define themselves. In “Weaving Transnational Cultural Identity through Travel and Diaspora in Sandra Cisneros’s *Caramelo*,” Tereza M. Szeghi explains that Junior shifts from a “commodifiable representation of Mexicanidad, or ‘Mexicanness’” to signifying “the permeability of the border with his “Mericaness” (162). The tourists anticipated an experience that depicted Mexican “authenticity” through the foreign and exotic environment in the basilica and an authentic, pure cultural identity in the children; however, the children’s description of their identity as Mericans underlines migration or transnational movements between the United States and Mexico and a connection to both countries.

For these “Mericans”—a word play that blends Mexicans and Americans, signifying hybridity in terms of movement, identity, and space—the perception of the basilica is quite different; their ability to traverse and participate in these spaces defines their understanding of identity. The children in “Mericans” live in the borderlands, “*alma entre dos mundos*” (Anzaldua 99), two countries, languages, and cultures, and their designation is one of inclusivity, one that avoids hyphenation. As Anzaldua posits in “*La Conciencia de la Mestiza*,” “the coming together of two self-consistent but habitually incompatible frames of references causes *un choque*, a cultural collision” (100), and their designation of themselves as *Mericans* alludes to that collision. In *Bilingual Aesthetics: A New Sentimental Education*, Doris Sommer states, “W.E.B. Du Bois worried about doubling [double consciousness]. African Americans, he said, bore the burden of a double identity, a contradiction because identity should mean one consciousness not two. This is a symptom of melancholia as one be-longing gets in the way of another” (178). Anzaldua expands on the idea of double consciousness and postulates that the borderland

is the space in which these contradictory identities emerge, but to survive the borderlands one “must live *sin fronteras*” (217). To live without borders or *sin fronteras* suggests actively welcoming or accepting these conflicting identities.

It is important to consider the lack of hyphenation in their designation of themselves as *Mericans*. The blending of Mexican and American without hyphenation is a visual representation of their connection to the U.S. and Mexico and the idea that both cultures inform and are implicated in their understanding of identity and the other. In the same manner, one must consider the alternatives that have been used by Mexican-Americans, or Chicanos, a hyphenated name that denotes doubleness. According to Sommer:

The structural duplicity [of these contradictory identities] is braced together by hyphens (African-American, Jewish-American, Hispanic-American, Irish-American...). *Braced* is a word that might point to a cure, like an orthopedic supplement to produce better alignment, a necessary nuisance that will be removed once citizens achieve attractive maturity. (180-81)

Thus, in order to reach attractive maturity, the minority culture must assimilate to the dominant culture. In this case, the hyphen operates as a reminder of the conditioning that takes place in order to fit the “American” ideal. Namely, the American ideal consists of a defined, unified, singular consciousness, which should be reflected through a common language, cultural identity, and sense of spatial belonging. With this in mind, a smooth transition should take place in which double consciousness is abandoned, or “straightened out through time” (181). In “America,” Kirsten Silva Gruesz posits that questions about “Americanness” and “Americanization” emerged as a result of the flow of immigrants at

the turn of the century and postulates that “‘America’ has generally been used as a term of consolidation, homogenization, and unification, not a term that invites recognition of difference, dissonance, and plurality...” (20). Gruez’s observations concur with those of Sommer; however, and as has been previously noted, the experience of minorities, as they undergo the transition of Americanization and assimilation to the dominant culture, is not straightforward. Immigrants do not simply forgo their original culture but continue to experience doubleness and learn to become flexible and move within the borderlands.

On the other hand, Carolyn Porter’s analysis in “What We Know That We Don’t Know: Remapping American Literary Studies” differs as the hyphen functions to “resist” or challenge Americanization, and it further highlights the layered histories that are not entirely recognized through hyphenation. Porter maintains that:

...US cultural nationalism has already failed as the linchpin of an Americanist field-imaginary, proving itself unable to incorporate by hyphenation the cultural practices of those resisting ‘Americanization’ under its terms. Such hyphenation is a form of resistance to homogenization...But like the transformation of borders into borderlands, the hyphens also figure what *Chicano* achieves—the emerging recognition of mestizo cultural traditions that are distinct from either or any of those they hyphenate. (470-71)

In other words, the hyphen is symbolic in its function, it arguably separates rather than “braces” two contradictory identities; it further functions as a reminder of what it cannot assimilate. Furthermore, simply indicating difference through hyphenation is not enough because it fails to account for the “mestizo cultural traditions” present, which, according to Porter, *Chicano* takes into account. In Cisneros’s “Mericans,” the children’s

understanding of their identity is exemplified in their designation as *Mericans*; specifically, it is one that does not correspond with the current propositions of the hyphen, as indicated by Sommer and Porter, or the chosen identity or designation of *Chicano*. *Mericans* denotes doubleness and equal implication in identity formation.

Through her work, Cisneros seeks to problematize what seems natural or inherent as it pertains to “authentic” “Mexicaness.” In “Anguiano Religious Articles,” the narrator recounts her experience in a store that sells religious items associated with Chicano Catholic culture. The story’s backdrop is South Laredo, Texas. In this story, the narrator mentions having the option to buy cheaper religious articles “on the other side” (*Woman Hollering Creek* 114); however, she doesn’t have time to cross to Nuevo Laredo, Mexico, right across from The Rio Grande.

Well, that’s what I was looking for. One of those framed pictures with a silver strip of aluminum foil on the bottom and top, the wooden frame painted a happy pink turquoise. You can but them cheaper on the other side, but I didn’t have time to go to Nuevo Laredo ‘cause I only found out about Tencha Tuesday. They put her right in Santa Rosa Hospital. (*Woman Hollering Creek* 115)

The expression “*el otro lado*” (literally “the other side”) is particularly used by Mexicans to mean or refer to the U.S. whereas in “Anguiano Religious Articles” the narrator, a Chicana, uses “the other side” to mean Mexico, which alludes to an understanding of “*el otro lado*” contingent on where one is standing, and not explicitly meaning one particular place, thus not prescribing as specific position as natural. The narrator is able to use this expression for both, as she traverses these spaces; in the same way, it alludes to transnational movements that take place across the border between the U.S. and Mexico.

The significance in this story not only rests on the narrative process and the continuous interconnecting of English and Spanish, sometimes translated in literal terms. Notably, the narrator also draws attention to these religious articles and satirizes the sanctity inherent in them.

I was thinking about those framed holy pictures with glitter on the window. But then I saw some Virgen de Guadalupe statues with real hair eyelashes. Well, not real hair, but some stiff black stuff like brushes, only I didn't like how La Virgen looked with furry eyelashes—*bien* mean, like *los amores de la calle*. That's not right. (*Woman Hollering Creek* 115)

Here Cisneros emphasizes the commercialization of these religious items, numerous images of Our Lady of Guadalupe and, at the same time, desanctifies these objects through the indication of mass production. The narrator has a preconceived idea of how La Virgen is supposed to look, saintly and not “like *los amores de la calle*” (*Woman Hollering Creek* 115). While in the store, she takes her time considering the ways in which La Virgen was depicted and decides not to buy any because the options available do not fit her idea of saintliness and “authenticity.” Through this experience, the narrator recognizes that these religious articles are mass produced fixtures. However, it is difficult to say whether it leads the narrator to question their “inherent” value or significance. However, “Anguiano Religious Articles” neither produces an idea of self-sacrifice, which Catholic or religious icons tend promote, nor seeks to “[invest] in the production of nostalgic fantasies” (Brady 114). It's clear that Cisneros' aim is to present an opposing approach to these spaces as fixed and challenge ideas of “authenticity.”

In the aforementioned paragraphs on the importance of spaces and border identity, I noted how our perception of spaces influence subject formation and our understanding of each other and the world. Furthermore, perceiving identity based on constructed ideologies as fixed, unchanged, and natural can have damaging outcomes. Cisneros' "*Bien Pretty*" points to the danger of fetishizing and essentializing the indigenous and cultural "authenticity" of Mexicans while ignoring their experiences as working immigrants. In "*Bien Pretty*," Guadalupe "Lupe" Arredondo, the narrator, struggles to identify, secure, and establish her cultural identity; she wants to validate her Mexican roots through the acquisition of folk art, articles, and Latin tapes and by performing her *Mexicanidad*. Lupe performs her "Mexicanness," through her connection to the Spanish language, her knowledge of Mexican mythology and folklore, and the spaces she chooses to navigate that connect her to the working class Chicano community.

While attempting to return to her roots, she essentializes and valorizes the indigenous "authenticity" she believes Flavio Munguia embodies and ignores his plight as a Mexican immigrant in the borderlands. The short story opens with "*Ya me voy, ay te dejo en San Antonio*," in epigraph form; these are lines from the song "Ay Te Dejo En San Antonio" by Leonardo "Flaco" (Skinny) Jiménez, a known conjunto (group) and tejano musician, who popularized *norteña* music. Jimenez's accordion driven songs are considered border music as it narrates the struggles of the people living the borderlands, particularly the border region of south Texas. According to Cathy Ragland in "Modern Música Norteña and the Undocumented Immigrant," "the chronicles of this experience, whether accounts of border crossing or of its impact on family life, make norteña an idiosyncratic fusion of tradition and modernity that helps maintain cohesion within a

community that has remained marginalized and is constantly traveling” (100). Pointedly, the stories narrated in *norteña* music, as Ragland states, parallel the stories of immigrants and of the families who leave Mexico for the U.S. The lines from “Ay Te Dejo En San Antonio” work thematically with Flavio’s story. Indeed, he leaves Lupe in San Antonio to return to his family in Mexico, but significantly his experience in the U.S. mirrors those that are often narrated through *norteña* music, immigrants who leave home, cross the border, and have to keep low-skilled jobs in order to survive. In the story, it’s mentioned that Flavio had to work odd jobs as soon as he moved north to Corpus Christi. He worked as a “dishwasher at a Luby’s Cafeteria,” “a shrimper in Port Isabel,” a plant worker at “the shrimp-processing factory” and as a farm worker in cabbage, potatoes and onion fields, before moving to San Antonio and working as an exterminator (*Woman Hollering Creek* 146-47). However, Lupe dismisses his immigrant experience. Instead, she values Flavio for his cultural markers or features that signify cultural and indigenous “authenticity.”

In the short story, Lupe asks Flavio to model for her as Prince Popo from the “Prince Popocatepetl [and] Princess Ixtaccihuatl volcano myth...[a] tragic love story metamorphosized from classic to kitsch calendar art...” (*Woman Hollering Creek* 144). According to the narrator, his facial features make him a perfect candidate for her rework of the Aztec myth, “face of a sleeping Olmec, the heavy Oriental eyes, the thick lips and wide nose, that profile carved from onyx” (*Woman Hollering Creek* 144). There is an implicit understanding of Flavio’s facial features as commodifiable and able to translate into mass-produced art, as kitsch calendars sold in local stores, such as “at Carniceria Ximenez or Tortilleria la Guadalupanita” (*Woman Hollering Creek* 144). Lupe regards

Flavio's features, his Mexican Spanish, and his humble background as markers of ethnic identity and cultural authenticity. In a similar vein, she has clearly defined and fixed expectations of Mexico and Mexicans, and these are dependent on an understanding of them as fixed and unchanging. For example, old Mexican movies where somebody is singing on a horse, sobbing heroines in *telenovelas*, and indigenous dances like *el baile de los viejitos* are all part of what she understands as contemporary Mexico, and the nostalgia they incite connects her to her "roots." For this reason, she is critical of Flavio's disinterest when she asks him to display his intelligence of his native background and indigenous myths and customs:

I said, "what *you* are, sweetheart, is a product of American imperialism," and plucked at the alligator on his shirt.

"I don't have to dress in a sarape and sombrero to be Mexican," Flavio said. "I *know* who I am."

I wanted to leap across the table, throw the Oaxacan black pottery pieces across the room, swing from the punched tin chandelier, fire a pistol at his Reeboks, and force him to dance. I wanted to *be* Mexican at that moment, but it was true. I was not Mexican. Instead of the volley of insults I intended, all I managed to sling was a single clay pebble that dissolved on impact—*perro*. "Dog." It wasn't even the word I'd meant to hurl."(*Woman Hollering Creek* 151)

Although a proud Chicana, Lupe recognizes that her cultural identity differs from Flavio's. In their interchange, Flavio claims he is sure of his cultural identity as Mexican, and doesn't have to wear traditional clothing or amass cultural artifacts to have a genuine Mexican identity. On the other hand, Lupe's identity is not only determined by her



possessions, but significantly as a Chicana living in the Southwest and shaped by her *mestizaje*— her indigenous background in conjunction with her Spanish and U.S. American cultural mixing. Her response, “I was not Mexican,” shows the tension whilst negotiating hybridity and in-betweenness. It’s her hybridity, as a bilingual speaker, that hinders her ability to say what she intends.

Significantly, in the process of using Flavio as a model, she finds the stories he shares about his past and family endearing. However, Flavio’s immigrant experience shows that transnational movements and migrations across the US-Mexico border are driven by particular circumstances. “Flavio’s family was so poor, the best they hoped for their son was a job where he would keep his hands clean” (*Woman Hollering Creek* 146). The living conditions in Mexico forced him to migrate to the U.S. and while in Texas he had to take on odd jobs in order to live and survive. When Flavio leaves back to Mexico because of family obligations, Lupe asks him whether he’ll come back and he answers, “Only destiny knows” (*Woman Hollering Creek* 156). The lack of certitude from Flavio’s response illustrates the uncertainty that immigrants experience if they decide to go back to Mexico. While most of the readings and analysis of “*Bien Pretty*” center on feminist readings and Lupe’s art as a form of power and previsioning of the Aztec myth, it’s important to consider the immigrant experience of Flavio as a way to understand transnational movements that take place as a result of dire and poor living conditions in Mexico. At the same time, it’s imperative to gather and record accounts of border crossings particularly of those who are pushed to migrate and are often marginalized while living in the U.S.

Cisneros establishes a liminal space in these stories, one in which individuals straddle multiple languages, spaces, and cultures; they live in the borderlands. The physical boundary that separates the U.S. and Mexico promote ideologies or an understanding of space and identity as natural or fixed. However, nations should be defined by connection and through borders that are characterized as shifting and in a constant state of transition to reflect the demographics and identities of the people who reside in the borderlands. Cisneros' spatial narratives challenge the ideologies assigned or tied to the border. We know that history can be narrativized; the issue stems from the ideology of single, unified, and uncontested perspective. In order to not privilege a single narrative of reality or a "best version of history" (Spivak 25), we must acknowledge and accept multiple histories and narratives, so that we don't favor the elite's version or the account of those in power. Furthermore, it's just as significant to question and interrogate concepts that are defined as intuitive and natural because such understandings promote a world of essences and the universal Western ideas of identity and spaces.

CHAPTER II: THE MEXICAN GULF REGION AS A LATINO-ANGLO BORDER  
SYSTEM IN SANDRA CISNEROS' CAMELO OR PURO CUENTO

“The truth, these stories are nothing but story, bits of string, odds and ends found here and there, embroidered together to make something new. I have invented what I do not know and exaggerated what I do to continue the family tradition of telling healthy lies. If, in the course of my inventing, I have inadvertently stumbled on the truth, *perdónenme*.

To write is to ask questions. It doesn't matter if the answers are true or *puro cuento*. After all and everything only the story is remembered, and the truth fades away like the pale blue ink on a cheap embroidery pattern: *Eres Mi Vida, Sueño Contigo Mi Amor, Suspiro Por Ti, Sólo Tú.*”

– Sandra Cisneros, *Caramelo or Puro Cuento*

In *Caramelo or Puro Cuento*, Sandra Cisneros introduces the Isthmus of Tehuantepec through a footnote, at the end of the short story “¡Pobre de Mi!” Although seemingly factual, her lengthy annotation on the isthmus is a fictional narrative. This footnote, or presumed historical background, functions as a novel archival form that works in a threefold manner: it historicizes the narrative to highlight how national myths supersede and shape History, challenges the alleged “pure” objectivity of History, and chronicles transnational movements that heighten our understanding of Chicano/Latino border studies.

In the opening of the novel, arranged in three sections wherein several short stories unfold, Cisneros presents a disclaimer about the validity or truth of its contents. She claims that the events in the novel are *puro cuento*, pure fiction. The author purposefully avoids the telling of a story that is grounded on accuracy, universal truth claims or notions of origin. In contrast, these *cuentos*, as nonfactual, carry a tradition of invention and favor collectivity and varying perspectives—as opposed to an individual, unifying, and “objective” narrative. In fact, the purpose of her stories is not to clarify

events, or national myths, for the reader but to complicate facile notions of teleology, clarity, and transparency.

Indeed, Cisneros' stories do not consider the validity of events and cannot be said to produce or reflect history. The narrator, Celaya "Lala" Reyes, tells stories from her grandmother, her own experiences, and those of family members; as she does so, she embellishes family tales she believes to be *puro cuento*. Here the narrator is not repeating or retelling her family's stories or reflecting on a specific period in time but completely abandoning the notion of Truth. In *Caribbean Discourse*, Edouard Glissant establishes that stories, or tales, cannot naturalize experiences; these stories, which differ from myth, cannot be made universal. A myth is delivered or conveyed in the form of a story; partly, myths originate from stories whose objectives are masked or hidden and later revealed once it influences or creates history. Specifically, Glissant posits that myths begin in the form of a tale, which appear not to have a definite objective from the start; however, once "activated in the real world," its intended function becomes visible:

Myth not only prefigures history and sometimes generates history but seems to prepare the way for History, through its generalizing tendency. The tale, on the other hand, deals only with stories that cannot be generalized; it can happen that the tale...can react to a gap in history by simply acknowledging it. It is possible that the function of the tale is here to combat the sometimes paralyzing force of a yearning for history, to save us from the belief that History is the first and most basic dimension of human experience, a belief inherited from the West or imposed by it. (*Caribbean Discourse* 83-84)

Hence the significance of the narrator, Celaya, in telling stories from various family members without considering the truth or validity of these tales and at the same time muddying the versions of their stories. Similarly, Cisneros proposes that these stories are stitched together or arranged to produce “something new,” thus refusing the emergence of a single Truth that reflects Reality for and to the reader. It is important to note that this tradition of telling healthy lies is Cisneros’ method of critiquing national myths, from Mexico and the U.S., which have shaped our understanding of identity and history. One of the ways in which she complicates traditional notions of history is through the inclusion of stories or tales, assembling of facts, and distortion of chronology in the footnote of the short story “¡Pobre de Mi!”<sup>15</sup>

In this footnote, Cisneros provides a historical lesson on the Isthmus of Tehuantepec, closely linked to the short story that the narrator, Celaya, describes about her grandfather, Narciso Reyes, during the time he worked in the isthmus. Cisneros begins the footnote by noting the significance of its geographical location and its proximity to the Gulf of Mexico and the Pacific, “...trains ran as often as twenty times a day uniting the two oceans and testifying to all the world the modern nation Mexico was

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<sup>15</sup> In “Thresholds of Writing: Text and Paratext in Sandra Cisneros’ *Caramelo or Puro Cuento*,” Maria Laura Spoturno classifies the footnotes in the novel into three categories (fictional notes proper, historical-cultural notes, and metadiscursive notes) and suggests that these footnotes are significant as they shape the main narrative and provide a novel understanding of the text as a whole;

*Caramelo or Puro Cuento* was not well received by all critics, “Carol Cujec says that they ‘can be overwhelming at times, as we are introduced to numerous minor characters in footnotes and even footnotes to footnotes. This gives a sense of the vastness of experience connected to one family.’” Indeed, the number of footnotes included is extensive and has led other critics to refer to it as a “long-winded” and “Bible-weight size” novel (qtd. in Paulino Bueno 47-48).

fast becoming. But the Panama Canal of 1906 put an end to this transcontinental efficiency, and eventually the area was lucky if even one train passed daily” (*Caramelo or Puro Cuento* 179). Indeed, the Tehuantepec Railway was built on the ideal of progress, industrialization, international commerce, and Mexico’s transition into the modern world, under the dictatorship of Porfirio Diaz. Although this important undertaking has been neglected by Chicanos and U.S. based writers, the Tehuantepec Railway shaped U.S. and European relations with Mexico from the 1850s to the early 1900s, when the construction of the railway was finalized. Cisneros reminds us of the transnational movements that took place due to the construction of the railway and adds visibility to this neglected site.<sup>16</sup> In “The Politics of National Development in Late Porfirian Mexico: The Reconstruction of the Tehuantepec National Railway 1896-1907,” Paul Garner describes the Tehuantepec Railway as a crucial achievement for Mexico as it confirmed it had reached a new era of sovereignty and development:

...the [Diaz] regime considered that it had fulfilled important national goals, particularly with regard to the consummation of economic and political sovereignty. It had achieved what all other nineteenth-century governments had failed to do by bringing the project to a successful conclusion. Mexico, as the

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<sup>16</sup> Junot Diaz’s *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* is similarly noted for its inclusion of footnotes not only to present a background on the Dominican Republic and its historical figures but also to develop the main character’s narrative, within the footnote;

Consider that Sandra Cisneros’s *Caramelo or Puro Cuento* was published in 2002 and Junot Diaz’s *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* was published five years later, in 2007;

See Ellen McCracken’s *Paratexts and Performance in the Novels of Junot Diaz and Sandra Cisneros*.

regime saw it, was now a modern, progressive, strong and sovereign nation with a positive economic future as the centre of international commerce. The Tehuantepec Railway was therefore a cause for national pride as a symbol of profound modernization. (353)

While historians agree that during Porfirian Mexico the nation had entered a period of modernization, due to the construction of the railway across the isthmus, Cisneros draws attention to a different motive for its expeditious construction. In the footnote, she narrates that Diaz's intention to build the railway stemmed from his infatuation with Juana Romero:

Because of love, the railroads ventured into that furious savagery called Tehuantepec. It was here, while stationed as a soldier during the French occupation, that the future dictator Porfirio Diaz met the great love of his life, Juana Romero, or Doña Cata, and became her lover until death. The railroads, thanks to his eternal passion, were built on Diaz's orders and her request, and that is how the tracks arrived almost at the door of Doña Cata's resplendently gaudy house. This not only helped to expedite the sweethearts' visits, but the train whistle added a charming melancholy to their liaisons. (*Caramelo or Puro Cuento* 179)

According to Francie R. Chassen-López, in "A Patron of Progress: Juana Catarina Romero, the Nineteenth-Century Cacica of Tehuantepec," Juana Romero, or Doña Cata, was a working class woman, cigarette vendor and subject of popular myth in Mexico (393). As suggested in Cisneros' footnote, Diaz's intention was to be closer to "the great love of his life" and not necessarily to reach political and economic sovereignty.

Cisneros' use of poetic language to describe the relationship between Doña Cata and Porfirio Diaz and the motive for the construction of the Tehuantepec Railway, which differs from the one written by historians, is significant in that Cisneros' description and use of poetic language signifies as significantly as "fact." Generally, the ideas presented in history books are presumed to be straightforward accounts of events and their content rational, formal, precise and true. Although poetic language, as used by Cisneros in her footnote, signifies and presents a possible account of the events, her use of poetic language to convey meaning resists a singular and fixed meaning. As elucidated in Cisneros' description of the events, poetic language opens numerous possibilities and ways of presenting an idea.

Language, as Martin Heidegger points out, was used in a rationalized, objective manner, used to categorize the world and define reality, becoming a "worn-out overworked poem" (Kearney 41); conversely, through poetic language, speech is renewed. "By using language in a strange way, the poet estranges us from our familiar use of words in order to restore a sense of newness to their earthly origins" (Kearney 41). Thus, poetic language functions in a twofold approach: it functions as the definitive horizon where all meaning and thinking originates, coming into being or becoming; additionally, through language, it creates a space for the new and innovative, for change, which allows the subject to break free from the pragmatic and theoretical and explore a realm of possibilities. Poetic language, ultimately, becomes a foundation in which the subject is able to create a myriad of possibilities, an open horizon. This reading is important as it parallels Cisneros' task of stories that are embellished to produce something new, not being able to get to a single Truth or factual accounts of events.



Similarly, for Roland Barthes, writing becomes a source of change. Similar to Derrida's assertion regarding the text, Barthes states that it is impossible to get outside of language, language that has not been marked by bourgeoisie ideology, but by attacking from "within," writing becomes a system of shifting and varying meanings that oppose institutionalized language; here the signifier and signified association may be arbitrary. Ultimately, semiology cannot claim to be "uncontaminated by those languages of power," as there is nothing outside of language; nevertheless, it can "work within the totalitarian edifice of language" (Kearney 331); literature and writing become the means to subvert authoritarian discourse.

Arguably, Cisneros' writing attacks language of power from "within" by offering new ways of seeing or envisioning events during the construction of the Isthmus of Tehuantepec. As Barthes posits, writing becomes a source of change as it provides readers multiple voices and perspectives and not a fixed interpretation of events or point of origin. Cisneros introduces this national myth as a novel version of the events, thus obscuring the reader's perception of a singular Truth; here she presents an additional and possible account about the reason for the construction of the railway. Most significantly, the popular myth of Juana Romero has shaped the perception of these events for people living in Mexico and challenges the facts presented by those with the authority to narrate and thus shape history. As Glissant indicates, due to its generalizing tendency, myth enters a community's history (83). However, in this case, it is difficult to grasp or get to a credible, single source because of contesting narratives. Thus, Cisneros' archival process challenges our perception of objective Truths and a single History.

One of the most significant metanarratives or master discourses created by the West is that of history, a myth established to validate a single narrative that benefits the European Subject. From colonization, the development of the “othering” and subjection of peoples emerged. Ashcroft, Griffiths, and Tiffin consider how history is a “myth” of scientific representation of past events, linearity, and the foundation for what is deemed as true or real. To have a history, they claim, is to “have a legitimate existence [, to “be” or to exist]: history and legitimation go hand in hand” (355). Consequently, a “single narrative,” a neutral, meta-narrative or ideology emerged. However, History as a single, objective narrative is problematic as it reflects an account that Europe has written, one that places post-colonial societies in the peripheries or sidelines. To be able to narrate and create a single story means to have a “power to signify the ‘Other’” (Ashcroft, Griffiths, and Tiffin 356). A weighty suggestion posed by these writers considers the many histories and narratives, through literary writing, rather than one imposing narrative of History. The contentions of these writers are monumental in that they deconstruct the ideology of Truth, which places the post-colonial subject as the Other, the one that lacks the voice and agency to narrate and tell its story. Principally, their work is important because it reveals the factual and material implication that History has had on the post-colonial subject; to signify the Other is to create or narrate a story, to envision a future that the Other cannot envision or author itself, one that can place it in a state of servitude and subjectivity.

Through the historical background in the footnote, Cisneros intentionally alters the chronology of events to connect national myths, show transnational movements, and dispute the linear chronology traditional in literatures, cultures, and philosophy of the

West. In “The Gulf of Mexico System and the ‘Latinness’ of New Orleans,” Kirsten Silva Gruesz comments on Cisneros’ decision to place the Tehuantepec Railway in business during the period of the California Gold Rush. According to Gruesz, the Gold Rush, a U.S. national myth, has “exculpated expansionist policies as evolutionary and geographical inevitabilities” (487), which is analogous with Diaz’s rhetoric regarding the construction of the railway despite the many setbacks, “una mejora de tanta importancia y transcendencia para el porvenir economico del pais” (Garner 344). Gruesz states that Cisneros’ decision to place the construction of the isthmus alongside the Gold Rush is a critique to this national myth. In the footnote, Cisneros states, “it was during the California gold rush that the Tehuantepec Railway Company of New Orleans operated a route to San Francisco even though no railway trains were involved” (*Caramelo or Puro Cuento* 180). Cisneros is connecting these grand narratives or national myths that have been expounded or promoted with the logic of progress and even nationalist language.

However, it is evident that Cisneros alters the chronology of events as the California Gold Rush took place between the years of 1848 and 1855, and the first commercial passage in the isthmus was in operation until 1858 (“The Gulf of Mexico System” 487). Cisneros adjusts the chronology in the story’s footnote to reclaim the forgotten or overlooked relations that took place during the construction of the Tehuantepec Railroad. She reinterprets reality, and thus challenges the centrality of History, by shifting the dates in which the events took place, and although dates are purposely included, they do not conform to time as presented in current colonial archives. According to Glissant, “the linear nature of narrative and the linear form of chronology take shape in this context” (73). In other words, a person’s understanding and

consciousness of the world and History is contingent on a time scale. In the footnote, Cisneros conforms to the traditional ways of seeing history as linear while altering its chronology to highlight Mexico's new transnational passage.

In a *New York Times* article published in March 1859, "The Tehuantepec Route: Detailed Narrative of a Journey Across the Tehuantepec Isthmus," John K. Hackett details his journey across the isthmus on his way to New Orleans; his journey begins in San Francisco as he boards the *Golden Age*, a steamship, with 132 passengers, boards another steamer, *Oregon*, with 16 passengers at the port of Acapulco, mounts a coach to the city of Tehuantepec, and makes an arduous trek across the isthmus. His narrative highlights the difficult condition of the passage and reports on a fellow Californian who died from the "heat and fatigue of the journey" (Hackett). The passage he describes is quite different from the one of comforts and ease Cisneros narrates in her footnote. Cisneros presents the path from New Orleans to San Francisco as a route that exemplifies exotic fruits and animals and luxuries as these mountainous paths can be easily navigated. Arguably, she presents a different account that shows familiar tropes of exotic landscapes to adhere to the historically documented colonized spaces of Mexico. In addition, her description shows the efficiency of the Tehuantepec passage. At the same time, she points to the new transnational movements that extend from New Orleans to San Francisco.

Evidence of connections that expand across national boundaries during the process of construction of the railway is also present in accounts of laborers brought to work in the isthmus, "given the insalubrious climatic and working conditions, the presence of yellow fever, and the scattered distribution of the local population, the major

problem was to obtain (and to retain) both skilled and unskilled labour. The labour problem was partially solved with the importation of over 15,000 contract labourers from China, Japan, Korea, Jamaica and the Bahamas” (Garner 350). The employment of laborers further illustrates transnational movements that took place during the construction of the Tehuantepec Railroad, which remaps national borders and our perceptions of oceanic space as “more than a void between societies” (“The Gulf of Mexico System” 472), but a space where movement and immigration took place. In addition to indicating transnational movements across this overlooked border system, the importation of contract laborers during the construction of the isthmus shows forced and crucial migrations that are not often documented.

Significantly, the apparent historical lesson in the story’s footnote<sup>17</sup> also offers a new archival form, one that can introduce and disseminate information, in this case feature transnational movements not only through land but also bodies of water that ultimately present the Gulf of Mexico as a Latino-Anglo border system. One of the observations Gruesz makes is that the visions for a railroad or canal across the Isthmus of Tehuantepec was disseminated through an understanding of the Mexican Gulf as a “natural” access point to the Pacific:

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<sup>17</sup> In *The Footnote: A Curious History*, Anthony Grafton presents the footnote of the modern historian. Grafton introduces an insightful description of the traditional historian’s footnote that claims “universal validity,” confers “authority on a writer,” and provides “moral and political lessons.” In contrast, the modern historian shows a secondary story different from the main narrative or text; footnotes “prove that it is a historically contingent product, dependent on the forms of research, opportunities, and states of particular questions that existed when the historian went to work” (23). In other words, the footnote is dependent on the author’s intentions and the historical period in which these were documented. Based on Grafton’s analysis, footnotes do not reflect objectivity as the author, the modern historian, guides and contributes to their production.

The Gulf constitutes a supersaturated site for nineteenth-century visions of the Spanish imperial past, as well as the commerce-driven US empire of the future. These visions came together in numerous plans, propagated throughout the century, for a railroad or canal across the Isthmus of Tehuantepec, which by the same logic of geographical determinism seemed to be the Gulf's "natural" access point to the Pacific and its markets ("The Gulf of Mexico System" 470).

It is important to examine the Mexican Gulf in relation to New Orleans as these transisthmian and transatlantic movements show connection. However, as explained by Gruesz, and maintained by travel writers such as Domingo Faustino Sarmiento, these ports also signify, "orifices of a primitive organism: young nations are dominated by their access to the outside" and susceptibility to "foreign penetration" ("The Gulf of Mexico System" 472) conversely, through a developed interior, ports "become less dominant" ("The Gulf of Mexico System" 469). Thus, this modern understanding of ports and their connection to the nations also shaped U.S. expansionist views. These transit privileges across the Tehuantepec Isthmus were deemed as "natural" and necessary due to the Mexican Gulf's proximity to the Atlantic.

Ultimately, these conflicting views show a different vision of the Gulf of Mexico—not as "empty space" ("The Gulf of Mexico System" 472) but as a contested border zone. "Recalling the language of proximity and access that backers of the Tehuantepec route shared with Latin American travelers can allow us to rehistoricize the Gulf as a distinctly conflictual *social* space—not merely a "natural" one—well beyond the colonial period, and to make that space visible for present-day critique" ("The Gulf of

Mexico System” 490). Furthermore, the proximity to other Latin American countries and access to the gulf should not encourage ideas of expansionism or imperialism.

Through the footnote to the short story “¡Probre de Mi!” in *Caramelo or Puro Cuento*, Sandra Cisneros reframes History and produces information that is often viewed as inaccessible and only recorded by those in power. She historicizes the story introduced as a footnote to reinterpret established national myths, to show how they are promoted as uncontested and generalizing truths, and to produce counter-narratives that alter our understanding of History. Additionally, Cisneros places the Gulf of Mexico as novel border zone, which has not been previously considered by Chicano writers.

## CLOSING

“And I don’t know how it is with anyone else, but for me these things, that song, that time, that place, are all bound together in a country that I am homesick for, that doesn’t exist anymore. That never existed. A country I invented. Like all emigrants caught between here and there.”

—Sandra Cisneros, *Caramelo or Puro Cuento*

During an interview with journalist Jorge Ramos, while promoting her last book *A House of My Own*, Sandra Cisneros talked about her decision to move to San Miguel de Allende, in the state of Guanajuato, Mexico. After living in the United States, both in Chicago, Illinois and San Antonio, Texas, for 60 years, she moved south because she did not feel at home in the U.S. Her mother’s family had lived in Guanajuato but fled north during the Mexican Revolution, and as a result she felt her roots remain there (*A House of My Own* 352). The angst and longing for a fixed place, a home, as a consequence of displacement and border crossings are also recurrent narrative themes in Cisneros’ work, from her first publication, *The House on Mango Street*, with the main character, Esperanza, who longs for a house to keep her family from constantly moving, to her last published work, *A House of My Own*, a collection of essays and a sort of autobiography that culminates with her move to Mexico. Although the stories she tells in her books mirror her own experiences, Cisneros has learned to live with the nostalgia for a place she cannot pin down. In *A House of My Own*, she states that she cannot go back to the home where she grew up, “except through stories, spoken or on paper” (40). Similarly, in other interviews after the publication she has said that her home is her writing. Indeed, her work exemplifies the difficulty in longing for a definite place to call home while struggling with the awareness that to live in the borderlands one must let go of rigid and fixed ideas of place.



One of the short stories in the novel *Caramelo or Puro Cuento* reveals the constant search for a place to call home, an intense longing for a definitive home to return to, spatially and temporally. In the short stories “Someday My Prince Popocatépetl Will Come” and “Halfway between Here and There, in the Middle of Nowhere,” the narrator, Celaya, describes her father’s encounter with Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS) officers who inspect his upholstery shop as a result of claims that he hires undocumented workers. Despite his stories about serving in the U.S. Army during World War II, the officers ask him to see his *papeles*, and he feels betrayed. He recognizes his position as a Mexican-born immigrant having to prove his legal status and right to live in San Antonio, and as he claims, in that moment, it was his “word against the government’s” (378). It is a reminder of displacement, despite the many years living in the U.S. Every year Inocencio Reyes, his brothers and their families drive south from Chicago and San Antonio to Mexico City. However, these migrations are often motivated by a constant longing for groundedness and fixity accompanied by a subsequent realization of the inability to return to a home understood and felt elsewhere both spatially and temporally:

Father remembers too clearly the route south, and it’s like a tide that tugs and pulls him when the dust rises and cedar pollen makes him sneeze and regret he moved us all to San Antonio... That terrible ache and nostalgia for home when home is gone, and this isn’t it. And the sun so white like an onion. And who the hell thought of placing a city here with no large body of water anyway! In less than three hours we could be at the border, but where’s the border to the past, I ask you, where?

—Home. I want to go home already, Father says.

—Home? Where's that? North? South? Mexico? San Antonio? Chicago? Where, Father?

—All I want is my kids, Father says. —That's the only country I need. (*Caramelo or Puro Cuento* 380)

Celaya asks her father to name a specific place to call home, but Inocencio is unable to do so. He recognizes his place on both sides, in the borderlands, and accepts that the country to which he belongs is determined by his proximity to his kids. He is at home when his family is with him. These ideas of fixity that permeate our world are not only documented in Cisneros' spatial narratives of Chicanos living in the borderlands but reflected in our world in pragmatic and material ways as well. *A House of My Own* concludes with Cisneros' move to Mexico; in one of the concluding essays she writes, "My first house [in San Antonio] was my invented Mexico. I painted, decorated, and built it according to the Mexico of my childhood memories" (348). It is possible that her move south stems from the constant nostalgia for a home she attempted to build while living in the U.S., a home she believes is located in Mexico temporally and spatially; it supports the assertions made previously on the space she occupies, one in which cultural identities and ideas of place are constantly negotiated.

Although these short stories are positioned in San Antonio, close to the south border separating Mexico and the U.S., many of her narratives show that the feeling of in-betweenness induced by straddling two cultures is not necessarily dependent on a person's proximity to the border as the Reyes family constantly moved from Chicago and San Antonio to Mexico. Cisneros' texts are important as they focus on intranational and

transnational movements that suggest new ways of envisioning borderlands, as not only attributed to the U.S. Southwest. Notably, her work expands on Gloria Anzaldúa's theoretical principles or formulations by suggesting that these borderlands extend from the American Midwest and American Southwest to the heart of Mexico. In addition, these transnational movements present a different perspective; by not designating insider-outsider positions through borders, they illustrate connectedness and relation.

The short stories or selected pieces that I analyzed in the preceding chapters consider the manner in which Cisneros undermines the dichotomies that govern and inform our world as characters inhabit a space of multiplicity and *mestizaje*, and these narratives highlight the immigrant experience, forced migration, and marginalization that takes place in these borderlands. As I began writing my thesis, I felt that I needed to engage with the social, cultural, and political challenges faced by Chicanos, and Latinos, today and to point to instances in which the theoretical and the material intertwine. The subject of post-colonialism is tied to deconstruction as the work of deconstruction reveals how through periods of colonization, by both Spain and the U.S., Mexico has undertaken the space and place of the Other. It shows what colonization has been done to people "in the real world." Deconstruction then goes beyond revealing how these dichotomies are operating by suggesting the ethical implications involved.

Through the current political events in the U.S., it became evident that the positions posited in my thesis are not theorizations without any substantive implications in the real world; these are perspectives that are working in pragmatic ways, hence present day executive orders that are currently criminalizing immigrants and often ignore their ties to both the U.S. and Mexico. It has become clear that these executive orders

can end up legitimizing prejudice and the way immigrants are viewed in this country, subsequently normalizing acts of hatred in our own communities and toward those residing in the borderlands. Ultimately, my intention is to continue the necessary dialogue about the dichotomies that inform our understanding of the colonized Other. I submit that it is necessary to question the rigidity of the US-Mexico border as it does not correspond to the experiential and lived experiences of those living in the borderlands, straddling two cultures, “identities,” languages, and, sometimes, spaces. At the same time, there is an obligation to examine the material realities that we need to consider as these advanced or “modern” nations construe a different reality of open borders, one that usually highlights the weight of power structures over “Third World,” colonized nations.

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