MAKING SPACE, MAKING SOUL: RENOVATING SITES OF CHICANA ABJECTION IN *PEEL MY LOVE LIKE AN ONION* AND *CARAMELO*

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Abstract

of

MAKING SPACE, MAKING SOUL: RENOVATING SITES OF CHICANA ABJECTION IN *PEEL MY LOVE LIKE AN ONION* AND *CARAMELO*

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In response to white, patriarchal, elite, hetero-normative U.S. culture's multiple marginalizations of Chicanas, some voices in contemporary Chicana literary criticism work toward creating an essentially Chicana body of criticism that excludes voices of dominant U.S. culture. While at the heart of this trend lies the desire for Chicana creativity to escape marginalization, this movement dismisses rather than confronts problems within dominant U.S. culture. But it appears that, as contemporary Chicana literature becomes increasingly accepted by and published within mainstream U.S. culture, Chicana creativity is moving in a different direction. In the following analysis, I examine two contemporary novels, Ana Castillo's *Peel My Love Like an Onion* (1999) and Sandra Cisneros's *Caramelo* (2002), that are very much within yet remain openly critical of the dominant U.S. culture of which they are a part. As critical works that closely examine the subversive power of working within while deconstructing structures of oppression, both Sonia Saldívar-Hull's feminism on the border and Julia Kristeva's theory of abjection inform my study of these novels. In her examination of Chicana identity politics, Saldívar-Hull explores how contemporary Chicana literature challenges dominant U.S. culture's exclusion of Chicana voices and recovers the histories of those who have been denied expression within dominant culture. And in her psychoanalytic study of the negotiations of power involved in abjection and marginalization, Kristeva examines the transgressive power of those who deconstruct dominant culture as outsiders within. With these theories to provide the framework of my argument, I study how Castillo and Cisneros de-essentialize and expand Chicana literature by creating novels more richly complex than culturally essential, and how they deconstruct Chicana abjection and propel Chicana feminist narratives into new territories.

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Date

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Chapter 1

INTRODUCTION

American but hyphenated,
viewed by Anglos as perhaps exotic,
perhaps inferior, definitely different,
viewed by Mexicans as alien,
(their eyes say, "You may speak
Spanish but you're not like me")
an American to Mexicans
a Mexican to Americans […].
- from Pat Mora's "Legal Aliens" (ll. 8-15)

In her poem "Legal Aliens," Pat Mora captures the estrangement Chicanas/os encounter as multiply marginalized members of a culture somewhere in between dominant U.S. and Mexican cultures. Although Chicanas/os are members of U.S. culture with Mexican heritage, dominant U.S. and Mexican cultures tend to reject them for their racial, class, linguistic, and cultural differences. And as women within both patriarchal U.S. and Chicano cultures, Chicanas are additionally marginalized for their gender. Caught in between these multiple marginalizations, more Chicanas are turning to and embracing the geographical and philosophical space of the border as a site in which to explore their hybrid, complex, and multi-faceted identities. And it is in this flexible and blended border space where I position the following exploration of contemporary Chicana literature.

Historical Overview

In their early socio-historical work *La Chicana: The Mexican American Woman* (1979), Alfredo Mirandé and Evangelina Enríquez define a Chicana as "a woman (1) of

Mexican descent, (2) living in the United States, (3) culturally neither Mexican nor American but influenced by both societies, and (4) from a colonized minority [which experiences] a sense of marginality in an Anglo-dominated society" (12). Furthermore, Mirandé and Enríquez argue that la Chicana endures a "triple oppression:" as a member of an "internal colony" within the U.S., as a woman within the U.S., and as a Chicana (female) within Chicano (male) culture in the U.S. (12-13). This triple oppression is precisely what Chicanas began to openly address alongside issues of the Chicana/o movement in the 1960s and 1970s.

During these significant decades, Chicanas/os, a group consistently relegated to the margins of U.S. society, united to reject what Chicana/o historian Francisco Lomelí calls "the stigma of second-class citizenship;" to fight unfair working conditions, racism, and poverty; and to establish themselves as a growing cultural force (Lomelí 90).[i] Lomelí notes, "The agenda was institutional, economic, political, social and especially one of cultural pride. The central intent was to impact multiple sectors so as to achieve wide-spread results" (89-90). One of the most successful areas of Chicana/o cultural progress was in literature and the arts. As Lomelí observes, the dynamism of the movement cultivated "[a] new creative spirit [… which] helped produce a boom in literature, music, painting, murals, philosophy and overall cultural expression. Therefore, the Movement and the literary component became closely intertwined symbiotically as two parts of the same as they nurtured each other" (90).[ii] One highly prominent political task of the Chicana/o movement's literature involved an effort to recover "the[ir] history […] from the oblivion to which American social and literary history ha[d] consigned it" (R.

Saldívar 19). Chicanas/os sought to rectify the one-sided history that had been delivered through the lens of U.S. Manifest Destiny,[iii] pitting the self-proclaimed angelic Anglos against the so-called savage and illegal natives. As is in the nature of U.S. cultural and political hegemony, much of the history of the Chicana/o people was mediated and erased from an exclusive "American" history passed on by dominant (white, patriarchal, elite, hetero-normative) U.S. culture. By gathering untold stories into literature and song, and by de-centering the accepted dominant historical discourse,[iv] Chicanas/os were able to pass along another version of history – their history – to preserve and celebrate their cultural heritage.

However, while the larger Chicana/o movement evidenced such significant historical, political, and social advancements, progress in the area of gender relations proved slow. Many Chicanas, though they claimed active membership within the movement, were given nothing but supportive tasks; they were "expected to cook the beans, make the tortillas, do clerical work, care for the children, and satisfy their men's sexual needs" (Mirandé and Enríquez 234). When Chicanas spoke out against their marginalization within the movement, they "ran the risk of being labeled *putas*, or whores [… because] Feminism was seen not as something organic to the culture but as an Anglo trick to divide the Chican[a/o] movement" (234-35).[v] Furthermore, although Chicana feminists and Anglo-American feminists shared an interest in "overlapping issues of abortion, birth control, day care, and sex discrimination" (Dicochea 84), liberal and radical Anglo-American feminists espoused "a sort of maternal chauvinism that asked Chicanas to subordinate or minimize their needs as members of a racially

oppressed group for the greater cause – the universal oppression of women" (Mirandé and Enríquez 239). And by equating liberal and radical feminist agendas with the unqualified term "feminism," Anglo-American feminists "inadvertently colonized the very terms *feminism* and *politics*" (Saldívar-Hull 39). Chicanas were thus silenced on several fronts, both by the machismo mindset within the Chicana/o movement (Chicanas were considered cultural traitors or "sell-outs" if they joined white feminists (Dicochea 83; Carter-Sanborn, par. 2)) and also by the lack of racial and class representation within Anglo-American feminist movements.

Therefore, many Chicanas chose to align themselves with the Chicana/o movement over and above Anglo-American feminist movements, thereby "drawing a rigid boundary between Chicana and Anglo feminisms" (Dicochea 83) because they believed that it was impossible "to conceive of a separate women's movement independent of their racial-cultural struggle" (Mirandé and Enríquez 239). In other words, "[b]y remaining committed to the dominant, largely sexist Chicana/o movement while resolutely interrogating sexism, Chicana feminists recrafted La Causa to include matters such as welfare, child care, abortion, forced sterilization, and gendered wage difference" (Dicochea 86). In this way Chicanas revealed from within the shortcomings and failures of the Chicana/o movement and worked toward creating a space within this movement that included and validated their progressive work.

One such influential and outspoken advocate for Chicana subjectivity, Gloria Anzaldúa, rose in popularity during this frustrating time of stunted political, cultural, and social progress for Chicanas. Anzaldúa openly criticized the failure of European and

Anglo-American feminists to work toward the freedom and subjectivity of all marginalized groups and demanded that attention be paid to race, class, and sexuality in addition to gender. In her groundbreaking work *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza* (1987), Anzaldúa expands the space of Chicana identity as she discusses her own journey growing up in the U.S.-Mexico border region. Like Juan Bruce-Novoa, Anzaldúa argues that border residents do not fit into either binary category of Mexican or American, so she presses for the acceptance of a new, boundless identity: "it depends on the straddling of two or more cultures. By creating a new mythos – that is, a change in the way we perceive reality, the way we see ourselves, and the way we behave – *la mestiza* creates a new consciousness" (*Borderlands/La Frontera* 102). Anzaldúa describes this new consciousness as "complex, heterogeneous," rather than simply dualistic, and she embraces the hybrid and contradictory identities inherent in border inhabitants like herself. As evidenced by the lengthy tribute in the introduction to the third edition of *Borderlands/La Frontera*, Anzaldúa's politically progressive yet personal work influenced many Latina and Chicana writers in the 1980s and 1990s ("Gloria Anzaldúa ¡Presente!" n.p.). Her themes of hybrid identity, historical inclusion, and mestiza consciousness have inspired Chicana writers such as Sandra Cisneros and Ana Castillo, among others, who identify with the multiplicity and flexibility of a border identity and who reject rigid and exclusive essentialist definitions of Chicana identity.

However, as the literature of such Chicana writers began to flourish in the U.S. in the 1980s and 1990s, an interesting trend started to take shape in the marketing and popularity of their works. Ellen McCracken notes that for publishers and consumers of

American culture, Chicana narrative rose "to the status of desirable and profitable postmodern ethnic commodity" during these decades (*New Latina Narrative* 4). She asserts that "[Chicanas] are foregrounded as exotic and different from the mainstream precisely as they are being integrated into the mainstream, primarily because sameness is not as marketable in current conditions as difference" (5). This fetishization of the exotic "other" continues to present a controversial dilemma for the Chicana writer because as a marginalized member of U.S. culture writing and publishing in the U.S., she walks the fine line between assimilating into dominant U.S. culture and swimming against the current enough to cause a splash.

Theoretical Framework

Because many Chicana artists continue to balance these complex tensions and increasingly identify with the multiplicity and liminality of the border, I turn my attention to two contemporary Chicana novels, Ana Castillo's *Peel My Love Like an Onion* (1999) and Sandra Cisneros's *Caramelo* (2002), which both portray the complexity of Chicana identity formation within the dynamic and expansive region of the U.S.-Mexico border. In order to effectively situate my analysis of these novels, I first want to establish the theoretical framework which informs my argument.

To begin, much debate continues surrounding definitions of Chicana/o culture and creativity. Some critics define Chicana/o literature as works written by Chicanas/os, but this remains problematic, as "there is no consensus of opinion as to who is a Chican[a/o]" (Leal 2). Others define Chicana/o literature by thematic characteristics of the texts:

narratives take place on the border or in barrios, they tell the stories of campesinos, contain magic realism, or use code-switching; but even this text-specific approach fails because it expects an "essential" quality to be present in order to call the work "Chican[a/o]" (3). Still others argue that the discussion of essential characteristics places on Chicana/o writers unreasonable expectations and an unfair burden of representation. One such Chicana/o theorist, Juan Bruce-Novoa, criticizes essentialism by arguing that Chicana/o theorists must expand existing definitions and explore new definitions of Chicana/o identity. In *RetroSpace: Collected Essays on Chicano Literature, Theory, and History* (1990), Bruce-Novoa begins his deconstruction of early Chicana/o theory by rejecting the very act of defining Chicana/o literature, stressing, "What I object to is making this one style […] synonymous with 'the Chican[a/o] style' and canonizing it as the standard from which to judge others" (15). Instead, he advocates the idea "that *Chican[a/o]* remain undefined; that it, and thus the literature, is *nothing*, […], a *nothing* in no way negative, one which may manifest itself in many facets, but which perversely resists final definition […]" (94). By *nothingness*, Bruce-Novoa means that Chicanas/os are located in the space, or the openness, between the words "Mexican" and "American" from which emerge endless "intercultural possibilities" for creating Chicana/o literature and identity (98). In other words, Bruce-Novoa proposes that leaving the term "Chicana/o" without concrete definition allows Chicana/o creativity to speak for itself without the pressure to fit into a pre-determined mold. In this way Bruce-Novoa, like Stuart Hall in cultural studies, maintains a tension between discussing Chicana/o identity formation (which necessitates discussion of points of difference from other identity

formations) and not defining Chicana/o identity (which opens the door for infinite interpretations and expressions of Chicana/o identity). In Hall's words, such a theory "constantly allows the one to irritate, bother and disturb the other, without insisting on some final theoretical closure" (272). With this understanding I assert that within the open definition of Chicana/o, and by extension Chicana/o Studies, lies room for a multiplicity of voices and influences, including those from a variety of positions along the border region. This definition is most consistent with themes present in contemporary Chicana/o literature, *Peel My Love Like an Onion* and *Caramelo* notwithstanding. By maintaining open categories, then, contemporary Chicana/o writers such as Castillo and Cisneros allow room for a multiplicity of expressions of Chicana/o identity and express *a complex* rather than *an essential* Chicana/o experience.

While Castillo and Cisneros certainly write from within a more broad Chicana/o culture, they also write from their positions as Chicana feminists. As with Chicana/o studies, theorists hold a range of perspectives on Chicana feminisms, but most debate the issue of accepting European and Anglo-American feminisms, or as Shirley Geok-lin Lim calls them, Anglo/Euro/American, or AEA feminisms (279).[vi] For example, in her introduction to the anthology *Chicana Creativity and Criticism* (1996), María Herrera-Sobek delineates what she sees as the two main camps of Chicana criticism: those who find AEA feminisms enslaving and thus "search for an authentic Chicano [or in this case Chicana] critical discourse" (37), and those who find AEA feminisms useful. In the former group Herrera-Sobek locates Tey Diana Rebolledo and Yvonne Yarbro-Bejarano. Rebolledo boldly asserts, "I believe that [Chicana] critical discourse should come from

within, within our cultural and historical perspective" (211). With a bit more subtlety, Yarbro-Bejarano argues that critics must place "Chicana subjectivity in the center of literary representation" and that AEA feminisms fail to consider how "the Chicana's experience as a woman is inextricable from her experience as a member of an oppressed working-class racial minority and a culture which is not the dominant culture" (218, 214). But in response to such critical views, Judith Richards points out that many Chicanas, as they critique the essential-ization of their own culture, "assume static cultural unity in their use of terms like 'Anglo,' 'white,' and 'Chicano/a' and seem to override the natural evolution of cultures through interaction with each other" (par. 13). So rather than allowing room for cultures to influence each other and change, Chicanas and whites alike, Richards suggests, perpetuate static definitions and essentialism. Richards also asserts that "[a]nalyses that impose expectations and reify separatism tend to re-marginalize rather than articulate the complexities of the Chicana experience and imaginary" (par. 14). In other words, rejecting AEA feminisms only perpetuates the problem. Only by living within the tension between these contradictory theories, then, can critics truly examine this border feminism.[vii]

Like Herrera-Sobek, Rebolledo, Yarbro-Bejarano, and Richards, critics Kristin Carter-Sanborn, Norma Alarcón, C. Alejandra Elenes and Ellen McCracken also examine the complex relationship between AEA feminisms and Chicana feminisms, but remain open to perspectives from both sides of the border. Carter-Sanborn observes that Chicana feminists are often seen by fellow politically subversive Chicanas/os as sell-outs for having embraced AEA feminist ideals and abstract theory over the cultural ideals and

social and political activism of Chicanismo (par. 3). However, Carter-Sanborn argues that this perspective fails to recognize writing as a political act and "reinstate[s] a distinction between political speech and political action that has historically rendered the brown body, and especially the brown female body, invisible and inaudible in the public sphere" (par. 22). Stated differently, Carter-Sanborn proposes that by not engaging AEA feminisms and by not recognizing theoretical work as subversive, Chicanas/os risk perpetuating their own oppression and exacerbating the very circumstances they fight against. Like Carter-Sanborn, Norma Alarcón also values theoretical work as subversive practice, and she stresses that Chicana feminism's "more cosmetic" impact within European and Anglo-American feminist circles must be re-considered (357). Alarcón agrees with other Chicana feminists that "[w]ith gender as the central concept in feminist thinking, epistemology is flattened out in such a way that we lose sight of the complex and multiple ways in which the subject and object of possible experience are constituted" (361). But rather than reject AEA feminisms altogether, Alarcón acknowledges their influence upon Chicana identity formation and proposes that Chicana feminists confront AEA feminisms' failure to consider the many tensions of race, class, and sexuality in order for Chicanas to enact lasting political change. Like Alarcón, C. Alejandra Elenes also opens Chicana literature to outside cultural influences. She approaches Chicana feminist narratives from the perspective of individuality versus community, arguing that "[a]lthough they are based on a personal self, Chicana feminist narratives do not portray the self in isolation from the community or from the social structures that reproduce unequal relations of power. Rather, Chicana feminist narratives are manifestations of and

struggles against multiple forms of oppression" (par. 2). In brief, Elenes proposes that Chicana feminist narratives not remove themselves from structures of oppression but work within these structures in order to effect change from the inside out. Finally, in her investigation of Latina narrative, Ellen McCracken examines narrative, social, and religious changes taking place in contemporary literature, given recent trends toward identification with a hybrid and multiple culture. McCracken also considers the complex relationship between Chicana novels and the U.S. publishing industry, arguing that the literature in some cases "uses postmodernism's complicity with the dominant order to critique that very order. The text works against containment even as it is being contained" (*New Latina Narrative* 17). Therefore, although Chicana narratives emerge from and are published within dominant U.S. culture, this position affords them the opportunity to become agents of change from within, thereby carrying out successful political work. As McCracken highlights, Chicana authors hold a unique position within U.S. culture that enables them to deconstruct the dominant structures that oppress them. In terms of critical theory, Chicana feminists, as members of U.S. culture, have the opportunity to engage and critique dominant AEA feminisms, which has the potential to effect lasting change rather than the temporary change that comes with simply removing themselves from and ignoring their oppression. For this reason, I find using both Chicana and AEA feminisms to be an effective method for my literary analysis.

While AEA feminisms are often grouped together because of their exclusive discussions of gender in identity formation, my research in this field has led me to conclude, as Judith Richards concludes, that white feminisms are often unfairly treated as

sharing a “static cultural unity” when in reality this is far from the case (par. 13). In fact, Claire Goldberg Moses and S.A. Gambaudo suggest that even Anglo-American feminist understandings of Euro, and particularly French, feminism are “made-in-America” (Moses 264), or essentially “Anglo-American invention[s]” (Gambaudo 6). In other words, what many Anglo-American feminists, and in turn Chicana feminists, refer to as French feminism is not, in fact, French feminism but a strange fusion of Euro- and Anglo-American feminisms.[viii] Like Chicana feminism, then, this blend of AEA feminisms resists easy classification. For example, although Julia Kristeva is widely accepted in the U.S. as a French feminist, Moses and Gambaudo problematize her treatment as a member of the “‘Holy trinity’ of French feminist theor[ists]” (including Irigaray and Cixous), not only because her Bulgarian roots destabilize the Anglo-American representation of her as French (Gambaudo 7), but also because “Kristeva never associated herself with the MLF (the Mouvement de liberation des femmes [the women’s liberation movement]) or with feminism – indeed, she often railed against both in the popular press” (Moses 242, 245). So, then, while Kristeva is not a French feminist, Moses argues, Anglo-American feminists often mistakenly refer to her as such.

Now, while Kristeva may not call herself a feminist, her theories share with French feminists a critical view of “patriarchy and its institutions of social control” (Moses 244). But because Kristeva’s theories build from French psychoanalysis and engage theories of Lacan and Freud, she is often criticized by feminists for not “seeking a woman-centered perspective,” and because her theories deconstruct patriarchy and largely ignore issues of race, class, and sexuality, Kristeva is further criticized by many

feminists of color (Gambaudo 6). Since Kristeva's theory of abjection resists classification as purely French feminism, AEA feminism, or psychoanalysis, I call her theoretical position psychoanalytic "feminism." This term locates Kristeva within the psychoanalytic tradition but acknowledges the AEA assimilation of her as a feminist and speaks to the fact that much of her work does focus on gender politics.

With such theoretical blending and unstable categories, the field of border studies becomes a helpful resource in understanding the complexities of identity politics. Informing my own analysis, Cristina Beltran, Sonia Saldívar-Hull, and Héctor Calderón and José David Saldívar all offer helpful explorations of the space of the border. Beltran's examination of what she calls the "trope" of mestizaje focuses on the U.S.-Mexico border and returns to Anzaldúa's *Borderlands/La Frontera*. Beltran notes, "For Anzaldúa, the 'new *mestiza*' (italics in original) is both bridge-maker and translator; her displacement is both opportunity and resource" (606). In other words, because of her location within and between cultures, the new mestiza uses her position to connect with and interpret for others, and this ability to transgress boundaries enables Chicana artists not only to make connections with others unlike themselves in race, class, sexuality and gender but also to help these others to understand Chicana cultural identity. Saldívar-Hull also sees the space of the border as unique in its ability to express multiple positions, and her theory, which she calls Chicana feminism on the border, is dedicated to the recovery of Chicana histories that, because of their marginalization by dominant U.S. culture, have not been valued or recorded. Like Beltran and Saldívar-Hull, Héctor Calderón and José David Saldívar also turn their critical gaze to the region of the border, noting that "in

mid-nineteenth century […] Mexican-Americans, Chican[as/os], or *mestizos* began to project for themselves a positive, yet also critical, rendering of their bilingual and bicultural experience as a resistive measure against Anglo-American economic domination and ideological hegemony" (4). Calderón and Saldívar also situate their collection of essays, *Criticism in the Borderlands: Studies in Chicano Literature, Culture, and Ideology* (1991), within an intersection of theories: "from ethnographic to post-modernist, from Marxist to feminist, from cultural materialist to New Historicist critical perspectives" (6). Modeled after this example of theoretical expansiveness, my analysis of Castillo's and Cisneros's novels is informed by multiple perspectives – not only within Chicana/o, Chicana, and border studies, but also within Chicana feminism on the border and AEA feminisms.

To the conversations taking place in each of these studies of Chicana feminism, Chicana/o culture, AEA feminisms, and border studies, I add my own voice in an effort to develop an analysis of contemporary Chicana literature that highlights rather than erases the many tensions that influence identity formation within the U.S.-Mexico border region.

Overarching Argument

In the following analysis, I turn my attention to two contemporary Chicana novels, Ana Castillo's *Peel My Love Like an Onion* and Sandra Cisneros's *Caramelo*, and to two theories in particular - Sonia Saldívar-Hull's *Feminism on the Border: Chicana Gender Politics and Literature* (2000) and Julia Kristeva's *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection* (1982) - which offer significant paradigms for understanding negotiations of

power between dominant and marginalized cultures.[ix] While Saldívar-Hull engages a cross section of Chicana feminism and border studies in her exploration of race, class, gender, and sexuality in Chicana identity formation, Kristeva writes from a psychoanalytic perspective, which focuses primarily on the role of patriarchy (and which subordinates factors of race, class, and sexuality) in establishing and maintaining structures of power. While at first glance these two theories appear to have little in common, I have found that both provide unique and valuable perspectives in their critiques of dominant cultures. Taken together, these two theories put forward a richly complex framework for literary analysis that not only acknowledges the politics of race, class, sexuality and gender in identity formation but also highlights the subversive power of those who are marginalized within the dominant culture.

Saldívar-Hull's *Feminism on the Border* examines the space of the U.S.-Mexico border as a region of its own that is multiply marginalized by both dominant U.S. and Mexican cultures. Writing from her own experience as a Chicana from Texas, Saldívar-Hull describes the border as a space where "gender politics are lived simultaneously with race, class, and sexual awareness," a space that "challenges the dualisms that underpin the power structure of the United States" (61). In other words, unlike AEA feminists, who largely ignore issues of race, class, and sexuality, Saldívar-Hull argues that these issues are inseparable facets of Chicana identity, which, by nature of its multiplicity, destabilizes binary structures prevalent in dominant U.S. culture. In addition to this, one main focus of Saldívar-Hull's theory is "an emergent literary production led largely by the women who call themselves Chicana feminists" (34), whose "dialectical position as

feminists on the border demands different strategies for filling in the gaps of a suppressed history" (34). In other words, the project of such Chicana border feminists is one of recovering "an erased existence" and an "alternative history" (17). For example, Anzaldúa retraces the history of the silencing of Chicana voices in *Borderlands/La Frontera*, and Saldívar-Hull projects that Chicana border literature will turn in the direction of the testimonio, a way of remembering the voices of those not privileged enough to be included in dominant historical documentation (161). Ultimately, Saldívar-Hull's exploration of Chicana identity politics celebrates a multiplicity of Chicana lived experience and sheds light on the complications and tensions experienced in living out this complex identity.

Kristeva's *Powers of Horror* presents an exploration of the ways in which patriarchal structures in dominant culture use their power to marginalize, control, and contain the feminine. Elizabeth Grosz observes that "Kristeva's general model of signifying practice is derived from Lacan's integration of Freudian psychoanalysis and structural semiology" (150), which "has been instrumental in demonstrating the centrality of systems of meaning or signification to subjectivity and the social order" (148). Building from Lacan's connections between the process of becoming a subject within society and the acquisition of language, Kristeva focuses her study on an infant's development within the mirror stage as an important transition from the semiotic to the symbolic realm (*Powers of Horror* 67). Kristeva explains that the semiotic realm "precedes the establishment of the sign" and is characterized by "'energy' charges" and "vocal or kinetic rhythm" rather than words ("Semiotic and Symbolic" 36). For example,

before they learn to expresses themselves in language, infants inhabit the semiotic realm where they express their needs and emotions through physical movements and guttural noises. Grosz notes that “Kristeva considers the semiotic as a feminine and maternally structured space” (160), and she explains that “[t]he semiotic is the order of the sexual drives and their articulation. […] It is the ‘raw material’ of signification, the corporeal, libidinal matter that must be harnessed and appropriately channelled [sic] for social cohesion and regulation” (151). In other words, in the semiotic realm, the infant’s world is inseparable from and in a sense dominated by the mother, and the infant’s experience is characterized by physical and emotional urges and expressions. Before infants learn to control or describe these impulses with language, they experience and express them without words. So in this sense the substances and emotions that words signify and attempt to describe – the “raw material of signification” – are first felt and expressed in the semiotic realm, before language. Grosz further explains that the semiotic “is the precondition for and the object sacrificed by the child in establishing a position as a speaking subject within the symbolic” (160). In order for infants to eventually participate in the symbolic realm, then, they must first experience the semiotic before letting go of it when they learn to control their impulses and desires.

Unlike the semiotic realm, the symbolic realm that infants eventually enter is characterized by “law,” and “depend[s] on language as a sign system” (“Semiotic and Symbolic” 36). Grosz calls it “the condition of ordered, regulated, and rule-governed signification” (151). Essentially, as infants develop linguistic skills, they learn that to participate in the social order – to become a speaking subject – they must communicate

using words and must organize these words according to the rules of their language. Grosz further elucidates,

> For [Kristeva] the symbolic is […] based on the 'repression' or subsumption of the chaotic semiotic fluxes, and their utilization under regulated conditions so that they are capable of functioning as ordered, meaningful signifying elements. […] The symbolic is an order superimposed on the semiotic. It leads to the acquisition of a stable speaking, desiring position and the regulation and systematization of vocalization and libidinal impulses, as required by discursive production and social order. (152)

What Grosz is saying here is that the symbolic realm restrains the impulses of the semiotic realm in an attempt to create "social order." For example, for humans to communicate with one another, we must ascribe to a shared language with an agreed-upon set of signs and signifieds. When these rules are not established or followed, we experience a sense of social disorder because we have no way of communicating with one another. But for this symbolic order to be created, the semiotic order – with its "vocalization and libidinal impulses" – must be controlled. What Kristeva draws attention to, then, is the constructed nature of the order within the symbolic realm. She observes that in order for individuals to remain within the symbolic realm, they must assume what Grosz calls "a stable speaking, desiring position" that controls and confines the impulses and urges within the semiotic (152). This becomes problematic because the semiotic cannot be fully controlled, and it emerges now and again, breaking through its confines and revealing the true lack of stability of the symbolic realm (153).

For Kristeva's study of abjection, then, the mirror stage becomes important because in this stage infants begin their transition from the semiotic to the symbolic. Infants in the mirror stage start to recognize their reflection as an image of themselves, which, as Grosz establishes, builds a foundation for understanding signification:

> The mirror stage provides the conditions for the child's detachment from its lived experience. This is necessary if signification is to be possible or desirable for the child. If it lives only in/as the immediacy of the *chora* no experience can be represented by a sign or by anything other than itself. Any sign or representation would function simply as another pure presence, another immediately lived experience and not a delegate or representative of another (absent) experience. This detachment from the immediacy of the need brings with it the possibility of substitution, and thus of symbolization. (155-56)[x]

The mirror stage thus allows children to see that the reflection of their image is neither another person nor themselves but an image that stands in place of or represents themselves. This basic understanding of signification makes it possible for children to perceive of themselves as individuals - subjects separate from the mother (*Powers of Horror* 64). To further accomplish this separation, the child pushes away from the mother for two significant reasons. First, as Emma Parker states, "the mother's body [...] represents the presymbolic fusion of mother and child and therefore threatens the subject with a potential loss of autonomy (Parker, par. 4). In other words, the mother reminds the child of his or her initial complete dependence upon and lack of separation from the mother's body - not only is the child indistinct from the mother's body during her

pregnancy, but also as an infant the child depends completely on the mother's body for survival (nourishment and care). Second, the mother's body becomes a reminder of a time when the child did not exist and therefore reminds the child of his or her limitations and mortality – a thought that is suppressed in order to live (*Powers of Horror* 15, 63). Although the infant represses these memories, the reality of his or her dependence and limitations remains, and the inability to escape this reality generates a "fear of his [or her] very own identity sinking irretrievably into the mother," as well as a feeling of horror and then rejection, which Kristeva calls abjection (64). In other words, the child within the symbolic realm becomes threatened by the mother as a reminder of the constructed nature of and therefore the instability of the child's identity, and the mother is pushed away in order for the child to avoid his or her identity dissipating into the feminine semiotic.

In addition to positing that the mother's body reminds the child of its dependence and limitations, Kristeva proposes that motherhood itself becomes further abjected because it represents the semiotic and challenges the symbolic order. Because this dominant patriarchal symbolic order cannot rid itself of the threat that the feminine semiotic poses, it tries to control the feminine abject by maintaining practices of cleanliness (no crossing of boundaries), binary categories (clear, logical, black-or-white definitions), and order (everything in its place) (75-89). As Parker observes, "a subject's existence in the symbolic order depends on a 'clean and proper' body, which in turn depends on the expulsion or rejection of improper, unclean, and disorderly elements of corporeality: the abject" (par. 3). Motherhood becomes abject, then, because it transgresses multiple boundaries: the process of conception crosses both physical and

emotional boundaries (unifying two beings); pregnancy blurs the physical boundary between the bodies of mother and child; birth breaks this physical boundary; and nursing requires the transfer of nourishment from one body to another (*Powers of Horror* 75). Such crossing of boundaries violates the symbolic realm's values of cleanliness and order, yet such a violation cannot be removed because it remains necessary for life to continue. This demonstrates Kristeva's assertion that the symbolic realm is never fully able to control the semiotic (13). As Grosz explains,

> The semiotic overflows its symbolic boundaries…. These semiotic eruptions represent transgressive breaches of symbolic coherence or, put in other terms, the symbolization or representation of hitherto unspeakable or unintelligible phenomena [the semiotic], instances on the borders of the meaningful which reveal coercive forces vested in the domination of the symbolic over the semiotic. (153)

In other words, the semiotic pushes through its constructed confines and exposes the symbolic realm's forced control over the semiotic realm. Motherhood, then, becomes threatening for the symbolic realm because it upsets the established symbolic order and thereby testifies to the symbolic realm's constructed nature and instability. In response to this threat, Parker explains, the symbolic realm develops what she calls "misdirected abjection:" a "[f]ear of the maternal body [that] is transferred to women in general and results in misogyny" (par. 4). So this abjection of the mother manifests itself in culture and society as well, giving rise to dominant politics that privilege patriarchy.

While Kristeva centers her discussion of abjection around human bodies, her theory also offers a valuable critique of negotiations of power within and along the borders of national and cultural "bodies" as well.[xi] Such physical and symbolic transgressions of these bodies occur in many ways: the physical crossing of the geographical border, the difference of language prohibiting participation in the symbolic order, the lack of adherence to codes of cleanliness due to economic poverty, the creation of a "border zone" which defies strict cultural definition, etc. José David Saldívar, author of *Border Matters: Remapping American Cultural Studies* (1997), argues that the space of the U.S.-Mexico border signifies transition (a port of entry for immigrants from all of Latin America and elsewhere), hybridity (in language, culture, nationality), and mobility (women move into work in the public sphere or become heads of households as men cross into the U.S. for work) (J. Saldívar 25-35).[xii] The flexibility of this location becomes important because by nature it challenges boundaries and rigid definitions of geopolitical, cultural, ethnic, social, linguistic, economic, and gender identity on both sides of the border.

Kristeva's theory of abjection thus offers a valuable framework within which to deconstruct (and thereby reveal the fragility of) dominant U.S. structures of power (which privilege elitism, patriarchy, hetero-normativity, whiteness, physical beauty, physical ability). I therefore situate my analysis of *Peel My Love* and *Caramelo* within the blended framework of Saldívar-Hull's *Feminism on the Border* and Kristeva's *Powers of Horror*. Using both texts as critical lenses of analysis, I will examine: 1) how the form and content of each novel depict Chicanas as abject within dominant U.S. culture, 2) how

these structures fail to control and to confine Chicanas, and 3) how, ultimately, the renovation of these structures creates a space where Chicanas are freed from abjection and then enabled to embrace others who are marginalized. In other words, by working within and reconstructing such dominant structures (rather than destroying them and creating new ones altogether), Castillo and Cisneros carve out a space for Chicanas within them.

Articulation of Stakes

As established briefly in the explanation of my theoretical framework, an on-going debate exists within Chicana feminism, and within Chicano/a Studies in general, regarding the consideration of Anglo-American and European feminisms. Those who reject Anglo-American and European feminisms do so with the intent to cast off the yoke of assimilation into dominant U.S. structures of patriarchy, elitism, racism, and hetero-normativity, and their well-founded argument against Anglo-American and European feminisms' acceptance and proliferation of such oppressive structures is intended to evoke change. This view is compelling because the extent of marginalization that Chicanas have experienced within dominant U.S. culture is unfair at best, and their criticism of structures that enforce such discrimination is completely justified. However, I argue that Anglo-American and European feminisms should not be dismissed entirely because, by so doing, Chicana feminists enact the very exclusive ideologies against which they fight. To silence dominant voices only contributes to the "us-them" binary

and to the alienation of others by accepting a perspective that erases rather than deconstructs the tensions they face. Instead, I find it necessary to develop connections rather than build walls because doing so provides a counter-perspective to a dominant culture that tries to erase the complexities of identity formation.

In addition to perpetuating binary patterns, creating a new structure of purely Chicana feminists assumes two rather precarious positions. First, this separatist stance is grounded in the notion that an essential Chicana feminist identity can exist, a notion that has been and is still widely debated. Adhering to an essential definition of Chicana feminism becomes problematic because, as Castillo notes, “The woman in the United States who is politically self-described as Chicana, mestiza in terms of race, and Latina or Hispanic in regards to her Spanish-speaking heritage, and who numbers in the millions in the United States cannot be summarized nor neatly categorized” (*Massacre* 1). While I admit that defining a shared identity can be unifying and empowering for a group committed to confronting its marginalization, I agree with Castillo that such definitions become problematic when they become exclusive. Because of the diversity of Chicana experiences, attempts to delineate who is or is not Chicana create division within Chicana culture itself by privileging some experiences and expressions of Chicana identity over others.[xiii] Furthermore, the exclusive separatist stance assumes that a purely Chicana feminist structure will ultimately end their multiple oppressions, but, again, this dismisses rather than confronts the circumstances surrounding their marginalization. This stance first glosses over the fact that Chicanas can contribute to the marginalization of one another. We see this take shape not only in discussions of essential Chicana identity but

also in discussions surrounding tradition and cultural values. Saldívar-Hull notes that some Chicanas adhere to traditional discriminatory practices, often to earn the love of the men in her family or to pass along the hardships she once experienced (110-115). While such discrimination is certainly not always the case, it does speak to the instability of structures built upon a foundation of exclusion. Because of this, the separatist stance provides only a temporary escape from Chicanas' multiple marginalizations. Also, by removing from discussions of Chicana creativity the significant influence of dominant U.S. culture, it dismisses the standing issue of Chicanas' multiple oppressions within and by dominant U.S. culture. By thus dismissing dominant U.S. culture, separatists do not change but simply repress their situation as marginalized outsiders within that culture rather than bring about change by highlighting and confronting the many tensions surrounding their identity formation.

I propose that, rather than separate themselves completely from non-Chicana voices and influences, Chicanas' first step in overcoming their multiple marginalization should be to address and confront the issues present within the discriminatory framework of the dominant U.S. culture in which they live. While the renovation of this framework will only come with much more time and difficult work, it is work that Chicanas do not have to accomplish alone. In order to deconstruct this framework, it becomes necessary for Chicanas to develop alliances with others in order to effect the greatest change. Though their experiences may differ greatly, uniting with others who are marginalized within dominant U.S. culture will strengthen the forces determined toward a future of fewer marginalizations.

Such an alliance is what I hope to build in this exploration of Chicana literature. As a white, middle-class, heterosexual woman, I understand that my experience differs greatly from that of many Chicanas, and I recognize that I am unable to fully and completely identify with their experiences because I have been privileged enough not to have lived through the particulars of their social, political, and cultural oppression. Yet I feel that I have something to offer to the fields of Chicana studies, feminism on the border, and AEA feminism, and I propose that the border region has space for my voice as well. Rebolledo stresses that a critic must “be conscious of her biases” (209), and I try to do that here. As Alarcón points out, my situation as a writer/intellectual allows me to be aware of my position and subjectivity, which in itself demonstrates my privileged place as an educated woman (360). This privilege affords me a voice, which I use to direct attention to the multiple oppressions Chicanas face in U.S. culture today. I aim not to force either a psychoanalytic “feminist” or Chicana border feminist reading upon these novels but to use such theories as a lens through which to view these texts from new angles in order to grow in understanding of Chicana literature and to draw attention to the ways in which Chicanas continue much subversive and progressive political, social, and cultural work in the U.S. through their creativity.

In my own efforts to confront oppressive structures of U.S. hegemony, I have chosen here to give critical attention to newer Chicana texts because I propose that, as Rebolledo asserts, “The role of the Chicana critic […] becomes one of facilitator: reproducing and making known the texts of our authors” (206) and that, as Barbara Christian asserts, we must expand our critical gaze to include not just texts from the past

but texts that are being written today (340). Therefore, I consider it my role to contribute to the expansion of the canon and to carve out space for new and diverse voices. In addition to this, I have chosen to follow in Saldívar-Hull's example and not italicize Spanish words in my analysis. In my own readings of Chicana texts, I have found this practice to only further the "othering" of the Spanish language, and I find that making these words look different on the page only heightens the perception of their difference off the page. By not italicizing these words, I hope (in however small a way) to level the field and treat all languages equally on the page.

Chapter Outlines

In the analysis that follows I have organized my argument by first examining in greater detail Kristeva's theory of abjection and its correlation to Saldívar-Hull's theory of Chicana feminism on the border. From this I will lay the groundwork for my literary analysis of Castillo's and Cisneros's novels.

In chapter two I turn to Ana Castillo's *Peel My Love Like an Onion* and explore how Castillo works within a well-regulated and structured rhythm of chapters and sub-chapters, neatly organizing protagonist Carmen's story of her struggle to find acceptance. Within this carefully choreographed narrative structure, Castillo reveals Carmen as multiply abject within dominant (patriarchal, white, elite, hetero-normative, physically beautiful, and able-bodied) U.S. culture in order to uncover the instability of these structures. By following Carmen's journey, Castillo renovates these oppressive structures and carves out a space where Carmen can overcome her abjection of class, race, gender,

and sexuality; can forge for herself an identity that is truly mestiza; and can then embrace others who are abject.

In chapter three I turn to Sandra Cisneros's *Caramelo* and consider how protagonist Celaya's repeated transgression of the geographic U.S.-Mexico border demonstrates a breaching of boundaries inherent in the abject. I will examine how Cisneros works within traditional formal structures of historical documentation but challenges them by weaving into her narrative an exploration of truth and fantasy, as well as a recovery of those marginalized within dominant U.S. culture for their race, class, gender, sexuality, physicality, and ability. By so transgressing boundaries in form and content, Cisneros, like Castillo, creates a narrative that embraces rather than rejects those who are marginalized.

In my concluding chapter I consider how these two novels point to a growing trend in Chicana literature. By choosing to critique dominant (patriarchal, white, elite, hetero-normative, physically beautiful, and able-bodied) structures, Castillo and Cisneros confront Chicanas' multiple abjection and reject the responses of destruction and isolation, which only perpetuate exclusion. Instead, these Chicanas choose to transform and renovate dominant oppressive structures in order to create a space in U.S. culture where the liminality of the border region is no longer threatening. Although the burden of Chicana representation is great, both Castillo and Cisneros balance the pressures placed upon them by dominant U.S. and Chicana/o cultures, and they successfully accomplish critical progress and effect change. By contributing to efforts to de-essentialize and expand the genres of Chicana and border literature, and by creating texts more richly

complex than culturally transparent or essential, Castillo and Cisneros deconstruct Chicana abjection and propel Chicana border feminist narratives into new territories. In turn, I hope that my examination of these two contemporary Chicana novels draws critical attention to literature in la frontera, and I hope to extend Chicana feminism on the border (in the manner of Barbara Christian) one essay at a time beyond its current boundaries and expectations.

Chapter 2

STANDING AT THE EDGE: AN INTERSECTION OF ABJECTION AND FEMINISM ON THE BORDER

I stand at the edge where earth touches ocean
where the two overlap
a gentle coming together
at other times and places a violent clash. […]

This is my home
this thin edge of
barbwire.

But the skin of the earth is seamless.
The sea cannot be fenced,
el mar *does not stop at borders.*
- *(*Borderlands/La Frontera *23-25)*

In the poem that begins *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza* (1987), a compilation of poetry, autobiography, memoir, essays, theoretical texts, Gloria Anzaldúa envisions the geographical space of the U.S.-Mexico border as a metaphor for the ideological space of the border. According to Anzaldúa, the physical border is a space full of contrast and mixture, where worlds blend in some places and collide in others. What many writers, artists, and critics before her treated as a solid boundary line between the United States and Mexico (and therefore between two very distinct national and cultural identities), Anzaldúa reveals as a social and political creation. For her, the image of the ocean serves as a more realistic metaphor for the true fluid nature of this region, a region where, in the words of Hurtado, "[t]he political line dividing the United States from Mexico does not correspond to the experiential existence on the border, where families live on both sides of the Rio Grande and where shopping, entertainment, and

cultural expression do not abide by the legal line that separates both countries" (149). As an advocate for the expansion of social and political boundaries within Chicano, U.S., and Mexican cultures, Anzaldúa has been considered by many to be a prophetic voice, a mystic, a visionary for new frontiers in Chicana identity politics.[xiv]

Published toward the beginning of what can now be considered a Chicana Renaissance, Anzaldúa's *Borderlands/La Frontera* gave hope to Chicanas who were disempowered and silenced by the male-dominated Chicana/o Movement.[xv] A growing frustration amongst Chicanas was spurred on by the fact that they

> should have found expression in Chicano and feminist discourses, but they did not. The Chicano movement and Chicano studies paradigms have typically analyzed race/ethnic and class domination, neglecting gender critique. Women's studies and feminist theory have challenged the system of male domination and female subordination, ignoring race/ethnic and class contradictions. […] Although Chicanas sought numerous ways to express their concerns, their discourse was confined primarily to alternative publications within the Chicano movement. (Pesquera and de la Torre 2)

In other words, Chicanas were unable to find a political home for themselves. Chicanos rejected them as traitors to the Movement if they made alliances with AEA (Anglo-European-American) feminists, and AEA feminists excluded Chicanas not only by failing to recognize their own ethnic and racial privilege but also by failing to address issues of racial and economic discrimination alongside gender and sexual discrimination. Amidst these tensions, Chicanas longed for "una literatura [a literature] that testifies to our lives,

provides acknowledgment of who we are: an exiled people, a migrant people, mujeres en lucha [women in struggle]" (Gómez, Moraga, and Romo-Carmona qtd. in Saldívar-Hull 47). And this is precisely what Anzaldúa accomplished in *Borderlands/La Frontera*. She offered Chicanas a new feminist paradigm in which to navigate between the multiple tensions of cultural, economic, sexual, gendered, and racial identities present in their lives on the border. Anzaldúa's exploration of a "new mestiza consciousness" provided the language and framework for a new movement in, to borrow María Herrera-Sobek and Helena María Viramontes' words, "Chicana creativity and criticism" (2).

In 1985 what is now considered the "Contemporary Chicana Generation" emerged, and with it a new commitment to artistic experimentation and freedom, which has lasted into the 1990s and 2000s. In contrast to previous literatures, the works of Chicana writers such as Helena María Viramontes, Ana Castillo, Cherríe Moraga, Sandra Cisneros, Denise Chávez, Pat Mora, and Mary Helen Ponce, "focused on the reconceptualization, re-presentation, and recovery of women's voices," and they stylistically blurred genres and broke stereotypes (Lomelí, Márquez, and Herrera-Sobek 291). In other words, in response to the oppression and silencing Chicanas experienced within both the Chicano and AEA feminist movements, they created their own "feminist ethos [… and] aspired to represent Chicanas' lives in more accurate, complex, and authentic ways" (Lomelí, Márquez, and Herrera-Sobek 290). And although these writers did "not subscribe to one literary agenda or trend" (Lomelí, Márquez, and Herrera-Sobek 297), their emerging literature did exhibit several common characteristics:

> 1) the examination of women as “theoretical subjects”; 2) the cultivation of a wide assortment of literary forms; 3) the incursion into the psyche or what we might term “experimental inwardness”; 4) the portrayal of social elements from a “herstorical” approach; 5) the presentation of texts from a genderized political and cultural perspective; 6) the objective to either challenge, defy, or break traditional boundaries or borders of any kind (including textual and sexual); and 7) the desire to reach others in order to exercise some kind of inspirational influence among subsequent generations. (Lomelí, Márquez, and Herrera-Sobek 291)

This emerging literature was dedicated to creating a space for Chicanas, a space - like the border - that enabled them to transgress racial, sexual, gendered, and class categories and to deconstruct oppressive structures of dominant discourse in order to reconstruct Chicana critical discourse.

Perspectives on Chicana Feminism

These conversations about defining Chicana discourse still emerge today. Although Chicanas from 1985 until now have had differing opinions about how a Chicana feminist discourse is constructed and what texts it includes or excludes, they seem to agree that “when we invoke *Chicana* as a self-identifier, we invoke race and ethnicity, class, and gender in their simultaneity and in their complexity” (Saldívar-Hull 45). In their collection of essays *Building with Our Hands: New Directions in Chicana Studies* (1993), Beatríz M. Pesquera and Adela de la Torre asked their contributing authors “to discuss their perceptions of the relationship of Chicana scholarship to

Chicano studies and women's studies," and they found that "[their] contributors gave voice to the tensions and contradictions characteristic of earlier Chicana positions" (2). In other words, conversations that began years earlier are still taking place. Contributor Rosa Linda Fregoso understands that in Chicana studies, "Chicana scholars insist on the centrality of theorizing about all forms of domination" (qtd. in Pesquera and de la Torre 6). And another contributor, Denise Segura, outlines

> several types of Chicana scholarship. One type tries to connect research on Chicanas to mainstream frameworks in the respective fields; another type tries to develop an understanding of the status and oppression of Chicanas, using feminist frameworks as points of departure; another type, connected to postmodernist frameworks, tries to get away from all mainstream thought. It begins with Chicanas as a point of departure and builds from there an understanding of their uniqueness as well as their commonalities with other oppressed peoples in this society. (qtd. in Pesquera and de la Torre 6)

Alongside the range of responses from each of their contributors, Pesquera and de la Torre present their own perspective "that the vitality in Chicana scholarship springs from its insistence on developing new categories of analysis that reshape and expand established intellectual boundaries" (5). So like the space of the border, Chicana studies is dynamic in nature and draws strength from expanding into new areas.

María Herrera-Sobek sets out on a similar defining project in her collection *Chicana Creativity and Criticism: New Frontiers in American Literature* (1996) where she addresses what she sees as "two prevailing currents of thought" in Chicana feminism:

emancipation and appropriation (Herrera-Sobek 37; Richards par. 3). She explains that emancipationists "argu[e] for an emancipation from 'white' literary theoreticians in search for an authentic Chicano critical discourse," while appropriationists find "European, American, and Feminist critical discourse as useful tools in the analysis of Chicana writers" (Herrera-Sobek 37). Many Chicana feminists do more closely identify with one of these categories over the other (and thus a divide within Chicana feminism arises), but I propose that, like the space of the border, a more constructive approach does not seek the safety of a binary or tertiary (polarized) structure but rather locates itself in the liminal space in between and engages multiple and differing viewpoints.

Emancipationists, however, disagree. Two Chicana critics who align closely with emancipationists are Tey Diana Rebolledo and Yvonne Yarbro-Bejarano. These two women reject AEA feminisms because they argue that these discourses "survive by borrowing, absorbing, and, consequently, containing the oppositional cultural production of subordinate classes, a practice that neutralizes its resistant nature" (Richards, par. 5). In other words, Rebolledo and Yarbro-Bejarano draw attention to the ways in which dominant discourse seeks to make itself stronger by trying to assimilate any counter-cultural discourses. In her essay "The Politics of Poetics: Or, What Am I, A Critic, Doing in This Text Anyhow?," Rebolledo locates Chicanas "at the moment of questioning everything, even ourselves" and argues that this is the result of the fact "that in spite of the explosion of creative and critical activity […], Chicana writers and critics are still within a framework of marginality among Chicano writing as well as in mainstream writing" (204). And in her exploration of the increasingly important task of Chicana

critics, Rebolledo claims that they themselves have played an unfortunate part in this continued marginalization:

> By appropriating mainstream theoreticians and critics we have become so involved in intellectualizing that we lose our sense of our literature and therefore our vitality. This priority of placing our literature in a theoretical framework to "legitimize" it, if the theory overshadows it, in effect undermines our literature or even places it, once again in a state of oblivion. Privileging the theoretical discourse deprivileges ourselves. (205)

Rebolledo finds a direct correlation between the use of dominant theories – in this case AEA feminisms - and the continued marginalization of Chicana literature and theory. She argues that Chicana writers and theorists exacerbate their marginalization and lose sight of their work as "oppositional cultural production" when they buy into the idea that they need to use dominant literary criticism in order to justify themselves and the value of their literature within dominant U.S. culture (Richards, par. 5). So instead of using dominant discourse, Rebolledo argues that Chicana "literature [should] speak for itself" and that "critical discourse should come from within, within our cultural and historical perspective" (211). While "[m]aking others 'uncomfortable' in their Racism is one way of 'encouraging' them to take a stance against it" ("Introduction: Haciendo Caras" xix), repaying exclusion with exclusion rarely creates constructive dialogue but reinforces an "us-them" binary structure (thus reinforcing dominant discourse), which perpetuates cycles of discrimination and alienation. Furthermore, as Judith Richards so astutely notes, "[t]he assumption that insiders will naturally interpret 'correctly' Chicana symbolic

systems, and that Chicana critics can minimize the 'risk' of outsiders' interpretation, essentializes the nature of both Chicana literature and its audiences" (Richards, par. 10). Rebolledo, from this analysis, repeats rather than defeats the offensive cycle of the powers against which she fights.

Yarbro-Bejarano also affirms an emancipationist stance in her essay "Chicana Literature from a Chicana Feminist Perspective." Like many Chicana feminists, Yarbro-Bejarano distinguishes "between a Chicana perspective and the mainstream feminist perspective with regard to issues of race, culture and class" as well as community (215). She explains that through the creative act of writing, Chicanas "reject the dominant culture's definition of what a Chicana is," and "refuse the objectification imposed by gender roles and racial and economic exploitation" (215). So the written word provides Chicanas the space to accomplish progressive political work. Yarbro-Bejarano draws the conclusion that "[t]he love of Chicanas for themselves and each other is at the heart of Chicana writing, for without this love they could never make the courageous move to place Chicana subjectivity in the center of literary representation, or to depict pivotal relationships among women past and present, or even to obey the first audacious impulse to put pen to paper" (218). In other words, while Yarbro-Bejarano acknowledges that the act of writing for Chicanas is a bold and subversive act, she situates this act as being done by Chicanas, for Chicanas. As Herrera-Sobek observes, Yarbro-Bejarano makes the case "that any originality and contribution [Chicanas] can offer to world literature depends on [their] ability to draw from [their] own specific racial and cultural experience" (38). And while drawing from personal experience strengthens and enlivens Chicana literature,

requiring this alone as the basis for understanding "Chicana creativity and criticism" becomes problematic. As Joan W. Scott asserts in her exploration of "experience:"

> When experience is taken as the origin of knowledge, the vision of the individual subject (the person who had the experience or the historian who recounts it) becomes the bedrock of evidence upon which explanation is built. [...] The evidence of experience then becomes evidence for the fact of difference, rather than a way of exploring how difference is established, how it operates, how and in what ways it constitutes subjects who see and act in the world. (25)

Scott reveals that when an argument is built upon the foundation of experience, the evidence provided to support the argument only draws further attention to the difference between the one who has had the experience and the one who has not. Highlighting this difference leaves little room for counterargument because any response ultimately circles back to the fact that there remains a difference in experience, and this becomes problematic, Scott asserts, because the argument then focuses on reinforcing that difference instead of examining the deeper issues of why that difference exists and what the effects of that difference are. Yarbro-Bejarano and Rebolledo accomplish just this; in the words of Scott, they essentially "reproduc[e] rather than contes[t] given ideological systems" and therefore fail to challenge or deconstruct the larger framework of their oppression (25). So by excluding non-Chicana voices and by privileging their own experience over other forms of evidence, such emancipationist theorists "reify separatism" and "re-marginalize rather than articulate the complexities of the Chicana experience and imaginary" (Richards, par. 14).

The hesitation emancipationists exhibit toward allowing outside voices into their critical work is understandable, given their history of political and economic oppression as well as racial and social marginalization experienced at the hand of dominant U.S. culture.[xvi] Although much progress has been made, many more changes must still take place in order to empower and restore subjectivity to Chicanas in the realm of literary criticism and cultural study. While silencing the voice of dominant discourse has the potential to draw dominant culture's attention to a need for revolution, this act underestimates the subversive power of Chicanas to engage, deconstruct, and improve that discourse. Theorists such as Norma Alarcón, Papusa Molina, and Emma Pérez challenge the exclusionary practices of emancipationist Chicana feminists. As "appropriationist" theorists, Alarcón, Papusa, and Pérez find dominant discourses "useful in apprehending the Chicana text" (Herrera-Sobek 38), and they recognize Chicanas' "subalternity as a position of critique, as a recalcitrant difference that arises not outside but inside elite discourses to exert pressure on forces and forms that subordinate it" (Prakash 1481). In other words, Chicanas' location in dominant U.S. culture allows them a unique opportunity to challenge and deconstruct oppressive discourses from within.

In her essay, "The Theoretical Subject(s) of *This Bridge Called My Back* and Anglo-Feminism," Alarcón conducts just such work. She draws attention to the fact that "the most popular subject of Anglo-American feminism is an autonomous, self-making, self-determining subject who[, … b]elieving that […] she is the same as man, […] now claims the right to pursue her own identity, to name herself, to pursue self-knowledge…" (357). But Alarcón finds this subject problematic; she claims, "By having women be the

subject of knowledge, the so-called ‘objectivity’ of men is brought into question. Often, this leads to privileging women’s way of knowing in opposition to men’s way of knowing, thus sustaining the very binary opposition that feminism would like to change or transform” (361). “As a result,” Alarcón continues, “some Anglo-American feminist subjects of consciousness have tended to become a parody of the masculine subject of consciousness, thus revealing their ethnocentric liberal underpinnings” (357). In other words, Anglo-American feminists (and European feminists as well) place themselves in the dominant role once ascribed to men, and in so doing, they simply trade one form of domination for another. By ignoring the roles of class, race, and sexuality in their own identity formation, many AEA feminists remain oblivious to or choose to ignore the influence of class, race, and sexuality on identity formation, a practice that privileges gender as a universal identifier and thus continues to marginalize and silence the voices of non-white women (360). But to counter these practices, Alarcón suggests that the solution is not to create a separate space for Chicana study that excludes all other voices; she proposes instead that Chicanas confront and deconstruct such dominant ideologies in order to make room for an expression of a “plural personality” that draws attention the many factors – including race, class, and sexuality, not simply gender - that contribute to identity formation (366).

Like Alarcón, Molina also engages and deconstructs dominant discourses. She argues that women of color must “dismantle […] white people’s organizations and recreate them with diversity at their core and people of color as their leaders” (Molina 329). Rather than ignore oppressive dominant structures altogether, Molina suggests that

women of color (Chicanas included), renovate them in order to address and resolve the problems inherent within. She outlines one of the critical issues she observes:

> [I]n the feminist movement especially, we have been very good about recognizing the differences; we have named them; we have analyzed their construction, and we have deconstructed them. However, we have a hard time accepting and celebrating differences. Why? I think it is because we are immersed in a society where "sameness" is venerated as the most desirable quality. It is so internalized that even when we construct alternative organizations, we establish norms and regulations that create just another category of sameness […] Everything around us tells us that in order to affirm who we are, we need to negate the other or define it as the opposite. (330)

Molina here critiques binary structures within dominant discourse and directly addresses the issue of isolation that such structures create. She recognizes that when Chicanas create an exclusive space separate from dominant discourse, they take part in re-creating the very structures of oppression they have worked to overcome (330). In other words, this practice maintains an "us-them" binary in which one group is always defined by its difference from the other. In response, Molina proposes that Chicana feminists should view dominant structures with a critical eye and become aware of the ways in which they may perpetuate those very structures.

Emma Pérez is one such feminist who remains adamant about confronting dominant structures of oppression and who takes on the challenge of applying to Chicana literature what has become known as French feminist theory. In her essay "Speaking

from the Margin: Uninvited Discourse on Sexuality and Power," Pérez demonstrates the importance of engaging dominant discourse while, in the words of Saldívar-Hull, "us[ing] the master's tools to dismantle the master's house" (Saldívar-Hull 52). Pérez confronts the hypocrisy of Chicana feminists who rail against AEA feminists for their failure to consider class and race, yet who have no problem using the theories of Marx – "the quintessential white, middle-class, German man – to explain the exploitation of a Chicana in the cotton fields of Texas" (Pérez 58). Pérez continues, "Just as Marx provided a general paradigm for grasping the relationship between worker and capitalist, I claim that Luce Irigaray suggests models that interpret social and sexual relationships and hierarchical structures between and among heterosexuals, lesbians, and gay men beyond the borders of France" (58). In other words, just as Chicanas/os find valuable tools of analysis in Marxism, so she finds valuable tools in other non-Chicana theories – in this case, what AEA feminists call French feminism. While Pérez concedes that French feminists do not share her history or her language, she still asserts that some "rebel against that which I as a Chicana historical materialist also resist – the male symbolic order," and therefore Pérez works to "supplement an analysis for Chicanas that chiefly summons sexuality and embraces sexuality's relationship to race, class, and gender within our culture" (58). Centering her analysis upon Freud's Oedipal triangle and drawing on the works of Lacan, Foucault, and Irigaray, Pérez draws parallels between western society's obsession with the Oedipal complex and Chicana/o society's obsession with the *La Malinche – La María* dichotomy. She boldly proposes, "Not until victims resist perpetrators and have the courage to abandon the pattern, not until women and men

stop assigning the perpetrators power, can women and men abandon phallocratic law and order" (66). Pérez argues here that if Chicanas do not confront dominant structures of oppression, they only contribute to the pattern of their own oppression; but if they address these structures, they can take power from the dominant "perpetrators," empower themselves, and effect lasting change.

But Pérez does not stop there. She makes her argument personal by proposing that we can effect the changes we truly desire only when we are "willing to grapple with questions like 'Am I exploiting anyone, and if I am, how can I change?'" (Pérez 66). While Saldívar-Hull urges her "White feminist 'sisters' [to] recognize their own blind spots" (Saldívar-Hull 36), Pérez urges the same for her Chicana "sisters," and she concludes her argument with urgency: "We begin by shedding internalized sexist, homophobic, elitist, and racist behaviors. We change destructive patterns today, immediately, with the hope of raising children and teaching students who do not have to appropriate society's addictive capitalist patriarchal discourse to survive" (Pérez 66). Pérez's goal is to create a society for future generations where capitalist patriarchal discourse no longer dominates and therefore no longer needs to be re-purposed; but in order to accomplish this goal, she argues, capitalist patriarchal discursive structures must be addressed and renovated rather than ignored.

Although Alarcón, Molina, and Pérez seek to appropriate rather than reject dominant discourse, they do not do so blindly. They recognize that as Chicanas have attempted to enact social and political change, progress has been slow.[xvii] But Alarcón, Molina, and Pérez remain committed to a Chicana theory that does not close itself off but

confronts forces of oppression. Like emergent postcolonial critique, Alarcón, Molina, and Pérez's critical discourse

> seeks to undo the Eurocentrism produced by the institution of the West's trajectory, its appropriation of the other as History. It does so, however, with the acute realization that its own critical apparatus does not enjoy a panoptic distance from colonial history but exists as an aftermath, as an after – after being worked over by colonialism. Criticism formed as an aftermath acknowledges that it inhabits the structures of Western domination that it seeks to undo. In this sense, postcolonial criticism is deliberately interdisciplinary, arising in the interstices of disciplines of power/knowledge that it critiques. This is what Homi Bhabba calls an in-between, hybrid position of practice and negotiation […]. (Prakash 1475-76)

Alarcón, Molina, and Pérez recognize that, as Chicanas who are marginalized as outsiders but remain very much within dominant U.S. culture, they occupy a uniquely situated theoretical position because of its historical and political nearness to colonialism. Within such a conflicted space, Alarcón, Molina, and Pérez purposefully engage other theoretical perspectives and connect with other marginalized voices in order to strengthen their oppositional stance against and yet within dominant discourse.

Border Studies: A Liminal Space

Chicana feminists and postcolonialists are not the only groups examining the space of the border. Committed to renovating structures of oppression within dominant society, the theoretical field of border studies, led by Héctor Calderón, José David

Saldívar, and Sonia Saldívar-Hull, also closely examines the nature of borders as political constructs and acknowledges the multiplicity of voices and influences in the U.S.-Mexico border region. And although her work is not typically classified as "border studies," Anzaldúa's exploration of borders in *Borderlands/La Frontera* flows along the same thematic currents as border studies, and thus her re-definition of the border proves invaluable to my understanding of this theoretical approach:

> The U.S.-Mexican border *es una herida abierta* [is an open wound] where the Third World grates against the first and bleeds. And before a scab forms it hemorrhages again, the lifeblood of two worlds merging to form a third country – a border culture. 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. The prohibited and forbidden are its inhabitants. *Los atravesados* live here: the squint-eyed, the perverse, the queer, the troublesome, the mongrel, the mulato [sic], the half-breed, the half-dead; in short, those who cross over, pass over, or go through the confines of the "normal." […] The only "legitimate" inhabitants are those in power, the whites and those who align themselves with whites. Tension grips the inhabitants of the borderlands like a virus. Ambivalence and unrest reside there and death is no stranger. (*Borderlands/La Frontera* 25-26)

This vision of the border as an open region broadens our understanding of the impact of such a space. Rather than conceptualizing the border as a clear-cut perimeter

distinguishing *this* from *that*, Anzaldúa argues that the border is wider, that it is a liminal area, and that it is home to many people who are often over-looked and kept in the margins, in the in-between, outside both Mexico and the United States.

Deconstructing the U.S.-Mexico binary therefore proves central to Anzaldúa's project in *Borderlands/La Frontera*. She cries out for a space of her own:

> I want the freedom to carve and chisel my own face, to staunch the bleeding with ashes, to fashion my own gods out of my entrails. And if going home is denied me then I will have to stand and claim my space, making a new culture – *una cultura mestiza* – with my own lumber, my own bricks and mortar and my own feminist architecture. (*Borderlands/La Frontera* 44)

In order to make room for her own space, Anzaldúa renovates dominant (symbolic) structures of language, purity, and truth. Embracing a border plurality, Anzaldúa asserts herself as multi-lingual - "speak[ing] a patois, a forked tongue, a variation of two languages" (77) – and therefore multi-ethnic – "Ethnic identity is twin skin to linguistic identity – I am my language" (81). She argues that this multiplicity does not weaken her but makes her stronger, more diverse, and more flexible (99). Anzaldúa calls this identity "the new *mestiza*" and locates herself in a space "where the possibility of uniting all that is separate occurs." She explains that

> [t]he new *mestiza* copes by developing a tolerance for contradictions, a tolerance for ambiguity. She learns to be an Indian in Mexican culture, to be Mexican from an Anglo point of view. She learns to juggle cultures. She has a plural personality, she operates in a pluralistic mode – nothing is thrust out, the good the bad and the

> ugly, nothing rejected, nothing abandoned. Not only does she sustain contradictions, she turns the ambivalence into something else. (*Borderlands/La Frontera* 101)

Very much characterized by her geopolitical location, this *mestiza* accepts the border and the state of "in-between" as home. She recognizes that "[t]he work of *mestiza* consciousness is to break down the subject-object duality that keeps her prisoner and to show in the flesh and through the images in her work how duality is transcended" (102). In brief, the work of the mestiza is both subversive and reconstructive.

This mestiza consciousness exemplifies much of what contemporary border studies theorists Héctor Calderón, José David Saldívar, and Sonia Saldívar-Hull explore in their own work. Like Anzaldúa, these theorists all agree that the liminal space of the border demonstrates the weakness of binary structures and reveals the need to deconstruct notions of essential identities in order to create a space for those who do not conform to such social, cultural, and political expectations. Calderón and Saldívar, in the introduction to their collection of essays *Criticism in the Borderlands: Studies in Chicano Literature, Culture and Ideology* (1991), point out that "models of 'American' culture and reconstructions of 'American' literary history that fail to take into account the four hundred years of a Mexican-*mestizo* presence in our borderlands will of necessity be incomplete" (7). Clearly, what is at stake in their argument is their desire to bring an end to a history of exclusion. In an effort to enact this inclusive practice on all fronts, Calderón and Saldívar employ what they call a "dialogic" method, which includes "a range of varying ideological, feminist, and cultural studies perspectives. That is, [they]

present Chicano/a theory and theorists in our global borderlands: from ethnographic to postmodernist, from Marxist to feminist, from cultural materialist to New Historicist critical perspectives" (2, 6). Furthermore, Calderón and Saldívar take note of the growing popularity of Chicano literature among "European and Latin American scholars," and therefore, they draw attention to the expansion of the geopolitical region of the border. While they focus on issues relevant to the U.S.-Mexico border, Calderón and Saldívar recognize the ever-increasing plurality of borders and thus create a space in which multiplicity and diversity are encouraged and celebrated. In this way borders produce alternative interpretive communities which emphasize "bonds among people rather than the articulation of national differences[…]" (J. Saldívar 107). This emphasis opens the door for many voices, perspectives, and influences from multiple positions along the border.

Border theorist and Chicana feminist Sonia Saldívar-Hull also brings together different theoretical positions and acknowledges the influence of AEA and Latin American scholarship on her own exploration of the border region and its critical production. Working within a "theory of feminism that addresses a multiplicity of experiences, what [she] call[s] 'feminism on the border,'" Saldívar-Hull focuses her analysis specifically on the recovery of Chicana history (Saldívar-Hull 49).[xviii] She asserts, "If feminist scholars, activists, and writers – who have lived under the *o* in *Chicano* – had to rely on the historical record written by men and male-identified women, Chicanas' roles in history would remain obscured" (27). Because European and Anglo-American men have predominantly controlled and recorded historical events, Saldívar-

Hull is interested in the ways in which Chicanas on the border subversively "seek additional sources of history […] in the gossip and rumors for which [they] are criticized and through which they are silenced; in the lacunae of family stories that tell of confined grandmothers and abused great-grandmothers; and in the late-night kitchen-table talks with Mexican immigrants to the barrios of the United States" (25). In other words, while traditional historical documentation privileges public and political events (and the elite white males who have predominantly been involved in them), Chicanas look to the private sphere, to everyday happenings, and to memories that have not been deemed worthy of public record. By recovering these stories, Chicanas challenge historical certainty while preserving the memory of those (working-class, minority women) traditionally excluded from history.

The project of feminism on the border thus becomes a recuperation of Chicana subjectivity, made possible by de-centering dominant historical discourse and by restoring a Chicana-centered literature that preserves and celebrates their cultural heritage. But this does not mean that non-Chicana voices or non-border voices must be silenced in turn. Citing Chicana feminist Cherríe Moraga, Saldívar-Hull draws attention to the fact

> that Chicanos see no contradiction in citing Marx or Engels, but accuse Chicana feminists of racial betrayal when they cite or build upon White feminist theory […]. She proposes that 'it is easier for the Chicana to criticize white women who on the face of things could never be familia, than to take issue with or complain, as it were, to a brother, uncle, father. (Saldívar-Hull 33)

So excluding AEA feminist voices is not the answer because much of Chicano theory, which focuses on race and class, also builds upon the work of other AEA theorists. Rather, Saldívar-Hull affirms the importance not only of approaching dominant theories with a critical eye (and a recognition of our "blind spots") but also of "illuminating the complications and intersections of the multiple systems of exploitation: capitalism, patriarchy, heterosexism, and White supremacy" (36). She stresses that "[l]ife as feminists on the border means recognizing the urgency of dealing with the sexism and homophobia within our culture; our political reality demands that we confront institutionalized racism while we simultaneously struggle against economic exploitation" (34). As she delves further into her exploration of Chicana feminism on the border, Saldívar-Hull examines closely the works of various Chicana and AEA feminists, outlining the strengths and weaknesses of their arguments. She begins with the problem that "for too many people in our communities, feminism in any form – materialist, radical, liberal, lesbian, or heterosexual – is still considered 'White'" (34), and she draws attention to specific examples of how although "White women in U.S. academia helped promote [Chicana] literatures, too often the foremost White feminist theorists erased [Chicana] specificity [… and] denied [Chicanas] subject positions as writers, critics, and students of color" (35). She first addresses socialist feminists who, though they become allies with Chicana feminists on the platform of class, remain hypocritical in their politics when they disregard racial issues. Saldívar-Hull explains, "Our feminist sisters and Marxist compañeras/os urge us to take care of gender and class issues first, and race will naturally take care of itself," and this mindset, she argues, only contributes to "color

blindness instead of color consciousness" (36). She continues, "These blind spots that socialist feminists scorn as the discourse of liberal feminists indicate the extent to which the issues of race and ethnicity are ignored in feminist and Marxist theories" (36). Essentially, socialist feminists commit the same act for which they critique liberal feminists, but in this case they neglect race instead of class.

This type of hypocrisy, Saldívar-Hull points out, takes place on a broader spectrum as well, as "the 'sisterhood' called feminism professe[s] an ideology that at times [comes] dangerously close to the phallogocentric ideologies of the White male power structure against which all feminists struggle" (36). For example, she states, "When White feminists began to categorize the different types of feminisms in the 1980s, [Chicanas], in turn, began to trace the muting of issues of race and ethnicity under other feminist priorities" (37). A division therefore became even clearer between AEA feminists and feminists of color. Saldívar-Hull uses Kristeva's essay "Women's Time" as an example of such diverging viewpoints, and she critiques Kristeva for "assum[ing] a universalist privilege" that pays no attention to class in its delineation of three categories of feminism:

> The most "primitive' would be the position that women in the United States would call liberal feminism. While not denying the political importance of this phase – the struggle for universal suffrage, equal pay for equal work, abortion rights, and so on – Kristeva nonetheless sees its ahistorical, universalist, globalizing limits. Next on the evolutionary scale is the radical feminist phase, a reductive, essentialist feminism in which women 'demand recognition of an

> irreducible identity, without equal in the opposite sex, and, as such, exploded, plural, fluid." A mixture of these two feminisms, Kristeva explains, constitutes the dominant European feminism. She ultimately privileges the final "signifying space." (38)

Stated another way, according to Saldívar-Hull, Kristeva makes the case that liberal feminists accomplished the changes they set out to effect in society and politics, and therefore their feminism naturally phased out. She then proposes that radical feminists, who "evolved" from liberal feminists, sought more than social and political equality and instead focused on defining themselves as different from and even superior to men. Kristeva then takes the best of both categories and combines them into what she sees as her own feminist position, which, Saldívar-Hull argues, is "unapologetically ahistorical" and "assumes a universalist privilege" that pays no attention to race or class and therefore ignores women of color (38).[xix]

As evidence of the need for further changes, Saldívar-Hull notes, "While the [Chicano] men worried that Chicana feminism meant becoming White-influenced, leftist feminists feared that a racialized feminism could only mean indulgence in the concerns of the privatized self" (39). Leftist feminists therefore "dismisse[d] 'identity politics' as a legitimate locus of struggle" (40), assuming that it essentially exchanged political action for passive introspection (40-44). So on multiple fronts, "real change in sexist institutions of power" – run by both men and women - still must be addressed if issues of discrimination and marginalization can ever be fully overcome. For example, Kristin Carter-Sanborn confronts the misguided understanding that many liberal feminists have

of identity politics. She argues that liberal feminists' continued privileging of *physical* political action over and above *artistic* political action places Chicanas in the position of having to defend or justify their political work; this, she contends, leads "our most accomplished Chicana authors [to] find themselves writing against writing, talking against talk, tying their own tongues" (par. 21). Carter-Sanborn further asserts that such

> a distinction between political speech and political action [. . .] has historically rendered the brown body, and especially the brown female body, invisible and inaudible in the public sphere. It seems absolutely necessary, then, for a forward-looking Chicana identification, one which can lay legitimate claim to cultural citizenship in a larger America, to [. . .] look forward to the sound, the feel, and the force of talk. (par. 22)

Essentially, Carter-Sanborn argues that identity politics is indeed what it claims to be: political. So Chicanas who consider identity formation do so not at the *expense* of political action but as an *assertion* of political power. In Saldívar-Hull's words, Chicanas who practice identity politics "[aim] beyond interpreting the world; their aim is to change it" (43). She proposes that these Chicana feminists "insist on illuminating the complications and intersections of the multiple systems of exploitation: capitalism, patriarchy, heterosexism, and White supremacy" (36), and she maintains that "[t]he feminism advocated by women of color re-centers the concerns of U.S. women who identify as racialized women committed to working class politics and, to use Cherríe Moraga's words, to a spirituality that 'inspires activism and, similarly, politics which move the spirit'" (39). In other words, these Chicana feminists accomplish effective

political work in their creative endeavors. While they may not directly gather crowds in physical protest, their work still moves hearts and minds, confronts oppressive dominant structures, and invites others to envision and participate in political action in new ways.

Feminism on the Border Meets Abjection

In keeping with the transgressive work of border studies, I wish to examine the borders between two specific Chicana and AEA theories: Saldívar-Hull's *Feminism on the Border*, and Julia Kristeva's *Powers of Horror*. Although there remain obvious differences between these theories, I find many parallels that beg further exploration and comparison. While, perhaps most obviously, Kristeva's geographical location in Europe differs greatly from the U.S.-Mexico border region, European cultures have not been altogether isolated from Chicana influence. According to Lomelí, Márquez, and Herrera-Sobek, the 1980s saw Chicana writers cast off the yoke of essentialism and instead create more experimental works that appealed to new audiences, not just in the United States but also in Europe (288-89). In addition to these literary changes, "[…] the first and second International Conference on Chicano Culture and Literature in Germersheim, Germany (in 1984), and Paris, France (in 1986)" also helped to spread the influence of Chicana literature, and this "global arena contributed much toward a better understanding between European and Chicano critics, who learned critical theories and approaches from both sides of the Atlantic" (289). Therefore, as conversations between Europeans and Chicanas continued, the ideological border region expanded and allowed for greater influences from around the world. In addition to this, Kristeva's theory and the surge in

Chicana creative production both entered the public scene within three years of one another, the former in 1982 and the latter around 1985. So although the psychoanalytic "feminist" and Chicana border feminist scenes arose from different cultural and political contexts, their emergence in both situations speaks to a historical climate of critical and theoretical change. For example, in the 1980s, feminist thought became more "diversified" as boosts in mainstream publishing facilitated the rapid spread across the globe of literature and criticism from women of color, who, like Chicanas, challenged AEA feminists for ignoring "experiences of Third World, lesbian, and poor working-class women" (Barvosa-Carter 270, 277). This challenge in turn sparked within academic circles more discussions surrounding "difference, race, ethnicity, gender, and sexuality," and eventually more discussions surrounding "'identity politics'; multiculturalism; gay civil rights; feminism; and postmodernist, poststructuralist, and postcolonial thought […]" (277-78). Now, while expansion of the availability of literature and criticism and the historical emergence of new feminist modes of thought do not in themselves create a connection between AEA and Chicana feminisms, they do suggest that a connection may be possible. But what is more, the creative and critical works of many Chicanas engage issues also addressed in AEA feminisms, and for this reason I find that Kristeva's psychoanalytic "feminist" theory of abjection, though admittedly somewhat "inorganic" to a Chicana border experience, can become a useful theory in Chicana literary criticism (Pérez 58).[xx]

More noteworthy than the historical and geographical parallels, the theoretical frameworks of Saldívar-Hull's Chicana feminism on the border and Kristeva's

psychoanalytic "feminism" intersect in critical places. Both share the idea that their subjects "can be identified where difference and otherness are found; and both address the politics of marginalization, the transgressive power of borders, and the intense fear and hatred with which dominant cultures treat those whom they label as "other" (Gambaudo 6). In addition to this, Kristeva and Saldívar-Hull both carefully choose language to express their theories. Saldívar-Hull writes predominantly in English, the language of the dominant U.S. culture, which positions her in the place of effecting cultural change from within. Kristeva, on the other hand, "choos[es] to express [herself] in a foreign language," French (7), which, as Gambaudo suggests, not only "ha[s] a long history as linguistic oppressor *and* oppressed" (8), but also may "be a defensive linguistic response against the feared American linguistic imperialism (9). So both Saldívar-Hull and Kristeva recognize the power of the languages in which they communicate, and both linguistic choices strategically position them in opposition to the dominance of U.S. culture. And both positions draw attention to and support the subversive work these theorists seek to accomplish.

In her subversive work *Powers of Horror*, Kristeva opens her argument with various illustrations of abjection, flashing images before her readers and evoking emotions before explaining their significance. She first describes the abject as "skin on the surface of milk" that sticks to one's lips when drinking (*Powers of Horror* 2); then as "a wound with blood and pus, or the sickly, acrid smell of sweat, of decay" (3); and finally as a "corpse," "body fluids," "defilement," "dung" (3). Each of these substances, she explains, produces "a gagging sensation and, still farther down, spasms in the

stomach, the belly; and all the organs shrivel up the body, provoke tears and bile, increase heartbeat, cause forehead and hands to perspire" (2-3). This visceral response of disgust and horror in these illustrations, Kristeva proposes, is caused by the subject's discomfort with and inability to repel that which violates a desired standard of cleanliness or order (to which the subject ascribes upon entering the symbolic realm as an infant), and in each illustration the element that causes abjection also disrupts the subject's expectations.[xxi] In other words, to use Kristeva's example of drinking a glass of milk, when the film on the surface of the glass touches the subject's lips, not only does it cause the subject to question whether the milk had spoiled, but also it disrupts the subject's preconceived idea (formed from experience) of how drinking the milk should feel. Since milk is typically smooth and creamy, a solid, sticky, filmy, or chunky texture becomes a signal that something is not right or is not in order. What becomes even more disturbing, in the case of drinking milk, is the fact that the spoiled milk enters the subject's body, making it more difficult to cleanse and thereby threatening to pollute from within. Potential results might be as significant as getting sick or as insignificant as having a bad taste in one's mouth, but in any case, some degree of pollution takes place, therefore requiring the subject to enact what Kristeva calls "a ritual of purification," whether it be simply spitting out the milk, wiping off one's face, or even rinsing one's mouth (*Powers of Horror* 74). Yet even after the violating substance is removed, and despite the cleansing practices, there looms in the subject's memory the lingering fear that the offending substance still remains. Emma Parker notes that "[t]he condition of abjection is caused by the inability to expel that which arouses horror" (par. 3), and Kristeva calls this

"something rejected from which one does not part" (*Powers of Horror* 4). The subject, in other words, senses that it cannot fully rid itself of the unclean, which in turn produces an even stronger sense of repulsion, horror, and aversion to the experience, causing the subject to repress the event in order to create distance and purify him- or herself from the unclean.

This scenario enacts what Kristeva defines as abjection. She explains that the standard to which the subject ascribes is "the clean and proper," a dominant social order that is taught to the subject from an early age, as he or she first enters the symbolic realm. Parker clarifies "that a subject's existence in the symbolic order depends on a 'clean and proper' body, which in turn depends on the expulsion or rejection of improper, unclean, and disorderly elements of corporeality: the abject" (par. 3). For example, in order for children to become accepted into society, they are taught to abide by socially prescribed rules; as they are taught to use language (and therefore enter the symbolic realm), they also are taught lessons about what is and is not socially acceptable. A toilet, for instance, is the proper place for bodily waste rather than a diaper. In terms of abjection, a toilet enables control and containment of the unclean waste, whereas the diaper guarantees no such separation. In other words, to be accepted in society, one must maintain a code of cleanliness, and in order to do this, one must separate oneself from the unclean; or, stated differently, one must define oneself oppositionally from the unclean and must therefore continue to push away, or abject, the "other," or the violating substances (*Powers of Horror* 4). However, as Parker notes, "that is never quite possible," in this case because releasing bodily waste is a process humans must follow in order to live (par. 3).

To get a sense of why it is not possible to "permanently thrust aside" the abject (*Powers of Horror* 4), we can look to Kristeva's examples of abjection, which, she proposes, typically manifest themselves in one of three main categories: food and food remainders ("residues of […] someone"); corporeal waste ("feces, corpses"); and "femininity" ("signs of sexual difference such as menstrual blood and breastmilk") (76; Parker, par. 3). Inherent within each of these categories is a transgression of bodily boundaries (*Powers of Horror* 71). If we consider eating and digestion, for example, our very existence depends on these activities (without them we would die), but consuming food disrupts order because it takes what is outside and places it inside the body, thereby transgressing boundaries and disturbing order. In the same way, digesting food and expelling waste is a natural part of life, but it is messy. Since we cannot simply stop performing these actions and remain alive, we adopt social customs – or in Kristeva's words, we perform rituals of purification, which "parcel out, demarcate, delineate an order" - to help us manage the process, minimize the mess, and repress the truth that these messy activities enable and define our existence as humans (*Powers of Horror* 74).

Because a subject's existence in the symbolic realm depends upon a constructed identity that constantly excludes but is never fully separate from the abject, Kristeva concludes that the abject constantly threatens to confront the subject with that which has been rejected and repressed, and therefore the abject "does not respect [the] borders, positions, rules" of the symbolic realm, and it "disturbs [the] identity, system, order" of the subject (*Powers of Horror* 4). Kristeva clarifies that the abject is not expelled for any awful quality inherent within it - "[i]t is … not lack of cleanliness or health that causes

abjection" (4). In reality, she argues, the abject is expelled because it challenges the power of the symbolic: the abject is "unassimilable" (1); it embodies "[t]he in-between, the ambiguous, the composite" (4); it is "a border" (9); it "is an element connected with the boundary, the margin, etc., of an order" (66); and it is a "primal repression… where what is repressed cannot really be held down" (13). In essence, the abject "testifies to the (potential) frailty of the symbolic order" because it reminds the symbolic order of that which it wishes to but cannot ultimately expel and ignore (Parker, par. 3).

Now, in her consideration of the gender politics involved in abjection, Kristeva denotes "the maternal [as] the privileged representation of the semiotic" and the paternal as the symbolic (Parker, par. 45). And while Kristeva addresses the bodily substances of menstruation and breastmilk as one of the categories of abjection because they by nature cross boundaries, she also explores the complexities of the abjection of women as a whole by considering the relationship of the symbolic to the semiotic. Parker clarifies this portion of Kristeva's argument:

> Horror, as the title of Kristeva's book suggests, is a matter of power, and abjection is a politically motivated issue. Kristeva understands female oppression to be, partly at least, a product of misdirected abjection. According to her, the condition of abjection stems from the subject's first (presymbolic) attempt to separate from the mother. To facilitate this separation, the maternal body is abjected. Kristeva suggests that even after the process of separation is complete and the subject is established in the symbolic the mother's body is still considered a phobic object (abject) because it represents the presymbolic [semiotic] fusion of

> mother and child and therefore threatens the subject with a potential loss of autonomy. Fear of the maternal body is transferred to women in general and results in misogyny. (par. 4)

Parker highlights the argument that as infants begin to recognize themselves as entities separate from those around them, they begin to exercise a degree of independence and naturally try to separate themselves from the mother, who becomes a reminder of the child's initial total dependence upon her (for food, mobility, cleaning) and even physical indistinction from her (in pregnancy). In order to maintain independence, the child represses memories of the presymbolic, which become reminders not only of the child's lack of autonomy but also of his or her limits, of a time before he or she even existed. So the maternal body, and by extension the female body, becomes a symbol of abjection and a reminder that "the subject will always be marked by the uncertainty of his borders…" (*Powers of Horror* 63). Kelly Oliver points out that this abjection of the maternal body becomes foundational in society (qtd. in Parker, par. 45) because the maternal body represents what Kristeva calls "a reality that, if I acknowledge it, annihilates me" (*Powers of Horror* 2). In other words, since the identity of every subject becomes defined oppositionally from the mother, then society as a whole is built upon the abjection of women.

But Parker clarifies, "Ironically, through that prohibition [of the maternal body], symbolic law testifies to maternal authority even as it attempts to repress it" (par. 45). The horror with which women are expelled testifies to the inability of dominant culture to fully expel her and therefore reveals her power and dominant culture's weakness.

Essentially, this pattern emerges: the abject threatens the subject; the subject responds by trying to control and contain the abject; efforts to control and contain the abject are "at best, tenuous and liable to breakdown…" (Elizabeth Grosz qtd. in Parker, par. 3); and the abject overcomes repression and containment, thereby simultaneously revealing its own strength and threatening the power and stability of the subject (*Powers of Horror* 18). In other words, as members of society and as a vital part of the reproduction of human life, women cannot be expelled or contained, and thus they reveal not only the inherent weakness of the order that tries to control them, but also their own strength to overcome that order.

Parker argues that this pattern of abjection essentially "enables [women] not to leave or reject the symbolic order but to renegotiate their position within it" (par. 49). She notes that "…whereas [Virginia] Woolf proposes the establishment of the 'Society of Outsiders,' Kristeva believes that women can be more subversive as outsiders within," because as "'outsiders within' they are ultimately able to challenge the categories of inclusion and exclusion (Parker, par. 30). Women therefore occupy a powerful position as abject because "it is precisely their alterity that enables them to confront the abject and so transform the symbolic order" (par. 35).[xxii] This renovation is what Kristeva refers to when she posits that "abjection is a resurrection that has gone through death …. It is an alchemy that transforms death drive into a start of life, of new significance" (*Powers of Horror* 15). Women, therefore, as marginalized "outsiders" within patriarchal society need not respond to their own abjection by abjecting others. Parker suggests instead that there is hope for "a renegotiation of the symbolic order that creates a space within the

patriarchal realm not only for women but potentially for all those who are denied representation and are repressed by symbolic law" (par. 1).

I agree with Parker that within discussions of abjection lies room for addressing non-gender-centered issues (such as, but not limited to, race, class, and sexuality – topics central to Chicana identity politics) because "[a]bjection works to oppress and disempower various social groups, not just women" (Parker, par. 19). And Parker acknowledges as well that "… the house that fails to accommodate women (the symbolic order) also excludes the social and racial other" (par. 19). If we look critically at the ways in which dominant U.S. culture privileges whiteness, patriarchy, elitism, and hetero-normativity and marginalizes people of color, women, the working class, and LGBT communities, we can see that, as Parker argues, abjection and alienation have been used as rituals of purification that "construct foreigners and ethnic minorities as ugly, filthy, or degenerate in order to establish the identity of the dominant group as purer or superior" (par. 19). But as Kristeva suggests, the boundary separating the dominant and the marginalized is weak, and the marginalized (the abject) can never be fully controlled or contained. Parker further argues that "the concept of abjection is useful for deconstructing racism as it prompts a recognition that all subjects contain others within themselves," which ultimately reveals the instability of dominant structures that seek to exclude the "other" (par. 29). In other words, having experienced abjection, marginalized people groups recognize the fragility of dominant categories and are therefore in a position to challenge and renegotiate those categories.

Like Parker, I wish to address abjection in its many forms, and I find that its theoretical framework offers valuable insight into the relationship between dominant U.S. culture and marginalized Chicanas in particular. In the theoretical analysis that follows, I examine two Chicana writers, Ana Castillo and Sandra Cisneros, who both demonstrate a blending of style and genre and a deconstruction of boundaries indicative of contemporary Chicana border literature. Castillo and Cisneros reveal how dominant U.S. culture marginalizes “others” who do not ascribe to or fit into its value system (which privileges, they show, not only patriarchy, elitism, whiteness, hetero-normativity, but also beauty and ability); they demonstrate dominant U.S. culture’s inability to control, confine, and expel the “other”; and finally, they facilitate a return to and embrace of the abjected “other,” thereby challenging, destabilizing, and renovating oppressive structures of dominant U.S. culture.[xxiii] This is the project toward which I now turn my critical attention.

Chapter 3

CARMEN SANTOS

" The New Mestiza challenges the dualisms that underpin the power structure of the United States [... and] expresses the multiple consciousness of feminists whose gender politics are lived simultaneously with race, class, gender, and sexual awareness."

- Saldívar-Hull (61)

In her novel *Peel My Love Like an Onion* (1999) Ana Castillo illuminates the complexity of identity formation for Chicana protagonist Carmen Santos, who struggles to find her identity and purpose as a marginalized member of U.S. culture. In both form and content, Castillo draws attention to and challenges patterns of abjection prominent in a U.S. culture that privileges not only patriarchy (as Kristeva suggests), and whiteness, elitism, and hetero-normativity (as Saldívar-Hull suggests), but also attractiveness and physical ability, and so she illuminates the reality of living within the multiple tensions that surround and threaten Chicanas as marginalized "others." Francisco Lomelí notes,

> [Castillo]'s primary accomplishment is in providing an in-depth and dialectical view into Chicano(a)'s existence as society conditions people in terms of suffocating social institutions (education, family, machismo, sexism, racism) that confine and harness full development. Ana Castillo is particularly adept in creating a deconstructive discourse on re-establishing ties, especially between women themselves. (105)

Peel My Love is just such a "deconstructive discourse," where Castillo not only presents a coming of age story that emphasizes the complex and evolving nature of Carmen's

identity formation but also, as Lomelí suggests, documents Carmen's abjection as a Chicana within dominant U.S. culture and reveals how, by overcoming this abjection, Carmen is empowered to embrace and affirm others who, by nature of their non-conformity, experience the same abjection.

Viewing this novel through the lens of Saldívar-Hull's feminism on the border enables us to see how Castillo illuminates life at the margins of U.S. culture, presenting the unique story of a Chicana who embraces the tensions she must hold in balance in order to create a space for herself where she is free to forge her own multi-faceted identity. And viewing this novel through the lens of Kristeva's theory of abjection enables us to see how Castillo challenges structures of dominant U.S. culture as she works within yet simultaneously deconstructs oppressive patterns of marginalization. Taken together, both theories provide a framework for expanding our understanding of the complex politics of Chicana identity formation while renovating the dominant structures that already exist in order to develop a less essential, less oppressive, and more inclusive space for Chicana creativity.

Form

While I will focus my analysis on the *content* of *Peel My Love*, several *formal* characteristics reinforce my argument for Castillo's subversive work. At first glance *Peel My Love* appears more traditional and less experimental than Castillo's earlier novels, but its form, in both structure and genre, still defies categories and challenges definitions.[xxiv] To begin, Castillo works within the traditional structure of a novel, dividing and

organizing her narrative within the typical numbered chapters, which she calls "Installments" (*Peel My Love* n.p.). Each of these installments Castillo then divides into smaller sections or sub-installments that are numbered in Spanish and are titled in English. Three points become significant in this structural organization: first, the overall effect of such an organized form projects a sense of order (everything labeled and in its place), which, as Parker suggests, reflects "a masculine economy, [characterized by] ownership, appropriation, classification and dominance" (par. 9); second, Castillo's choice of the term "installments" instead of "chapters" mildly disrupts readers' expectations and invites them to see these sections of the novel as interconnected parts in the larger series of Carmen's story; and third, Castillo's use of Spanish for the numbers and English for the titles of the sub-installments visually and linguistically mimics the blend of cultures and languages present throughout Carmen's story. In other words, through these details and subtle manipulations of structure, Castillo grounds her novel in tradition while at the same time repurposing this tradition to suit her own purposes.

In addition to this subversive structural work, Castillo challenges definitions and blurs boundaries of genre by incorporating into her novel elements of short stories and telenovelas. For example, while the length (213 pages), organization (into installments and sub-installments), and overall chronological arc of the plot exhibit the formal characteristics of a traditional novel, the fragmented chronology within each installment and the short snapshots from Carmen's memory read more like short stories or episodes from a telenovela. For instance, in a sub-installment entitled "The last thing I want to do on my day off…," Carmen complains about having to take her mother, Amá, to a

doctor's appointment (*Peel My Love* 24-32). She begins her story by explaining why her father cannot take Amá, and from here Carmen wanders back through family memories in order to fill in some history and give context for why her day off turns out the way it does. Like a short story, the arc of the plot in this segment is rather simple and brief, but nonetheless complete, taking readers from the initial moment of conflict, through points of building tension (where she describes just what makes Amá so difficult), into the climax (the doctor's appointment itself), and finally into the resolution, where Carmen submits to her mother's demands for the purpose of simply getting along. Although this episode is short, Carmen provides enough background information to develop the characters involved, and in her conclusion she connects to details from earlier in her story to establish a sense of closure. So although this is just one part in the whole of Carmen's story, the snapshot itself resembles a short story that can easily stand alone.

In addition to these similarities with short stories, Castillo's novel, in plot and character development, also resembles the exaggerated style of telenovelas (or soap operas). Prevalent in popular culture, telenovelas are not simply harmless escapes from real life, but instead carry significant weight in fashioning the worldview and identity formation of their audiences. As Saldívar-Hull notes,

> The mass media, in this case fotonovelas, telenovelas, and revistas femeninas (women's magazines), all shape women's consciousness and their limited knowledge of the world. In Mexico, the fotonovela and the telenovela target the barely literate working poor who usually do not have more than a grammar school

> education […and who] learn their place within the class system from such telenovelas. (108)

In other words, because these conduits of popular culture so strongly communicate an ideal of passive femininity, they continue to disempower and marginalize working class women. While *Peel My Love* in many ways reflects such melodramas, Castillo pushes the boundary of this genre by recording the journey of Carmen, a strong female protagonist who eventually challenges and overcomes her marginalization rather than succumbing to it. According to Manuel Luis Martínez, the plot of *Peel My Love* "could easily devolve into melodrama" (par. 6) because "[o]n the surface the novel covers old ground: a love triangle involving an older, married man who discovers and then shapes a young, beautiful girl with a tragic physical flaw, and a later emotional entanglement with a handsome, talented younger man who happens to be the older man's protégé" (par. 2). Stated in so many words, the plot of Castillo's novel certainly risks being labeled as simply shallow, low-brow, and formulaic. After all, much of the plot focuses on the tension surrounding rather stereotypical characters: Carmen, the leading lady on a heartbreaking journey of self-exploration, who finds herself conflicted, in love with two men and entangled in a drama of jealousy and anger between her first lover, Agustín, a "domineering and ruthless" flamenco instructor and musician (par. 4), and her second lover, Manolo, a youthful, "impetuous, handsome, passionate" flamenco dancer (par. 5). However, despite the initial appearance of superficiality Martínez argues that in her novel "Castillo defies stereotypes even while she evokes them: Gypsies, romantic Latinos, sultry dancers, Chicago Chicanas, domineering mothers and spunky drag queens populate

the novel, all the while being drawn in ways that successfully reconsider all the characters in all their flawed, empathic, comic humanity" (par. 6). For example, Carmen moves beyond the static role of the overly emotional, unhealthy, and helpless lover by listening to the wisdom of her friends and by forcing herself out of her comfort zone in order to take an honest and critical look at her identity and values. In this way "… the novel [becomes] fueled not by its familiar romantic elements so much as by a worn woman's desire to recount and then reconcile herself to her past, and in so doing, to perhaps imagine a future" (par. 3). In other words, although stereotypical plot and characters are present in the novel, Castillo does not craft a surface-level narrative but plunges deeper into the struggles and tensions Carmen experiences in forming her own identity. Yet again we see Castillo working within traditional genres yet reconstructing them in order to carve out a space within dominant structures for the growth and development of those who are marginalized.

Content

In addition to form, Castillo further deconstructs the content of traditional Chicana/o literature by moving her novel in new thematic directions. Unlike many Chicana/o novelists, Castillo does not center her narrative around Chicana/o themes of immigration, barrios, migrant workers, or magic realism. Instead, she rejects the essentialist burden of representation and diversifies Chicana literature by telling the unique story of Carmen, whose lived experience unfolds in Chicago, includes a struggle to overcome polio, and follows her career as a dancer in a gypsy flamenco group. Carmen

defies traditional Chicana stereotypes as she asserts her independence and sexuality, living on her own before getting married and maintaining more than one sexual relationship at a time. Even Carmen's eventual retreat into the desert (a symbolic return to Aztlán) breaks tradition as she does not find healing and renewal in the Chicana/o homeland; only by returning to Chicago, to the city she calls home, does Carmen finally discover the power to unconditionally accept herself and others.[xxv] Castillo thus uses her creativity to break from tradition and challenge classification, to "tak[e] from rather than [go] toward" or assimilate into dominant structures (Castillo qtd. in Milligan 21). Saldívar-Hull calls such subversive work "us[ing] the master's tools to dismantle the master's house" (52), which, simply stated, means that while Castillo uses dominant culture's literary structures (as stated earlier), she does so in order to renovate these structures by deconstructing essentialist expectations of Chicana/o identity and by making room for a diversity of lived experiences that more accurately reflects the nature of the border.

This method of engaging and critiquing dominant culture in order to effect change parallels the deconstructive work Kristeva addresses in her theory of abjection. But while Kristeva focuses on the role of gender inequality in identity politics, and Saldívar-Hull concentrates on issues of race, class, and sexuality in addition to gender, Castillo challenges other oppressive structures of dominant U.S. culture as well, such as attractiveness and physical ability. By addressing the concerns of each of the former categories, Castillo creates a novel that reflects themes from both French psychoanalysis and Chicana border feminism; and by including still other categories of identity

formation in her novel, she expands the boundaries of both and invites further discussion and deconstruction of dominant U.S. culture's oppressive structures that abject not only Chicanas but also other marginalized people groups. In other words, Castillo accomplishes her subversive work not by creating a separate sphere for Chicana feminism on the border but by grounding her work in the tradition of the oppressive structures themselves and by effecting change from within.

Peel My Love thus parallels the pattern of abjection that Kristeva establishes, and Castillo reveals this abjection in several significant moments. First, Castillo depicts Carmen as abject for not conforming to the values (of whiteness, patriarchy, elitism, hetero-normativity, attractiveness, and physical ability) of the dominant U.S. culture that surrounds her in Chicago. Born into a working-class Mexican-American family, Carmen is a woman of color and a polio survivor who does not measure up to dominant culture's values and so is rejected. In response to this abjection, Carmen at first accepts dominant culture's values and participates in her own abjection; she works hard to prove her worth and to earn acceptance by conforming to dominant values as best she can. Second, Castillo shows that, despite Carmen's efforts, she remains unable to find acceptance within dominant U.S. culture because her physical appearance (dark skinned, handicapped, working-class) marks her as "other" and prevents her from seamlessly assimilating into this culture. Even her best attempts to fit in (by conforming to beauty standards, by trying to mask her disability, and by accepting the patriarchal rule of her dance instructor) backfire, as Carmen's polio symptoms return, and an unexpected pregnancy causes her to lose her job and get evicted from her parents' house. When

Carmen does not reflect the values or fit into the expectations of those around her, she is rejected and left with no other option than to join those who have been discarded by dominant culture and who live in the margins (in the Hollywood Hotel). Castillo also shows that Carmen, in an effort to escape her abjection, leaves dominant culture and flees to the desert. But Carmen soon realizes that her life outside dominant culture does not solve her problems but leaves her feeling even more unfulfilled and isolated because she is far from her home, her friends, and her family. Finally, Castillo documents Carmen's decision to return to Chicago (a symbolic return to dominant U.S. culture) in order to overcome her abjection both by disregarding dominant U.S. culture's rejection of her and also by embracing those around her who have also been abjected for not conforming to dominant culture's value system. This act of reaching out to those on the margins enables Carmen first to reconfigure and reclaim this marginal space and then to create a space within dominant culture where she and those around her can finally be freed from abjection.

In several pivotal scenes throughout the course of the novel, Castillo reveals Carmen's struggle to define herself amidst the tensions she experiences as a marginalized member along the borders of dominant U.S. culture, and she establishes Carmen as abject (according to her gender, class, race, sexuality, attractiveness, and physical disability) by associating her with Kristeva's three main categories of abjection: "food loathing" (*Powers of Horror* 2), "the corpse" (3), and "corporeal waste" (70). The first time Carmen recognizes her "other-ness" is at the age of six, when polio nearly takes her life. She explains that she almost died because "Amá [(her mother)] did not call the doctor

[…] right away because she says she could not afford it" (*Peel My Love* 12).[xxvi] While Carmen survives, she is forever marked physically by a leg which she describes as "bald and featherless, a limp dead heron fallen from its nest," and again as "pathetic, a dead gnarled limb, thin and crooked" (13). In these descriptions Castillo reveals how Carmen internalizes her abjection and accepts dominant culture's estimation of her physical body as worthless because of her disability. To Carmen, her leg is as good as dead, a corpse that constantly reminds her of her social and physical limitations. According to Kristeva, "corpses *show* [*us*] what [we] permanently thrust aside in order to live;" they remind us of our mortality by taking us to "the border of [our] condition as a living being" (*Powers of Horror* 3). Just as "[one's] body extricates itself, as being alive, from that border" of mortality, so Carmen attempts to separate herself from the "corpse" that is her leg. Even though this corpse is not an entire body, it nonetheless confronts Carmen with her own mortality, the thought of which, as Kristeva states, must be repressed in order to live. Yet in a sense the corpse of Carmen's leg becomes even more threatening because, unlike one who is confronted with the corpse of another being, Carmen is never able to separate herself from the discomfort and fear evoked by this reminder of her mortality. And instead of accepting this as part of herself, she participates in her own abjection and sees her leg as horrible and unsightly, something to be rejected.

Carmen's disability thus represents not only the "death" of her limb but also the "birth" of her marginalization within dominant culture. For example, Carmen remembers one of her former nurses suggesting that Amá (Carmen's mother) send Carmen to "The School for the Handicapped" (*Peel My Love* 17), which she describes as "a special school

for […] cripples, retards, the deaf and dumb" (12). Castillo shows that while the nurse's intentions are good – she encourages Amá to educate Carmen, and she points out that "Carmen is a smart little girl" – the nurse still functions within dominant culture's values because she believes that Carmen's disability will hinder her from marrying or becoming an independent adult (14). Castillo demonstrates further evidence of Carmen's marginalization in her description of the school itself. While having a separate school to care for the special needs of particular students can be highly beneficial for many who attend, Castillo helps readers see how dominant culture sometimes abuses this and uses such separation to further marginalize those who are different. For example, students who attend The School for the Handicapped with Carmen are placed there for a variety of reasons, with "problems" ranging from blindness to not speaking English (13, 15). While Carmen's disability physically marks her as different from able-bodied students, she is intelligent and capable of attending a "normal" school. But through Carmen's experience, Castillo helps us see how dominant culture maintains its power by creating and marginalizing "others." Because the students at The School for the Handicapped do not fit into its definition of "normal," dominant culture sends them away, isolates them and rejects them for their physical, linguistic, racial, or other differences. As Kristeva points out, whatever does not conform to dominant culture's values threatens that culture because it deconstructs the prescribed definition of normalcy and thereby attests to the constructed nature of (and therefore weakness of) the values themselves (*Powers of Horror* 18). Therefore, in response to such a threat, dominant culture seeks either to assimilate that threat or to confine and control it so that it no longer threatens dominant

stability (2, 8). Since the students in The School for the Handicapped are outwardly marked as different from dominant culture, they are not easily assimilated, and therefore dominant culture rejects and confines them in a separate school, without regard for individual student success.

Through Carmen's honest narration, Castillo further highlights the severity of emotional damage caused by such exclusionary practices. While Carmen does not linger in her description of the pain she experiences at The School for the Handicapped, she clearly conveys that this abjection leaves her with deep emotional scars. Carmen remembers in one significant moment of frustration, "My body went this way while I wanted it to go that way. When I wanted it to do something it did nothing. When I was twelve I took a lot of pain pills. They shoot horses, don't they?" (*Peel My Love* 13). While this final question appears abrupt and out of place, Castillo positions this question strategically, inviting a careful reader to pause and consider the gravity of Carmen's words. Not only is Carmen aggravated by the lack of control she has over her own body, but also she loses hope for a future free from her emotional pain and social rejection. Castillo here emphasizes the tragic dehumanization that abjection causes; Carmen is told she is worthless because she is different, and, as a young girl trying to construct an identity, she internalizes her abjection and adopts self-hatred as part of her lot in life. This belief even leads Carmen to see herself as no better than property, than an animal that becomes worthless and useless when it is no longer able to meet the demands of its owner.

A sign of hope arrives none too soon when Carmen enters eighth grade, and a new teacher, Miss Dorotea, begins teaching flamenco as part of a physical rehabilitation program (*Peel My Love* 17). In one of the first sessions Miss Dorotea calls on Carmen to dance in front of the class. Self-conscious of her disability, Carmen feels embarrassed and insecure in front of her fellow classmates, and her internalized abjection surfaces when she measures herself against Miss Dorotea:

> … Her long neck was poised like that of a flamingo. She had very pretty skin. I was just starting to break out. There was nothing redeemable about me, I was certain. I was a sight on the street with a paisley babushka on my head like a Polish farmer's wife and my mother's hand-me-down lady's coat with a ratty white rabbit collar and used crutches.
>
> My hair was oily and my mother insisted that I did not have to wash it every day. I needed help washing it bent over in the kitchen sink, no bathroom basin, no shower in the claw-footed tub. I was shedding my child's body and I wanted my mother to share her woman's secrets with me, the mysterious treasures in the bathroom that I knew were hers alone, the razor and douche bag and Kotex; things I wanted explained to me and even be allowed to claim, too. I got no instructions with my period, not even a sanitary napkin. Just use toilet paper, she said on my first day as if it would be a waste of product on a thirteen-year-old. With all the blood on the second day, I got some from the nurse at school.
>
> Now this beautiful milky white-skinned lady wanted me to follow her movements, the movements of a well person. Did she want to make fun of us,

> make us look absurd to each other? Wasn't it bad enough to feel absurd each day when we left the security of our little homes and the people who were used to seeing us? (15)

This brief moment holds more significance for Carmen than simply overcoming her stage fright; in remembering this moment, details about Carmen's transition into womanhood seem to spring up from "a deep well of memory that is unapproachable and intimate: the abject" (*Powers of Horror* 6). Carmen's memory is inextricably linked to her understanding of her identity as abject, and Castillo reveals this in two significant ways: first, Carmen experiences what W.E.B. DuBois calls "double consciousness" (12); and second, the image she sees reflects dominant culture's values and therefore attests to the fact that she has accepted and internalized the abjection placed upon her. Like a child in the developmental mirror stage, Carmen acutely notices her own image as distinct from and in contrast to the image of another woman, in this case Miss Dorotea. Although Miss Dorotea is not biologically her mother, Carmen's memory of this moment associates her with motherhood not only because Miss Dorotea brings hope to Carmen when she most needs it, thereby offering her new life, but also because Miss Dorotea embodies the grace and beauty valued by dominant culture and thus becomes a role model of womanhood femininity for Carmen when her biological mother refuses this role. But when Carmen compares herself to Miss Dorotea, she is reminded of her own abjection, of all that she lacks. Carmen experiences "double-consciousness," which DuBois describes as a "sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others, of measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity" (12).[xxvii] In other words,

Carmen becomes acutely aware of how others may see her, and she realizes that in comparison to Miss Dorotea, she falls short. According to Kristeva, in such a mirror experience the image of the mother is “split in two:” one side is “Ideal, artistically inclined, dedicated to beauty, […] the focus of the artist’s gaze” (*Powers of Horror* 157), and the other side “is tied to suffering, illness, sacrifice, […] repulsive and fascinating, abject” (158). For Carmen, Miss Dorotea clearly fits the first image of the mother, the image to which Carmen aspires. But what Carmen sees in her own image is so far from beauty that she sees no other option for herself than the second, repulsive, image, and she therefore accepts abjection as part of her identity.

In addition to the mother imagery in this passage, through the contrast between Carmen and Miss Dorotea, Castillo reveals how Carmen is not only abject in her femininity, but also in her sexuality, race, and class. Carmen wants so desperately to become a beautiful and mature adult, yet she becomes frustrated with a body that changes slowly and ungracefully. In contrast to the beautiful body of Miss Dorotea, whose “milky” skin and graceful posture imply glowing health as well as economic privilege, Carmen describes her own body as having oily hair, a crooked leg, and heavy bleeding, all of which make her feel like a homely “Polish farmer’s wife” (*Peel My Love* 15). The language Carmen uses in this description echoes the values of dominant U.S. culture, which places worth on beauty, health, and cleanliness (which all require some amount of time and money to maintain). Carmen does not live up to these standards, so she accepts and internalizes her rejection, equating herself with what white, patriarchal, elite culture sees as the lowest of the low, someone with no “redeemable” qualities: an ugly, working

class, immigrant woman (14). Castillo thus highlights how Carmen devalues herself by accepting as valid dominant U.S. culture's rejection of all that is not white, male, or elite.

In this same passage, Castillo also draws attention to the way in which Carmen's age as a pre-teen places her in the border between childhood and adulthood, thereby positioning her in a place that challenges definitions of both categories. At the age of thirteen, Carmen is no longer a child and not yet a woman, so she occupies the awkward state of "in-between," a transitional space of bodily changes (Parker, par. 6): she gets acne, her hair becomes oily, and her menstrual cycle begins. Carmen describes her desire to be a woman already, to "claim" women's things, but her mother, Amá - who accepts dominant U.S. culture's aversion to that which is not "clean and proper" nor easily defined (*Powers of Horror* 2) - refuses to help her. In addition, according to Kristeva, such an indefinable state is destabilizing because it "disturbs identity, system, order. [It] does not respect borders, positions, rules. The in-between, the ambiguous, the composite" (4). Carmen's state of transition also becomes threatening because of the bodily changes that begin to take place. Kristeva asserts that "'Matter issuing from [the orifices of the body] is marginal stuff of the most obvious kind. Spittle, blood, milk, urine, faeces or tears by simply issuing forth have traversed the boundary of the body" (69). Because Carmen's body begins to produce both oil and menstrual fluids, her body defies the "clean and proper" and is pushed away. As Kristeva explains, "… what goes out of the body, out of its pores and openings, points to the infinitude of the body proper and gives rise to abjection" (*Powers of Horror* 108). In other words, the fluids that leave the body become reminders of the processes our bodies carry out in order to remain alive, and

therefore they become subconscious reminders of our mortality. Kristeva clarifies that the "filth" associated with this passage of fluids from inside to outside the body "is not a quality in itself but it applies only to what relates to a *boundary*" (69). Castillo exemplifies this point when Carmen examines her mother's "woman's secrets" and "mysterious treasures" in the bathroom. Before Carmen experiences these bodily changes firsthand, and before she learns from her mother that they violate the "clean and proper," she does not find them dirty or disgusting but is intrigued by them and wants to know more (*Powers of Horror* 2). Only after Carmen experiences her mother's rejection of these bodily changes does she begin to see such signs of femininity as unclean and therefore abject.

As Carmen grows older and continues her dance instruction under Miss Dorotea, she learns to mask her disability and manages to overcome many of her physical limitations. When Miss Dorotea takes Carmen to dance for her flamenco group, Carmen quickly asserts herself and confidently shows off her talent and ability, much to the pleasure of the group leader, Agustín, who offers her the opportunity to train under him. While the gypsy flamenco group is hardly an example of dominant culture, within the group, Agustín's patriarchal dominance parallels the workings of dominant U.S. culture, and Carmen learns through this experience that she can get ahead by masking her disability and seducing dominant culture (Agustín) by performing the role of a confident and independent woman. While their affair lasts seventeen years, during which Carmen's career as a flamenco dancer flourishes, she once again encounters abjection when she unexpectedly discovers that she is pregnant with Agustín's child. Making her pregnancy

known only alienates Carmen from those closest to her; her mother forces her to move out of the family home, and Agustín flees to Spain. By becoming pregnant outside of marriage, Carmen disgraces her family and violates their cultural values, which place upon her clear expectations for her sexuality and uphold a binary understanding that women are either sexually pure or filthy. Saldívar-Hull explains that in Chicana/o culture, a dichotomy exists that requires women to identity either with the pure and holy virgin, represented by La Virgen de Guadalupe, or with the promiscuous whore, represented by Cortés' mistress La Malinche (22, 28). By process of elimination, Carmen can no longer be seen as the innocent virgin; she cannot marry Agustín (who is already married), and she cannot mask her sexuality because of the changes to her physical appearance. So Carmen becomes seen as La Malinche, a traitor who turns her back on her family. As such, she is found to be contemptible, and she is abjected.

With no one to turn to, Carmen searches for a space where she can redefine herself and locate an identity apart from the binary constrictions of La Virgen/La Malinche (Saldívar-Hull 64). The only place Carmen can afford is a dingy studio apartment at the Hollywood Hotel, which, she observes, houses other social outcasts: "the poor whites, Winnebagos from Wisconsin, the new Salvadoran immigrants, the drunks, drug addicts, streetwalkers and those one-step-away-from-homelessness" (*Peel My Love* 58). By placing Carmen alongside others whom dominant culture rejects, Castillo centers her narrative in the margins of U.S. society and draws attention to a people group often neglected in narratives of U.S. life: those who do not meet standards of whiteness, patriarchy, elitism, and hetero-normativity, beauty, or physical ability.

Cisneros further emphasizes that Carmen is abjected for her sexuality and gender when, after she miscarries and no longer bears the physical signs of her fertility, Agustín returns, and for the first time her father comes to visit her. It appears that once Carmen is no longer marked by her abjection, others allow her to once again perform an identity "acceptable" to the dominant cultures around her. But despite these changes, Carmen's experience with abjection is far from over. She endures yet another facet of abjection when her polio symptoms return and eventually force her to give up dancing, her one true love and her source of income. Unable to pay rent anymore, Carmen moves back in with her mother, who also experiences health problems. Concerned that her mother will no longer be able to pay her medical bills, Carmen sets aside her reservations and decides to take a job working for "a Korean wholesaler" (*Peel My Love* 122-123). But when Carmen arrives at the factory, she can't believe her eyes. While she had assumed such wholesale shops produced inexpensive, poor quality goods and took advantage of overseas workers, Carmen is shocked by the reality that such a shop with such poor conditions exists in the city she calls home. She describes:

> …[N]othing I'd ever read before in my brother's magazines or heard on public radio prepared me for what I was hit with on the second floor. It was like something I had studied in school about the Industrial Age, a page right out of Dickens. But this is the brink of the twenty-first century, I thought. And this isn't a book, it's my life. My life in Chicago – not Juárez, where I'd heard these low-tech, low-skilled, low-paying operations existed, but right down the street from where we live. […] I rubbed my eyes. But when I looked again, the woman

> sweating over the hot press in the back was still there, a puff of searing steam hitting her face each time she closed down on a garment. I saw teenage girls, too, about fifty of them with piles of endless acrylic yarn before them, somber and subdued. These weren't British waifs or Jewish immigrants like in my schoolbooks either but chinas and indias – meaning they could be women from anywhere – reedy and dark, thin-limbed younger copies of myself, sewing in mausoleum silence, quick-fingered and agile-eyed, like indentured servants toiling in exchange for their freedom. I thought, You can't do this to people, you just can't! Slavery was abolished a long time ago. Wasn't it? (123-24)

In this scene Castillo reveals the disturbing truth that factory worker exploitation is still a reality for many U.S. immigrants. Carmen's first response is one of shock because her schooling has only shown her the historical reality of such treatment toward minorities now assimilated into U.S. culture. But Carmen feels so far removed from this history and has believed the American narrative, the American myth, that freedom and justice are available for all. Through Carmen's experience at the factory, Castillo once again re-centers her narrative on those marginalized by U.S. society, which privileges whiteness, patriarchy, and elitism. Castillo's description of the factory and its workers confronts readers with the horrifying reality that human labor exploitation still exists in "the home of the free." Because the women in the factory are undocumented workers, not U.S. citizens, they not only are given no *legal* rights but also are stripped of their *human* rights. Carmen initially describes the workers as "chinas and indias – meaning they could be women from anywhere," thus emphasizing that neither their status as workers nor their

racial identity is valued, and because of this dominant U.S. culture easily exploits, dehumanizes, and abjects them.[xxviii] Parker asserts, "Abjection explains racism partly as the attempt to construct foreigners and ethnic minorities as ugly, filthy, or degenerate in order to establish the identity of the dominant group as purer or superior" (par. 19). While Castillo does not paint the immigrant workers as particularly "ugly, filthy, or degenerate," she does reveal the inhumane conditions in which they labor, and she highlights the fact that Carmen believed that dominant U.S. culture was beyond tolerating such practices. While Carmen has heard about the awful conditions of marginalized workers near the U.S.-Mexico border, she has trouble accepting that such a place exists in her hometown. The shock Carmen experiences in learning of this factory demonstrates how dominant U.S. historical narratives devalue these workers by ignoring the fact that such injustices that still take place.

But while dominant U.S. culture dismisses these factory workers, Castillo uses Carmen's experience to reconstruct their value both as workers and as humans. In a moment of empathy and compassion, Carmen allows the scene before her to sink in, and she admits that the workers look like "reedy and dark, thin-limbed younger copies of [her]self" (124). Although Carmen first tries to shut out the image of these women, as her experience in dominant U.S. culture has trained her to do, she is unable to push away or repress this moment. As Kristeva suggests, the fact that this image cannot be repressed demonstrates both the weakness of the dominant structures that try to contain it and also the strength of the image itself to overcome efforts of containment (*Powers of Horror* 5). So Carmen allows herself to be moved by this experience, but she also admits to her

struggle in finding the best way to respond. For a while Carmen continues to work without complaint simply to earn some extra money for her mother's medical bills. She plans "to write an outraged letter to someone somewhere about the unimaginable conditions" of the workers, but Carmen's friend Vicky is finally the one to call for an immigration raid (*Peel My Love* 128). For Carmen the issue becomes more complex as she realizes that the work itself, however inhumane the conditions, provides for these women, and she understands that calling immigration may temporarily fix the problem, but it risks creating even bigger ones – separating families, ending income, and forcing employers into further secrecy in future operations. Castillo thus illuminates the tensions surrounding such moral and ethical issues, but she holds responsible those involved. She makes an ethical and emotional appeal to her readers and invites them to ask, alongside Carmen, if the ideology of slavery lingers even after slavery has been legally abolished.

For Carmen, life after the immigration raid leaves her feeling increasingly isolated and depressed by her progressing physical limitations. She eventually heeds a friend's advice and visits a therapist, who encourages Carmen to explore ceramics as an artistic outlet. The creative energy this brings inspires Carmen to work toward spiritual renewal by removing herself from the influence of dominant U.S. culture, so she moves away to the desert to "liv[e] completely alone for two long years," in order to "tr[y her] hand as a potter," to "put on the veil," and to "take a vow of solitude" (*Peel My Love* 5).[xxix] But in keeping with Kristeva's pattern, Carmen finds that while this time away stretches her and gives her room to reflect, it does not show her her true identity but leaves her with a sense of incompletion, and she begins to miss her home:

> When […] I stopped dancing I wanted to return to the earth, bathe in it, live inside the planet. But what did I know of the desert or clay? What did I know of the music of silences? I only knew dance, the sound of my heels on the hard wooden platform. […] When the second winter of howling winds and sleeping alone was over I returned to the city of my birth. I wasn't cut out for living alone in the desert and came back to my natural urban habitat. (*Peel My Love* 5)

Even though she escapes to the desert, a symbolic retreat into her Chicana/o ancestry, Carmen realizes that "[t]he exile to the desert ha[s] not cured [her]" (191), and what she needs is not to be alone but to return to her true homeland in Chicago. So Castillo demonstrates that for Carmen creating a life outside the influence of dominant culture did not give her the freedom and satisfaction she hoped for; instead, while it did give her space, it did not ease her sense of isolation and alienation. Carmen thus comes to understand that in order to fulfill her desire to belong, she must return to Chicago, to her home within dominant U.S. culture and create a space for herself there. She explains,

> You say your city the way some Americans say this is their country. You never feel right saying that – *my country*. For some reason looking Mexican means you can't be American. And my cousins tell me, the ones who've gone to Mexico but who were born on this side like me, that over there they're definitely no Mexican. Because you were born on this side pocha is what you're called there, by your unkind relatives and strangers on the street and even waiters in restaurants when they overhear your whispered English and wince at your bad Spanish. Still, you try at least. You try like no one else on earth tries to be in two places at once.

> Being pocha means you try here and there, this way and that, and still you don't fit. Not here and not there. But you can say this is my city because Chicago is big and small enough to be your city, to be anybody's city who wants it, anybody at all. (*Peel My Love* 3)

Heredía explains that through Carmen's embrace of Chicago as home, Castillo "reclaim[s] the city transnationally" (par. 24). Quoting "post-colonial critic Homi Bhabba," Heredía continues, "'It is the city which provides the space in which emergent identifications and new social movements of the people are played out. It is there that in our time, the perplexity of the living is most acutely experienced'" (par. 24). In other words, Chicago becomes like a nation of its own, a place where people from many different backgrounds can all feel a sense of belonging. José David Saldívar proposes that the space of the city, like the space of the border, is one of mobility, blending, and multiple identities (22). Like borders, cities become sites where people of varied cultures, races, classes, and sexualities enter into contact with one another and create a space for dialogue, movement and growth. So symbolically, Carmen leaves her place of exile in the desert (outside dominant culture), and returns to Chicago to embrace her true home, a space that is very much within dominant U.S. culture but that also enables Carmen to carve out a place for herself to live out her multi-faceted identity.

Upon returning to Chicago, Carmen's problems do not leave her, but she finds herself learning to deal with and accept some of the difficulties she faces daily. For example, Carmen eventually makes her big break, not as a flamenco dancer as she once hoped, but as a singer, and this new role - no longer as a silent performer (the object on

stage), but now as a singer (the subject, the voice to which the audience listens) - becomes symbolic of her internal change:

> Forty or not (but it is forty), I'm okay. I take a look in the mirror in the back of Amá's bedroom door. I may not dance professionally anymore but I still have a waist. Since I stopped dancing I got my breasts back, too. It's the details that count. Although sometimes you have to look real close for the tiniest sign of something green. Like a lotus that has grown out of the mud underneath water and blossoms when it reaches light and a new life unfolds. I am a big lotus blossom, lovely and impermanent as everything else. In our own skin we can be reincarnated. You don't have to have a baby, reproduce yourself for a new and improved you. You don't have to die first. You don't have to die at all. (*Peel My Love* 197)

In this scene Carmen looks at herself in the mirror, no longer in the gaze of men or of her mother, but of herself. She pauses to appreciate changes in herself from when she was younger and dancing, and she finds good in the femininity expressed within her body, like having a waist and getting her breasts back. And against the trend of a dominant culture that admires youth and physical beauty, Carmen even embraces her mortality by accepting the way her body has changed. This moment signifies a re-birth, but one that no longer reminds her of her limits but reminds her of her potential. What is more, Carmen embraces her new life and accepts herself as being enough; she does not need to conform to dominant culture's values; she needs only to see the sunlight and grow toward it.

But Carmen does not foster this vitality on her own; it comes after she returns from her time alone in the desert and only with the help of community: "If I learned nothing else from my retreat into the desert, the tough love of my support group, the other night back on stage, it is that only superficial beauty fades with time. Like a pearl, the longer you wear it the more sheen it has, that's how a woman of substance begins to show her beauty. That's me" (*Peel My Love* 179). Carmen begins to see the beauty in herself and in accepting all of her quirks and imperfections.[xxx]

Carmen's success as a singer enables her to purchase a condo, more than a room of her own. While she admits to letting Agustín and Manolo back in as lovers, she does so on her own terms:

> Sometimes when Manolo calls, I say, Okay, you can come see me. […] Sure, come over! I also say to Agustín on other nights when he calls […]. And when I don't want to see anyone I don't answer the telephone at all, pull the shades down tight, put on my own CD on the new stereo with six speakers around the apartment and just dance. I dance and dance and dance. (*Peel My Love* 213)

Ultimately Carmen decides not to let others define who she is or who she becomes. She creates a safe space and learns to accept herself, and within this space she learns to accept and embrace her mother, her brother, and her friends, who have all experienced abjection for not measuring up to dominant U.S. culture's values of race, class, gender, sexuality, attractiveness or physical ability. For example, Carmen admits during one of her mother's moments of complaining, "My father smiles at me as if to say, Don't mind her, which of course I don't because the truth is, I can't remember my mother being this content in

years" (*Peel My Love* 188). In other words, although Carmen's mother does not alter her obnoxious habits of nagging and worrying, Carmen is able to embrace her and accept even her flaws. In addition to this, Carmen makes an effort to connect with her estranged younger brother, Negrito, her friend Vicky, and Vicky's brother, Virgil. Each of these people in Carmen's life is labeled as a social outcast – a criminal, a lesbian and a polio victim, a gay man and a victim of HIV – but Carmen embraces them anyway and takes them out for an evening of drinks and dancing (189-190).

Just as Carmen accepts these marginalized individuals in her daily life, she also performs another type of embrace, in the narrative she constructs. One of the most touching examples of this emerges in Carmen's memory of her friend and neighbor Chichi. Because Chichi, a transvestite prostitute, dresses as a woman but was born a man and therefore problematizes dominant culture's binary categories of gender and sexual orientation. Chichi's identity challenges and destabilizes these definitions as it draws attention to their inability to label or control her. In other words, she becomes a living reminder of the constructed nature of such categories, thereby deeply unsettling those who depend upon such clear definitions in constructing their own identities. And through Chichi's tragic story, Castillo exposes the depth of horror that such a deconstruction of identity effects; Carmen remembers that "just before Chichi was able to have the operation that would have made her a total woman […] someone found her pre-op corpse in the hallway, broken forever. Nobody claimed the body and it went to the city morgue" (62). While Castillo never divulges why Chichi is killed, readers clearly see the tragedy of her death as an effect of her abjection.

Yet while Castillo shows how Chichi's life is taken, she also reveals how Carmen reclaims it by including Chichi's story within her own narrative. Carmen accepts Chichi as a friend and embraces the ambiguity of her gender and sexuality; she even admits that she "learned a lot about being a woman from Chichi, who was a lot of woman for being a man" (*Peel My Love* 45). Carmen also documents other aspects of Chichi's personality, showing how she went out of her way to be kind and hospitable: "Sometimes if Chichi went out for dinner with some trick she'd bring back Chinese leftovers or pizza. She'd leave a beer or a half bottle of cheap wine for me too. Chichi means well but you can't expect a whole grain diet from someone who makes her living on the street" (61). Although dominant culture would hardly accept Chichi's imperfect offerings, Carmen appreciates them and values Chichi's giving heart. By recording memories such as these, Carmen gives back to Chichi the value that is stripped from her, and in this way Carmen "… confronts the abject and embraces the repressed feminine" (Parker, par. 44), thereby "enabl[ing] a demystification of power and thus a challenge to authority" (par. 49). In other words, by "re-membering" Chichi in her narrative, Carmen uncovers the instability and inaccuracy of the dominant structures that dehumanize and marginalize, and in so doing, she accepts and embraces the abject and rectifies a history that wrongfully rejects characters like Chichi (par. 46). Through such an embrace, Carmen overcomes abjection and creates a space of acceptance, freedom, and contentment, where marginalization and oppression are no longer defining forces in identity formation.

From this analysis we see that the theories of Saldívar-Hull and Kristeva help reveal the intricacies of Castillo's subversive work in *Peel My Love Like an Onion*.

Chicana feminism on the border and the theory of abjection help us to see the inner workings of identity politics amidst the conflicting tensions between dominant and marginalized cultures. And both offer hope that even the powerful and oppressive structures of dominant U.S. culture can be renovated to make room for the many who have been abjected.

Chapter 4

CELAYA REYES

> *"Guillermina's mother had taught her the* empuntadora*'s art of counting and dividing the silk strands, of braiding and knotting them into fastidious rosettes, arcs, stars, diamonds, names, dates, and even dedications, and before her, her mother taught her as her own mother had learned it, so it was as if all the mothers and daughters were at work, all one thread interlocking and double-looping, each woman learning from the woman before, but adding a flourish that became her signature, then passing it on."*
>
> *- Cisneros (93)*

Like the intricate braids woven from the fringe of a rebozo, Sandra Cisneros's most recent novel, *Caramelo*, collects many loose ends of untold cuentos and forgotten historias and knots them into a beautiful, complex, and interconnected pattern. Pulling strands from stories of her own family's past, from cultural myths, from textbook histories, and from pure imagination, Cisneros crafts a multi-faceted novel that, in both form and content, draws attention to and challenges widespread patterns of abjection in dominant U.S. culture, which privileges not only patriarchy (as Kristeva suggests), and whiteness, elitism, and hetero-normativity (as Saldívar-Hull suggests), but also historical objectivity and physical beauty. Cisneros thus depicts the reality of living within the complex tensions that surround and threaten Chicanas, who find themselves multiply marginalized and abjected as "others" within dominant U.S. culture.

Viewing *Caramelo* through the lens of Saldívar-Hull's feminism on the border enables us to see how Cisneros illuminates life along the U.S.-Mexican border as she recovers the untold history of the diverse and transnational Reyes family. And viewing this novel through the lens of Kristeva's theory of abjection enables us to see how

Cisneros's recovery project works within yet renovates oppressive structures of dominant U.S. culture, which marginalizes and abjects Chicanas. Taken together, both theories provide a framework for expanding our understanding of the complex politics of Chicana identity formation while renovating the dominant structures that already exist in order to develop a less essential, less oppressive, and more inclusive space for Chicana creativity that is made stronger by its multiple perspectives. Cisneros thus emulates in her narrative the same artistic practice of the rebozo artists: she documents and participates in a lineage of creativity while "adding a flourish" that is all her own (Cisneros 93).

Form

One of the most visible sites of Cisneros's subversive activity emerges in the form of her novel, where, by playfully complicating both structure and genre, she works within yet renovates dominant structures of historical documentation and creates an alternative "liminal space between truth and fiction" ("Postmodern Ethnicity," par. 25). To begin, Cisneros grounds her narrative within traditional formal structures of objective truth by utilizing footnotes and including a timeline (or "Chronology") of events. But the content she includes within these footnotes and timeline - information that is fictional and semi-fictional alongside information that is non-fictional with no distinction between them – leads readers to question the veracity of all her citations. By problematizing the information included within these structures, Cisneros destabilizes the structures themselves as sites of historical truth. For example, in the footnotes Cisneros documents historical events – "In 1914 President Woodrow Wilson authorized the Marines to invade

the port city of Tampico …" (Cisneros 135) – as well as moments where she bends the truth – "These words were actually Lola Alvarez Bravo's, the great Mexican photographer, but I loved them so much I had to 'borrow' them here" (117). By interweaving events from "objective" political histories and those from untold private histories, Cisneros begins to deconstruct the boundary between the two. Furthermore, in her timeline at the end of the novel, she again ties together threads from dominant histories – such as the beginning of the Mexican Revolution in 1911 (436) and the U.S. entrance into World War II in 1941 (437) – as well as from popular culture – such as, "José Mojica, the Mexican Valentino, records "Júrame" in 1926 (436) and "Elvis has *Fun in Acapulco*" in 1963 (438). By uniting these events in one timeline, Cisneros interprets for herself the events she deems worthy of mention in historical documentation. McCracken posits that Cisneros's method also draws attention to "the subjectivity and fictionality of [historical] records" and in turn challenges readers to investigate the authenticity and honesty of footnotes and timelines in other historical texts (par. 24). McCracken asserts,

> Cisneros' use of the scholarly devices of the footnote and the chronology to document elements of her narrative of ethnic memory and identity draws us once again into the postmodern nature of her fictional enterprise. Not only do such techniques situate readers in the liminal space between genres, but also between fiction and truth, invention and documentation. In postmodernist fashion, Cisneros breaks down the borders between genres by merging techniques of scholarly documentation with fiction. This collapse is central to the novel's desire

> to call into question the stable distinction between fact and fiction. ("Postmodern Ethnicity," par. 22)

In other words, by blurring the distinction between fictional novel and non-fictional history, Cisneros challenges dominant historical narratives that traditionally erase or assimilate "narrative[s] of ethnic memory and identity" (par. 22), and she carries out the subversive task of working within while deconstructing such oppressive structures. Cisneros thus renovates the dominant binary of truth versus fiction and carves out a space that looks much like the border, where movement, blending, and mixing occur, and where multiple perspectives, experiences, and historical narratives emerge.

In addition to such structural renovations, Cisneros also pushes the boundaries of genre, as McCracken suggests, by incorporating into her novel elements of short stories or telenovelas, memoir, and even poetry ("Postmodern Ethnicity," par. 22). Although the cover page explicitly states that *Caramelo* is a novel – and while the page count (434 pages), organization (into three parts and eighty-six chapters total), and complexity of the plot exhibit the formal characteristics of a traditional novel – the fragmented narrative chronology, the competing voices that vie for center stage in telling the story, the conflation of fact and fiction, and the intricate and artfully-crafted language, all suggest that this text cannot simply be classified as a novel. Rather, the narrative Cisneros creates brings to life the multiplicity and liminality of the border region as it embodies a pastiche of genres - short stories or telenovelas, memoir, and poetry.

To begin, identifying *Caramelo* as a novel and by writing predominantly in English, Cisneros positions *Caramelo* within traditional U.S. literature, where novels

dominate publication. But as McCracken points out, the marketing of Chicana novels by dominant U.S. publishing houses becomes an attempt to assimilate them, “to secure the closure of commodification on both the literary production and the writers themselves,” and therefore writers such as Cisneros create within their texts “a system of competing discourses” (*New Latina Narrative* 12). Such “competing discourses” upset traditional expectations for novels and therefore make classifying genre a difficult task. This is what Allan Cogan bemoans in his review of *Caramelo*:

> My biggest problem with Caramelo is that it really isn't a novel. It's more like a huge collection of sketches and strings of narrative loosely woven together, swinging back and forth among three generations and three families. There's no centre that I could perceive and, consequently, little sense of direction. […] There isn't even a single character who dominates the proceedings and with whom you can identify. (par. 8)

While I find some of Cogan’s complaints (“[t]here’s no center” to Cisneros’s plot, and “[t]here isn't even a single character who dominates the proceedings and with whom you can identify” (par. 8)) to be weak and underdeveloped, I propose that his frustrations demonstrate Cisneros’s success in her subversive project of renovating traditional expectations for genre. Cogan is correct in noting that *Caramelo* is broken up into small chapters that all could likely stand alone as a short stories. For example, in the brief chapter, entitled “Querétaro” Celaya remembers the day she got her long hair cut off for the first time (Cisneros 22-24). She begins her story as she and her family drive to the Awful Grandmother’s house, and she hopes that, as they pass the town of Querétaro, her

brothers will not bring up her traumatic experience and make fun of her again. She then leads her readers through the building tensions (how her family members respond to her new look – her grandmother coldly tells her to stop crying, her brothers make fun of her and call her a boy, and her father tries his best to make her feel better), into the climax (when they drive past the sign), and finally into the resolution (when her brothers, as she expects, begin to tease her again, and she sits quietly in the isolation she feels as the only girl (22-24). While this chapter is only three pages long, Cisneros manages to develop her characters and establish closure in the brief plot. So, as Cogan suggests, the novel truly is made up of mini stories like this one. But while Cogan sees *Caramelo*'s "collection of sketches" as evidence of Cisneros's inability to craft a cohesive novel, I posit instead that by structuring the narrative in such a way, Cisneros challenges traditional expectations for novels to meet a constructed standard of unity and clarity. Furthermore, while Cogan feels that "[t]here isn't even a single character who dominates the proceedings and with whom you can identify" (par. 8), I again see this as Cisneros's carefully considered deconstruction of the traditional novel. Because Cisneros's project involves recovering histories from the many who are marginalized by dominant cultures, it comes as no surprise that the many perspectives she engages would have many voices to contribute to the narrative. Summarizing these perspectives or mediating them to create a unified novel in the way that Cogan expects would compromise the integrity of this project. So by calling *Caramelo* a novel yet by fragmenting the plot and narrative voice, Cisneros deconstructs the traditional structure of the novel and creates a space where new interpretations and expressions of that genre are accepted.

But novel and short story alone do not fully describe *Caramelo*'s complex genre. As Juanita Heredía observes, some "[c]ritics have commented on the form of the novel as a mimicry of the *telenovelas* (Spanish soap operas), an engagement with popular culture …" (par. 6). Without a doubt these critics label and dismiss *Caramelo* as nothing but low-brow melodrama that manipulates audience interest; and they have a point. *Caramelo*, in plot and character development, is not unlike such melodramas. One of the most obvious and dramatic moments like this occurs when the Reyes family is on a family vacation in Acapulco. Learning for the first time, from the Awful Grandmother (Inocencio's mother), that Candelaria is Inocencio's daughter (Celaya's half-sister), Zoila (Celaya's mother) becomes irate, and tensions build between the three of them as they begin their journey home. The scene that eventually erupts could be straight from a telenovela like *Maria la del Barrio* because of the exaggerated anger, passion, and desperation of those involved. In the heat of the argument, Zoila tries to run away from the situation by jumping out of the car and "disappearing into a scruffy neighborhood plaza" (Cisneros 83). But when the entire family follows Zoila into the crowded plaza, the real drama begins. Celaya describes the scene: "Guests peer out half-naked from the windows of third-class hotels, customers at the fruit-drink stands twist around on barstools, taxi drivers abandon their cars, waiters forget their tips. The corn-on-the-cob vendor ignores his customers and moves in for a better view, as if we're the last episode of a favorite *telenovela*" (84). While the drama itself might be intriguing for anyone, Cisneros reveals that the crowds that gather to watch the Reyes family drama are made up of the same groups of people who regularly tend to watch telenovelas: the "working

poor" (Saldívar-Hull 108). Stopping their work to enjoy the scene, the people in the crowds listen in suspense as the insults and attacks continue in front of everyone. And, in typical telenovela fashion, Cisneros builds the tension to a breaking point, and then ends with a cliff-hanger: "Father raises his head skyward as if looking for a sign from heaven. The stars rattling like a drumroll. Then Father does something he's never done in his life. Not before, nor since" (Cisneros 86). With this, Cisneros ends Part One of her novel and leaves her readers, like the members of the crowd, in suspense. By evoking the genre of telenovela through the melodrama and cliff-hanger, Cisneros positions her narrative within what Saldívar-Hull sees as a damaging pop-cultural form of entertainment. But while telenovelas, as Saldívar-Hull critiques, perpetuate for the lower classes a limiting ideal of weak and subservient women, Cisneros's narrative recovers the stories of the Reyes women, who reinterpret "cultural values" and "contest [dominant culture's] condescending attitudes toward them" (Heredía, par. 31). In other words, Cisneros's novel defines these women not as weak, wilting, and overly-emotional but as a strong, honest, and independent. So yet again we see Cisneros expand the boundary of the novel genre by positioning her narrative within traditional structures yet renovating them in order to carve out a space for new expressions of Chicana identity.

Furthermore, in addition to short stories and telenovelas, Cisneros also utilizes elements of memoir in *Caramelo* in order to further complicate the genre. In a "Disclaimer" inserted before the narrative even begins, Cisneros forewarns her readers that the story that follows is a blend of both her own family's history as well as her imagination; she admits, "I have invented what I do not know and exaggerated what I do

[know] to continue the family tradition of telling healthy lies" (Cisneros n.p.). Cisneros here "recapture[s] the eroding cultural memory and identity" of a narrative tradition that rivals dominant U.S. and Mexican cultures' values of truth and objectivity, and therefore is at risk of erasure ("Postmodern Ethnicity," par. 3). By thus blending fact and fiction, Cisneros becomes a curator for her own history, gathering stories from others and adding them to her own so that, as McCracken suggests, "[a]udiences who read *Caramelo* can never be certain if they are reading facts about Cisneros and her family or imaginative inventions" (par. 24). McCracken also posits that Cisneros embellishes her story in order "[to protect] the members of her family from the exposure of their private life to the public, yet at the same time [to reveal] and preserv[e] their story for posterity" (par. 24). In other words, while the narrative is based on truth, Cisneros "dissolves" the "distinction between history and memory" and so challenges readers to let go of the desire to know what is fact and what is fiction and to embrace the ambiguity of the narrative (Parker, par. 23). Therefore, yet again, Cisneros deconstructs the border between genres and makes room for different expressions of novel and memoir.

Finally, Cisneros also fuses prose and poetry, the written word and the spoken word, as her signature figurative language brings her narrative to life through its vivid images and aural rhythms. McCracken argues that the "careful aesthetic language" which Cisneros employs demonstrates that "[t]he double figure of Celaya/Cisneros is an ethnographer of her communities on both sides of the border" ("Postmodern Ethnicity," par. 17, par. 16). She offers Celaya's earliest description of Mexico as evidence:

Little girls in Sunday dresses like lace bells, like umbrellas, like parachutes, the

> more lace and froufrou the better. Houses painted purple, electric blue, tiger orange, aquamarine … Above doorways, faded wreaths from an anniversary or a death till the wind and rain erase them. A woman in an apron scrubbing the sidewalk in front of her house with a pink plastic broom and a bright green bucket filled with suds. (Cisneros 18)

McCracken proposes that these descriptions situate Celaya as an "outsider" to Mexican culture because the details Celaya first notices are those that most drastically differ from U.S. cultural practices – the fancy attire for church, the departure from builder's beige for home colors, and the woman mopping the sidewalk outside. While McCracken makes a solid case for viewing Celaya as an ethnographer, her analysis of the above descriptions fails to address one of the most prominent aspects of Cisneros's writing: the sounds and rhythms of the words themselves. Strongly indicative of her background in poetry, Cisneros's prose plays with the sounds and rhythms of the words; for example, the alliteration - repetition of the "l" sounds in "little," "like," and "lace," – and the assonance – "dresses," "bells," "umbrellas," and "better" – in the first sentence roll smoothly off the tongue and invite readers to say the words aloud. Cisneros's descriptions also overflow with figurative language. In this first description of Mexico, Cisneros not only uses similes to show how the little girls' dresses are overly fluffed and decorated, but also she uses metaphors to bring life to the colors of the houses that are "electric blue" and "tiger orange." This figurative language appears in other places throughout the novel as well. For example, when Celaya describes the cold of a Chicago winter, we see alliteration, consonance, and metaphor: "It was not the picturesque season of Christmas,

but the endless tundra of January, February, and March. Daylight dimmed to a dull pewter. The sun a thick piece of ice behind a dirty woolen sky" (Cisneros 292). By manipulating sound and language like this throughout her narrative, Cisneros blends the spoken word with the written word and, yet again, blurs distinctions between genres in order to make space for something hybrid, something "other." In a rather subversive fashion, then, through manipulation of the formal and structural aesthetics in *Caramelo*, Cisneros emulates the liminal qualities of the border and creates a narrative space that not only reflects the complexity and multi-faceted nature of the border but that also opens a space within traditional forms where creativity allows for diverse constructions of structure and genre.

Content

But Cisneros does not conduct her subversive work "as a feminist historian" in the *form* of her novel alone, but also in the *content* (Saldívar-Hull 64). While on the surface *Caramelo* appears to follow traditional themes of essential Chicana/o literature – immigration, the barrio, cultural conflict – Cisneros pushes these themes in new directions. For example, while *Caramelo* follows the story of the Reyes family, which immigrates to the U.S. from Mexico, which resides in working-class neighborhoods, and which experiences its share of racial discrimination, the focus of the narrative is not on these issues themselves but on Celaya's undertaking to recover and document the untold histories of the members of the Reyes family in order to better understand the people and events that have played a role in their identity formations. McCracken posits, "The story

of the Reyes clan … is the excavation project of Celaya Reyes, who attempts to uncover the repressed secrets of both her family and the larger historical master narrative. … The stories of Celaya's father, grandparents, and mother are situated within both the broad sweep and the everyday minutiae of Mexican and U.S. history" ("Postmodern Ethnicity," par. 15). In other words, the narrative itself becomes Celaya's mission to rescue from erasure the marginalized histories of her family in order to preserve their memory, better understand herself, and reconfigure historical records to include more than what dominant U.S. culture alone has deemed valuable. And by recording intimate personal narratives alongside dominant public and political histories in Celaya's narrative, Cisneros deconstructs traditional exclusionary historical narratives.

In addition to this, Cisneros allows multiple voices to contribute to this recreated historical narrative. For example, although Celaya is arguably the protagonist and narrates a majority of the novel, the Awful Grandmother, Aunty Light Skin, and the attendees of Inocencio and Zoila's anniversary party also contribute to (and even argue about the correctness of) the recreation of the Reyes family history. Heredía suggests that Cisneros allows these multiple voices to share their memories in the novel in order to "develo[p] a consciousness that takes into consideration the silenced voices of marginalized groups such as women and immigrants in the Americas" as well as to contribute to "… a discourse of intervention in the Mexico-United States borderlands that contests dominant forms of oppression …" (par. 37, par. 6). In other words, by including multiple perspectives in her recovery of the histories of the Reyes family and by presenting them within and alongside traditional historical accounts, Cisneros

deconstructs dominant U.S. culture's projections of historical objectivity and creates a space within historical narratives where all voices are welcomed, where all histories (whether in public or private spheres) are valued, and where complex and multi-faceted identities can be formed.

Another significant way that Cisneros problematizes and renovates oppressive structures of dominant U.S. culture emerges in a pattern of abjection that can be seen in protagonist Celaya's own journey of identity formation and self-acceptance. As an outsider marginalized for not conforming to the values (of whiteness, patriarchy, elitism, hetero-normativity, and physical beauty) of dominant U.S. culture, Celaya becomes aware of herself as abject from an early age. In response to this abjection, Celaya at first accepts dominant culture's values and participates in order to fit in; she works hard to maintain standards of cleanliness and to prove herself valuable. But despite these attempts, Celaya remains unable to find acceptance in dominant U.S. culture because, by nature of her identity as a Chicana, she cannot easily be assimilated into this culture. Because of this, she tries to find her value and prove her maturity in a romantic relationship. But Celaya soon realizes that this does not help her escape her abjection and solve her problems but only exacerbates her feelings of isolation and alienation. After this realization Celaya returns to her family and to her community and, having experienced the lowest point of her abjection, finds the ability to embrace those around her who have also experienced abjection for their non-conformity to the values of dominant U.S. culture. And the tangible product of Celaya's inclusion and embrace becomes the novel

itself, which allows the stories of these people to be recorded and revalued, or, as Parker suggests, “re-membered” (par. 46).

By taking us through Celaya’s journey, Cisneros crafts a narrative that reflects the pattern Kristeva outlines in her theory of abjection. Celaya’s experience of rejection, alienation, acceptance, and reconciliation ultimately reflects, as Kristeva suggests, not only the instability of oppressive dominant U.S. culture but also the strength and power to overcome inherent in those who are marginalized (*Powers of Horror* 69; Parker, par. 3). Cisneros establishes this in several significant moments throughout the novel, when Celaya associates with Kristeva’s three main categories of abjection: “food loathing” (*Powers of Horror* 2), “the corpse” (3), and “corporeal waste” (70). Celaya’s first encounter with abjection occurs when she and her family take their yearly visit to the Awful Grandmother’s house in Mexico City, where she meets the washerwoman’s daughter, Candelaria. The first detail Celaya notices about Candelaria is the color of her skin:

> The girl Candelaria has skin bright as a copper *veinte centavos* coin after you’ve sucked it. Not transparent like Aunty Light-Skin’s. Not shark-belly pale like Father and Grandmother. Not the red river-clay color of Mother and her family. Not the coffee-with-too-much-milk color like me, nor the fried-*tortilla* color of the washerwoman Amparo, her mother. Not like anybody. Smooth as peanut butter, deep as burnt-milk candy. (Cisneros 34)

Celaya is captivated by the rich color of Candelaria’s skin (in comparison to the lighter skin colors of those in her family), and she finds beauty in the uniqueness and complexity

of its tone. Through this simple description Cisneros reveals to her readers that while Celaya's first impression of Candelaria is so focused on her skin color, Celaya does not see this sign of difference as negative; in fact, she associates it with things she enjoys - a "coin after you've sucked it clean," "peanut butter," and "burnt-milk candy" (a caramely treat). These comparisons establish two important points. First, they show that Celaya does not share dominant culture's value of whiteness. Instead, she finds Candelaria's warm caramel color superior to her own, lighter, "coffee-with-too-much-milk" color. Celaya becomes so interested in Candelaria's skin partly because she has never seen a shade like it before; the shades of those in her family are either much darker or much lighter, but Candelaria's shade is somewhere in between, and this fascinates young Celaya. But for the dominant U.S. culture (and in this case the dominant Mexican culture as well) to which Celaya's family ascribes, Candelaria's medium skin tone marks her as a mestiza, a mixture, and therefore an "other." Candelaria's hybridity presents problems for dominant culture, then, "because [her identity] can never be entirely anchored or secured" or defined within binary racial categories ("Postmodern Ethnicity," par. 13). Candelaria thus destabilizes such categories that structure dominant culture's values as she draws attention to the inadequacy and therefore weakness of binary categories. But while Candelaria's skin color is unsettling to dominant culture, Celaya admires it and finds it beautiful, and this locates her alongside Candelaria, in opposition to dominant culture.

Cisneros further positions Celaya in opposition to dominant culture through the unique comparisons she makes in describing Candelaria's skin tone. Celaya begins by comparing Candelaria's coloring to a "coin after you've sucked it clean," and while

sucking on a coin is something more common or normal for kids to do, it is also, arguably, a repulsive idea. According to Kristeva's theory, this act is abject for two reasons: first, because the coin enters Celaya's mouth, thereby crossing the physical boundary of her body, from outside to inside; and second, because sucking on the coin violates a standard of cleanliness - the coin is not only a non-edible and therefore foreign object for the mouth, but the germs and grime that collect on the coin from it numerous uses now pollute Celaya's mouth (*Powers of Horror* 3-4, 65). But, unlike the dominant culture Kristeva describes, Celaya does not see anything repulsive about sucking on the coin; rather, she refers to it in a positive light in order to show that the pleasure she experiences as a result of making the centavo shiny is the same pleasure she feels in seeing the color of Candelaria's skin. In a similar manner, when Celaya compares Candelaria's skin to the arguably less repulsive peanut butter and burnt-milk candy, she still evokes abjection because, as Kristeva outlines, food crosses the body's physical boundaries when it is consumed (outside to inside) and digested into waste (inside to outside) and therefore becomes unclean (Parker, par. 6; *Powers of Horror* 75). Furthermore, comparing Celaya to burnt-milk candy carries a negative connotation; while the name is a reference to how the caramel candy is made, calling it "burnt" suggests that something is wrong, that it has been cooked for too long, that it no longer exhibits the supposedly purer qualities of milk in its original state. But while these foods represent abjection to dominant cultures, Cisneros shows us that young Celaya does not see them this way. This yet again locates Celaya in opposition to dominant culture and positions her with Candelaria as abject. Also, in showing us that Celaya sees nothing wrong with

the items she describes, Cisneros draws attention to the fact that these objects are not inherently or essentially unclean in themselves but that they become labeled as unclean through dominant culture's conditioning (Kristeva 69, 4). By highlighting this difference, Cisneros yet again demonstrates the constructed nature of dominant culture's values that privilege lighter skin, and she places Celaya as abject within these values.[xxxi]

What is more, Celaya's family eventually prohibits Celaya from playing with Candelaria because she continually violates dominant standards of cleanliness, and this begins to affect Celaya's cleanliness as well. It appears that for Celaya's family Candelaria's most offensive crime is giving Celaya head lice, but, again, Celaya is not bothered by this. Instead, she mourns the loss of her friend: "I'm not allowed to play with Candelaria. Or to even talk to her. And I'm not to let her hug me, or chew the little cloud of gum she passes from her mouth to her fingers to my mouth, still warm with her saliva, and never let her carry me on her lap again as if I was her baby" (Cisneros 36-37). Cisneros shows her readers here that Celaya's initial disregard for Candelaria's lack of cleanliness demonstrates that Celaya has not yet internalized dominant values. And by showing that the very things Celaya will miss most about Candelaria are the very reasons why she is not allowed to play with her, Cisneros invites her readers to see that Candelaria's "filth is not a quality in itself, but applies only to what relates to a *boundary*" (*Powers of Horror* 69). In other words, there is nothing inherently dirty about Candelaria's practices; instead, it is the fact that her practices cross physical and social boundaries that causes them to be abjected.

But Candelaria's skin color and hygiene are not the only qualities that set her apart as abject; her age also situates her in the awkward phase between childhood and womanhood (Parker, par. 6). Candelaria's pre-adolescent state is threatening because it is "[t]he in-between, the ambiguous, the composite" (*Powers of Horror* 8). Cisneros describes Candelaria as "still a girl, even though she is older," and as "a girl who likes to play even though she wakes up with the rooster and rides to work" (35). In other words, even though Candelaria's age suggests that she should be more mature, her actions (like playing house with Celaya or peeing behind the laundry room) are still quite juvenile, and this disconnect between dominant culture's expectations and Candelaria's actions "disturbs identity, system, order," and "does not respect borders, positions, rules" (*Powers of Horror* 8). Because she straddles the socially drawn lines separating children from adults, Candelaria becomes a symbol of ambiguity that unsettles the dominant culture around her. And by revealing how Candelaria occupies an in-between in so many ways – caramelo-skinned, working class, girl/young woman – Cisneros reveals that Candelaria threatens the stability and order of dominant culture and must be, as Celaya's family insists, pushed away, abjected.

While Celaya, at the request of her family, distances herself from Candelaria's abjection, she cannot escape it completely and eventually experiences her own abjection as a Chicana (not Mexican nor American). Like Candelaria, Celaya experiences a heightened sense of her marginalization and abjection during her pre-teen years. For example, not only does she feel awkward as the only girl in a family of six boys who always poke fun at her, but also even Celaya's grandmother (whom she understandably

refers to as "The Awful Grandmother") picks on her and makes her feel awkward about her bodily changes by making comments like, "You've got the body of a man and the mind of a child" (Cisneros 256), and saying things like,

> I can't stand looking at you walking about like the hunchback of Notre Dame. Why do you insist on wearing your hair like that? Can't you at least pin back your bangs? You look like a sheep dog. The last time I saw you, you were a normal little girl. And now look. You're as big as a Russian. Don't you think you should exercise and try to look more feminine? (258)

Through this heartless ridicule, Cisneros reveals that The Awful Grandmother embodies characteristics of what Saldívar-Hull calls "the maternal patriarch," a woman who passes along patriarchal traditions either for the sake of acceptance from men she loves or for the sake of elevating her own status forcing upon others the abjection she has experienced (110, 114). Parker explains, "Society regards [her] as abject because [she is] a woman, and as [a] symbolic subjec[t], [she] regard[s] other women as abject," which helps clarify "why sisterhood is problematic for some women" (par. 11) In other words, in order to find acceptance in a society where women are not privileged, The Awful Grandmother must distance herself from other women if she wants to avoid her own abjection. And this is what she does with Celaya, measuring her against dominant values of beauty: a petite frame and a softer, "feminine" look. While Celaya knows from experience to shield herself from the attacks of her grandmother, in her vulnerable transitional stage, she begins to agree with the criticisms:

> When it comes down to it, I guess I inherited the worst of both families. I got Father's face with its Moorish profile, a nose too big for my face, or a face too small for my nose, I'm not sure which. But I'm all Reyna from the neck down. A body like a *tamal*, straight up and down. To top it off, I'm way taller than anyone in my class, even the boys. The last thing I need is the Grandmother pointing out my charms. No wonder I'm always depressed. (Cisneros 258)

Cisneros shows us here that Celaya understands her appearance does not fit her grandmother's definition of beauty (which is synonymous with dominant culture's standard), and she recognizes this difference as a flaw that must be overcome.

But Celaya's feelings of alienation and discomfort get worse before they get better. During this same vacation, she begins her first menstrual cycle and is forced to seek help from The Awful Grandmother, who is the only woman around at the time, and who, yet again, insults her: "You mean to say your 'rule' hasn't descended yet? A big lug of a girl like you?" (Cisneros 260). What is more, Celaya feels even more isolated and abnormal because, as she explains, her flow is not like the "nervous drip like a leaky faucet" that her friends experienced; instead, she says it is "like the body swallowing backward. But from down there" (260). This moment for Celaya is frustrating and confusing because her expectations are upset, and she feels like the criticism stated about her might be true. She remembers this moment with a dark clarity:

> It's in the pink bathroom of the house on Destiny Street that the blood first appears, the bathroom with the huge tomb of a tub big enough to drown in, the floor of white octagons, the hundred times I've balanced on the tub ledge

> pushing the windows of pebbled glass open when the balloon vendor went past whistling his balloon-vendor whistle. (260)

The details Cisneros includes in this image – the blood, the "huge tomb of a tub," the memory of the balloon vendor - suggest that for Celaya this moment marks the death of her innocence and her entrance into an adulthood she does not feel prepared for or ready to embrace because she does not measure up to the idea of womanhood that has been presented to her.

Shortly after this moment, in an effort to distance herself from the labels The Awful Grandmother has given her, Celaya attempts to prove her maturity by volunteering to run an errand for the first time on her own (ironically, she secretly plans to purchase balloons and sweets for herself, thereby exposing the child she still is) (260). But what she initially imagines to be a pleasant getaway turns into an emotionally disturbing experience as the joy she feels when strangers recognize her as a "señorita" eventually fades into fear when men cat-call and "mak[e] smacky kisses at [her]" (Cisneros 261). To ease the discomfort of being ogled by the men around her and to distance herself from the panic she begins to feel, Celaya searches for something else to capture her attention. But everything she sees on the street repulses and horrifies her:

> In the gutter, the bone of a mango with wisps of golden hair. A half-eaten corncob. Satellites of green iridescent houseflies. […]
>
> On the corner before crossing to the church plaza, a man more raggedy than Cantinflas, *un borrachito* slouched like a sack of dirty laundry. What *is* that bulging out from his belt? I don't think anything of it until I get closer.

> *Ay*, it's his *thing*. Worse – a green fly is sitting on it like a big green sequin!
>
> ¡*Córrele, córrele!* Run, run! My heart racing several steps ahead of me. *Ay, qué feo, feo, feo.* A little shudder goes through me when I make my way around the corner and turn back to the Grandmother's house on Destiny Street. I forget about the balloons, the milk gelatins, the cookie vendors in front of the church, the pumpkin-flower *quesadillas*, the sandwich of cotton wadded between my legs. I forget about everything on the way to the Grandmother's house except what I wish I could forget, that man's ugly pipi with the fly on it.
>
> When I get back, I throw myself on the bed, and pretend to be sick from my period [...]. I try not to think, but the things I try not to think about keep bobbing to the surface like drowned people. (262-63)

Although Celaya is not physically violated by this experience, she feels quite obviously upset and troubled by what she sees. Her innocence is symbolically lost when she abandons her plans to purchase the balloons and sweets and when the magic and mystery she once saw in the outside world fades into fear and horror. This fear Celaya encounters is produced by a confrontation with the abject. The objects she encounters on the street - the mango, corncob, gelatin (food remnants), a dead bug (death), and menstruation, sexual organs (bodily fluids and private body parts) - violate what Kristeva calls the "clean and proper" guidelines of the dominant symbolic order and therefore induce a sense of horror that necessitates their rejection and therefore abjection (*Powers of Horror* 2).

While these objects are not horrible in and of themselves, the dominant symbolic order treats them with horror because they transgress or blur boundaries (whether by moving in and/or out of physical bodies, by crossing metaphysical boundaries, or by making unclear the boundaries separating one object from another).[xxxii] For example, the first several objects that bother Celaya are food scraps, which, according to Kristeva, represent both the residue of someone else's eating as well as the transgression of borders involved in consuming food (*Powers of Horror* 75). Furthermore, Celaya is most repulsed and horrified by the drunk man's indecent exposure in front of the cathedral. While no physical contact occurs between them, this man symbolically violates Celaya's innocence by showing her what she does not want to see, an image that haunts her thoughts and prevents her from removing herself from the horror she feels because of this image; she explains, "I forget about everything on the way to the Grandmother's house except what I wish I could forget, that man's ugly pipi with the fly on it" (Cisneros 262). This image disturbs Celaya partly because his presence crosses boundaries. On the street he transgresses the social boundary between acceptable actions in private and public spheres as well as on secular and sacred ground. For example, while dominant culture deems it acceptable to be naked in the solitude of one's home, it does not approve of this on the public streets; and while being drunk in public is not exactly praised, it is perhaps more acceptable than being drunk at church. Furthermore, the image of this "man's ugly pipi with the fly on it" (262) juxtaposes two objects that, according to dominant culture's standards, should never be together, and therefore part of what makes it so disturbing is

the shock it effects. Again, while the fly belongs in the public sphere, the man's genitalia belongs in the private sphere; so when the two meet, they disrupt the established order.

Celaya's horror, then, becomes an understandable response because although she distances herself physically from this moment and tries to repress and abject this image, she remains unable to do so. She divulges, "I try not to think, but the things I try not to think about keep bobbing to the surface like drowned people. … A river roaring in my brain. Muddy water sweeping everything along" (262). Celaya tries to escape all of this abjection by avoiding and repressing it, but this does not help her because, as Kristeva explains, this repression "cannot really be held down," and, as Celaya admits, her thoughts continue to surface (*Powers of Horror* 13). Celaya's inability to emotionally free herself or distance herself from this awful experience only adds to her anxiety and horror because it prevents her from distancing herself from the abject. Because Celaya's "existence in the symbolic order depends of a 'clean and proper' body, which in turn depends on the expulsion or rejection of improper, unclean, and disorderly elements of corporeality: the abject," she tries to cleanse herself from the image that makes her feel dirty (Parker, par. 3). But her inability to clear this image from her mind, and therefore separate herself from it, threatens her with the possibility of becoming overtaken by abjection herself, as symbolized by the "[m]uddy water sweeping everything along" (Cisneros 262).

In time Celaya is able to distance herself from the horror of this memory, but the emotions she represses resurface in her second outing alone in Mexico City. In many ways this second experience several years later closely parallels her first. For a second

time Celaya's expectations are upset, her long-desired freedom turned sour, her innocence lost, and her abjection re-established. Like her first experience, Celaya's second trip emerges as Celaya's attempt to escape her abjection and begins with her desire to demonstrate to those around her that she is a mature and independent woman. But this "escape" into the land of her ancestors does not give Celaya the lasting sense of acceptance she searches for. In an act of rebellion, Celaya and her boyfriend Ernesto run away to Mexico City, under the impression that doing so will force their families to accept their relationship. For Celaya this first sexual experience initially empowers her and gives her an overwhelming sense of belonging. She explains, "All the parts of me coming back from someplace before I was born, and me little and safe …, well loved, myself again" (Cisneros 382). This "someplace before" to which Celaya refers is what Kristeva calls the semiotic realm, the developmental stage before the acquisition of language and entrance into the symbolic (*Powers of Horror* 2). Kristeva explains that the semiotic realm has become abjected by the dominant order that privileges the traditionally masculine symbolic realm. She states, "The abject lies … in the way one speaks it; it is verbal communication, it is the Word that discloses the abject" (23). In other words, abjection is communicated and maintained by the symbolic order, by language. So when Celaya describes her retreat into the semiotic (the pre-symbolic), she essentially describes a moment so full of emotion that it moves her to a place where she is no longer bound by language (words cannot fully express her feelings), where her abjection disappears, and where she finds her true identity. Even though sex itself physically and emotionally unites (blurs boundaries between) Celaya and Ernesto and

therefore represents abjection in the symbolic realm (because it deconstructs and consequently threatens the stability of physical distinctions between them as separate individuals), Celaya embraces this unity as a positive change. She admits, "I want to dissolve him inside me again. I want to be him and for him to be me. I want to empty myself and fill myself with him" (Cisneros 386). In this moment Celaya willfully lets go of the dominant symbolic order and joyfully embraces the deconstruction of individual identities, thus removing herself from her abjection.

But after the intensity of the moment passes, the symbolic returns, and once again Celaya experiences abjection. After attending Mass on the morning following their sexual encounter, Ernesto explains to Celaya, "… the *padrecito* made me realize … My mother is like la Virgen de Guadalupe, and I'm her only son, and now I've hurt her. I just understood everything. Then when I asked for forgiveness, it's like I've become myself again" (Cisneros 387). As a Chicano who has much at stake in defining himself within dominant cultural structures, Ernesto begins to feel afraid and ashamed and runs back to the dominant order, symbolized here by the Catholic Church. Just as Celaya found herself in the feminine semiotic experience of sex, so Ernesto finds himself in the masculine symbolic order of the Catholic Church, which reminds him that in order to distance himself from the abject and become clean again, he must undergo a "rite of purification" that will re-establish order (*Powers of Horror* 64). So Ernesto begins his purification by separating himself from his sin and by pushing away all reminders of his transgression, namely Celaya. In his justification to Celaya, Ernesto alludes to his acceptance of what Saldívar-Hull calls one of the most destructive binary structures in Chicano culture: that

of La Virgen and La Malinche. Within this binary order women are imitators either of the pure and perfect Virgin of Guadalupe, or of La Malinche, who turned on her people and became known as the whore of Cortés (Saldívar-Hull 63-67). This is the binary structure Ernesto forces upon Celaya; because he equates his mother to La Virgen, Ernesto has no other option but to see Celaya as the whore who threatens his subjectivity and must therefore be expelled. So after Ernesto performs his ritual of purification by leaving her and returning to the U.S., Celaya once again finds herself alone and walking the streets in Mexico City.

Like her first solo journey here, Celaya once again realizes that she is surrounded by the abject: "… the air ruined, filthy, corncobs rotting in the curb, the neighborhood pocked, overpopulated, and boiling in its own stew of juices, corner men hissing *psst*, *psst* at me, flies resting on the custard gelatins rubbing their furry forelegs together …" (Cisneros 388). Again, Celaya sees the filth on the street: the food residue, the stench of bodies and waste, the dirt, and the flies. But this second visit produces one significant distinction: while Celaya notices the abjection around her, she does not try to avoid it or separate herself from it (as in an act of purification). Having just experienced abjection by Ernesto, Celaya courageously refuses to allow it to isolate and define her. Instead, she lets it signify her connection to those around her, and this offers her a sense of fulfillment. Looking around she observes,

> Everyone needs a lot. The whole world needs a lot. Everyone, the women frying lunch putting warm coins in your hand. The market sellers asking, -What else? The taxi drivers racing to make the light. The baby purring on a mother's fat

> shoulder. Welders, firemen, grandmothers, bank tellers, shoeshine boys, and diplomats. Everybody, every single one needs a lot. The planet swings on its axis, a drunk trying to do a pirouette. Me, me, me! Every fist with an empty glass in the air. The earth throbbing like a field ready to burst into dandelion.
>
> I look up, and la Virgen looks down at me, and, honest to God, this sounds like a lie, but it's true. The universe a cloth, and all humanity interwoven. Each and every person connected to me, and me connected to them, like the strands of a *rebozo*. Pull one string and the whole thing comes undone. Each person who comes into my life affecting the pattern, and me affecting theirs. (389)

Celaya describes men and women of different trades and classes, and she views them all on the same level: as broken, in need, incomplete. We see reappear images previously associated with abjection – food, coins, motherhood, drunkenness - but in this moment Celaya allows her encounter with La Virgen to refashion her response, and she refuses to see these images as abject. Instead, she allows this moment to connect her to those around her. Celaya realizes that while she thought her escape into the semiotic realm would fulfill her and save her from her abjection, it has left her with a broken heart and has exacerbated her sense of isolation and alienation. But this encounter with La Virgen gives her hope and enables her to reinterpret the images she sees. Instead of distancing herself from or abjecting those around her, Celaya allows the "sense of strangeness" she feels to become "a mainspring for identification with the other" (Kristeva qtd. in Parker, par. 35), which helps her to perceive that, as a woman, as a member of the working class,

as a social outcast, and as a mestiza, she can relate to the suffering and oppression of others.

Just as Celaya re-envisions those around her, so Cisneros renovates the image of La Virgen as a figure of connection rather than division, a figure who breaks through binaries and who offers to Celaya the rebozo both as a spiritual symbol of community and creativity and "[as] a metaphor of narrative, family history, and ethnic identity" ("Postmodern Ethnicity," par. 2). Through this symbol Celaya begins to see the intersection of her own narrative, her own historical background, and her own identity in relation to others, and her experience of abjection is what ultimately sets this transition in motion. Heredía argues that this moment provides evidence that

> [Celaya] does not become a victim of love as other weeping women do. Rather, she takes comfort in the spiritual strength of the Virgin of Guadalupe, who symbolizes inner female power, not orthodox institutional Catholicism, a definite US Latina perspective. The realization of woman's spiritual strength aids her in confronting her family, especially Inocencio, the father, about her independent decisions – for deciding to elope without her father's blessings, a "disgrace" for leaving the patriarchal home. (Heredía, par. 18)

In other words, this new image of La Virgen empowers Celaya and inspires her "to confront the abject and so transform the symbolic order" (Parker, par. 35). So Celaya begins to understand in this moment that in order for her to overcome the abjection she experiences, she must embrace the others around her who are similarly marginalized and abjected. The hope of this transformation is what Kristeva refers to when she states,

"Abjection is a resurrection that has gone through death (of the ego). It is an alchemy that transforms death drive into a start of life, of new significance" (*Powers of Horror* 15). By confronting the dominant order, then, both Celaya and Cisneros move from a paradigm of exclusion to one of acceptance, a movement that embodies the space of the border as it embraces those who are marginalized and abjected.

Celaya's most significant demonstration of such an embrace emerges in the novel itself, which not only traces her own identity formation but also preserves the history of The Awful Grandmother. The moment of reconciliation between Celaya and her grandmother actually begins after The Awful Grandmother's death and is sparked by Inocencio's suffering health, which lands him in the hospital. Confronted with the possibility of losing her father, Celaya remembers watching the ambulance take him away and feeling "as if [her] bones had been drawn from [her]. […] Like those mummies in the basement of the Field Museum" (Cisneros 402). Inocencio's sickness causes Celaya to feel weak because it reminds her of her own mortality, and, as Kristeva explains, in order for humans to manage life and maintain subjectivity, they must repress the truth of their finite nature (*Powers of Horror* 15). Even though she tries to protect herself by ignoring this reality, it, like all repressed memories, resurfaces and overwhelms Celaya, causing her to feel like she physically loses the structure that holds her up when she senses she is losing her father, the structure that has mentally and emotionally held her up.

Celaya's worldview is further destabilized at the hospital, where, uncertain of Inocencio's future, Zoila finally discloses to Celaya the secret that Candelaria is

Inocencio's first child. This knowledge deconstructs Celaya's former understanding of her family's history and of the identities of those she so intimately knows. This moment where what had previously been repressed now resurfaces sends Celaya into a daydream where the boundaries blur between her father, herself, and Candelaria: "I think of Candelaria bobbing in the sea of Acapulco. The sun sparkling in little gold flecks all around her. Her face squinting that squint that I make, that Father makes. Her face suddenly Father's face" (Cisneros 404). Although this vision deconstructs the boundaries between these three people, it evokes not abjection but acceptance for Celaya. When she enters her father's hospital room, she explains, "… I wish I could trade hearts, give him mine because it's too terrible to see Father like this, hooked up to tubes and plastic bags and machines, his body ragged and tired and broken …" (Cisneros 405). Faced with the physical limits of her father's body, Celaya wishes to take his place, help him by giving up herself, and this is the resurrection of Kristeva's theory; this is how the "death drive" turns into a life-giving force (*Powers of Horror* 15). Celaya reaches out to her father and accepts him in his physically and emotionally broken condition.

But Inocencio is not the only broken being in his hospital room. Crossing the barrier between life and death, the Awful Grandmother appears to Celaya to fight for possession over Inocencio. She begins to cry as she bemoans her loneliness and the abjection she experiences in the space between life and death, stuck "halfway between here and there […] in the middle of nowhere" (Cisneros 406). Celaya describes,

> … for the first time in my life, I feel sorry for the Grandmother. Her cries are like the yelping of a dog hit by a car, a terrible, ancient sadness, from below the belly.

> I've heard that cry before. I cried like that too, when the ambulance came for Father. A cry like a hiccup, over and over, and you can't do a thing about it. … I want to touch the Grandmother's shoulder, but don't know how. I never hugged her when she was alive, and it's too late to start now. (406)

Once again, because Celaya has experienced the same pain of loneliness and rejection, she empathizes with the Awful Grandmother and is able to show her compassion. Celaya even expresses a desire to embrace the woman she once so despised, and although she does not physically embrace the Awful Grandmother, Celaya does listen to her pleas for forgiveness and representation:

> Celaya, it's so lonely being like this, neither dead nor alive, but somewhere halfway, like an elevator between floors. You have no idea. What a barbarity! I'm in the middle of nowhere. I can't cross over to the other side till I'm forgiven. And who will forgive me with all the knots I've made out of my tangled life? Help me. … You'll tell my story, won't you, Celaya? So that I'll be understood? So that I'll be forgiven? (408)

The Awful Grandmother, who in life abjected others in order to conform to the ideals of dominant culture, now finds herself dependent upon forgiveness from those she condemned. Again, because Celaya has inhabited this abject state of "in-between," she is able to embrace her grandmother not only by listening to her story, but also by retelling it. And by remembering the history of the Awful Grandmother alongside her own history, Celaya accepts her grandmother and invites others to accept her, too, by listening to her story and trying to understand why she lived the way she did. This act of remembering –

or as Parker distinguishes, “re-membering” – “symbolizes healing and regeneration” and ultimately an acceptance and preservation of the “other” within a re-created body – the novel – that never dies (par. 46).

Through Celaya’s narrative excavation in *Caramelo*, Cisneros reveals Chicanas’ abjection within dominant U.S. culture, recovers the histories of the Reyes family, and invites “readers to engage with dense details about the overlooked historical agency of *mexicanos* and Chicanos” (“Postmodern Ethnicity,” par. 26). And by working within yet challenging structures of dominant U.S. culture, Cisneros deconstructs and renovates these spaces to create room for multiple expressions of Chicana identity and creativity.

Chapter 5

CONCLUSION: MAKING SPACE, MAKING SOUL

"[W]e are slowly acquiring the tools to change the disabling images and memories, to replace them with self-affirming ones, to recreate our pasts and alter them …."

- Making Face, Making Soul (*xxvii)*

In her introduction to the anthology *Making Face, Making Soul: Creative and Critical Perspectives by Feminists of Color* (1990), Gloria Anzaldúa outlines the political significance of what she calls "making faces:"

> Among Chicanas/*méxicanas*, *haciendo caras*, "making faces," means to put on a face, express feelings by distorting the face …. For me, *haciendo caras* has the added connotation of making *gestos subversives*, political subversive gestures, the piercing look that questions or challenges…. "Face" is the surface of the body that is the most noticeably inscribed by social structures, marked with instructions on how to be *mujer*, *macho*, working class, Chicana. … However, it is the place – the interface – between the masks that provides the space from which we can thrust out and crack the masks. … [W]e women of color strip off the *máscaras* others have imposed on us, see through the disguises we hide behind and drop our *personas* so that we may become the subjects in our own discourses. We rip out the stitches, expose the multi-layered "inner faces," attempting to confront and oust the internalized oppression embedded in them, and remake anew both inner and outer faces. … "Making faces" is my metaphor for constructing one's identity. ("Introduction: Haciendo Caras" xv-xvi)

For Anzaldúa this subversive creative project of making faces is foundational to the work of Chicanas, whose multi-faceted identities endure abjection from dominant cultures on both sides of the U.S.-Mexico border. But as Anzaldúa suggests, "the interface," or space between – the border area – becomes a site of contestation and confrontation where old identities and cultural expectations are deconstructed to make room for new, honest, and complex expressions of Chicana identity.

We see this very project of deconstruction and renovation at work in contemporary Chicana literature and specifically here in Ana Castillo's *Peel My Love Like an Onion* and Sandra Cisneros's *Caramelo*. On a broad scale, Castillo and Cisneros accomplish this renovation in the publication of their novels. Both writers position themselves within U.S. culture by writing their novels in English, by publishing them in U.S., and by setting their stories predominantly within U.S. borders. But Castillo and Cisneros also challenge and expand the expectations of dominant U.S. novels by experimenting with genre and form and by placing Chicana protagonists at the center of their narratives. By thus contributing to while expanding the categorical expectations of U.S. novels, Castillo and Cisneros carry out the progressive work Anzaldúa refers to. Rather than retreating to an essential Chicana literature, these writers participate in dominant U.S. culture and accept the challenge of creating a space within it for Chicana narratives. At the same time, Castillo's and Cisneros's novels push Chicana literature in new directions as well. Like earlier Chicana novels, both *Peel My Love* and *Caramelo* follow Chicana protagonists; but unlike earlier novels, the journeys of these leading women do not unfold in the barrio or on a farm. Rather, the stories of Carmen – a

flamenco dancer – and Celaya – a young writer – reject essentialism and reflect a diversity of Chicana lived experience. Castillo and Cisneros even challenge current discussions of Chicana feminism to consider not only the roles of gender, race, class, and sexuality in Chicana identity formation within dominant U.S. culture, but also the influences of dominant standards of beauty and physical ability. By introducing new themes and perspectives to contemporary Chicana literature, Castillo and Cisneros conduct subversive political work and "make space" for a future more open to diverse expressions of Chicana creativity and identity.

In addition to this, when we view these narratives through the lenses of Kristeva's theory of abjection and of Saldívar-Hull's feminism on the border, we begin to see how Castillo and Cisneros challenge oppressive structures of dominant U.S. culture by highlighting rather than erasing the many tensions Chicanas face in their identity formation. The pattern of abjection that appears in both novels sheds light not only on the multiple marginalization of Chicanas within U.S. culture, but also on the power of Chicanas' subversive efforts in changing the structures that oppress them. Although, as Grosz observes, Kristeva's discussion of abjection remains focused on the "struggles between powers and resistances on the margins of the symbolic, on the border between the paternal order and a (potentially psychotic) maternal imaginary," her theory offers a helpful paradigm for understanding the deeply-rooted fear and horror that drives cultural marginalization within the U.S. today (154). In combination with Saldívar-Hull's feminism on the border, Kristeva's theory enables readers to see a pattern of dominant society abjecting that which threatens its power and autonomy. As Castillo's and

Cisneros's novels demonstrate, because Chicanas (as mestizas) evade clear definition, they inherently threaten the order upon which dominant U.S. culture defines itself. Saldívar-Hull explains that Chicanas' identity as multi-faceted border residents enables them to "challeng[e] the dualisms that underpin the power structure of the United States" (61). Dominant U.S. culture, then, tries to confine and control Chicanas, yet because Chicanas are part of U.S. culture, they cannot be fully expelled and are therefore marginalized. However, as Kristeva asserts, this marginalization does not testify to any inferiority of the abjected group but rather is a fearful response to the power inherent within the abject to destabilize the signifying paradigms of the dominant order (*Powers of Horror* 4). Chicanas, therefore, have the power to remain within yet renovate the U.S. culture they call home, and this renovation enables them to create a space where they can be free from dominant culture's rejection of them according to their race, class, gender, sexuality, beauty, or physical ability.

Saldívar-Hull explores the nature of this Chicana space in the conclusion of her book *Feminism on the Border*. She explains that one project of Chicana feminism on the border is to recover the lost or untold histories of Chicana border residents (53). She clarifies that because members of the border region are often considered less American to those in the U.S. and less Mexican to those in Mexico, the stories and cultures from the border region go untold and unremembered in either country's historical narratives (53). In addition to this, stories of everyday life from the private sphere also remain absent from dominant historical documentation (53). But in Castillo's and Cisneros's novels we clearly see an effort to recover such narratives, from the geographical border region as

well as from the details of daily life. Furthermore, we see from both novels a celebration of a variety of lived Chicana experience. Castillo and Cisneros do not reproduce essential stories of Chicana identity formation but rather recover the unique histories of individual Chicanas, whose stories might otherwise go unrecorded. This commitment to a diversity of lived experience demonstrates what Saldívar-Hull sees as the future of Chicana feminism on the border; she predicts that border narratives will take a turn toward the testimonio, making room for the unmediated perspectives of those so often denied the space to speak (161). And while Castillo's and Cisneros's novels are not quite such testimonios, they do help pave the way for future explorations and diverse expressions of Chicana identity.

As in Anzaldúa's "making faces" metaphor, Castillo and Cisneros create narratives that "confront and oust the internalized oppression" they experience as Chicanas living along the border of dominant U.S. culture. Saldívar-Hull asserts that this subversive project is indicative of an emerging Chicana feminism on the border, which "disrupt[s] accepted genres as well as traditional topics and subjects of literary representation" (Saldívar-Hull 161). As we have seen in this analysis, Castillo and Cisneros successfully accomplish such a deconstructive project. Through the manipulation of form and content within their novels, these Chicana feminist writers focus their creative energy on renovating oppressive structures and on making room for a range of expressions of Chicana identity. And by leading readers through the abjection, alienation, and eventual reconciliation of their protagonists, Castillo and Cisneros both "facilitate a renegotiation of the symbolic order that creates a space within the [dominant]

realm not only for women but potentially for all those who are denied representation and are repressed by symbolic law" (Parker, par. 1). In other words, these Chicana writers understand that "… abjection has to be confronted for transformation to occur" (par. 49), so they ground their narratives within dominant U.S. culture but draw attention to those along the borders in order to push out the boundaries of contemporary Chicana literature and expand the scope of its representation. In this way, Castillo and Cisneros enact the progressive work of "making space" for Chicana voices. And, "by continuing in the direction of honoring others' way, of sharing knowledge and personal power through writing (art) and activism, of injecting into our cultures new ways, feminist ways, mestiza ways" ("Introduction: Haciendo Caras xxvii), Castillo and Cisneros also make soul.

NOTES

Chapter 1

[i] While in the Spanish language the masculine form (Chicano) is used to refer to a group comprised of both men and women, I choose to use the form Chicana/o to recognize the presence of both men and women. As an extension of this, when I use the term Chicano, I refer to specifically to men; and when I use Chicana, I refer specifically to women.

[ii] Perhaps because the Movement and its creative works so closely correlated, much of Chicana/o literature in the 1960s and 1970s espoused similar themes of political justice, social equality, immigration, and economic hardship. At first these issues remained true to the experiences of many Chicanas/os, but as time progressed, the Chicana/o experience, and therefore the literature, took on new shapes and themes.

[iii] The lens of Manifest Destiny allowed Anglo settlers to see the Americas as a new promised land and enabled them to thereby justify any means in order to realize what they believed was God's ordained plan. Many of the historical accounts that sprang from and reinforced this ideology not only glossed over terrible events that took place in order to claim the land that is currently the United States, but also constructed a narrative that recognized Anglo settlers, not Native Americans, as God's chosen people. Joe Rodríguez observes, "Many Americans of European descent behave as if their actual forefathers landed on Plymouth Rock with the Pilgrims, which is not the case. Such a fantasy heritage confers legitimacy. Yet, only Native Americans are not immigrants"

(269). In other words, the historical narratives passed along by Anglo settlers reinforce the myth that white immigrants belong in the U.S., but immigrants of color do not belong. This longstanding historical, cultural, political, and ideological myth is what many Chicanas/os strove to deconstruct.

[iv] Part of the de-centering of dominant historical discourse involved a movement away from the written word and toward performance arts such as poetry, music, and theater. In addition to a change in artistic media, the content of many artistic expressions focused on reinterpreting history and culture to assert a Chicana/o experience. In opposition to dominant accounts of U.S. history, which favor the public sphere, many Chicana/o artists focused on themes of everyday life in the private sphere; by so doing, Chicanas/os enacted a type of historical and cultural recovery, saving their heritage from being erased by dominant accounts and thus forgotten forever (Lomelí 90-91).

[v] The virgin-whore dichotomy is commonly placed upon many Chicanas by Chicano culture. Essentially, Chicanas are seen as either La Virgen de Guadalupe – pure, holy, and blameless – or as La Malinche – ruined, unclean, and unfaithful. Issues arise, then, when Chicanas once seen as La Virgen do something counter-cultural; they then fall from grace and are treated like La Malinche since there is no identity in-between these (Dicochea 81-82).

[vi] I have chosen to use Shirley Geok-lin Lim's term Anglo/Euro/American feminism in my analysis because, as she suggests, "in the production, circulation, and reception of feminist theory and criticism, these terms overlap in overdetermined ways"

(279). While there are certainly different expressions of AEA feminisms, I use this conflated term to emphasize the fact that many Chicana feminists (arguably unfairly) group these feminisms together due to their shared privileging of gender issues over and above issues of race, class, and sexuality. Furthermore, as I will later discuss, I also use this term to draw attention to the ways in which European feminisms have been misunderstood or reconstructed, as some theorists propose, by Anglo-American feminist scholarship.

[vii] Stuart Hall argues that in cultural studies "one registers the tension between a refusal to close the field, to police it and, at the same time, a determination to stake out some positions within it and argue for them. That is the tension – the dialogic approach to theory – that I want to try to speak to…." (263-64). In terms of Chicana identity, for example, what Hall proposes is an approach that addresses characteristics of Chicanas without essentializing these traits. This approach holds in tension, then, the desire not to rigidly define Chicana identity (to maintain an open definition, as Bruce-Novoa proposes), yet still to distinguish Chicana identity from other non-Chicana identities. Cultural studies thus "holds theoretical and political questions in an ever irresolvable but permanent tension. It constantly allows the one to irritate, bother and disturb the other, without insisting on some final theoretical closure" (Hall 272).

[viii] Gambaudo summarizes, "French feminism is not the sum of its parts, it is not French and it is not feminism" (1). It is, she notes, "a body of comments by Anglo-American writers on a selection of French and non-French writers" (7).

[ix] Although many Chicana writers have successfully created numerous short stories and poems as expressions of their identities and cultures, I have specifically chosen the genre of the novel because of the complexity of its form and origins. Although in the 1960s much of the Movement's literature existed in journals, poetry, and theater, the 1970s through 1990s saw an increase in the genre of the novel, perhaps, as Lomelí suggests, because of "its meditative potential and because it lent greater legitimacy to Chicana/o creativity in established literary circles" (95). Ellen McCracken makes a similar argument:

> While a number of Latinas had published poetry and political essays during the movement, the social and economic marginalization of these genres had led to difficulties in publication and an only minimal dissemination of this writing. The key issues of gender and sexuality around which large movements and national debates developed in the post-1960s decades required that alternative narrative focuses be taken up in the new writing by women. (*New Latina Narrative* 4)

In addition to this necessary shift, I also want to explore how the genre of the novel allows Chicana writers to work within a traditionally dominant (AEA, male, elite) form while simultaneously renovating that form to suit their own purposes – namely, breaking free from strict categories and recovering untold histories.

[x] Kristeva defines the *chora* as "a nonexpressive totality formed by the drives and their stases in a motility that is as full of movement as it is regulated" ("Semiotic and Symbolic" 36). Grosz clarifies that the *chora* is semiotic: "The space of the maternal

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chora is the pre-imaginary space from and in which the drives emanate and circulate" (151). She further expounds, the *chora*

> is a space or receptacle, an undecidably enveloped and enveloping locus from which the subject is both produced and threatened with annihilation. The *chora* defines and structures the limits of the child's body and its ego or identity as a subject. It is the space of the subversion of the subject, the space in which the *death drive*, i.e., the compulsion to repeat, emerges and threatens to engulf the subject, to reduce it to the inertia of non-existence. (151)

[xi] Grosz even calls Kristeva's theory an exploration of the "struggles between powers and resistances on the margins of the symbolic, on the border between the paternal order and a (potentially psychotic) maternal imaginary" (154).

[xii] José David Saldívar argues that the border area has become a distinct culture of its own, emphasizing the deconstruction of Mexican and American binaries (J. Saldívar 25). Because the nature of the border is one of movement and crossing, the region along both sides has become full of interaction and cultural blending. Because of this, Saldívar argues that culture along the border does not reflect an essential or high culture; rather, it is composed of multiple everyday images and routines, traditions of the past (from both sides), and mass media (33-35). As this barrage of images and messages confronts border-dwellers each day, the multiplicity of influences creates a multiplicity of identities (as Juan Bruce-Novoa would say, the possibilities of emerging cultures becomes infinite) and therefore deconstructs cultural norms. Saldívar also asserts that the movement along

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the border area allows for changing subjectivities. For example, women along the border (as opposed to women submissive to their husbands in much of central Mexican culture) can change from being objects to becoming subjects by gaining employment and becoming heads of households (25-27). Location along the border therefore allows one the freedom to "change subjectivities" – to reject prescribed essential identities and to combine cultural history with daily life (35).

[xiii] For example, migrant agricultural work and barrio life once were seen as essential Chicana/o experiences, but Mexican-Americans (often younger generations) who have never encountered these circumstances do not relate to this Chicana/o identity and therefore become excluded from Chicana/o culture on the basis of different experience.

Chapter 2

[xiv] The introduction to the third edition of *Borderlands/La Frontera* gives evidence to the impact of Anzaldúa's work, as ten voices – Norma Alarcón, Julia Alvarez, Paola Bacchetta, Rusty Barcelo, Norma Elia Cantú, Ana Castillo, Sandra Cisneros, T. Jackie Cuevas, Claire Joysmith, and AnaLouise Keating – all speak to "the significance of Gloria's contribution as an artist, as an activist, and as a political and social theorist" ("Gloria Anzaldúa ¡Presente!," par. 1).

[xv] According to Lomelí, Márquez, and Herrera-Sobek, although the Chicana/o Movement began in the 1960s and 1970s with a burst of political and social energy and

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with a growth in literary production, the 1980s showed more of a tapering off of enthusiasm and creativity, which fostered within the Chicana/o community a "sense of self-doubt [and] fears that a revolutionary window of opportunity was fast disappearing" (287). Part of this decline, they argue, can be attributed to the increasingly varied experiences of Chicanas/os in the United States. Some Chicanas/os from newer generations or from locations more influenced by U.S. culture, who felt more intensely the pull between Mexican and U.S. identification, began to exercise their voices and challenge notions of essential identity. As Lomelí, Márquez, and Herrera-Sobek note, "Writing Chicano works only for Chicanos became a burden to some because the motivation to break boundaries and expand the Chicano presence seemed a loftier goal" (288). This challenge, they argue, brought about not only a new understanding of ethnicity - not "as static and essentialist in nature," but as "hybrid," "fluid," and "dynamic" (286) – but also "a new group of writers," who "viewed culture as a fluid experience than a prescribed form of defining worldview" (288). Lomelí, Márquez, and Herrera-Sobek continue,

> Prominent in this new group were a sizable number of Chicana writers. The year 1985 marks the date of the rise of what we term the "Contemporary Chicana Generation[,]" [… a group] of well-trained and inspired Chicana writers who came together more by circumstance than by design. Their success became so well documented that eventually the 1980s became known as the "Decade of the Chicana." […] As a group, their focus on feminist and gender issues spawned a

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renaissance of literary production. This production focused on the reconceptualization, re-presentation, and recovery of women's voices. Their new aesthetics underscored a woman's worldview. Without a doubt, the convergence of such a high-powered group sparked a new synthesis with respect to how Chicano culture came to define itself. These writers added experiential depth, creative vigor, and international visibility to the literature" (290-291).

I propose that in the same way that the "new aesthetics" of these Chicana writers presented a "woman's worldview" in the Chicano Movement, these aesthetics also presented to European and Anglo-American feminist movements a perspective that emphasized the role of race, class, and sexuality in identity formation. For these contributions, Lomelí, Márquez, and Herrera-Sobek suggest that "[t]his group [-including Helena María Viramontes, Sandra Cisneros, Denise Chávez, Cherríe Moraga, Gloria Anzaldúa, Mary Helen Ponce, and Ana Castillo, among others (290) -] has exerted a great deal of influence since then and promises to continue to do so into the twenty-first century" (288).

[xvi] For example, historically, Chicanas/os emerged as a people group after the 1848 Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo: "Overnight, the people residing in what has become the southwestern United States had a new government, which used a different language and a different culture and had the victor's power over them" (Hurtado140). And from this beginning, dominant U.S. culture has held these differences against Chicanos/as as "proof" that they are not truly "American." Their histories have been all but erased from

dominant narratives of U.S. history, and Chicanas are "othered" for their skin color, class, gender, and sexuality. McCracken argues in *New Latina Narrative* that dominant U.S. publishing houses have even constructed "minority commodities" from Chicana literature in order to fetishize Chicanas as exotic while at the same time trying to assimilate them into dominant culture (11-39). So even now as Chicana literature garners more mainstream attention, Chicanas still resist pressures of assimilation into dominant U.S. culture.

[xvii] Like emancipationists, Alarcón is not afraid to critique European and Anglo-American feminists for their failure to "explor[e] how our understanding of gender relations, self, and theory are partially constituted in and through experiences of living in a culture in which asymmetric race relations are a central organizing principle of society" (Jane Flax qtd. in Alarcón 357). She notices that although the works of women of color are included in more and more course syllabi (in an effort to be multi-cultural), their voices are not really being heard; instead, "'material about minority women' [is being 'tacked on'] without any note of its significance for feminist knowledge" (Alarcón 359). Such educators seek to assist Chicanas and women of color, but, as Uttal notes, the issue remains that "many have not altered their own core concerns to see fully either the relevance of the dynamics of race, class and gender to their own work or how they might benefit from incorporating varied perspectives into their own work" (Uttal 43). In other words, Anglo-American feminists remain hesitant to change "the theoretical underpinnings of [their work]" (Pesquera and de la Torre 4). And therefore, "in current

European and Anglo-American feminist usage, the concepts of ‘race, class and gender’ are applied only to ‘women of color’” (Uttal 43).

[xviii] This historical recovery echoes postcolonialism’s attempts “to rethink history from the perspective of the subaltern” (Prakash 1478).

[xix] Saldívar-Hull maintains that considering historical and political context is essential to effective and thorough critical theory. She states, “While some Chicana literary critics, such as Norma Alarcón, employ French feminist theory and selectively employ theories that help tease out the complexities of Chicana texts, they never ignore historical and material specificity” (37-38).

[xx] In her Kristevan analysis of Michéle Roberts’s novel *Daughters of the House*, Parker states that “[w]hether or not Roberts has read Kristeva is irrelevant, for her text shows a familiarity with Kristeva in the same way that Terry Eagleton argues that Shakespeare’s plays suggest that the Bard was familiar with Hegel, Marx, Nietzche, Freud, Wittgenstein, and Derrida” (Parker, par. 48). Essentially, historical record is not all-telling; history may not document that an author has read a particular theory, but that does not necessarily mean that author had no familiarity with similar ideas. I find this clarification significant in my own work because although Castillo and Cisneros do not mention outright Kristeva’s theory of abjection, both writers exhibit a familiarity with various feminist and non-Chicana theoretical perspectives. For example, in her collection of critical essays, *Massacre of the Dreamers*, Castillo states, “It stands to reason that because people of color in the U.S. are forced to succumb to white dominant society’s

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rules, are educated in Western culture, and read the literature that gives white dominant society's viewpoint we understand quite a bit about the world we live in, in addition to our own unrecognized one. Our survival depends on it" (5). In addition to this, she also cites French feminist Simone de Beauvior in the epigraph of her novel *Peel My Love Like an Onion*. And Cisneros extends Virginia Woolf's concept of "a room of one's own" when she "suggests that […] the prerequisite for a woman to be able to write [is]: 'Not a flat. Not an apartment in back. Not a man's house. Not a daddy's. A house all my own … Only a house quiet as snow, a space for myself to go, clean as paper before the poem'" ("Postmodern Ethnicity," par. 8). Clearly, both writers engage European feminisms, and their novels demonstrate that they are acquainted with other theorists, so, as Parker suggests, whether or not they have read *Powers of Horror* is perhaps not the most important connection.

[xxi] Kristeva also offers this image of abjection:

> In the dark halls of the museum that is now what remains of Auschwitz, I see a heap of children's shoes, or something like that, something I have already seen elsewhere, under a Christmas tree, for instance, dolls, I believe. The abjection of Nazi crime reaches its apex when death, which, in any case, kills me, interferes with what, in my living universe, is supposed to save me from death: childhood, science, among other things. (*Powers of Horror* 4)

For Kristeva, the image of the children's shoes comes to symbolize something quite different from that which she expects; instead of symbolizing youth and innocence, they

symbolize death, destruction, and evil. The horror of which these shoes become reminders is unbearable, and as a coping mechanism this horror is repressed and abjected in order for life to continue (Parker, par. 3).

[xxii] Parker explains, "Facing the abject enables a demystification of power and thus a challenge to authority" (par. 49).

[xxiii] As established earlier in this chapter and in the introduction, while many Chicana theorists argue for consideration of race, class, and sexuality in addition to gender, Castillo and Cisneros push the envelope a bit further. In their novels not only do they address Chicanas' abjection in these common areas, but also they address dominant culture's abjection of non-Chicanas who fit this description as well as Chicanas who are multiply abjected for other reasons. For example, in *Peel My Love* and *Caramelo* Carmen and Celaya are abjected for not fitting into dominant U.S. culture's aesthetic ideals, and Carmen is further abjected for because of her disability.

Chapter 3

[xxiv] As part of the Chicana literary boom in the mid-1980s, Ana Castillo was and continues to be a leader in the movement for restoring Chicana voices, and one of the ways in which she conducts her subversive work is through "mix[ing] art forms freely to break down barriers or simply blend divergent forms by contradicting, undermining, or interrogating otherwise 'straightjacket' limitations" of the dominant culture (Lomelí, Márquez, and Herrera-Sobek 291-92). Castillo's 1986 novel *The Mixquihuala Letters* and

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her 1993 novel *So Far from God* demonstrate such breaking down of barriers through experimentation with form and fantasy. For example, *Mixquihuala*, written in "epistolary form" (Martínez, par. 11), mimics Julio Cortázar's *Rayuela* (1963) in its "polyvalency and resist[ance of] the closure of dominant narrative" (par. 10). In essence, Castillo invites her reader to move about in the text, reading the letters in any desired order and producing any number of narrative pathways. In a similar way, in *So Far from God* Castillo experiments with narrative structure, but this time by interweaving history and fantasy, creating a mystical reality akin to Gabriel García Márquez's magical novel *One Hundred Years of Solitude* (1967). Therefore, Castillo challenges dominant accounts of history that are passed along as absolute truth yet neglect the experiences of so many people. However, even though these novels reflect postmodern characteristics which challenge the values of dominant U.S. culture, Castillo still utilizes some dominant structures. For example, even though Cortázar's narrative structure reflects postmodernist traits of multiplicity and instability, Castillo, mimicking his structure, chooses to carry out her subversive work from within a masculine (Latino), and thus dominant, form. Likewise, even though García Márquez's narrative structure problematizes dominant historical truth by juxtaposing realism and myth, Castillo, following this structure, challenges dominant history's exclusion not only of Latinos but also of women. While this is a progressive move, Castillo still functions within dominant structures and accomplishes her subversive work from within.

[xxv] Commonly in Chicana/o literature protagonists who feel alone, isolated, or out of place in U.S. culture take a sort of pilgrimage to the Chicana/o homeland – to Aztlán, or the region of the Southwest U.S. and northwest Mexico. Although in *Peel My Love* Castillo does not explicitly state that the desert where Carmen escapes is in the Southwest U.S., she leaves this open as a possibility. Carmen states that "for two long years" she "swe[pt] the tumbleweed and dust off the patio" and lived alongside "Spanish Catholic artistas" (*Peel My Love* 5). While this could possibly refer to a desert in Spain, Carmen later states, "Agustín was living in Cádiz, as far as I knew, … which may as well have been Jupiter as far as I was concerned. To me Spain was a myth anyway" (167-68). Because to Carmen Spain is so distant, her retreat into the desert likely refers to the Aztlán region.

[xxvi] We see in this passage as well how the various facets of Carmen's identity are intertwined; her family's economic status has influence over Carmen's access to medical care, which in turn affects her physical ability.

[xxvii] For Lacan and Kristeva the mirror stage precedes "the subject's acquisition of a speaking position" (Grosz 155). In order to become a subject, the child must recognize the reflection in a mirror as an image of him- or herself. Without this initial self-recognition, Grosz explains, "no experience can be represented by a sign or by anything other than itself," and therefore the child cannot adopt the use of language – a system rooted in signification (155). So "[t]he mirror stage provides the conditions for the child's

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detachment from its lived experience” and therefore enables the child’s entry into the (symbolic) social order (155).

DuBois’s “double consciousness” is not unlike the mirror stage. He explains it as a product of the “American world, — a world which yields [the subject] no true self-consciousness, but only lets him see himself through the revelation of the other world” (12). So instead of seeing himself in a mirror, the subject sees himself only as the dominant “American world” reflects him. This subject, DuBois continues to explain, “ever feels his two-ness,—an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder” (12). This subject recognizes that his reflection is not simply an American, but an always-marked American, an American and something different, a hyphenated American. And this subject must constantly hold in tension the racially different image of himself reflected by the dominant “American world” and the image of himself revealed by his lived experience as an American.

[xxviii] Castillo here draws attention to the group identifiers that Carmen’s mother, Amá, uses. While many of the women may in fact be “chinas and indias,” Castillo uses this phrase to show that cultural ignorance is not only present in dominant U.S. culture but in any culture.

[xxix] Although Castillo does not specify that Carmen travels to the Southwest U.S., her retreat nonetheless becomes a symbolic return to Aztlán. But the fact that Carmen does not find the healing, restoration, and sense of belonging she had hoped for, she

returns home to Chicago, to dominant U.S. culture and to her friends and family who inhabit the city, in order to assert her true, whole identity.

Saldívar-Hull states that although "Anzaldúa's reclamation of Aztec deities and traditions begins a reformulation of Aztlán from a male nation-state to a feminist site of resistance" (60-61), her claim to this 'origin' is a strategic move that aligns her, a lesbian feminist, with the undeniably homophobic, often misogynist nationalist Chicano movement. Her dialectical position as a feminist on the border, however, allows her to move between Chicano nationalism and socialist feminism" (64). Despite this, Carmen does not find in the desert the connection she looks for. Like Carmen, Castillo's own experience does not conform to Chicanas/os from the Southwest U.S.:

> While I descend from Mexic Amerindian lineage, the fact that I was born and raised in the United States, a descendent of one and two generations of migrants from Mexico, and was raised in the inner city of Chicago (Place of Wild Onions), means that I have been completely alienated from my indigenous connection to the Americas. (*Massacre* 7)

And like Castillo, Carmen's home is in the city.

[xxx] Another example of Carmen's acceptance of herself occurs when she signs CDs "at a chain music store," a quintessential site of mainstream U.S. cultural production. Carmen's placement in this store demonstrates not only that her music is growing in popularity within the dominant culture, but also that as her popularity

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increases, the dominant culture attempts to contain and control her and her music through efforts of assimilation.

In addition to this, the chain store has difficulty labeling the type of music on the CD: “We’re listed under Latin and International and World and Pop/Reggae. Although I’m not sure why, we’re even under Musicals. It won’t help clarify things if I say I’m from Chicago” (*Peel My Love* 188). Castillo draws the reader’s attention to the binary structures that rule U.S. culture and to the discomfort that ensues when these structures are found insufficient. In this case, the predicament is how to classify a new style of music (an already difficult medium to describe) that is flamenco with “a mixture of Middle Eastern with a jazz flair to it” (181), sung by a gypsy-trained Chicana from Chicago. While the label “Latin” is partly true, as the musicians themselves come from Latin backgrounds, the label “International” includes the Middle Eastern and gypsy influences of the music itself, and yet the musicians are from the United States, so in that sense, “International” does not fit. By so problematizing the act of labeling – which includes only as it excludes - Castillo draws the reader’s attention to the instability of such categories. And, according to Kristeva, revealing the instability of these dominant structures simultaneously exposes the power of that which cannot be held back, that which pushes back: the abject (*Powers of Horror* 13). In other words, although mainstream U.S. culture tries to categorize Carmen and her music, it comes up short, thus uncovering the true revolutionary nature of the mestiza. Carmen, however, does not seem bothered by this. She doesn’t bemoan the fact that no one gets her in the “right” category.

She understands that her identity is complex, but she realizes that adding yet another category is not the solution; that is, her response to the confusion created by the dominant culture's binary structures is not to add a "Chicago Chicana Middle-eastern flamenco" musical label. Instead, she refuses the temptation to join in the practices of exclusion and definition inherent in the very structures of the dominant culture and allows her mestiza qualities to challenge clear categories of thinking, reasoning, and forming identity. Instead, she seems content to be un-categorize-able. Rather than succumb to the ways of dominant society, Carmen lets it all go: "There's very little lately that can get to me" (*Peel My Love* 186).

[xxxi] In addition to skin color, Candelaria is also abjected because of her low social status in the working class, which hinders her from practicing the same prescribed standards of cleanliness as the elite. For example, Celaya's cousin Antonieta calls Candelaria "dirty" because "[s]he doesn't even wear underwear," and because Candelaria was known to "squat down behind the laundry room and pee. Just like a dog" (Cisneros 36). Antonieta does not consider that Candelaria may be unable to afford underwear or that she may not have access to traditional bathrooms; instead, she recognizes that Candelaria is different, and she rejects and dehumanizes her for this. By highlighting Antonieta's lack of awareness of Candelaria's social and economic limitations, Cisneros draws attention to the divisive nature of the assumptions and practices that dominant culture takes for granted as standard, accessible, and acceptable.

Chapter 4

[xxxii] Parker explains that "[b]ecause the functioning of the symbolic order depends on distinct divisions and clear categories, the symbolic subject must disavow whatever threatens to blur boundaries" (par. 3).

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