THE BORDERLANDS:
LIVING BETWEEN ARCHETYPES IN YOUNG ADULT CHICANA LITERATURE

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The undersigned, appointed by the dean of the Graduate School, have examined the thesis entitled

“THE BORDERLANDS: LIVING BETWEEN ARCHETYPES IN YOUNG ADULT CHICANA LITERATURE”

presented by Suzanne Morlock

a candidate for the degree of Master of Art

and hereby certify that, in their opinion, it is worthy of acceptance.

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I want to dedicate this project to my loving husband. The man who picks me up when I fall, who helps me along when I waver, and who cheers the loudest when I succeed. His support cannot be quantified. His unquestioning faith in my abilities and countless pep talks are what gave me the motivation to power through and finish strong. This achievement is as much his as it is mine.
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INTRODUCTION

*It started before I was born, before my mother was born, and before her mother was born. We were groomed to be caretakers, to carry the world on our shoulders without swaying ... We were an impossible fusion of Wonder Woman’s strength and La Virgen Maria’s sanctity and sacrifice*

-Erica González Martínez

It was 1987 when Gloria Anzaldúa published *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza*. With the publication of this groundbreaking text, she revolutionized and transformed academe, creating a space for a feminist discourse that had previously been overlooked: Chicana Studies. Heretofore, any and all discourse pertaining to Chicano/a studies had been centered on the male Chicano’s idea of “the homeland,” presented as “the ideal in two formative Chicano texts: Corky Gonzales’s *Yo Soy Joaquín* (I am Joaquín) and Alurista’s *El Plan Espiritual de Aztlán* (both written in the 1960s)” (Cook 26). Anzaldúa reconfigured this idea by creating a female-centric space she termed the *borderlands*. She states, “Borders are set up to define the places that are safe and unsafe, to distinguish us from them … A borderland is a vague and undetermined place created by the emotional residue of an unnatural boundary” (25). Thus, the borderlands are not exclusively a geographical location but “a state of being and consciousness, continually being redefined” (Perales 163). Continuing this idea, Anzaldúa states:

> As a *mestiza*, I have no country, my homeland cast me out; yet all countries are mine because I’m every woman’s sister or potential lover … I am cultureless because, as a feminist, I challenge the collective cultural/religious male-derived beliefs of Indo-Hispanics and Anglos; yet I

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1 A mestizo/a is “person of mixed blood, specifically a person of mixed European and American Indian ancestry” (m-w.com).
am cultured because I am participating in the creation of yet another
culture, a new story to explain the world and our participation in it.

(Anzaldúa 103)

In her article celebrating *Borderlands/La Frontera*’s 25th Anniversary, Monica Perales
asserts, “Chicana/o scholarship has long argued for the centrality of gender, proposing a
radical re-imagining of the historical enterprise that privilege’s women’s voices and
experiences” (165). Anzaldúa’s creation of this new borderland culture accomplished just
that. Its publication resulted in a new Chicana feminism and a number of Chicana novels
that feature strong, independent female protagonists who subvert culturally sanctioned
norms that require female passivity. These Chicana writers and protagonists alike blur the
lines (or borders) between male and female agency/ability.

Similarly, as seen in both Viramontes’s and Cisneros’s *Entwicklungsroman* novels, female adolescence may also be viewed as “a state of being and consciousness, continually being redefined” (Perales 163). Both Viramontes’s Estrella and Cisneros’s Esperanza, alike become burdened with new feelings of sexual excitement, insecurity, inhibition, and a heaping dose of self-consciousness. Relationships that would previously have been platonic or professional are defined or redefined as romantic as both girls make their way through adolescence. Thus, the liminal space between girlhood and womanhood, like the geographic borderland, becomes a “vague and undetermined space.”

In addition to the borderlands of adolescence and Chicana literature, there is also the issue of Young Adult (YA) literature. Christi Cook, in her study of the intersections

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*Entwicklungsroman* is a subgenre of the *bildungsroman*. A novel of personal growth, but one that takes place over a truncated period of time. (Cook 78)
of Anglo and Chicana YA literature, states, “Young adult literature is a marginalized, oft-contested and sometimes suspect genre existing on the borderlands of the canon of adult literature” (2). Essentially, YA literature is not taken seriously within the canon. However, those who underestimate it fail to realize the significant impact it can have on adolescent development—particularly in young teenage girls. Hence, as Cook asserts, “it is important to analyze the messages these teen girls could receive from popular literature” (6).

Thus, there are three degrees of liminality at work within this project: Borderland Theory, female adolescence, and YA’s placement in the canon. The two texts I have chosen for this study—Helena María Viramontes’s *Under the Feet of Jesus* and Sandra Cisneros’s *The House on Mango Street*—have indeed been classified within the borderlands of the canon as both YA and adult literature and continue to be taught in both high schools and universities alike (Cook 4). I have chosen these novels because they have both achieved critical and commercial success and have thus been consumed by both Chicana readers and non-Chicana readers, like myself.

What I am concerned with is how women writers and their characters resist the status quo—particularly when it is so culturally ingrained in them from birth onwards not to. As González Martínez states in the epigraph, “It started before I was born, before my mother was born, and before her mother was born.” What she is referring to is not only the history of Mexico’s colonization, a trauma that is carried on through generations of *Mestizaje*, but also the cultural conditioning that stems from that colonization and from Mesoamerican Catholicism, a foundation of Chicano culture, which pigeonholes Chicanas into essentially two stringent female archetypes: *La Virgen de Guadalupe* and
La Malinche. I will explore each of these archetypes in depth within their respective chapters, but to give an overview, La Virgen de Guadalupe and La Malinche are the Mothers of Mexico. La Virgen is the good mother; La Malinche is the terrible mother.

As Amy Kaminsky notes, “Sexuality remains the constant source of women’s subordination” (qtd in Blake 134). Not surprisingly then, both female archetypes are “necessarily tied up with virginity, marriage, and motherhood” (Blake 125). Pilar Melero in Mythological Constructions of Mexican Femininity observes that, “Historically, feminism has cast motherhood under the light of patriarchy, and with reason, for it can be a strategic institutional tool for the oppression of women in male-controlled societies” (6). However, Latina feminism does not view motherhood this way. Motherhood is central to their feminism and femininity. While “White” feminism typically eschews the maternal role and fights for gender equality, Latina feminism fights for equal rights while observing the differences between men and women. Woman can have children; it is a power bestowed only on women. Thus it is central to their feminist identity. However, that motherhood becomes oppressive when Chicanas are forced into a good mother/terrible mother paradigm.

It is my interest to see not only what requires adherence to this paradigm but how women are challenging it, overcoming “the restrictions imposed by their gendered condition as Other” (Melero 21). The connection between Chicana YA literature and Mesoamerican Catholicism that I find fascinating pertains to the examples young girls are given as models for womanhood when they lack both fore- and hindsight. They have to navigate the waters of their adolescence, searching for autonomy while internalizing cultural messages of oppression and dependence.
Anzaldúa asserts that “Culture (read males) professes to protect women. Actually it keeps women in rigidly defined roles” (39). In Chicana culture and, more specifically, Mesoamerican Catholicism, those roles are bifurcated between the La Virgen de Guadalupe and La Malinche dichotomy. These two narrow roles decidedly inhibit female sexuality and occlude female subjectivity. Cisneros herself notes of these dichotomies, “Certainly that black-white issue, good-bad, it’s very prevalent in my work and in other Latinas. We’re raised with a Mexican culture that has two roles: La Malinche y La Virgen de Guadalupe. And you know that’s a hard way to go, one or the other, there’s no in-betweens” (qtd in Petty 119). Petty notes, “In response to this dilemma, Cisneros claims that she and other Chicana women must learn the art of ‘revising’ themselves by learning to ‘accept [their] culture, but not without adapting [themselves] as women” (Petty 123). Throughout this paper, I will argue that Viramontes’s Under the Feet of Jesus and Cisneros’s The House on Mango Street are reflective of the two female archetypes, La Virgen de Guadalupe and La Malinche, respectively. Through close reading and analysis, I plan to show that though the language in both novels reinforces these archetypes, largely through euphemism or dysphemism, the actions of characters subvert them. This largely happens by way of sexual experience.

In Chapter One, I deal exclusively with Viramontes’s Under the Feet of Jesus and the La Virgen de Guadalupe archetype. Within this chapter, I give a brief overview of La Virgen de Guadalupe culture in order to situate the reader in the culture through which I am writing. After establishing the archetype and culture, I go on to challenge Christi Cook’s interpretation of the novel, especially pertaining to the scene in which Estrella (the young protagonist) loses her virginity and offer my own interpretation. In her
dissertation, Cook states, “The Chicano movement of the 1960s catalyzed a vast wealth of protest literature by writers who embraced some of the indigenous aspects of Mexican culture as they fought against their marginalization in the U.S. Therefore, Chicano/a young adult literature is doubly in shadow as compared to traditionally canonical literature” (Cook 5). She goes on to assert that Viramontes and other Chicana authors are writing “protest literature” by recasting La Virgen and La Malinche figures in a more positive light. However, her interpretation overlooks some of the more subtle protest elements that I plan on analyzing in order to truly categorize Viramontes’s novel as “protest literature.” Using Eliecer Crespo Fernández’s models of euphemism and dysphemism, I break down the actual euphemisms/dysphemisms used in the novel and make the argument that the figurative sexual language is not indicative of shame but of the double standards set for men and women within the culture. In addition to analyzing the figurative language, I also close read the barn (a key image in the novel) as a metaphor, which brings new light to particular scenes, especially pertaining to female sexuality.

In Chapter Two, I will look at Cisneros’s The House on Mango Street and the La Malinche archetype. Similar to Chapter One, I begin by giving a brief overview of who La Malinche is as a historical figure to situate her in a cultural context. Additionally, I do a character analysis of some of the women of the barrio to show how their interactions with Esperanza mold her ideas of womanhood and lead her onto the path of being one of

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3 Christi Cook’s dissertation, One High Heel On Each Side of the Border: A Closer Look at Gender and Sexuality in Chicana and Anglo Young Adult Literature, has yet to be published. However, despite not been a peer-reviewed source, her scholarship is crucial to include because she is one of the first to look at the intersections of Chicana literature and YA literature. Though I disagree with her on a number of her points, many of her readings inform my own within this study.
the neighborhood *malinches*, which is ultimately what leads her to reject that archetype. I then go on to compare and contrast Esperanza and Estrella. Through examining their environments, their models for womanhood, and their sexual experience, I argue that they are each other’s antithesis yet paradoxically, by individually rejecting their respective models for womanhood, they end their narratives with the same sense of freedom. Though both Esperanza and Estrella ultimately reject their female archetypes via sexual experience, in this chapter, I make the argument that it is the *rejection* of sexuality that ultimately empowers Esperanza to subvert female passivity as opposed to an embracing of it.

Finally, in Chapter Three, I bring the two protagonists together for some additional comparisons and contrasts. I begin by demonstrating all the ways in which these female characters defy the dichotomies placed before them, instead opting to live in the “in-between.” Then, using Britton’s theory of the “spectator stance,” I extend Katherine Crawford-Garret’s spectator argument in Cisneros’s *The House on Mango Street*, to show how its inverse—the “participant stance”—also applies in Viramontes by analyzing what is called “embedded” and “displaced” speech. I make the argument that using these stances to their advantage leads to both Estrella’s and Esperanza’s ultimate rejection of their female archetype and self-empowerment.

Ultimately, I argue that the female adolescent protagonists of these works are exemplars of Anzaldúa’s “New Mestiza”—despite Cisneros’s novel being written three years before Anzaldúa’s *Borderlands/La Frontera*. This is an important thing to note as it shows that we can use Borderlands Theory to look at texts from different eras to view how female subjectivity is shaped. For instance, in reading *The House on Mango Street*
through Anzaldúa’s lens of hybridity, Esperanza, previously discussed as a victim becomes newly empowered through embracing a feminine/masculine stance of hybridity. It is through Estrella’s and Esperanza’s observations of and experiences with their female “roles” they ultimately decide to “revise themselves.”
CHAPTER ONE:

La Virgen de Guadalupe and Viramontes’ Under the Feet of Jesus

Both La Virgen and La Malinche have their roots in colonialism. Pilar Melero in Mythological Constructions of Mexican Femininity gives a brief overview of La Virgen’s historical significance to Mexico: “Femininity in Mexican culture is rooted in the cult to the mother, the Virgen of Guadalupe. The Virgin has been a national symbol of motherhood since colonial times, not only in Mexico City, where she is said to have appeared in 1531, but also in most of the country” (38). She goes on to recount La Virgen’s involvement in the Mexican War of Independence, in which Mexico fought Spain over a period of eleven years, from 1810-1821. It is said that “Miguel Hidalgo’s call to arms came wrapped in her image, turned into a flag, and in her name” (38). He roused the masses by invoking her name shouting “‘Viva la Virgen de Guadalupe y muera el mal gobierno’ (Long live the Virgin of Guadalupe. Death to bad government!)” (Melero 38). She continues, “It is not surprising, then, that when the Mexican nation attempted to reformulate its identity, during and immediately after the Mexican Revolution, as Rivas Mercado noted in the 1920s, the model to emulate for women was that of the Virgin (324)” (Melero 38). Thus, La Virgen de Guadalupe becomes the “loving mother of all Mexicans” (Melero 4) and the ideal model for motherhood. Using this model, I analyze Helena María Viramontes’s novel Under the Feet of Jesus in order to demonstrate how the novel’s young protagonist rebels against it, which sets up my ultimate argument that through Anzaldúa’s Borderlands Theory, we can view Estrella as one of the “New Mestiza.”
Helena Viramontes’s *Under the Feet of Jesus* is a novel that explores the nuances of border culture and exposes the hard life of the migrant worker. Families are constantly disoriented and relocated, children are required to work as though they are adults, and workers constantly live in shadow of poverty and racism. Life is a hardship. Estrella is a thirteen-year-old who travels and works with her family as a California migrant worker. The novel follows Estrella as she encounters her first romantic experiences and begins to explore the “borderlands” of her burgeoning womanhood and sexuality—that is, the liminal space between adolescence and adulthood. Throughout the novel, we see her reluctance to adhere to her predestined archetype, instead opting to carve out her own path somewhere in between the two.

As mentioned earlier female sexuality and empowerment in Chicana literature is a new “undetermined borderland” that is beginning to be explored. Heretofore, the traditional Chicana/o story was one that essentially mirrored the Chicano culture—the male protagonist “has adventures, suffers defeats, and learns through sexual experience—all to attain his goal of maturity. In the end, he is a stronger, smarter being, able to reap the rewards of his attainment” (Martinez 133). However, within the last twenty years or so, many Chicana writers are beginning to break that mold and feature explicit and empowering depictions of female sexuality.

Elizabeth Coonrod Martinez explores this virgin territory (pun intended) in her essay “Crossing Gender Borders: Sexual Relations and Chicana Artistic Identity.” Funnily enough, though she does not analyze it, she uses Cisneros’s *The House on Mango Street* to introduce her topic—female agency in Chicana literature. In her study,
she analyzes four works by Chicana writers⁴ that feature strong, empowered female protagonists and “sexual initiative as subjectivity” (132)—meaning sexual agency is not necessarily determined by one’s gender. Females can be just as sexually liberated, and for the female characters in study, sexually aggressive as males. Through my analysis and interpretation of Viramontes’s *Under the Feet of Jesus*, I will show how Estrella is, like the characters of Martinez’s study, a “strong, empowered female” who claims her own sexuality “while remaining true to her heritage” (Martínez 133).

Viramontes finds herself in a unique position in that she is writing through both of the aforementioned “borderlands”—that of female sexuality and empowerment and of female adolescence—two things that have previously been considered mutually exclusive. As the title of Michelle Fine’s study suggests, “Sexuality, Schooling, and Adolescent Females: The Missing Discourse of Desire,” there seems to be a particular way we talk about adolescent female sexuality that omits any discussion of actual desire. While boys are educated on wet dreams, erections, and orgasm, females are given, according to Fine, three discourses on sexuality: Sexuality as *violence*, Sexuality as *victimization*, and Sexuality as *individual morality*. The adolescent females are represented simply as “actual or potential victims of male desire” (32)—not as subjects capable of desire themselves. She states, “The naming of desire, pleasure, or sexual entitlement, particularly for females, barely exists … When spoken, it is tagged with reminders of ‘consequences’—emotional, physical, moral, reproductive, and/or financial” (33). She determines that to continue in this manner of discourse would mean “there is little possibility of their developing a critique of gender or sexual arrangements” (31). In

⁴ Estela Portillo-Trambley’s *Trini*; Alma Villanueva’s “Ripening”; Erlinda Gonzales-Berry’s *Paletitas de Guayaba* (*Guava Popsicles*); and Ann Castillo’s *So Far from God*
addition to this, Hurtado and Sinha’s study, which uses Fine’s study as the frame, focuses on Chicanas and Chicanos. They note that the double standard for men and women exist regardless of race or ethnicity but that “Chicano families justified the enforcement of their version of [the double standard] by referring to culturally sanctioned constructions of womanhood as dictated by Mexican Catholic notions of ‘purity’ and embodied in La Virgen de Guadalupe” (36).

By taking full control of her body and exploring her desire, Estrella embodies herself as “subject.” She has a sexual experience that is not a product of violence, victimization, and without any shame attached to the experience. To bring back Martínez’s study, she observes, “In each of these stories, the Chicana characters have had to claim a sexuality or sexual gratification traditionally denied them and considered whorish, lacking in dignity and self-control while remaining true to their heritage and continuing to establish a Chicana identity” (133). It can be argued that Estrella is connected to the women of Martinez’s study in that she is perhaps their younger selves, discovering her sexuality and learning to take control. Conversely, however, Martinez’s authors use overt sexual language and experience whereas Estrella’s is more subtle, perhaps due to her adolescence and perhaps more due to the stigma and double standards with which young girls are faced. Her decision of when and how she should lose her virginity demonstrates the link between sexual initiative and personal agency. However, Estrella differs from those of Martinez’s study in that Estrella’s sexual feelings and encounters are expressed in extremely euphemistic language. While evocative, nothing is ever explicitly articulated. Estrella is young and part of a culture that discourages sex education. As a result, she is never given the language to understand her burgeoning
sexuality and thus her experiences are explained through metaphor and simile. It cannot be explicitly stated, only related to and referred through something more abstract.

Viramontes, through Estrella, creates a tension between female adolescent sexuality and the culturally sanctioned suppression of it in the way she depicts and describes Estrella’s experiences, respectively. As Estrella develops into a sexual being, she finds with it other instances of empowerment that intimately connect pleasure and desire with self-sovereignty. Estrella is just beginning to discover the first glimpses of sexual attraction and experience but with the added burden of *marianismo* and the culture of *La Virgen de Guadalupe* (two concepts I will be exploring in this chapter). She thus serves as a perfect case study for my exploration of this new frontier of Chicana writing that includes an exploration of female adolescence.

Though I have already established *La Virgen* as the mythic figure, in order to fully understand the importance in some of Estrella’s (and by extension, Viramontes’s) decisions, it is important to also establish the culture—that is, *La Virgen de Guadalupe* and *marianismo* culture. On the culture of *La Virgen de Guadalupe*, Debra Blake in *Chicana Sexuality and Gender* explains: “Representing a gendered position, La Virgen de Guadalupe is indeed complex and contradictory. Her symbolic meaning oscillates among characteristics of strength, liberation, collective identity, and passivity, idealized purity, and confinement” (114). Thus, when one’s intercessor is defined by her virginity, it can produce in women a conflict of sexual expression and female subjectivity. She continues of this conflict: “For a conviction in La Virgen—who gave birth to the son of God—as a

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5 *Marianismo* is the female answer to *machismo*. While *machismo* is defined as male chauvinism and pride, *marianismo* is essentially defined as devotion to and embodiment of the Virgin Mary through sacrifice.
virgin relies on acceptance of the doctrine of the Immaculate Conception. More profanely, that means conception without copulation, implying that sex is a debased mortal activity with its attendant bodily expulsions—heat, sweat, blood, vaginal fluid, semen—that entail from physical contact between man and woman” (115-116, second emphasis mine).

Being both a mother and a virgin negates Mary as a sexual being and maintains her pristine image (Blake 115). The contradiction then comes when one is supposed to value both virginity and motherhood without ever being recognized as a sexual being. To further this contradiction, in a study on Chicano/a sexuality, Aída Hurtado and Mrinal Sinha note: “The majority of Chicanas were expected to remain virgins until marriage, whereas Chicanos were, at minimum, allowed to experiment sexually with no repercussions or in a few instances, actually encouraged, mostly by fathers to engage in sexual behaviors” (35-36). How one gender is supposed to experiment without the other is never stated, yet these are the contradictions and double standards young Chicanas must navigate and abide by.

As a result, and as evidenced by the two aforementioned studies, females who are brought up with strict religious mores are often faced with anti-sex rhetoric from their mothers or, perhaps worse, no discussion at all. Viramontes’s Under the Feet of Jesus hints at this sort of apprehension: “Being the oldest, just turned the corner to thirteen (the mother thought the number unlucky, and they both waited anxiously for [Estrella’s] fourteenth birthday)…” (9). Petra, Estrella’s mother, is a superstitious woman so the number thirteen holds ominous overtones on its own; however, despite her superstition, it is also the typical age to begin menstruation. This also seen in the following passages:
“Estrella cradled a watermelon like a baby and this vision saddened her … She wanted her children to stay innocent and honest” (40); “Soon Estrella would begin menstruation, and Petra thought of blood in the glow of the fire, the amber red of molten wood, and in the absence of her own menstruation” (120); and “Petra heard the shifting of bodies. Was Estrella squeezing against Alejo, as she was doing with Perfecto? Petra stared at the sheet. How blind could she have been? Hadn’t she learned something in her thirty-five years? Is this what it was all about, healing Alejo so that he could take Estrella?” (117). This final scene is particularly interesting because Petra is actually initiating sex with Perfecto, and she makes that connection that Estrella and Alejo are in the exact same position to do the same. What is most curious about these passages, however, is not just that Petra is afraid of her daughter having sex and getting pregnant but that she never speaks to her about it, even after it is clear that they are reaching (or more accurately, they have already reached) that point. The aforementioned study by Hurtado and Sinha of Chicanas from “predominantly working-class, Mexican-origin families” (34), likewise, reveals that the majority of Chicanas were given “almost no discussion about the mechanics of sexual intercourse, menstruation, sexual development, pregnancy prevention, or sexually transmitted diseases” (34).

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6 These Chicanas, 101 of them in all, varied from age 20 to 30 and were all classified as having “some education beyond high school” (33). According to the study, “Seventy-four respondents were attending institutions of higher education such as Harvard University, the University of Michigan, and the University of California, Santa Cruz. Twenty-seven respondents had graduated (some with a bachelor’s degree and most with advanced and professional degrees)” (33-34). What this tells us is that the culturally sanctioned occlusion of female sexuality is not relegated to the poor migrants of the borderlands, and that the culture is thoroughly ingrained into females despite class, education level, and geographic location.
Additionally, within *La Virgen de Guadalupe* Chicanas are raised with ideas of *marianismo*—the feminine equivalent of *machismo* in Chicano culture. In her essay, “In Praise of Difficult Choices,” Adriana Lopez explains, “Symbolizing the primacy of the Virgin Mary in the female role, marianismo describes the self-sacrifice and rejection of pleasure … so they can please others, especially the men in their families” (125). Erica Gonzáles Martínez, in her essay, “Dutiful Hijas: Dependency, Power and Guilt,” extends this idea saying:

*Marianismo* is the crux of our existence … In marianismo, it is a woman’s duty to be subservient and submissive, not to make decisions for herself … Among the ten commandments of marianismo listed in *The Maria Paradox* are: “Do not forget a woman’s place. Do not be single, self-supporting, or independent-minded. Do not put your own needs first. Do not wish for more in life than being a housewife.” (145)

When one couples *marianismo* with migrant culture, the burden is doubled. The mother (and daughters) after working in the fields all day, must come home and work all night cooking and cleaning for her family, while the men socialize and rest. An additional obligation under *marianismo* is when “dutiful hijas” must take on the maternal role, mothering the children and then later, mothering their mothers in their old age. Of mothering mothers, González Martínez remembers:

On another occasion an elderly male relative complimented me on my independent spirit. When I thanked him and told him I wasn’t in a rush to get married or have kids, he responded with, *Pero quien te va a a cuidar*
“cuando te pones vieja”\textsuperscript{7}? Giving birth to a daughter was the equivalent of buying life insurance. A daughter would be there to take care of the parent in old age. (González Martínez 143).

To have a son is to ensure the family has someone to carry on the family name; to have a daughter is essentially to ensure the family has a servant. González Martínez observes: “What is problematic is the double standard; the patriarchal definition of what it means to be a ‘good’ woman; the reproduction of a superior-inferior power dynamic via culture and religion” (144). It is important to note that González Martínez does not come from migrant culture. Chicana women are expected to take on this role regardless of class, education level, socioeconomic status, successful careers or any other obligations.

This sentiment is echoed consistently throughout Viramontes’s novel: “Estrella sat on the porch … Her eyes hurt badly, and she wanted to close them but knew the mother would need help to make dinner” (62). Both Perfecto Flores and Petra’s sons are excused from any and all housework after the workday concludes. The men are seen drinking and socializing around fires in the evenings. Meanwhile the mothers and “dutiful hijas,” who have also worked in the fields from the crack of dawn, set immediately to bathing the children, preparing the meals, and cleaning the house. In her reading of the novel, Cook states, “The teenaged Estrella is her mother’s real source of strength” (172). I agree with her that Petra relies physically (and even sometimes emotionally) on Estrella, but I would add that she draws her spiritual strength through La Virgen and her religion. It is through La Virgen and her Catholicism that her role is

\textsuperscript{7} “But who is going to care for you when you’re an old woman” (my translation).
circumscribed, and it is through them that she gets her strength to fulfill such a sacrificial and assiduous role.

Though Estrella is the focus of this chapter, a brief characterization of Petra is crucial as she (and The Virgin) is Estrella’s mother and only model for womanhood. It is through adolescence when girls learn to be women and boys learn to be men. As Estrella matures, she is not given any other examples or possibilities for her development, and her future as a marianismo is all but guaranteed. For example, in one reflection we are told, “Estrella hadn’t remembered a lot of those years, except that the twins started calling her mama” (13). Even at her young age, she is being conditioned into marianismo, which makes her ultimate rebellion from it all the more extraordinary.

Petra, conversely, is the epitome of piety, marianismo, and La Virgen de Guadalupe culture. Regardless of wherever the itinerant migrant family lands, Petra ensures that there is room enough for her altar: “Three crates in the corner would be a good place to set up Petra’s altar with Jesucristo, La Virgen, y Jose” (8). Petra keeps the family’s birth certificates and legal documents under the feet of the Jesus statue (thus the book’s title)—her entire family’s identity is literally and symbolically protected by her religion. The altar, additionally, serves to underscore and mirror the female-centric aspects of the novel. Jesus acts as Petra’s protector, and Mary acts as her intercessor and paragon; Joseph, as usual, plays an ancillary role. One might argue that Perfecto plays the role of Petra’s protector; however, his plan to ultimately leave the family proves his unreliability. Thus, the focus remains on mother and child, seen in lines such as “Then the mother embraced Estrella so firmly, Estrella felt as if the mother was trying to hide her back in her body” (171). This line both affirms the strong connection between Petra
and Estrella and, at the same time, implies a feeling of suffocation on Estrella’s part, a need to not be absorbed into her mother (and mother’s fate). This is underscored when Estrella conquers the barn (the self-actualizing scene that immediately follows and which I analyze later).

This brings us to Estrella’s self-actualization through sexual agency. Hurtado and Singha note in their study that as a result of *La Virgen de Guadalupe* and *marianismo* culture many Chicanas will have trouble imagining a “sexual self, free of and uncontaminated by power” (36). Petra, for instance, is constantly at the mercy of the men in her life and powerless to stop them from leaving her. First there is Estrella’s father:

The women in the camps had advised the mother, *To run away from your husband would be a mistake*. He would stalk her and the children, not because he wanted them back, they proposed, but because it was a slap in the face, and he would swear over the seventh beer that he would find her and kill them all. Estrella’s godmother said the same thing and more. *You’ll be a forever alone woman*, she said to Estrella’s mother, *nobody wants a woman with a bunch of orphans. You don’t know what hunger is until your huercos tell you to your face, then what you gonna do?*

The reader is told that, it is the father who in fact leaves them. And though Petra does find another man, Perfecto Flores, he, too, is planning to leave Petra (pregnant again, no less) and the family in order to return to his homeland. The males hold the power. They have the agency and ability to leave and pick up whenever and wherever they want to, often leaving the women in their lives destitute.
Additionally, *La Virgen de Guadalupe* and *marianismo* culture is so concerned with female sexuality (whether that female is a virgin or a mother) that even if there is not a physical male power present, the cultural power is. As quoted earlier, “For many Mexicans, subjectivity is necessarily tied up with virginity, marriage, and motherhood” (Blake 125). However, Viramontes “writes back” to these standards by allowing Estrella to experiment with her sexuality. By having these experiences outside of marriage, and by not tying herself to the boy she experiments with, Estrella establishes her own subjectivity. She finds power and strength within her sexual self and not through someone else, be it a man, a mother, or a religious figure.

For this exploration, I would like to begin with Cook’s argument because, while she raises interesting points pertaining to Chicana YA literature in her dissertation, she misses the mark when it comes to Viramontes’s portrayal of Estrella as a sexual being. Her overall argument for Chicana protest literature is that “the inclusion of powerful female characters and exploration of the injustice of poverty are methods of protesting the dominant culture, which, in this case, was oppressive to Chicano/as in late 20th century U.S. culture” (162). Viramontes is indeed writing protest literature; however, Cook misreads the pivotal scene in which Estrella loses her virginity, which ultimately skews her overall interpretation and leaves a hole in her analysis. She extremely downplays Viramontes’s writing of Estrella’s sexual experience and embodiment—a far more subversive act than merely writing independence. If one is exploring the injustice of poverty and how to protest it, one has to look at what agencies are available. Estrella, as a thirteen-year-old impoverished migrant worker does not have access or opportunity for material or economic agency. Sexual agency then becomes the avenue for exploring
autonomy and sovereignty over herself. Hence, Estrella becomes a sexual being as a way to enact her autonomy. To begin, Cook’s argument states:

Several scenes involving sexuality come to mind, but they are, by and large, subtle, leaving much content in the shadow, or unexplained and unexplored, for the young adult reader. For example, during a sweet encounter underneath the shade of a truck on a scorching day, Estrella and Alejo hold hands and talk. There are sexual undertones to their dialogue, but they are young and the reader understands that their relationship will be sexually innocent. (189)

Oddly enough, this is, in fact, the scene where, I argue, Estrella loses her virginity. In this scene, Alejo and Estrella are alone, lying in the shadows (discussion of link between shadows and female sexuality to follow) underneath the truck bed. In order to properly argue against Cook’s interpretation, I feel including the actual extended scene is necessary:

Estrella felt Alejo’s hand take hers and she could feel the wet of sweat rolling down the side of her breasts. She was used to bodies, those of her sisters and brothers, pressing themselves against her while they slept / … But this skin was different, this heat was different, this scent.

She became aware of his body shifting in the gravel, imagined where his face was, where the words came from. She could feel the hairs of her arm stand erect, and could feel the space between her shoulder blades molting sweat. She heard him swallow a dry swallow as if he needed a drink of water then heard him inhale, his breath pulling in
streams of hot air. Estrella tried to distract herself by studying the nuts and grimy bolts and how tightly they were screwed onto the tire.

…

They were quiet. Estrella felt him take her hand again, her fingers soiled with the tar grease, and she closed her eyes. She did not resist, unaware of where he was taking her or how. Alejo carefully smoothed her fingers flat as if unfolding a map. His mouth pressed against the center of her palm and his lips, which felt as dry as baking soda, lingered until the heat of his air welded into the cup of her hand. Her fingers closed on his chin gently like the tentacles of a sea anemone. He then pressed his cheek against the nakedness of her palm and his bristles tickled and she smiled in her darkness, until Alejo kissed her again, but this time longer, damp and pleadingly and still … And that was all he had to do.

Estrella lay very still, very quiet, her eyes closed tightly, trying not to think of Exits and Entrances, of Stop signs and Yields. She fisted her hand with a grasp as tight as a heart and then slipped her hand in her front pocket. He was quiet and she wanted to blank out the hunger and so she tried to think of tar oil so black, it swallowed the radio and the baby’s plump toes and the shoes crunching all around the edges of her life. She uncrossed her ankles. (87-89)

There are a number of key images and phrases that allude to this as a sex scene and not “sexually innocent” as Cook claims. For one, after giving examples of innocent touching, it explicitly states that this “was different”; the images of nuts and bolts being screwed
together; “she smiled in her darkness” (sexuality in shadows); the euphemistic language of “Exits and Entrances, of Stop Signs, and Yield” all indicating the movements of intercourse, or the decision to consent to intercourse; her hunger; the images of the tar pits (a motif in the novel)—a place where the bones of migrants will be absorbed into the tar, where they’ll reconnect and become one body of matter; and finally, the most telling, “She uncrossed her ankles.” She has invited Alejo in. Thus, in its totality, we can understand this scene as not only more sexual than Cook asserts but also more denotive of Estrella’s control and subjectivity. Where Cook fails is that she does not read through or into the language. She remains on the surface and, thus, misses the subtlety of the scene. To further make this point, I will next discuss how appetite, symbolism/metaphor, and euphemism/language are also working in the novel so that there can be no question as to what is happening.

Firstly, there are a number of scenes where what should be innocuous exchanges are described in overtly sexual language, incorporating vaginal/phallic imagery and including mention of the mouth or language that implies the use of the mouth alluding to experimentation with oral sex. For instance, in one scene between Estrella and Alejo, Estrella drinks from a Coke bottle, which seems innocent enough; however, Viramontes uses language to allude to oral and manual stimulation: “She recalled the curvature of the bottle in her hand, the velvet cool and sweet liquid lubricating her parched throat and she let her black hair fall over one shoulder and stroked” (69). Viramontes is being very deliberate here. One could try to argue that it is just a young girl drinking a Coke, but her focus on how the bottle feels in Estrella’s hand combined with liquid lubricating her
throat, her hair falling over her shoulder while she’s stroking the bottle in her hand give the scene extremely amplified sexual connotations.

Additionally, there are a number of scenes in which Estrella is sexualized through Alejo’s male gaze. For example, when Alejo spots Estrella for the first time, he watches her bathe nude from the tree he is in: “[Estrella] sliced through the cool irrigation water, opening her legs like a frog to propel herself to the watermelon, the bulbs of her buttocks bobbing. The water was quiet and licked around her in velvet waves” (40 emphasis mine). The sexual overtones and allusions to oral sex in this scene are emphasized by the fact that Alejo is watching her, imposing these descriptions, and will continue to recall the image of her naked body in the water. In the next scene, while riding on the truck together, sexual language is utilized more explicitly (no doubt because it refers to male sexuality), “She nodded hello, then tucked a few strands of loose hair over her ear. Only her mouth seemed visible under the shade of her straw hat. / Alejo could feel the steel of the zipper against him … Her chest jiggled like flan custard beneath her shirt whenever the truck bounced” (65 emphasis mine).

This is just a sampling of scenes that employs overtly sexual language in typically asexual encounters. Many of these scenes are through Alejo’s perspective, which calls to mind Laura Mulvey’s critical work “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema.” In it she discusses the male gaze. She states, “The determining male gaze projects its fantasy onto the female figure, which is styled accordingly” (1448). The male gaze objectifies the woman. She becomes a “perfect product whose body, stylized and fragmented close-ups, is the content of the film and the direct recipient of the spectator’s look” (Mulvey 1450). Though the medium here is fiction and not film, we see through Alejo what would be the
director’s “close-ups”—her buttocks bobbing in the water, her mouth just visible beneath her straw hat, her jiggling chest. The male gaze is exploitative, reducing a woman to the sum of her parts. However, there is something interesting here in that it is a woman writing the male gaze. In a way, Viramontes exploits the exploitative gaze. Mulvey states that “the male figure cannot bear the burden of sexual objectification. Man is reluctant to gaze at his exhibitionist like. Hence the split between spectacle and narrative supports the man’s role as the active one of advancing the story, making things happen” (1449). Viramontes subverts this idea by being a woman writing the male gaze. In doing so, she not only calls out the how males sexualize females (even thirteen year old females) but she also faces her “exhibitionist like,” conflating the spectacle and the narrative as opposed to splitting it, thus giving the active role to the woman to advance the story, which is evidently not fated to remain “sexually innocent” as Cook claims.

Additionally, within her study, Cook astutely notes the regular conflation of two types of hunger when it comes to female adolescence—food and sex (90). She argues that because “good girls are supposed to maintain an acceptable level of sexual desirability without ever actually desiring or having sex themselves” (90), food is an apt substitute for sexual hunger. She notes that “Society hungers for the bodies of adolescent girls, but the girls themselves are not supposed to have their own appetites” (73) because adolescent girls are “on the outskirts of human sexuality” (75). This brings me back to Estrella and Alejo under the truck whereby she wants to “blank out the hunger.” If food and sex are the remedies for hunger, and there is no food in the scene, it follows that she satisfies it with sex. Additionally, the conflation of hunger with sexual appetite makes Estrella’s first encounter with Alejo all the more subversive and clearly displays that she
is having sexual feelings upon meeting him. Alejo, having already watched her bathing nude is desperate to meet her. To do so, he introduces himself by presenting her family with a sack of peaches. Upon meeting Alejo, Estrella looks at him and “bit[es] the peach with a deep, ravenous bite” (45). The Coke bottle also comes to mind in that drinking might also be considered an “apt substitute for sexual hunger.” When viewed in this light, it makes the sexual overtones of that scene even more explicit. Cook states, “Examination of young adult novels illustrates the cultural script that young girls should not be hungry for either food or sex” (74), but Estrella’s display of unabashed hunger (and thirst), in front of Alejo, no less, indicates that she is subverting both of these cultural scripts.

Moreover, the barn is one of the most substantial images in the novel and is the crux of my interpretation. In this section, I argue that the barn is a metaphor for sexual agency. When viewed in this new light, the scenes in which Cook downplays Estrella’s sexuality become exponentially more sexual. Estrella is consistently both drawn to and repelled by the barn throughout the novel. At times she fears its dark and cavernous interior. At other times she sees it as a quiet place of respite, a place to get away from her family. Her reluctance to definitively view it as either good or bad is yet another manifestation of a “vague and undetermined” borderland. It remains not on one side or the other of the good/bad dichotomy but somewhere in between depending on the context.

There are a number of ways the barn can be viewed as a metaphor for sexual agency. To begin, the barn is noticeably where Estrella sees the deformed boy with a harelip—something Petra insists is a “result of female sexual transgression” (McCracken 183). On a night when Estrella shirks her duties and is caught fraternizing alone with
Alejo (which, incidentally, is the overtly sexual Coke bottle scene), her mother yells, “Is that what you want … a child born sin labios? Without a mouth?” (69). For Petra, the punishment for sexual transgression is a deformed child, born “sin labios.” The boy’s presence in the barn would seem to imply a caution or a warning to Estrella who longs to enter it.

Also contributing to this metaphor for sexual agency is the fact that Estrella is constantly told to stay away from the barn and that only the boys are allowed to go there. This is made most clear in a scene where Perfecto asks for her help in tearing it down.⁸ Suspecting that Petra is pregnant again (she is), he decides that he is too old to deal with a baby in addition to her kids. He becomes consumed with the idea of leaving Petra and returning to his homeland to die.⁹ He wants to tear down the barn for money so he can afford the trip. When he asks for her help, Estrella states, “I thought I had no business in the barn, Estrella replied. She walked over to its shade. I thought you said it was dangerous” (74, emphasis mine).

I emphasize shade because shade and shadows are an important motif pertaining to female sexuality. Rebecca Fine, in her study on adolescent sexuality, observes, “Pleasure and desire for women as sexual subjects remain largely in the shadows, obscured from adolescent eyes” (33, my emphasis). Additionally, citing Nodelman, Cook notes, “Nodelman asserts that sexuality is often in shadow in the children’s literature

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⁸ The fact of a man wanting to tear down a symbol for female sexuality and subjectivity is interesting on its own. Though I don’t explore it in this paper, it might make an interesting site for analysis in a larger or a different project.

⁹ The idea of homeland is patriarchal and thus appropriate for Perfecto’s character. In reference to location, it represents another dichotomy—there vs. here. Conversely, through Anzaldúa’s feminized borderlands, Petra becomes a good representative in that, as noted earlier, she makes a home wherever the itinerant family lands. Her thoughts never drift to a homeland—her home is where her family is, wherever that may be.
genre; he claims that the ‘hidden adult’ author uses the text to share her/his knowledge of the shadow with the young reader” (188, my emphasis). And, of course, Estrella loses her virginity in the shadows—lying underneath the truck bed with Alejo. Thus, by walking over to the shade, Estrella enter into the realm of sexual agency.

A final indication that ties the barn to sexual agency is that it is consistently described with religious terminology: “The children stood in the shade of the barn, a cathedral of a building” (9, emphasis mine). Ordinarily ascribing religious terminology to a barn would not imply a sexual metaphor for it, but as I have hoped to show, female sexuality is inextricably tied up in religion in La Virgen de Guadalupe culture. Estrella is only asked to enter the barn when it is to a male’s benefit—otherwise it is forbidden. Any other time she ventures into it thus stands as a subversive act of her taking “the reins of sexual experience in [her] own hands” (Martínez 147). In summation, the religious references, the gendered admittance, and the allusions to shade all serve to keep Estrella from exploring it for herself implying that it can be, in fact, viewed metaphorically.

As Estrella begins to develop sexually we see a correlative effect in her confidence and ability to control her environment. One example of this is in a scene in which she teaches Alejo how to make music with a soda bottle. His attempts are clumsy and fail to produce music while she maintains authority: “She dunked her top lip on the spout and placed her thumb near her lip and grooved a breath into the hollow and it sounded full of longing. Estrella blew some more deep and low notes, her thumb directing the flow of air” (71 emphasis mine). She is in control of every action in the scene here. This authority and control is carried over when it comes to making the

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10 I return to this scene in Chapter Three when I discuss displaced/embedded speech.
decision to lose her virginity, which, incidentally happens in the next scene with Alejo:

“She uncrossed her ankles”—it is Estrella who makes the decision and who, again, “takes
the reins of sexual experience in her own hands” (Martínez 147). She does not give in to
pressure nor is she pictured as the aggressor. She simply makes a gesture that invites him
in—she controls the experience. She is able to conjure images and allusions to sex; she is
also able to decide she is ready to have sex, yet for some reason, there is still a need to
talk in circles around it. The scene is described in highly euphemistic terms that mask the
actual action.

While the language reflects the culturally sanctioned norms that suppress female
sexuality, it is the protagonist’s actions that subvert them. Eliecer Crespo Fernández, in
“Sex-Related Euphemism and Dysphemism: An Analysis in Terms of Conceptual
Metaphor Theory,” states, “This power of taboo keeps language users from avoiding the
forbidden concept and compels them to preserve or violate it … This ambivalence
towards taboo seems to be especially noteworthy in the case of sex, an area of
interdiction particularly fruitful in lexical generation” (96). He continues, “Given that
metaphorization stands out as the most prolific linguistic device of lexical creativity, it is
hardly surprising that speakers turn to figurative language as a means of coping with the
realm of sex” (96). Losing one’s virginity at thirteen years old would widely be
considered a taboo—a Chicana raised in La Virgen de Guadalupe and marianismo culture
would be twice as much. It is no wonder euphemism is used to describe her experience. It
merely underscores Estrella’s self-actualization as a sexual being. Furthermore, there is
no reason to believe that the euphemism is indicative of shame. Fernández illustrates the
use of euphemism and dysphemism through a number of constructs: SEX AS WAR, SEX AS
BUSINESS, SEX AS FOOD, etc. Looking at the euphemisms Viramontes uses, I would add to his list of possible euphemistic models SEX AS DRIVING.

Estrella envisions traffic signs as she is having sex. Given her life as a migrant worker and the durations of time spent on the back of the truck, Estrella is constantly being driven around. Her envisioning these signs and the elements of control exhibited ("She uncrossed her legs"), perhaps indicates that she is finally driving the truck, so-to-speak. This scene is Estrella taking control of her life and making decisions about her body. Conversely, Perfecto’s sex scene is highly explicit and uses dysphemistic terms for description:

Without the church’s legal signature, he had pushed his trousers down to his ankles and sat, the hot limestone against his bare buttocks, and reassured her that this was love, trust him, and he had pulled her into him right under the open sky and sun and cloudy eyes. She had straddled him, her knees folding open like a waxed cactus flower, her heels digging into the small of his back, the grind of the stone, his face under the cotton of her dress, the smell of peeled cucumbers, fleshy red opuntia fruit. The glossy semen had flashed out of him and into her and out of her and down his thigh and had evaporated on the limestone like clear water" (79).

The graphic sexual description dysphemistic phrasing: “flashed out of him” foils the subtle and highly euphemistic descriptions of Estrella’s sexual encounter. These scenes are set less than ten pages apart from each other. My claim is that by using euphemistic language for Estrella and dysphemistic language for Perfecto, Viramontes is displaying the double standards on how sexuality is discussed pertaining to males and females. This
is further supported by Fernández: “the intention of the speaker to be respectful or offensive will be largely responsible for the positive or negative attributes to be transferred from a given source domain to the target domain of sex” (105). Ironically, Cook’s argument for Perfecto’s sex scene is more fitting to Estrella’s sexual encounter. She states that the “lengthy poetic description” of Perfecto’s sex scene is a style that “appears to avoid open carnality” (190). On the contrary, it confronts open carnality, underscored by the fact that Perfecto has sex “right under the open sky and sun” whereas Estrella’s encounter is kept in the shadows where, according to cultural norms, female sexuality belongs.

As stated earlier, the barn plays a significant part in the scene immediately following Estrella’s sexual encounter. Immediately afterwards she runs to its entrance: “Estrella couldn’t resist. She cupped her hands on one of the sunbeams, the motes of dust swirling upward, while the beam shot downward. She caught the flow of sun, felt the laser heat slowly penetrate her palms he had kissed, saw the blood of her body, a brilliant reddish pink rose, and she laughed” (90). There is no indication that for Estrella, as *La Virgen de Guadalupe* culture insists, shame is connected to sex. On the contrary, the image is one of enlightenment. She is enshrouded, haloed, and kissed by the sun. The detail of a beam being shot downward implies some ethereal divinity. Her skin is described as a “reddish pink rose”—a healthy glow as opposed to perhaps a blush that shame brings. She is literally enlightened and no longer in the shadows. However, Estrella’s euphoria does not last long. The narrator tells us:

Now unafraid, she walked to the center of the barn where the chain suspended in an almost unnatural way. Everything else belonged …
everything except the chain … Why was the chain there? She noticed a trapdoor, squared by the sunlight near where the chain hooked the ceiling. She took hold of its end, yanked it like a bell ringer, lightly at first to test it, then jerked it with all her muscle … The chain barely resisted … Estrella noticed her hands. Once filled with light, her palms were now tainted with brick red rust” (90).

Her locality in the “cathedral” and her hands tainted with red rust allude to having blood on her hands; it implies she may be having feelings of Catholic guilt. Religion unequivocally links sex with sin, especially sex out of wedlock. I argue, however, that it should be no critique on her female subjectivity. Having been conditioned in her culture, feeling some remnants of Catholic guilt would not be out of the ordinary. It is whether and how she continues her journey that matters.

And continue her journey she does. After Alejo is poisoned by pesticides, Estrella and her family make a Herculean effort to get him to a hospital. I will discuss this more in depth in Chapter Three, but after overcoming significant obstacles and taking charge for her family, Estrella returns to the barn. To understand this return, we might consider it through Amy Kaminsky’s proposal that “sexuality remains the constant of women’s subordination” (qtd in Martinez 134). Therefore, if she wants to embody herself she must return to the source of inhibition and conquer it. Thus she returns to the metonymical barn/cathedral. The last time she was here, she left with her hands stained—presumably with sin. However, after her self-actualizing experience at the hospital, she is ready to fully conquer whatever obstacles lie in her way:
Estrella clasped the chain and hoisted herself up. There was no turning back now. She pulled her arms to raise her shoulders up until her feet could brace the chain better … Her hands were calloused and her grip became strong … She wrapped the chain between her thighs now and jerked down to raise herself up as if she were tugging on a cord of a bell. She … steered her attention upward to see the door square expanding much larger than she could have imagined it. The intensity of the climb soaked the back of her shirt collar with sweat. (173).

Estrella conquers the barn by utilizing her own strength to climb the chain. The masturbatory language that describes her climb—the chain held tight between her thighs as she jerks up and down it—suggests a self-embodiment and a means of sexual satisfaction without a male participant. Of this, Blake notes, “The Catholic Church teaches that to touch one’s body is a sin, an unnatural act. The prohibition is intended to prevent masturbation … considered a selfish act, an attitude reinforcing that sexual pleasure is only intended for heterosexual married couples” (130). By “climbing the chain” she not only subverts parochial mores but also patriarchal—she is able to sexually satisfy herself.

She stands atop the barn, victorious. McCracken makes the argument that Estrella’s reclamation is “a symbol of her autonomy and strength, her rite of passage into adulthood” (183). I agree with her analysis, but I would add to it that, in seeing the barn as a metaphor for sexual agency, Estrella (and Viramontes by extension) also conquers the culture that works to suppress it in females. If Estrella’s sexual experiences and self-actualization is a form of protest against her culture, then so is writing it. Martinez states:
“The sexual imagery becomes a metaphor for the act of writing or producing the text.”

Cook is right in her assertion that Viramontes is writing protest literature, but it goes beyond just featuring strong female characters and exhibiting the poverty they are forced into. The female characters: “must also make their own sexual choices … In such fiction, a sexual experience outside of marriage no longer brings shame or disappointment to the female character” (Martinez 132). She continues, “Such characters perform as independent subjects whose presence is not dependent on another being, but rather on her own actions … the strength of the female subject as its own entity is demonstrated, with action as well as presence” (132). We see this strength and renewed confidence in Estrella as she stands on top of that barn, we are told, “No longer did she stumble blindly. She had to trust the soles of her feet her hands, the shovel of her back, and the pounding bells of her heart … A breeze fluttered a few loose strands of hair on her face and nothing had ever seemed as pleasing to her as this” (175-176). Martinez’s study of Chicana writers and female subjectivity is centered on sexual imagery as a metaphor for the act of writing and producing. She states that the point is not that the male characters are only good for a tryst, but that it is important for the female protagonist to continue her journey (134). Hence, Alejo remains at the hospital and Estrella goes on without him.

Before moving on, I will note that Viramontes does not completely fulfill Martinez’s idea of the new Chicana writer. One of Martinez’s key arguments is that euphemistic language inhibits female sexuality and that only by being explicit and unambiguous does the Chicana writer and the Chicana subject become fully realized as stronger Chicana voices. Quoting Erlinda Gonzales Berry, she says that “to name the unnameable, to speak the unsayable, to articulate clearly without euphemisms the female
sexual experience is to find freedom” (qtd in Martinez 143). Does that mean then that Estrella is not free? Hardly. Estrella is very much the new Chicana woman—she just is not a woman yet. She must make it through her adolescence, have more experiences, and get to know herself even more. She is, however, a precursor. She is on her way. Viramontes has already provided her with the strength and fortitude to make her own decisions about her body even at her young age. One can hope that instinct will only develop further as she continues her journey.
CHAPTER TWO:  

**LA MALINCHE AND CISNEROS’S THE HOUSE ON MANGO STREET**

On the other side of the female archetype spectrum is *La Malinche* (or “The Traitor”). Leslie Petty, in “The ‘Dual’-ing Images of La Malinche and La Virgen de Guadalupe in Cisneros’s *The House on Mango Street,*” gives and in-depth an accurate description of this historical figure:

> As a young woman, she was given to Cortés, along with nineteen other Indian slave women … When Montezuma’s envoys came to Tabasco to find out information about Cortés, they / spoke only Nahuatl while Cortés’s Spanish translator spoke only Mayan. Marina was used to provide the missing link by translating the Nahuatl into Mayan. Marina soon learned Spanish and became Cortés’s primary translator … In addition to her role as a translator, historical writings confirm that Cortés and Marina had a sexual relationship; she gave birth to his son” (121-122).

As she gave birth to the “first” mestizo—the first recognized child of both Spanish and indigenous blood—she is “the traitor mother of all Mexicans” (Melero 4). Those are essentially the historical facts known about *La Malinche*; however, Octavio Paz resurrected her as a mythical figure. She has been known to represent many different things in Mexican culture, to name a few: the captive, traitor, the raped, the whore, the fallen woman, the violated, and perhaps the most vivid description, “the fucked one” (Paz qtd in Melero 21). Paz writes “La Malinche es la Chingada en persona” (‘is the personification of that which is fucked’)” (Paz qtd in Melero 21). Melero observes:

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11 Doña Marina’s/La Malinche’s first language.
Paz states that unlike the Spaniard, who is “un hijo de puta,” “the son of a whore,” Mexican men are even worse off when it comes to their honor, because they are “hijos de la Chingada,” “sons of the raped woman” (72, 1959). For Paz, this distinction is important because that means that the Mexican mother is not even a whore who participates voluntarily in the sexual act. She is a passive, raped non-being … she does not offer resistance to the violence [of the rape]. She is an inert pile of blood, bones and dust … She loses her name, she is no longer anybody, she becomes one with nothingness, is Nothingness. (Melero 73)

She is the “antithesis of the pure maternal image of la Virgen de Guadalupe” (Petty 121). What La Malinche has in common with La Virgen de Guadalupe, however, is that they are both maternal figures that represent female passivity in Chicano/a culture and ultimately lock women into a narrow reproductive role. They exist solely as models for womanhood in a patriarchal dichotomy that forces women into one or the other. La Virgen de Guadalupe offers herself; La Malinche is taken.

It’s important to recognize the colonial connotations of that word “taken” when we discuss the La Malinche archetype within this chapter. The women in Cisneros’s novel, as malinches, embody that archetype in that they are, like Mexico, colonized beings. The women in Viramontes’s novel are also colonized beings in a sense in that the children who inhabit their bodies colonize them. Though in the latter model the woman offers herself, she does so in accordance to a cultural obligation. None of them, it would seem, are actually free.
Unlike Viramontes’s linear (though fractured) narrative, Cisneros’s novel is a series of vignettes that give glimpses into Chicago’s *barrio*—a Chicano urban neighborhood. Esperanza, her protagonist, is approximately the same age as Viramontes’s Estrella, around thirteen years old. Like Estrella, she is young and part of a culture that discourages formal sex education. However, unlike Estrella, who is never given the language to understand her burgeoning sexuality, Esperanza is given her sex education through *la malinches* of the neighborhood. She is over-exposed to sexual and often violent relationships. Similar to Viramontes, Cisneros exhibits the tension between female sexual agency and the suppression of it. However, though Cisneros includes Esperanza’s (often bad) experiences, she largely demonstrates this more through the experiences of others, which will contribute to my discussion in Chapter Three of Esperanza’s “spectator stance.” Just as in Chapter One, in order to fully understand the significance in some of Esperanza’s (and by extension, Cisneros’s) decisions, it is again important to first establish the *La Malinche* culture.

Petty astutely observes that Cisneros’s *The House on Mango Street* features both maternal archetypes but that “the primary female characters associated with the Virgin in *The House on Mango Street* are adult figures” (125). She also notes that, “images of the violated, abandoned, or enslaved woman are scattered from beginning to end, indicating that the unfortunate reality of Malinche/Marina’s life is a more likely scenario for women in the barrio” (125). Thus, while Esperanza has access to the *La Virgin de Guadalupe* figures, the people with whom she mostly surrounds herself veer more toward *La Malinche*. She spends the majority of her time on the streets of the neighborhood and very little time at home and therefore much of the observations we get are of her in
proximity to *las malinches*. Within this section, I close read some selected vignettes and analyze the characters of the impressionable Esperanza’s world and her proximity and exposure to the *malinches* of the neighborhood.

While Estrella’s sole model for womanhood exists in her mother and *La Virgen*, Esperanza has no shortage of models in the barrio. The adolescent girls and young women who serve as her exemplars for womanhood are hyper-feminine and passive and are used, owned, abused, and thrown away by their men. Throughout this chapter I will look at each instances of female passivity, beauty, and abuse and show how Esperanza’s participation and observation of these occurrences lead her to resist her predestined archetypes.

As a young adolescent, Esperanza is impressionable. As spectators/readers, we see her view the women of her neighborhood and then try to emulate them. One of her first ideas of womanhood is exemplified through the character Marin (*La Malinche*’s real name). Esperanza describes her with: “dark nylons” and “lots of makeup” (23), with short skirts and pretty eyes (27). Esperanza says of Marin, “I like Marin. She is older and knows lots of things. She is the one who told us how Davey the Baby’s sister got pregnant” (27). She continues, “We never see Marin until her aunt comes home from work, and even then she can only stay out in front. She is there every night … it doesn’t matter if it’s cold out … What matters, Marin says, is for the boys to see us and for us to see them” (27). Marin epitomizes *La Malinche*’s female passivity and sexuality in nearly every way. Though she might not seem “passive” in how she consciously puts herself together with meticulous clothes and makeup and also appears knowledgeable (at least she does to Esperanza), if we take Rosario Castellanos’s view of Malinche it becomes
clear that she fulfills every definition of female passivity: “Malinche incarnates the most irrational elements of sexuality, the most irreducible of moral codes, the most indifferent to cultural values. Since no matter what, sexuality is a dynamic force which projects to the exterior and manifests itself in actions” (qtd in Melero 20). Marin takes action, yes, but only as a means to an end. She ultimately acts in order to “see the boys and be seen by them.” Her ultimate objective in taking this action is so that someone will marry her: “Marin’s boyfriend is in Puerto Rico. She … makes us promise not to tell anybody they’re getting married when she goes back to P.R.” (Cisneros 26); and in the next paragraph: “Marin says that if she stays here next year, she’s going to get a real job downtown because you … get to wear nice clothes and can meet someone in the subway who might marry you and take you to live in a big house far away” (Cisneros 26). She mentions getting married twice (to two different people [one real/one imaginary]) within the span of two sentences. And though readers do not get overt details about Marin’s “irrationality” or “moral codes,” they are told that Marin is eventually sent away for being “too much trouble.” Additionally, referring back to the Michelle Fine study on sex education, it is not likely that Marin has had any formal sex education. Her knowledge of it is most likely experiential. Dispersing that experiential knowledge to the younger girls in the neighborhood shows an “indifference to cultural values.”

Furthermore, Melero discusses Sara Estela Ramírez’s poem “Surge,” and the elements of conventional femininity that can also be applied to Marin’s passivity. Ramírez states, “women have been constructed as queens and as “Goddess[es] of

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12 Pilar Melero’s book *Mythological Constructs of Mexican Femininity* uses almost exclusively sources that are written in Spanish. As such, I am forced to quote within her text as opposed to using the source itself.
universal adoration,’” (qtd in Melero 85). She continues that those are “passive roles that women must abandon” and notes that “the temple and the dressing room are both lifeless statuses; corners where women must sit and wait” (85). The dangers of this passivity are that “‘Gods are cast out of their temples; queens are driven from their thrones…’ In the null roles of goddess and queen, it is the one who has placed women on the altar or throne who has the power to desecrate or dethrone them, to cast them out, at his desire” (Melero 86). Marin constructs herself as one of these goddesses or queens, and incidentally is also cast out—sent back to Puerto Rico after being considered too much trouble. In the meantime though, she waits and constructs herself in her dressing room, only allowed outside when her aunt gets home, and regardless of how cold it is, sits there hoping for someone to take her far away. Her passivity is even evident in how Esperanza sees her. “Marin, under a streetlight, dancing by herself, is singing the same song somewhere. I know. Is waiting for a car to stop, a star to fall, someone to change her life” (27). She is embodying what Ramírez calls “estar” instead of “ser.” Melero notes, “She urges women to ‘Be’ [‘ser’] woman, ‘sé mujer,’ as opposed to occupying the transitory space of the role, of ‘estar.’ Womanhood is permanent. Roles are not” (qtd in Melero 85).

Moving on, in “The Family of Little Feet,” Esperanza and her friends, Rachel and Lucy, experiment with what is often considered a girl’s first introduction to femininity and womanhood: high heels. The first thing Esperanza says when they get the high heels, is, “Hurray! Today we are Cinderella because our feet fit exactly” (40). Children most often get their first lessons in masculinity and femininity through fairy tales, establishing a patriarchal mindset very early. The fact that she uses Cinderella is an important detail here. Linda Parsons, in “Ella Evolving: Cinderella Stories And The Construction Of
Gender-Appropriate Behavior,” argues, “Fairy tales in the patriarchal tradition portray women as weak, submissive, dependent, and self-sacrificing, while men are powerful, active, and dominant” (137). Galia Ofek, in “Cinderella and Her Sisters” adds that the most familiar fairy tales (read: Cinderella) “reward beauty [and] passivity, encouraging conformity to the roles of wife and mother, including the heroine’s surrender to a prince as a means to obtain social and materialistic gains” (24). Cinderella is one of the most passive among the popular fairy tale protagonists. She works as an indentured servant in her own home, and her only salvation is through marrying the prince. She goes from one oppressive environment to another. Additionally, all schemes and exploits to actually get the prince are done via magical intervention, either through a fairy godmother or magical animal friends, depending on the version of the tale. She does not actually do anything to rescue herself, she merely waits and hopes something is done to rescue her. In a way, she is just like Marin. All of the women in Esperanza’s life—her mother, the women in the neighborhood, even the women in her stories—exemplify feminine passivity13.

After the girls put on the high heels they walk around the neighborhood, embodying or impersonating what they see as womanhood: “It’s Rachel who learns to

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13 Indeed, the title of the story, itself, “The Family of Little Feet” intimates at the history of female subordination and passivity through footwear. Chinese foot binding, for instance, in which a girl between the ages of four and six would have her feet broken and bound periodically over two to three years, essentially bending her foot in half and ensuring that it would remain small, persisted well into the 20th century (Schiavenza). The smaller a girl’s feet were, the more (and higher quality) offers of marriage she got. A sign of class and prestige, it also conveniently kept her from having her own agency. She had to be carried wherever she went ensuring she would never be able to leave on her own. The connection between Chinese foot binding and “The Family of Little Feet” lies in the reference to Cinderella, which actually derives from a 9th century Chinese fairy tale “Yeh-hsien” in which the slipper is golden and not glass—a possible allusion to the ideal foot binding size, the three-inch Golden Lotus.
walk the best all strutted in those magic high heels. She teaches us to cross and uncross our legs … and how to walk down the corner so that the shoes talk back to you with every step” (40). “So the shoes talk back to you”—they are not just learning how to walk in heels. They are learning how to strut. As they take their heels to the streets, what follows is a series of incidents whereby they become objects of the male gaze: “Down to the corner where the men can’t take their eyes off us. We must be Christmas” (41); “Them are dangerous, he says. You girls too young to be wearing shoes like that. Take them shoes off before I call the cops” (41); “On the avenue a boy on a homemade bicycle calls out: Ladies lead me to heaven” (41). The male gaze is emphasized when contrasted with girls’ reactions to them in heels: “In front of the laundromat six girls with the same fat face pretend we are invisible” (41). These contrasting and gendered reactions help them to internalize the message that high heels attract attention—good or bad—from males.

In the vignette “Sire” Esperanza further understands femaleness as the object of the male gaze: “I don’t remember when I first noticed him looking at me—Sire. But I knew he was looking. Every time. All the time I walked past his house … They didn’t scare me. They did, but I wouldn’t let them know” (72). Esperanza describes Sire’s girlfriend, Lois, as hyper-feminine: “I saw her barefoot baby toenails all painted pale pale pink, like little pink seashells, and she smells pink like babies do. She’s got big girl hands … and she wears makeup too. But she doesn’t know how to tie her shoes. I do” (73).

There are a number of things at work in these short passages. Firstly, that Sire is looking at her. She gives the impression that she wants to be looked at by him, “I don’t cross the street like the other girls” (72). Second, she describes the “other girls,” namely
his girlfriend. She wears, smells, and looks pink. Finally, she puts herself in competition with her, “But she doesn’t know how to tie her shoes. I do” (73). It seems that Esperanza, in her development is not only seeing what it means to be a woman, but is actually becoming one. She is starting to form crushes, to experience pangs of jealousy, and to imagine what it is like to be kissed, “Sire. How did you hold her? Was it? Like this? And when you kissed her? Like this?” (73). What is interesting, however, is that Esperanza also associates this romance with infantilization. She mentions Lois as a baby twice and notes that she has big girl hands but cannot tie her shoes. Sire has to tie them for her. She sadly sees this female passivity and makes the connection between being someone’s woman and being someone’s property: “I want to sit out bad at night, a boy around my neck and the wind under my skirt …A boy held me once so hard, I swear, I felt the grip and weight of his arms, but it was a dream” (73). Katherine Crawford Garrett argues that there is something in these lines that almost insinuates a desire for the strangulation and possessiveness that she sees in the relationships around her. However, I might argue that it is not desire so much as emulation. Esperanza’s examples for relationships are ones of ownership and possession. As such she does not dream about holding hands or kissing a boy. She dreams of a boy around her neck. It’s an image that connects affection with imprisonment, a common occurrence among the women of the barrio.

This brings me to my next point. The malinches of the barrio do not merely typify what it means to be a woman in the barrio; they also show Esperanza what it means to be someone’s woman in the barrio—another implication of colonialism. The first time a girl “belongs to a man” it is her father. However, it seems fathers are just as elusive (or abusive) as the lovers in Cisneros’s world as we are told in “Alicia Who Sees Mice” and
“What Sally Said.” Alicia, who is “afraid of nothing except four-legged furs. And fathers” (32). And Sally who says, “He never hits me hard. She said her mama rubs lard on all the places where it hurts. Then at school she’d say she fell. That’s where all the blue places come from. That’s why her skin is always scarred … But Sally doesn’t tell about that time he hit her with his hands just like a dog, she said, like if I was an animal … Just because I’m a daughter” (92). The fathers on Mango Street are either non-existent or abusive to their daughters, instilling a shaky foundation for adult male/female relationships seen in “Minerva Writes Poems.” Minerva is slightly older than Esperanza (though she’s already saddled with children with a husband “who left and keeps leaving” [85]) and considers her a confidant. Esperanza narrates, “Next week she comes over black and blue and asks what she can do? Minerva. I don’t know which way she’ll go. There is nothing I can do” (85). There is nothing anyone can do actually. Melero notes that Chicana women are often forced into one (or more) of five cautiverios de las mujeres (identity prison cells for women) as: madresposas (mother-wives), monjas (nuns), presas (prisoners), putas (whores), and locas (madwomen) (Melero 16). Though I agree, I would note that these can all be subsumed under the two maternal archetypes. A woman never belongs to herself. She belongs to her parents as a child. Then when she grows up, she inevitably get imprisoned into one of these cautiverios. If she is a madresposa, she belongs to her family. The child literally inhabits her. If she is a monja she belongs to God. If she is a presa she belongs to her captor. If she is a puta she belongs to whoever possesses her body in that moment. And if she is a loca, she belongs to no one, not even her sanity. None of these roles allow a woman to belong to herself. In a way, one could make the argument, that they are all presas.
One of the first times we see Esperanza reflecting on relationships as such is very early in the novel through her great-grandmother (from whom she gets her name). Esperanza describes her as a wild horse that had been broken: “I would’ve liked to have known her, a wild horse of a woman, so wild she wouldn’t marry. Until my great-grandfather threw a sack over her head and carried her off … And the story goes she never forgave him. She looked out the window her whole life … Esperanza. I have inherited her name, but I don’t want to inherit her place by the window” (10-11). Here we have an image of *La Malinche* as “the violated mother” or “the captive.” She is one of many *malinches* who are secluded or held captive by their men on Mango Street. Another such case is Rafaela in “Rafaela Who Drinks Coconut & Papaya Juice on Tuesdays.” We are told, “On Tuesdays Rafaela’s husband comes home late because that’s the night he plays dominoes. And then Rafaela … gets locked indoors because her husband is afraid Rafaela will run away since she is too beautiful to look at” (79). The case of her grandmother is crucial because it offers the reader the first glimpse of Esperanza’s ideas about self-sovereignty. In hearing the stories of her grandmother, she comes to understand that to be married is to be possessed and to be possessed is to be a wild horse broken. Rafaela’s vignette is important because it confirms this idea. Her grandmother might have been possessed but that does not necessarily mean all women are. However, when Esperanza looks around and sees that same possession reflected in the women of Mango Street, it corroborates her initial impressions. Her reflections on her grandmother, on not wanting to inherit her place by the window are the first inklings we get that she will be different. She is able to view instances of injustice and make judgment calls about them. Not all the time, mind you. She is still young and naïve, and it is her naïveté that
often causes her to experiment with her ideas of womanhood (often with pitiable results); however, her poignant insights helps the reader to see that she is more reflective than her cohorts.

As stated before, Esperanza often breaks with being a spectator\(^\text{14}\) and experiments with ideas of womanhood. Whether that idea of womanhood is something simple such as imitating how they walk or dress or something more daring such as going out and getting a job of her own, it is this experimentation and the often-disastrous and sexually abusive results that ultimately lead her to rejecting her *malinche* archetype. Each time Esperanza makes an attempt at embodying her neighborhood exemplars—she is met with sexual trauma of some sort. For instance, in “The Family of Little Feet” as Esperanza, Lucy, and Rachel all strut down the street in high heels they are met by a drunk “bum man” outside a tavern. He says to Lucy, “If I give you a dollar will you kiss me?” (42). Esperanza notes, “We have to go right now, Lucy says taking Rachel’s hand because she looks like she’s thinking about that dollar” (42). The girls run down the street as the “bum man” yells after them. When they finally get to the safety of their home Esperanza says, “We are tired of being beautiful” (42). The incident with “bum man” is the culmination of a series of street harassments, which all threaten to commute them into one of Melero’s *cautiverios*. She says of the men on the corner: “the men can’t take their eyes off of us. We must be Christmas” (40), insinuating that their bodies are gifts to be unwrapped. Describing oneself as Christmas, too, evokes both images of *La Virgen* and *La Malinche*—*La Virgen* as someone whose biggest gift is the giving of herself; and *La Malinche* as someone who was *gifted* to Cortés. Then there is Mr. Benny who threatens

\(^{\text{14}}\) I discuss in depth the spectator stance in Chapter 3.
them with becoming *las presas*: “Take them shoes off before I call the cops” (41). The boy on the bicycle says, “Ladies lead me to heaven” (41) reminiscent of salvation through Melero’s *las mojas* (nuns), then finally, the “bum man”: “If I give you a dollar will you kiss me?” fulfilling the role of the *puta*, the whore who sells herself for money. Esperanza tells the reader, “We have to go right now, Lucy says taking Rachel’s hand because she looks like she’s thinking about that dollar” (42). Esperanza (and Lucy as well) can see the dangers in attracting male attention. She also sees how quickly one can go from being a child playing dress up to selling oneself on the streets, which is essentially the image we get here—a young girl in high heels accepting money in a sexual transaction. When she gets home and says, “We are tired of being beautiful” it is an acknowledgment of the burdens of womanhood. Incidentally, when Lucy’s mother throws them away, Esperanza notes that “no one complains” (42).

Another example of sexual abuse is in “The First Job.” Esperanza, in her attempt at economic sovereignty (though she mentions that it is also to help pay her parents’ bills) gets a job working at a photo lab. On her first day, an older coworker sexually abuses her:

An older Oriental man said hello and we talked for a while about my just starting, and he said we could be friends and next time to go in the lunchroom and sit with him, and I felt better. He had nice eyes and I didn’t feel so nervous anymore. Then he asked me if I knew what day it was, and when I said I didn’t, he said it was his birthday and would I please give him a birthday kiss. I thought I would because he was so old and just as I was about to put my lips on his cheek, he grabs my face with both hands and kisses me hard on the mouth and doesn’t let go. (55)
The violence lies in the words “grabs my face with both hands and kisses me hard on the mouth and doesn’t let go.” Esperanza is completely overpowered by someone much older and stronger than her. In this moment she becomes both the “captive one” and the “violated one.” Additionally, her violation is immediately preceded by her observation that he “had nice eyes,” which ultimately puts her at ease with him and allows him to take advantage of her. As a result, she has likely internalized that she cannot trust her own judgment and that she cannot trust men.

As the novel progresses, and Esperanza has more and more bad experiences, she increasingly participates less and less and becomes more of an observer and a storyteller. Which makes the vignette “Red Clowns” all the more devastating. While waiting and looking for her friend Sally at a carnival, Esperanza is assaulted. I plan to address Esperanza’s assault but before that happens, Sally’s character must first be addressed.

Sally has the most influence over Esperanza though she does not come into the novel until rather late (page 81). However, once she enters the novel, the vignettes either center on or at least include her and her influence on Esperanza. Her delayed entry is crucial to the story and a shrewd move on Cisneros’s part. In order for her to be so influential in Esperanza’s life, Esperanza would have needed to already have her ideas about who women are, what they do, how they act, and how they are treated. To Esperanza, a woman is a wife, mother, or lover: every woman in the novel (except Alicia), is described in reference to a paramour. A woman is beautiful thing to be looked at: every woman is described in excruciating detail whether the looker is male or female. A woman is abused: Sally, Alicia, and Minerva all come from abusive homes. A woman is a comfort: her relationship with her mother is one of the only healthy relationships in
the novel. A woman is passive/inactive: whether sitting by a window or sitting on the stoop, the women do not really move around. With the exception of “Red Clowns” and “Monkey Garden” the women of the book typically occupy a single space from which they never move. And they do nothing to change their situations. And finally, a woman is a prisoner. As just stated, the women really do not move out of their domestic spaces. They only exist within their homes or out in front of them. Esperanza and her friends are the only mobile characters who move from space to space, but of course, they are not really women yet. The exception to this example, the only woman who moves to and through different locations, is the character Sally.

Sally is La Malinche incarnate. She is passive, hyper-feminine, promiscuous, abused, and imprisoned. Esperanza, drawn in by her beauty and confidence, becomes a kind of devotee to her. She follows her around, she emulates her behavior, she stands up for her, and ultimately she personifies her in the climactic “Red Clowns” vignette. In her descriptions of Sally, Esperanza says that the boys at school think she’s beautiful and “when she laughs, she flicks her hair back like a satin shawl over her shoulders and she laughs” (81). It is important to note that Esperanza says that the boys at school think she’s beautiful—not that she does (though the way she describes and admires her shows she clearly does). She is not merely looking at her but looking at her through their eyes. Esperanza wants to be seen that way. She considers herself “an ugly daughter” (88). She asks: “Sally, who taught you to paint your eyes like Cleopatra? And if I roll the little brush with my tongue and / chew it to a point and dip it in the muddy cake, the one in the little red box, will you teach me?” (81-82). She says “I want to buy shoes just like yours, like your black ones made of suede …And one day, when my mother’s in a good mood
... I’m going to ask to buy the nylons too” (82). Esperanza idolizes (and idealizes) Sally and refuses to believe anything that is said about her behind her back: “The stories the boys tell in the coatroom, they’re not true” (82). This is Sally as Esperanza first sees her—beautiful and confident. It is easy to see that Esperanza is under her spell.

Sally embodies essentially every description of every other malinche in the novel: she is beautiful and promiscuous like Marin, abused by her father like Alicia, later abused by her husband like Minerva, and captive like Rafaela. And ultimately she is a traitor to Esperanza. Sally’s physical description is almost identical to Marin’s, which is her first connection to the other women. While Marin’s description states, “she wears dark nylons all the time and lots of makeup” (23), Sally is described as “the girl with eyes like Egypt and nylons the color of smoke” and with hair “shiny black like raven feathers” (81). Additionally, both of their chief concerns are the boys of the neighborhood and getting their attention. Marin stands outside waiting to see and be seen and Sally blows off Esperanza to stay “by the curb talking to Tito and his friends” (96)

Like Alicia who is “afraid of nothing except four-legged fur. And fathers” (32) and “black and blue” Minerva (85), Sally is the “abused” malinche. The vignette “What Sally Said” opens with: “He never hits me hard” (92) and ends with :“Then we didn’t need to worry. Until one day Sally’s father catches her talking to a boy and the next day she doesn’t come to school. And the next. Until the way Sally tells it, he just went crazy he just forgot he was her father between the buckle and the belt. You’re not my daughter, you’re not my daughter. And then he broke into his hands” (93). Like Rafaela who “gets locked indoors because her husband is afraid Rafaela will run away since she is too
beautiful to look at” (79). She is the “captive” malinche: “Her father says to be this beautiful is trouble … Then she can’t go out. Sally I mean” (81).

The malinche traits that are exclusively Sally’s are the “used” malinche and the “traitor” malinche. In “The Monkey Garden” Esperanza describes a garden that was once beautiful but over time has become abused and ugly, perhaps an allusion to Sally herself. In this vignette, Sally is hanging out and flirting with a group of boys. She is trying to get her keys back from the boys who have stolen them, but their conditions are that she kisses them all. This is another crucial scene as we again see Esperanza reflecting on the injustice of how women are treated: “Something wanted to say no when I watched Sally going into the garden with Tito’s buddies all / grinning. It was just a kiss, that’s all. A kiss for each one. So what, she said. Only how come I felt angry inside. Like something wasn’t right (96). She cannot figure out why she is so angry. This indicates that Sally’s and the boys’ behavior is typical. It is nothing to get angry about. Her anger is thus not at the behavior but at a system that normalizes that behavior. This is yet another important milestone that puts her on the path of rejecting La Malinche.

And, finally, Sally is the “traitorous” malinche. It becomes apparent in “The Monkey Garden” that Sally is not as good of a friend to Esperanza as Esperanza is to her: “I said, Sally, come on, but she wouldn’t. She stayed by the curb talking to Tito and his friends. Play with the kids if you want, she said, I’m staying here” (96). In “Red Clowns” she turns her back on Esperanza again and leaves her by herself resulting in tragedy. In a frantic, stream-of-consciousness vignette Esperanza says, “I was waiting by the red clowns. I was standing by the tilt-a-whirl where you said. And anyway I don’t like carnivals … I like to be with you, Sally. You’re my friend. But that big boy, where did he
take you? I waited such a long time. I waited by the red clowns, just like you said, but you never came, you never came for me.” (99-100). Sally betrays Esperanza, leaving her alone at a carnival to be preyed upon and forcing her to become one of the *malinches* of the neighborhood—the “raped” *malinche*:

Sally, you lied. It wasn’t what you said at all. What he did. Where he touched me. I didn’t want it, Sally … I waited such a long time. I waited by the / red clowns, just like you said, but you never came, you never came for me … Sally Sally a hundred times Why didn’t you hear me when I called? Why didn’t you tell them to leave me alone? … He wouldn’t let me go. He said I love you, I love you, Spanish girl. (99-100).

The importance of this last line cannot be stressed enough. It evokes the history of Spain’s colonization of Mexico, the raping of the land and of Doña Marina (*La Malinche*) herself. The anthropologist Graciela Lagarde y de los Ríos, writes, “Putas are the object of (dominant) male polygamy … their body incarnates eroticism and their being-of-the-others (‘su-ser-de-otros’)” (qtd in Melero 16). Of this last term Melero says, “This last set of words is specially telling when applied to the whore, where the ‘being’ in ‘being-of-others’ drops its intended meaning and becomes ‘belonging-to-others.’ The woman, now an eroticized, colonized body, belongs not to the self but to the males who possess her body” (16). He colonizes her. In this moment, Esperanza is *La Malinche*. In every way. Captive. Raped. Betrayed. Immobile. And a “Spanish girl”—as in belonging to the Spanish people (Cortés).

The next vignette, “Linoleum Roses,” is Sally’s last appearance in the novel. It opens, “Sally got married like we knew she would, young and not ready but married just
the same. She met a marshmallow salesman at a school bazaar, and she married him in
another state where it’s legal to get married before eighth grade. She has her husband and
her house now, her pillowcases and her plates. She says she is in love, but I think she did
it to escape” (101). Of note here is the fact that she is not yet in eighth grade. This is the
first mention of her age, but in viewing her description, it would seem to imply that
womanhood is not predicated upon age so much as experience. Additionally, Petty, in
“The ‘Dual’-ing Images,” seems to think that this is a crossover moment for Sally: “As a
wife she gains respectability and a propriety of which her culture approves; her sexuality
has been contained within the proper confines of marriage, and now she has the potential
to recreate the Virgin’s role as nurturer and worshipped love” (126). This is an optimistic
(and rather reductive) perspective. One does not simply get to embody La Virgen de
Guadalupe just because she becomes a wife. It is an embodiment, not a mere title such
as Mrs. Her argument becomes particularly problematic when one considers the
following passage:

She is happy, except sometimes her husband gets angry and once he broke
the door where his foot went through, though most days he is okay. Except
he won’t let / her talk on the telephone. And he doesn’t let her look out the
window. And he doesn’t like her friends, so nobody gets to visit her unless
he is working. She sits at home because she is afraid to go outside without
his permission … She likes looking at the walls, at how neatly their
corners meet, the linoleum roses on the floor, the ceiling smooth as
wedding cake. (101-102)
She is still very much the “abused,” “used,” “captive,” La Malinche she began as. She has gone from her father’s abusive home to her husband’s. The title of the vignette, “Linoleum Roses,” tells of the artificiality of the content within. It seems to say, “These roses are not real. They are plastic. They are fake.” The last sentence, too, speaks to the veneer of her big crossover moment. The construction of how the corners fit, the artificiality of the linoleum roses, and the ceiling like wedding cake are all manufactured to look perfect without actually being perfect.

The placement of the vignette and the fact that it is the last time Sally is in the novel is an important detail. I argue that this is Esperanza’s goodbye not only to Sally but also to life on Mango Street and life as a malinche. She sees that even if one can be redeemed through marriage, nothing really changes. To remain in the barrio, to remain on Mango Street would be to remain a malinche. Leaving Mango Street becomes the leitmotif for every vignette that follows. Also of interest is the lack of men in the remaining vignettes—a significant exclusion. Males play a part, whether big or small, in almost every single vignette in the novel. Their expulsion from the remaining vignettes signifies Esperanza’s rejection of men and, ultimately, of the La Malinche archetype.

The vignette “Three Sisters” tells the story of a funeral. When Lucy and Rachel’s baby sister dies Esperanza attends the wake at their house where she meets the titular three sisters, noticeably without husbands. Of the sisters, Esperanza states, “They must’ve known, the sisters. They had the power and could sense what was what. They said, Come here … She’s special. Yes, she’ll go very far. Yes, yes, hmmm” (104). The sisters then tell her to close her eyes and make a silent wish. After she does, one of the sisters tells her, “When you leave you must remember to come back for the others. A
circle, understand? You will always be Esperanza. You will always be Mango Street. You can’t erase what you know. You can’t forget who you are” (105). Esperanza, stunned, thinks, “Then I didn’t know what do say. It was as if she could read my mind, as if she knew what I had wished for, and I felt ashamed for having made such a selfish wish” (105). The sisters are reminiscent of Shakespeare’s “Weird Sisters” who prophesy Macbeth’s kingship and put the entire plot into motion. It is fitting that this prophecy takes place at a funeral. One might read it as the death of one life—Esperanza the child, the helpless, the malinche—and the birth of another—Esperanza, the woman and writer. The sisters’ words are repeated in the next vignette, “Alicia & I Talking on Edna’s Steps.” Alicia tells her, “Like it or not you are Mango Street, and one day you’ll come back too” (107). In “A House of My Own,” Esperanza makes an explicit renunciation of men, which completes her rejection of both the La Virgen and La Malinche archetypes. In its entirety, it reads:

Not a flat. Not an apartment in back. Not a man’s house. Not a daddy’s. A house all my own. With my porch and my pillow, my pretty purple petunias. My books and my stories. My two shoes waiting beside the bed. Nobody to shake a stick at. Nobody’s garbage to pick up after. Only a house quiet as snow, a space for myself to go, clean as paper before the poem. (108)

In a search for self-sovereignty, it cannot get much clearer than this. She opens with “Not a flat. Not an apartment in back”—the structure of the space itself has to be an independent entity, completely unattached to any power structure. In addition, the repetition of the first person possessive—“my own,” “my porch,” “my pillow,” “my
petunias,” “my books,” “my stories,” “my shoes”—implies ownership. She is not at the mercy of a landlord, and she owns her own property. There is a material and economic sovereignty that is implied in this vision for her future. There is a sexual sovereignty as well—“Not a man’s house. Not a daddy’s.” Unlike Estrella, Esperanza’s sexual sovereignty comes in finding freedom from it, not freedom through it. Her vision of her future frees her from the La Malinche. Incidentally, there are also hints that she is rejecting the La Virgen de Guadalupe archetype as well: “Nobody to shake a stick at. Nobody’s garbage to pick up after.” These statements imply motherhood and the constant caretaking of other individuals. Esperanza rejects both of these options in this short passage. Additionally, she makes a subtle move to reject them in the next and final vignette, “Mango Says Goodbye Sometimes.” She states: “One day I will pack my bags of books and paper. One day I will say goodbye to Mango. I am too strong for her to keep me here forever” (110). Esperanza genders Mango Street. In her feminizing it she alludes to the models of womanhood that her culture offers her—models that are not strong enough to keep her locked into them. She says, “She does not hold me with both arms. She sets me free” (110). Esperanza is liberated from the good/bad dichotomy in the maternal archetypes and free to live in the in-between.

There are indications that Esperanza will choose this path early on in the novel. As stated earlier, she has many moments of reflection that show her to be more insightful and sensitive to her environment than those in her company. “Alicia Who Sees Mice,” for instance, is one of the sharpest critiques of the barrio, the gender roles, and the domestic sphere that Esperanza ultimately rejects. In full, it states:
Close your eyes and they’ll go away, her father says, or You’re just imagining. And anyway, a woman’s place is sleeping so she can wake up early with the tortilla star, the one that appears early just in time to rise and catch the hind legs hide behind the sink, beneath the four-clawed tub, under the swollen floorboards nobody fixes, in the corner of your eyes.

Alicia, whose mama died, is sorry there is no one older to rise and make the lunchbox tortillas. Alicia, who inherited her mam’s rolling pin and sleepiness, is young and smart and studies for the first time at the university. Two trains and a bus, because she doesn’t want to spend her / whole life in a factory or behind a rolling pin. Is a good girl, my friend, studies all night and see the mice, the ones her father says do not exist. Is afraid of nothing except four-legged fur. And fathers. (31-32)

Esperanza qualifies her as a “good girl” and recognizes her efforts to break free of the barrio. Alicia seems to be a proto-Esperanza figure. She sees the injustice of her gender and the relegated roles it prescribes and she resists that role by studying and by setting goals for herself even as she fulfills it by rising early to make tortillas. She, and eventually Esperanza, recognizes that it is education that will set her free. This point is underscored in the end when she makes another appearance in “Alicia & I Talking on Edna’s Steps.” She gives Esperanza a purse with the word Guadalajara on it, representing the bigger world out there. However, she also reminds Esperanza, “Like it or not you are Mango Street, and one day you’ll come back too” (107), indicating that she should not forget where she comes from.
There are more indications of Esperanza’s eventual resistance threaded through
the various vignettes: In “Hips” Esperanza distinguishes biologically the differences
between men and women: “But most important, hips are scientific They bloom like roses,
I continue because it’s obvious I’m the only one who can speak with any authority; I have
science on my side” (Cisneros 50). She knows the names of her body parts and what they
are used for. Furthermore, in “Sire,” Esperanza’s mother tells her that “those girls are the
ones that go into alleys. Lois who can’t tie her shoes. Where does he take her?” (73). Her
mother tells her to stay away from him (and presumably from boys like him). Through
these interactions, Esperanza internalizes these various messages and codes, determining
where she stands in all of it. Though she ultimately falls prey to La Malinche’s fate as
“the raped one,” I argue Esperanza’s strength and ultimate answer to it lies in the vignette
“Four Skinny Trees.”

In reference to the Four Skinny Trees she states, “They are the only ones who
understand me. I am the only one who understands them. Four skinny trees with skinny
necks and pointy elbows like mine. Four who do not belong here but are here. Four
raggedy excuses planted by the city” (74). She continues, “When I am too sad and too
skinny to keep keeping, when I am a tiny thing against so many bricks, then it is I look at
trees” (75). Katherine Crawford-Garret argues, “that Esperanza views the fate of
neighborhood women as ‘so many bricks’ threatening to determine her future, and as a
result she is beginning to experiment with the idea of leaving” (104). I do not disagree
with her analysis; however, in her assessment, she skips over some of the more important
lines that would give a more layered reading of the vignette: “Their strength is secret.
They send ferocious roots beneath the ground. They grow up and they grow down and
grab the earth between their hairy toes and bite the sky with violent teeth and never quit their anger. This is how they keep … Four who grew despite concrete. Four who reach and do not forget to reach” (74-75). These lines seem to imply that Esperanza, though “beginning to experiment with the idea of leaving” also finds strength in where she comes from—her “roots.” She can break through concrete and bite at the sky but she also grows down as she grows up. She becomes more firmly rooted in her environment and that entrenchment is what drives her to reach higher. Furthermore, the fact that there are four of them would imply that she is referring to her circle of friends at the time (this is before Sally): Esperanza, Nenny, Lucy, and Rachel. If this is the case perhaps Esperanza is giving them some hope for the future as well. Furthermore, if the trees are symbols for the people who give her strength then perhaps the roots she refers to are a symbol for her mother—her source of life.

Esperanza’s mother is the one La Virgen de Guadalupe figure in her life. In “Hair,” where she is first introduced, we are told, “But my mother’s hair, my mother’s hair, like little rosettes, like little candy circles all curly and pretty … sweet to put your nose into when she is holding you, holding you and you feel safe, is the warm smell of bread before you bake it, is the / smell when she makes room for you on her side of the bed still warm with her skin, and you sleep near her” (6-7). She is quintessentially maternal and a protector. Immediately the reader understands that Esperanza’s relationship with her mother is one of love and comfort.

Her mother is also the only one in the novel who encourages Esperanza to resist the two archetypes Chicanas are often forced into. In “A Smart Cookie,” the vignette opens with “I could’ve been somebody, you know” (90). Esperanza listens to her mother
sing opera and bemoan her missed opportunities: “I could’ve been somebody, you know? Esperanza, you go to school. Study hard … Look at my comadres. She means Izaura whose husband left and Yolanda whose husband is dead. Got to take care all your own” (91). Petty views this in a negative light. She states, “she is not contented with her life … Apparently, being the nurturing, self-sacrificing mother whose hair ‘smells like bread’ is not sufficient to make Esperanza’s mother’s life complete” (123-124). However, Petty is working under the assumption that anyone who regrets a youthful indiscretion (such as dropping out of school) or anyone who has talent/ability (such as singing opera) is discontent in a maternal role. My view is that, like many mothers, she wants more for her daughter than she made for herself. She is never really featured as unhappy. On the contrary, she seems to love her children and her maternal role. I would argue she is just teaching her daughter not to make the same mistakes.

This brings me to my final point before I close this chapter. Though Chicanas might be limited in the roles prescribed for them through their culture—La Virgen de Guadalupe or La Malinche—they should not necessarily be considered disenfranchised or subjects to be pitied. Like I argued for Esperanza’s mother, many women find their maternal roles just as empowering as the women who resist them. Cecilia Ballí in her personal essay, “Thirty-Eight” states:

Feminists often claim that we should not have to give up ourselves for others. Yet many women writers of color have reminded us that sacrifice and motherhood go hand in hand. From the moment a woman conceives her child, she offers up part of her body for something bigger. So, if
feminists should not sacrifice, but mothers must does it follow that mothers cannot be feminists? (196)

Of course mothers can be feminists. Melero comments on this, saying:

Unlike feminism with Anglo-American roots, which supported gender equality under the notion that men and women were equal and, therefore, should have equal rights, feminism with roots in Spain and Latin America sought equal rights for men and women, but embracing the idea of innate sexual difference … This theorization of sexual difference accepted and even embraced traditional constructs of femininity such as motherhood.

(40)

And I would argue that Esperanza’s mother proves this. She performs her feminism by empowering her daughter to be more than an archetype and to get an education. Likewise, Cisneros’s mother would fall into the category of a La Virgen feminist: “What does her mother say about all this? She puts her hand on her hips and boasts, ‘She gets it from me.’ … She knows what it is to live a life filled with regrets, and she doesn’t want her daughter to live that life too. She has always supported the daughter’s projects, so long as she went to school” (Cisneros xiv).

Finally, though both Viramontes and Cisneros have written Entwicklungsroman novels, Cisneros’s differs in that her novel might also be further classified as Künstlerroman—a novel of an artist’s growth to maturity. Esperanza serves as the novel’s narrator, but this is also a role she will eventually come to play in her own life as she grows into a writer. In the last vignette, “Mango Says Goodbye Sometimes,” Esperanza says:
I like to tell stories. I tell them inside my head … I make a story for my life, for each step my brown shoe takes. I say, “And so she trudged up the wooden stairs, her sad brown shoes taking her to the house she never liked.” I like to tell stories. I am going to tell you a story about a girl who didn’t want to belong. We didn’t always live on Mango Street … but what I / remember most is Mango Street, sad red house, the house I belong but do not belong to. (109-110)

Returning to “Four Skinny Trees” remember that Esperanza originally said, “Four who do not belong” (74). She now says, “I am going to tell you a story about a girl who didn’t want to belong” (109). There is a distinction to be made between not belonging and not wanting to belong. Once believing that she is not meant to be on Mango Street or that she did not fit in on Mango Street, she now sees that she can \textit{choose} whether or not she belongs there. And she can \textit{choose} whether or not she remains there. She writes her own story. Hélène Cixous says, “Woman must write her self: must write about women and bring women to writing, from which they have been driven away as violently as from their bodies … Woman must put herself into the text—as into the world and history—by her own movement” (qtd in Hua 56). Additionally quoted in Hua is Nancy Peterson who says, “The processes of healing trauma can involve reconstructing, intersubjective witnessing, and mourning the traumatic individual and collective past” (60). Peterson argues that in order to heal you need both the “intra” and “inter”—that is to turn inward and to reach outward in order to heal from a trauma. This is exactly what we see Esperanza doing through these vignettes. She slowly goes from a participant to an observer, from character to author. Her branches reach away from the barrio while her
roots stay firmly implanted in the concrete. As she begins to write her self, she begins to heal.
Anzaldúa’s Borderland Theory and her “New Mestiza” are contingent upon hybridity and living in the in-between. It relies upon someone (typically a woman) who refuses to subscribe to one side or another of whatever border is put before her. In *One High Heel on Each Side of the Border*, Cook asserts that this new *mestizaje* leads to a woman-centered narrative that may become a “representational space and trope for all kinds of hybridity” (33). However, Cook (somewhat paradoxically) also views Anzaldúa’s Borderlands Theory as such a peaceful presence of hybridity that she actually argues that the *New Mestiza* model “works best as a model for adults as most teenagers will have to transition painfully and often amongst their borderlands identities in ways that do not reflect peaceful coexistence amongst hybrid influences” (31). Her argument is such that adolescence is too painful to represent fully the *New Mestizaje*. But if we take Anzaldúa’s definition of the *literal* borderlands, that between the US and Mexico, it is obvious that it is not such a passive peaceable place: “The U.S.-Mexican border *es una herida abierta* [it is a 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” (Anzaldúa 25). The borderlands is a very painful place in which to begin and to exist. It is a place of conflict and therefore, I argue, is the perfect model to discuss Chicana adolescence, despite what other critics might suggest.

In the past two chapters I have attempted to show how both Estrella and Esperanza fulfill this requirement, neither of them subscribing to either *La Virgen de Guadalupe* or *La Malinche* archetypes. What is interesting to me is that they accomplish
the same thing by taking two radically different approaches: Estrella embraces her sexuality, Esperanza rejects it. They are both equally effective forms of protests, however, as they each reject a predestined path opting instead for self-actualization. For Estrella, after being raised and disciplined through La Virgen de Guadalupe culture, she rebels by embracing a sexual self and conquering the barn. Esperanza, being witness and participant to La Malinche culture in the barrio and after being forced into a sexual role, rejects it, opting instead to leave the barrio and make a life for herself—not through a man. Because they have successfully and effectively rebelled against their discrete archetypes and have opted to live for themselves, they both qualify as being one of the New Mestizaje.

This chapter will explore instances of hybridity that are seen within both Viramontes’s Under the Feet of Jesus and Cisneros’s The House on Mango Street to understand the “new Mestizaje” in terms of hybridity beyond Estrella’s and Esperanza’s rejection of a female archetype. In this chapter, I will discuss the spectator/participant stance in both Estrella and Esperanza. Through investigating both Estrella’s and Esperanza’s reluctance to subscribe to a limited dichotomy, their diverging spectator/participant stances, and their eventual self-actualization and empowerment, I plan to show how two female protagonists from two starkly different worlds—rural versus urban—can each embody Anzaldúa’s “mestizo consciousness.”

The vignette “And Some More” in Cisneros’s The House on Mango Street exemplifies most clearly the dichotomies that Chicanas are forced into. The vignette opens, “The Eskimos got thirty different names for snow, I say. I read it in a book … There ain’t thirty different kinds of snow, Lucy says. There are two kinds. The clean kind
and the dirty kind, clean and dirty. Only two” (35). Petty, in “The ‘Dual’-in Images,” correctly observes of this passage, “females, like the snow, are not seen in Latino culture as unique individuals but are labeled as either ‘good’ women or ‘bad’ women, as ‘clean’ or ‘dirty,’ as ‘virgins’ or ‘malinches’” (121). Women, not only Chicanas, are often forced into a Madonna/Whore dichotomy. Cisneros resists this idea by having her protagonist refuse to accept that there are only two kinds of snow (or women).

Estrella and Esperanza both possess this “mestizo consciousness” not only by not subscribing to the traditional female archetypes prescribed by their shared culture but also by not subscribing to any other traditional dichotomies. Both protagonists consistently explore and inhabit opposing gender roles, spaces, and cultures deciding instead to live in the borderlands of the “in-between.” For instance, Estrella vacillates between the feminine and masculine in her actions—she experiments sexually and defends her family (males included) against an unjust system. For instance, in one of the most important scenes in the book, Estrella moves between the masculine and feminine when met with injustice at a local medical clinic. (I also correlate this with a vacillation between the spectator and participant in the next section.) After Alejo is poisoned by pesticide, the family makes a Herculean effort to get him medical attention. The conflict arises when the nurse requires their last nine dollars for essentially just telling them he needs to go to a hospital. However, it is their last nine dollars and getting him to the hospital twenty miles away would ensure they would not have the gas to get back. Estrella, fed up with the injustice acts as protector of her family:

Estrella walked out the door and out to the car. She didn’t know what she was about to do, but had to do something to get the money for the gas for
the hospital for Alejo … Estrella opened the back door, pulled open the hidden trunk door, grabbed the crowbar which laid next to the red jack, heavy, iron cold, and walked back to the clinic. Perfecto was already walking out with Alejo, the mother behind them, but they froze as she approached. The moved aside to let Estrella pass, then U-turned and followed her. Perfecto laid Alejo on the vacant chairs … Estrella moved forward to the desk, the crowbar locked in her two fists.

--Give us back our money. (148-149)

Perfecto Flores becomes passive and impotent against the system of injustice that keeps the family, and the Mexican people, subjugated. Estrella thus has no choice but to take control for him. Melero notes of the Mexican Revolution, “The fact that Mexican men are ‘inclinados’ or bending over so that the regime can trample them, turns them into spectators or, worse yet, abject victims of the Revolution when they should be the protagonists” (72). She continues, “If passivity is conventionally culturally laudable in women, it is not in men. Women must become active when men abandon their own culturally assigned place as men, that of protectors of humanity” (72-73). Afterward, when Estrella gets the money she says she “felt like two Estrellas” (150)—that is the passive feminine and the active masculine. However, she notes that “The money felt wet and ugly and sweaty like the swamp between her legs” (150). She connects the sweaty money to the “swamp between her legs”—to her innate femaleness. It implies that a female can be both feminine and masculine. Citing Gutiérrez de Mendoza, an activist and journalist during the Mexican Revolution, Melero notes, “[Gutiérrez de Mendoza] advocates for a model that sheds the binary of passive (female)/active (male). The break
with this binary at the heart of gender ideology is significant because it disrupts the notion of gender difference that relegates women to the role of non-presence: non-doing and therefore non-being” (72). Through activating Estrella as the revolutionary in this scene, Viramontes, like Gutiérrez de Mendoza, is also advocating for a hybridity instead of a binary.

Esperanza breaks from the binary through her ways of thinking of herself. In “Beautiful and Cruel” she states:

I have decided not to grow up tame like the others who lay their necks on the threshold waiting for the ball and chain. / In the movies there is always one with red red lips who is beautiful and cruel … Her power is her own. She will not give it away. I have begun my own quiet war. Simple. Sure. I am one who leaves the table like a man, without putting back the chair or picking up the plate. (88-89)

In these lines we understand Esperanza’s definitions of both masculinity and femininity. To be masculine is to be untamed, to be free (of the ball and chain, implying marriage), and to reject domestic duties. Gutiérrez de Mendoza says that “women are being forced to leave their rightful place as passive homemakers because men have forsaken their own place at the head of the Mexican table” (qtd in Melero 73). This is probably more applicable toward Estrella and Perfecto Flores at the clinic. For Esperanza, she does not need to be forced into a role. No man has to abdicate his position, Esperanza is happy to usurp him. There does not need to be a war going on, Esperanza has begun it herself, “her own quiet war.” However, she also finds power in the feminine, identifying the women in movies with the “red red lips” as the most powerful. She finds empowerment in both the
masculine and feminine and determines not to subscribe to either of them exclusively but both of them inclusively. To sum up, Estrella embodies masculinity physically; Esperanza does so mentally.

Additionally, Estrella and Esperanza explore different spaces. Estrella occupies the 1st and 3rd world by working as a migrant but still attending school when she can. And Esperanza, by the end of *The House on Mango Street*, decides to leave Mango Street and find a house of her own. And perhaps most obviously, both protagonists straddle the line between adulthood and girlhood while also embracing both their U.S. and Mexican cultures through speaking both English and Spanish. This is especially pertinent to Estrella who at one point acts as a translator for Perfecto and at another reads to her friend Maxine who is not able to. By remaining in the borderland and by not choosing one side or the other, they are both free to “imagine a self, free of and uncontaminated by power” (Fine 41).

In the introduction to Anzaldúa’s *Borderlands/La Frontera*, Cantú and Hurtado state:

> Living in the borderlands produces knowledge by being within a system while also retaining the knowledge of an outsider who comes from outside the system. This ‘outsider within’ status gives Chicanas’ sense of self a layered complexity that is captured in Anzaldúa’s concept of mestizo consciousness … The basic concept involves the ability to hold multiple social perspectives while simultaneously maintaining a center that revolves around fighting against concrete material forms of oppression. (7).
Both Estrella and Esperanza are able to inhabit the “mestizo consciousness” because they each take on this “outsider within” stance by moving fluidly between the roles of spectator and participant. Katherine Crawford-Garrett asserts, “To spectators, unhealthy relationships seem quite obvious … To the participants, however, … the objective assessment remains elusive” (95). What she is saying here, essentially, is that it is too hard to analyze a painting when one is right up against it. Details are missed; connections seem fuzzy. Proper analysis requires one to step back and take an objective point of view, to see the entire picture. When it comes to unhealthy relationships, outsiders are the ones looking at the picture from across the room, understanding that the composition might be off, whereas the participants have their noses right up against the canvas. Both female protagonists remain on the margins to analyze their environments. It is through this analysis that they are able to understand the injustice of their gendered positions and eventually resist them, similar to their sexual experiences though, they each take opposing paths to find their freedom, implying there is more than one way “to be”—for instance, ser and estar. As both Chicanas come from two different worlds, one from a rural environment and one from an urban, had they taken the same path, it might imply there is only one way out of their subaltern states. By introducing two opposing strategies, I argue, it sends the message that regardless of one’s current environment or status, there is always another option. One doesn’t have to settle for estar—a role. They can embody ser—a permanent state of being (Melero 86).

Crawford-Garrett’s article, “Leaving Mango Street” utilizes Britton’s theory of the spectator stance in order to analyze Esperanza’s character. However, while there has been much written on “Esperanza as spectator,” “Esperanza as writer,” “Esperanza as
feminist\textsuperscript{15},” there has been little if any written on Estrella as such, which is where I offer my intervention. I contend that Crawford-Garrett’s argument (and Britton by extension) can be turned on its head to apply to Estrella. Like Esperanza, she inhabits both spectator and participant roles at different times, but Estrella follows an opposite trajectory, going from spectator to participant. I also extend Crawford-Garrett’s argument to illuminate aspects of Esperanza that, I believe, were overlooked in her assessment.

According to Britton, participation precludes “both reflection and evaluation, manifesting itself as action without thought” (qtd in Crawford-Garrett 96). Though Crawford-Garrett rightly argues that “Esperanza’s journey through the text traces a trajectory of dwindling participation” (96), she fails to speculate as to why that is. In Chapter Two I argued that each time Esperanza ventures into the realm of womanhood, each time she participates, therein follows a trauma of some sort, typically some form sexual assault, most obvious incidents being the “older Oriental man” in “The First Job” and ultimately her rape in “Red Clowns.” These incidents actually force her into, or more accurately, back into, a spectator stance. As she observes the world around her, she sees how the beautiful the women are, how they are viewed through others’ eyes. She views herself as an “ugly daughter” (88). She ventures out to participate, I would argue, in order to get closer to being those beautiful girls. However, when she tries to participate she inevitably obtains a negative result, driving her back to a spectator stance. She gets a taste of girls and women around her and how they are treated, absorbing and internalizing

\textsuperscript{15} See Elizabeth Coonrod Martínez’s “Crossing Gender Borders: Sexual Relationships and Chicana Artistic Identity”; Leslie Petty’s “The ‘Dual’-ing Images of La Malinche and La Virgen de Guadalupe in Cisneros’s The House on Mango Street”; and Katherine Crawford-Garrett’s “Leaving Mango Street: Speech, Action, and the Construction of Narrative in Britton’s Spectator Stance”
information from her environment, and through this, she learns about what it means to be a woman or *malinche*, and inevitably chooses to no longer participate, but to remain an observer of those around her. After the three sisters prophecy, she interacts with only one person for the rest of the novel, Alicia—the one who studies, the only other girl in the novel who is working to get out of the barrio. She says, “I like to tell stories. I tell them inside my head” (109). She does not tell them to any one else presumably because she is no longer interacting with anyone else. She has assumed the role of the pure spectator—a writer. She interacts with her text and that is all we get to see. Through her spectator stance, she is able to stand away from the painting, to evaluate her life effectively, freeing herself of “the ghost” (110), that is her traumatic past.

Conversely, Estrella in *Under the Feet of Jesus*, finds her freedom and power by participating. Her position as a spectator is not quite as obvious as Esperanza’s; however, if we utilize Britton’s theory of displaced and embedded speech, her trajectory from initial spectator to eventual participant becomes rather obvious. Crawford-Garrett notes, “According to Britton, embedded speech occurs in the here and now while displaced speech is used to ‘refer to, recount, or interpret an experience from the past’(p.98)” (100). When using displaced speech, she notes, “the speaker is concerned primarily with other times and places, not present surroundings” (101). Much of the language surrounding and pertaining to Estrella in the novel uses the past or past perfect tense, which indicates both displaced speech and a spectator stance. For instance, “What Estrella remembered most of her real father was an orange. He *had peeled* a huge orange for her in an orchard where they stopped to pee” (12); “The women in the camps *had advised* the mother, *To run away from your husband would be a mistake* … Instead, it was her father *who’d ran*
“Estrella hadn’t remembered a lot of those years except the twins started calling her mama” (13); “She had opened the tool chest” (24); Until then, it had never occurred to Estrella that she was dirty” (24). This displaced language permeates the novel from beginning to nearly the end. It is within these moments and events of reflection and inaction, though, that Estrella is able to recognize, like Esperanza, that “she doesn’t want to belong.” It also makes her instances of embedded, active speech and her empowerment through it all the more evident.

Embedded speech typically incites a “call to action” (Crawford-Garrett 102). And the novel clearly illustrates the power of language and Estrella’s beliefs in its ability to give or withhold power and to incite action. For instance, the reader is told, “Estrella pointed to the bottle because she wanted to tell him how good she felt but didn’t know how to build the house of words she could invite him into” (70). To Estrella, speech is the key to empowerment16. It provides the tools to ask for or demand what is wanted and to allow or refuse others and their power. The connection between “tools” and “words” is made evident very early in the novel:

She had opened the tool chest and all that jumbled steel inside the box, the iron bars and things with handles, the funny-shaped objects, seemed as confusing and foreign as the alphabet she could not decipher … The teachers in the schools did the same, never giving her the information she

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16 This makes the novel’s euphemistic language all the more ironic. However, as Melero’s notes, “Duplicitous language or double-voiced discourse allows marginal subjects to position their speech in a less threatening space so as not to alienate their intended audience … Adopting masked language as a discursive strategy allows women to swerve from the central sequences of male literary history and enact a uniquely female process of revision and redefinition so as to manage ‘the difficult task of achieving true female literary authority by simultaneously conforming to and subverting patriarchal literary standards’ (Gilbert and Gubar 1362-1363)” (Melero 29).
wanted. Estrella would ask over and over, So what is this, and point to the diagonal lines written in chalk on the blackboard with a dirty fingernail. The script A’s had the curlicue of a pry bar, a hammerhead split like a V. The small i’s resembled nails. So tell me. But some of the teachers were more concerned about the dirt under her fingernails. (24)

Estrella inextricably links letters and words with tools and their ability to either build things up or tear things down. To her, language is absolute power. Within the classroom the teachers both have and withhold that power by ignoring her requests to learn how to read and focusing instead on how dirty or clean she is. In this, she also associates cleanliness with power, made clearer when the family visits the clinic: “The nurse’s white uniform and red lipstick and flood of carnations made her even more self-conscious. It amazed Estrella that some people never seemed to perspire while others like herself sweated gallons” (137). She makes the connection that those who are dirty or sweaty are not worthy of education and, by extension, a place in the power structure. But if she can learn the same skills as them, the possibility exists to empower herself. On the next page:

Perfecto Flores taught her the names that went with the tools … names that gave meaning to the tools. Tools to build, bury, tear down, rearrange and repair, a box of reasons his hands took pride in. She lifted the pry bar in her hand, felt the coolness of iron and power of function, weight the significance it awarded her, and soon she came to understand how essential it was to know these things. That was when she began to read. (25)
Within the novel Estrella has very few scenes with actual dialogue; most of the speech is displaced narrative speech. However, where she does have dialogue (or embedded speech), there typically follows an action that shows she is in control and feeling more empowered supporting her assumption that language is inextricably tied up with power.

The first instance of embedded speech from Estrella comes when she gets into a fight with her friend Maxine. Maxine’s comes from a white migrant family and is considered white trash by the rest of the camp. To illustrate how active the language is in this scene, I include it in full below:

--Why your papa so old? Maxine asked.

--He’s not my papa

--Then why you let your grandpa fuck your ma fo’?

Estrella stopped. She halted Maxine with a jerk of her arm.

--What? … She isn’t fucking him.

--And how’d you know that?

--‘Cause he’s not my papa.

--Jesus Henry Christ! Maxine replied incredulously … Sweet toast, don’t you know nothin’? … They ain’t dry-humping.

Estrella pulled Maxine’s stringy sandy hair with such pure hatred it startled her. For a moment she felt as if she could kill the white girl. She clawed and wrapped Maxine’s hair around her fingers, pulling clump after clump” (34-35).

“She halted,” “Estrella pulled,” “She clawed and wrapped”—the active verbs themselves “defy the passive mold” (Melero 66). She is as active as the language in this
scene and she enacts that power over “the white girl.” There are racial implications in this language. The white family is as bad off as the Mexican family, possibly more so since Estrella is able to read and Maxine cannot. Estrella’s literacy and the embedded speech that precedes this confrontation works on a broader scale that allows Estrella to enact her power over the white race in order to pummel it.

In another example, I made the argument in Chapter One that Viramontes gives Estrella full control of her body by allowing her to discover her sexuality and to take control of situations by establishing herself as an authority. I used the scene in which Estrella makes music with a soda bottle by directing the flow of air with her thumb, while Alejo’s attempts remain clumsy. This scene was a prelude to her losing her virginity; however, it is also another instance in which embedded speech appears and invites action: “Give it here, she said, and pointed to the bottle … She dunked her top lip on the spout and placed her thumb near her lip and grooved a breath into the hollow and it sounded full of longing Estrella blew some more deep and low notes, her thumb directing the flow of air” (71). When she returns the bottle to him, he also tries to make music but to no avail. But she helps him: “she took his warm thumb slightly in her trembling hand, Here” (71). With her as his teacher, he ends up blowing a weak note. The power of speech should not be underestimated in this scene. With the simple use of an imperative sentence—Give it here—Estrella goes from not knowing “how to build the house of words she could invite him into” to “[taking] his warm thumb slightly in her trembling hand.”

Finally, as I mentioned earlier in the chapter, one of the most important scenes in the book is when the family takes Alejo to the clinic. It is here that Estrella moves from
spectator to participant. We already know that Alejo is poisoned by pesticide and that the conflict arises when the nurse requires their last nine dollars for essentially just telling them he needs to go to a hospital twenty miles away, essentially ensuring they would not have the gas to get back. What follows is approximately three pages of nearly all displaced speech: “Estrella glanced around the room … she would do anything at this point” (147); “Estrella thought for a moment … she tried to make her mind work” (147); “Estrella stared at the mother’s resentfulness, at whom, what, she didn’t know” (147); “She remembered the tar pits” (148); “Estrella had figured it out” (148); and finally, “Estrella walked out the door and out to the care. She didn’t know what she was about to do” (148, all emphases mine). The final quotation is the moment that Estrella goes from spectator to participant and underscores Britton’s point that participation in an event “manifests itself as action without thought” (qtd in Crawford-Garrett 96). Her embedded speech is as follows:

   --Give us back our money.
   --Excuse me. …
   --I’ll smash these windows first, then all these glass jars if you don’t give us back our money. …

   Estrella slammed the crowbar down on the desk, shattering the school pictures of the nurse’s children, sending the pencils flying to the floor … Estrella knocked the folders which spread like cards on the floor … Estrella held out her hand, palm up.

   The nurse stepped forward gingerly … and unlocked the box and spilled the coins and dollars on the desk and backed away. Estrella
counted nine dollars and seven cents. She … showed the nurse what she had taken.

--You should have let Perfecto fix the toilet, she whispered. But it was then that Estrella realized the nurse was sobbing into her hands …. She saw the nurse trembling before her. (149-150)

Cook notes of this scene: “Alejo’s illness sets the stage for Estrella’s recognition of her stronger self and her ability to defend herself and her family against injustice” (Cook 187). Though I agree with her, Cook misses the instances of sexual empowerment and Estrella’s relationship to language that allows her to realize her stronger, more assertive self. Additionally, this viewpoint essentially takes away an element of female empowerment and gives credit to the male with the understanding that a female can only realize her strength through a man’s weakness. Alejo’s illness does not “set the stage” for her to stand up to the nurse, it simply enables her to act on the stage that she has set up for herself in all the events leading up to this point. And it is when the family returns from leaving Alejo at the hospital that Estrella, fully empowered now, conquers the barn.

Esperanza and Estrella continue to find self-empowerment through their spectator and participant stances, respectively. Esperanza begins her story as a participant and finds empowerment through being a spectator, while Estrella beings as a spectator and finds empowerment as a participant. It is my view that the reason Esperanza and Estrella take such different stances is because that is also where they started. Estrella, embedded in La Virgen de Guadalupe culture, rebels against the female model of sacrifice and suppression of female sexuality by embracing a sexual self and becoming assertive. Whereas Esperanza, inured with La Malinche culture, rebels against the system by
refusing to participate in it and rejecting the sexual model set for her by the women in the barrio. As a result, the both end up living somewhere in-between—two different roads, but the same destination.

Before concluding this section on spectator/participant, I would like to note that something Esperanza and Estrella have in common is that they each are forced into their respective roles. As noted earlier, whenever Esperanza ventures into the realm of the malinches she is forced back into the spectator stance by a traumatic event. Estrella similarly remains a spectator until she can no longer and is forced to act. What this tells me is that the stances are never static. Estrella and Esperanza move sinuously between them, the only difference being which makes them feel more empowered. Furthermore, I should note that the fact they are “forced” into these roles should by no means undermine the fact that their stance empowers them. I would argue that it has more to do with age than agency (or lack thereof). They are both young and learning what makes them feel empowered. It is the sink or swim situations that allow them navigate those waters. They each remain in a steady state before being excited into positions of empowerment. After each event, both Esperanza and Estrella will return to their neutral stances. For instance, Yarbro-Bejarano identifies that writing is both “the vehicle of Esperanza’s escape and the means by which she seeks to empower her female counterparts who remain confined by paternalistic boundaries” (qtd in Crawford-Garrett 96). Perhaps the argument can be made that her writing is a new form of participation. She participates in her community from a distance by empowering the malinches with her writing. In the last lines of the novel she says, “Friends and neighbors will say, What happened to that Esperanza? Where did she go with all those books and paper? Why did she march so far away? They
will not know I have gone away to come back. For the ones I left behind. For the ones who cannot out” (110). She goes away in order to “come back.” She must make a life for herself, get a house of her own, and explore her new self. However, it is all with the end goal of returning to the barrio for the “ones who cannot out.” Likewise, after Estrella conquers the barn, she too returns to a neutral state, reflecting on the events in which she feels empowered and evaluating her circumstances: “No longer did she stumble blindly. She had to trust the soles of her feet, her hands, the shovel of her back, and the pounding bells of her heart” (175). In the end, what is important is that both female protagonists find power within themselves, outside of the power structures that attempt to control women and force them into one archetype or another or which assigns personal value based on male/female relationships.
CONCLUSION

In Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza Gloria Anzaldúa asserts, “Culture is made by those in power—men. Males make the rules and laws; women transmit them” (38). If women are responsible for transmitting their culture then they also have an obligation to create art, poetry, literature, and music that resist those rules and laws. Sandra Cisneros and Helena Viramontes are two such women who resist their cultural norms by creating female-centered narratives with protagonists who refuse to abide by the status quo. They are as Castillo notes, “appropriating the master’s weapons” (100). Castillo continues: “to appropriate in this strong sense is an act of hope, a call for transformation of social and political and linguistic and interpersonal relations, a demand for a different reading, for reading otherwise” (100). “Reading otherwise” requires someone to first “write Other.” In taking on this project, it has been my hope to seek out writers who protest male-dominated culture by writing Other. I limited the scope of my research to Chicana YA literature not only because this is an under-theorized field of study but because it allows for greater discovery of protest literature and writing “otherwise.”

Avenues for further study would include an expansion of Chicana YA literature. Christi Cook, who, despite my contradictions, am indebted to for her original research, states: “Chicana young adult literature’s status as a marginalized, contradictory, hybrid art form can be understood with Anzaldúa’s framework in mind—hybridity is a positive, empowering status, for the YA book as an artifact, the YA character in the book, and for the YA reader herself” (30). Though she concentrated her research on comparing Anglo and Chicana YA Lit, in a larger project I would instead broaden my study to look at
Chicano YA authors and the female characters in *their* stories. For instance, Roxane Gay said of Junot Diaz’s writing in *This is How You Lose Her*: “Women are their bodies and what they can offer men. They are pulled apart for Yunicor’s sexual amusement … he is a product of a culture that routinely reduces women, that he is unable to remain faithful to his women, that none of the men in this book is very good to women” (107). While she acknowledges there is nothing wrong with this per se—“This is fiction, and if people cannot be flawed in fiction there’s no place left for us to be human” (107)—she proceeds with:

Still, I keep coming back to the relative impunity with which the men in *This is How You Lose Her* get to behave badly, and to the tone of the critical reception to these stories, which are not only stories but confessions, lamentations of misdeeds. We have all been influenced by a culture where women are considered inferior to men, and I would have loved to see what a writer of Diaz’s caliber might do if he allowed his character to step out of the constraints of the environment he grew up in” (Gay 107-108).

I would like to find those Chicano and Latino writers who not only feature strong female characters (protagonist or otherwise) but also who feature male characters who “step out of the constraints” of his environment as a form of protest literature. Possible novels for this larger project might include: Yuri Herrera’s *Signs Preceding the End of the World*, Benjamin Alire Sáenz’s *Everything Begins & Ends at the Kentucky Club*, David Tomas Martinez’s *Hustle*, Mario Albert Zambrano’s *Lotería*, and Tim Hernandez’s *Mañana Means Heaven*. I would also expand include other Chicana authors such as Laura
Esquivel’s *Malinche*, Ana Castillo’s *Give It To Me*, Guadalupe Nettel’s *The Body Where I Was Born*, and María Amparo Escandón’s *Esperanzas Box of Saints* to see whether they adhere to the dichotomous female paradigm or resist it and how. Anzaldúa considers these “counterstances”—a resistance to the traditionally white, patriarchal authority. She states: “The counterstance refutes the dominant culture’s views and beliefs, and, for this, it is proudly defiant … Because the counterstance stems from a problem with authority—outer as well as inner—it’s a step towards liberation from cultural domination” (100). This “counterstance” becomes more complicated when the authority is not only male, not only white, but also adult. Looking at YA literature from and featuring strong Chicanas is the ultimate counterstance.

When it comes to academia, the YA genre, like the Chicana herself, remains marginalized and underappreciated. However, for many readers, it is this very genre that introduces them to a life and love of literature that carries them into adulthood. Roberta Trites makes the argument that the genre is designed to repress adolescent readers because it is literature that is written by adults to children to instruct them how to behave (Cook 204). Though this certainly can be the case, I would argue that it is a rather negative perspective. I would instead argue that they assist in the adolescents’ growth and maturation. They provide friendships through the characters helping readers feel less lonely or isolated. They help the young reader to understand their feelings and bodies in a way different from the sterile textbooks of health class and without the judgment of their parents. They introduce and broaden the world around them show them what is possible. By providing female adolescents with both strong female and male characters who defy
the status quo and who rebel against limiting gender roles, there exists the opportunity to
transmit a different culture of rules and laws to a younger generation.


