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## Madres, Hijas, y la Frontera: an Analysis of the Relationship Between Mexican Mothers and Mexican-American Daughters

Arianna Gabriela Razo

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MADRES, HIJAS, Y LA FRONTERA: AN ANALYSIS OF THE RELATIONSHIP  
BETWEEN MEXICAN MOTHERS AND MEXICAN-AMERICAN DAUGHTERS

By

Arianna Gabriela Razo

Bachelor of Arts – English  
University of Nevada, Las Vegas  
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A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment  
of the requirements for the

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Arianna Gabriela Razo

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Department of English

Jessica Teague, Ph.D.  
*Examination Committee Chair*

Kathryn Hausbeck Korgan, Ph.D.  
*Graduate College Dean*

Megan Becker-Leckrone, Ph.D.  
*Examination Committee Member*

Vincent Pérez, Ph.D.  
*Examination Committee Member*

María Casas, Ph.D.  
*Graduate College Faculty Representative*

## Abstract

Madres, Hijas, y la Frontera: an analysis of the relationship between Mexican Mothers and Mexican-American Daughters

By

Arianna Gabriela Razo

The goal of this thesis is to investigate the role Mexican mothers play in raising their children and how the border affects their abilities as mothers, looking specifically into the Mother-Daughter relationship, broken down even further into the Mexican mother versus the Mexican-American daughter. To explore this concept, I examine Sandra Cisneros, *Caramelo*, looking at all the mothers, but specifically into the Reyes matriarchs, and Aaron Bobrow-Strain, *The Life and Death of Aida Hernandez*, to show how the border has influenced Mexican mothering styles, along with juxtaposing how Mexican immigrants were treated in the 20<sup>th</sup> century to how politicization of the border has led increased policing into the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Under this timeline, I examine how the border contributes to intergenerational trauma, looking into the effects mixed-status (undocumented vs. documented) families have on children who identify as American but cannot share in this identity with their undocumented mother. This thesis explores how gender roles, tradition, and religion impact the way Mexican woman mother and examine how the border has busted through, leading to pain in both the mother and daughter. This thesis is broken up into three chapters, with chapter one examining how both Mexican mothers and Mexican-American daughters can benefit from Healing Justice and explore how *Caramelo* and *Aida Hernandez* hint to those movements of healing, followed with chapter two analyzing the mother

figures during the 20<sup>th</sup> century in Cisneros *Caramelo* and chapter three exploring how the border disrupts mothering in the 21<sup>st</sup> century in Bobrow-Strain's *The Life and Death of Aida Hernandez*.

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Para los separados – no son olvidados y luchamos para ustedes.

## Table of Contents

Abstract .....	iii
Acknowledgements .....	v
Introduction .....	1
<i>History of US-Mexico Border</i> .....	4
<i>The Traditional Mexican Family and the Border</i> .....	7
<i>Mothers, Daughters, and Healing Justice</i> .....	12
Chapter 1: La Cura: Justicia Curativa (The Cure: Healing Justice) .....	18
Chapter 2: “What’s available to make a woman a woman?” - The complicated role of Mexican motherhood and Mexican-American daughterhood in 20 <sup>th</sup> century Mexico and United States in Sandra Cisneros <i>Caramelo</i> .....	23
Chapter 3: “She told her story to reclaim her life” - How the border has shattered the traditional Mexican mother in 21st century Mexico and the United States in Aaron Bobrow-Strain’s <i>The Life and Death of Aida Hernandez</i> .....	37
Works Cited.....	57
Curriculum Vitae .....	58

## Introduction

Take a moment to envision the US-Mexico border. What is the first thing that comes to mind?

Is it a desert?

Is there a fence?

What about the port of entry?

What about the heat of the sun beating down on you?

What about the agents patrolling in their green and white trucks?

Is there a long line of cars emitting so much exhaust that your head hurts?

What about the signage? Is it in English or en Español?

It wasn't always like this. Not long ago, both my maternal and paternal grandparents made the journey to cross, chasing an American Dream for their children and future grandchildren in a country that was completely alien to the one they grew up in. One did it legally – they came from money – but the other, simply crossed and thought about papers later. Were it not for Reagan opening amnesty in the 1980s, my father most likely would have never been able to become a citizen of this country and I probably would not be here today. Their stories, and many others, are ones of success, success that gave the next generation the opportunity to take part in that luxurious American Dream. It is because of my grandparents' sacrifices, that I, a young Mexican-American woman, have never had to question my US citizenship or worry about being deported.<sup>1</sup> It is their sacrifice that has given me the opportunity to learn and analyze how the border continues to impact us today and how stories connect us to our roots.

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<sup>1</sup> Throughout the entirety of this thesis, I will be using the term "Mexican-American" to add emphasis into the distinction between the Mexican mother versus the Mexican-American daughter. (cont. on the next page)



To understand this role of story, I have made the conscious decision to explore the stories of Mexican women, specifically those of Mexican mothers, and how the US-Mexico border has impacted their role both direct and indirectly. Under this lens, I will be examining how the border creates intergenerational trauma by looking into both the documented versus undocumented mother and how raising children in the United States creates friction between mothers and daughters, specifically the Mexican mother versus the Mexican-American daughter. The word “border” is a complex word, as it is used to describe not only the established, political boundary between Mexico and the United States, but also plays a role in separation when it comes to those who reside on the border or who often cross it. I use “border” to describe the emotional trauma that comes with not only crossing that line into the United States, but also to explore how this line creates heavy distinctions between who is Mexican and who is Mexican-American.<sup>2</sup>

My two case studies, *Caramelo* by Sandra Cisneros and *The Life and Death of Aida Hernandez* by Aaron Bobrow-Strain, take on the theme of motherhood in both similar yet different ways. *Caramelo*, a fictional novel inspired by her childhood and family, was published in 2002 and is Cisneros way of reconciling with how the past – from before she was born – shaped her future (Suarez 1). Through Cisneros main character, Celaya “Lala” Reyes, she narrates the story of her paternal grandmother, Soledad Reyes, chronicling the complex story of Soledad’s journey into motherhood. As the youngest, Celaya is an observer to many of the struggle’s mothers – including her aunts, her mother, and grandmother – endure throughout the

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Personally, I have never been a fan of the title “Chicana” due to personal familial distaste for the word and will avoid this phrase unless absolutely necessary. Like many first, second, etc. generations of Mexican-American’s, everyone has their opinion over this title, but my maternal grandmother views the term as an insult, since it once was used against Mexican migrants, and I follow in that same view.

<sup>2</sup> It is worth noting that this distinction is important and will be further described on page 14 of this thesis.

novel and I will be discussing how traditional Mexican gender roles/familial structures and the patriarchy impact the roles women fill in 20<sup>th</sup> century Mexico and the United States. In *The Life and Death of Aida Hernandez*, a nonfiction border story published in 2019, Aaron Bobrow-Strain takes a vastly different approach to both story-telling and motherhood, influenced heavily by modern day changes to the border through increased policing and changes to immigration law.<sup>3</sup> A journalist and academic, Bobrow-Strain tells the story of what it was like for Aida Hernandez – a pseudonym used to protect Aida’s real identity and family – to grow up in the United States as an undocumented child and describes her later struggles in motherhood, both as a mother to an American citizen and recognizing the role deportation plays in fracturing their lives as mother and child.<sup>4</sup> Bobrow-Strain notes that he wrote this book as a response to the American obsession with successful immigrant stories, specifically the “model immigrant”, and how the stories of migrants are often times more complicated than what the general American public can imagine.<sup>5</sup> Through Aida’s story, I will explore how the border has impacted the familial structure, looking closely into how young Aida was when she illegally crossed, followed by her journey into single-motherhood, and examining how being undocumented impacts both mother and child in 21<sup>st</sup> century Mexico and the United States.

To add further context, I will also be providing a brief summary into the history of the US-Mexico border, followed by a breakdown of the traditional Mexican family looking specifically into the influence of the patriarchy and the role religion has played in creating the family. I will also be discussing the literary mother, applying Gloria Anzaldúa’s definition of mothers found in her book, *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza*, and proposing new

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<sup>3</sup> Throughout the rest of this thesis, I have shortened the title to *Aida Hernandez* instead of the full title.

<sup>4</sup> Bobrow-Strain addresses the use of pseudonym’s in the “About this Book” section (348).

<sup>5</sup> “About the Book” (343-344).

terms to discuss the evolution of Mexican mothers into the 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> century. The purpose of this project is to reevaluate the role Mexican mothers play in the lives of their daughters, looking specifically into both being the cause of pain – both the intentional and unintentional – and as a healer. My thesis will be broken up into three chapters – chapter one focuses on Healing Justice and looking into how *Caramelo* and *Aida Hernandez* show ways of healing for both mother and daughter. Chapter two will be an analysis of the various mother figures in Cisneros *Caramelo* during the 20<sup>th</sup> century, followed by chapter three diving into Bobrow-Strains *The Life and Death of Aida Hernandez* and exploring how the border has disrupted mothering in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

#### *History of US-Mexico Border*

As many historians will agree, the creation of US-Mexican border is a relatively modern and recent area of discourse within American culture and politics. Historian Roger Bruns notes that in relatively short time, “over a century and a half” to be precise, the border has become a “scene of violence, racial, and cultural animosity” and argues that this “culmination of conflict and struggles” can be traced back to the creation of this imaginary line through the signing of the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo in 1848, following the Mexican-American War (Bruns, x). With the signing of this treaty, the fate of those living on the border – both within Mexico and the United States – was sealed. One aspect of the treaty argued for many of Mexico’s former citizens to now be considered citizens of the United States, meaning they were supposed to be treated fair and equally (Bruns 1). Many Mexican writers of the time expressed displeasure with the treaty, stressing that the protections the treaty was supposed to be given to the newly minted US citizens, was never truly honored. In 1885, María Ruiz de Burton publishes, *The Squatter and the Don*, pointing out the injustice that Anglo-American settlers commit against the Californios, old

Spanish families who had long settled the land of California before Anglo-American settlers began to inch their way West (Sánchez et al 72). Ruiz de Burton dedicates chapter 2, “The Don’s View of the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo”, to critique how Mexico had given up on her citizens and how the US government had begun to mistreat the new Mexican-American citizens, “... I fear that *the conquered have always but a weak voice, which nobody hears*” (Ruiz de Burton, 67). In losing the war, the Mexican people were now forced to live with their Anglo-American overlords and as a result of this treaty, the relationship between the United States and Mexico became strenuous, with this continued struggle still seen today on the border.

While emphasis on the role of immigration within California has long been discussed – most likely due to work programs, like the Bracero Program in the 1940s, that brought male, Mexican workers across the border to work in agricultural fields during World War II – the US-Mexico border consists of more than just California (Bruns 104). In total, the US-Mexico border consists of four states – Arizona, California, New Mexico, and Texas – and each state has their own history and reactions to the creation of the border.<sup>6</sup> For the purpose of this project, I will be focusing primarily on Arizona, as this is where the story of *Aida Hernandez* takes shape, and how the border changed the structural make-up of the state. Samuel Truett, another American historian, notes that “In the early twentieth century, Arizonans viewed their neighbors to the south as siblings in an interlocking family history of sorts” (6). For many of the border towns – Agua Prieta and Douglas are the ones of focus in Bobrow-Strain’s border story – the creation of the border, much like in California, brought confusion and created tension between the already established Mexican residents versus the incoming Anglo-Americans. This was further worsened

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<sup>6</sup> Discussion into this area can be further addressed via Roger Bruns book, *Border Towns and Border Crossings: A History of the U.S.-Mexico Divide*, who breaks down the history of each states interactions with the border in various different chapters by tying in history and politics to describe how politicians and people living on the border reacted to changes and legislation.

by Arizona becoming an official state in 1912 – sixty-four years after the Treaty was signed – and gave more power to Anglo-Americans versus Mexican-American citizens (Bruns 66). Ironically, on land that had been considered a “worthless desert,” a fight ensued over control for materials like copper and silver, but also in building train lines that would aid in the transportation of goods (Truett 57-58). Throughout much of the 20th century, a rise in xenophobic behavior in congress lead to the creation of the US Border Patrol in 1924 and other restrictions on various immigrant groups coming to the United States (Bruns 99). The United States would continue to have a love-hate relationship with Mexico and her citizens – first with the deportation of Mexican-American citizens (those who had been born on American soil but were racially profiled and sent back to a country they never recognized as their own) in the 1930s, yet quickly turning back to Mexico to supply the United States with field workers during World War II – but it was not until the events of 9/11, that lead to the creation of the Department of Homeland Security, that life at the border would be altered forever (Bruns 104).<sup>7</sup> After 9/11, not only was policing enforced, but anti-immigrant laws were enacted to shut-down the number of immigrants attempting to cross into the United States. In Michael Dear’s book, *Why Walls Won’t Work: Repairing the US-Mexico Divide*, Dear goes into the history of Arizona’s “draconian” anti-immigrant legislation, starting first with the passing of SB1070 (159). The goal of this legislation was to “detain, prosecute, and deport illegal immigrant by allowing authorities

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<sup>7</sup> This is an obvious understatement as legislation regarding the southern border has varied throughout the last century and a half, with the earliest insult coming from Henry Hoover’s administration in 1930 when he called Mexican immigrants “criminals”. I highly recommend checking out chapter 6 of Roger Bruns book, *Border Towns and Border Crossings: A History of the US-Mexico Divide*, for more information on how the US government viewed Mexico (102). For the sake of brevity, I simply sum up this point of border history to show how the border has evolved between the 20th and 21st century and how heavy policing at the border has changed the way in which Latino citizens cross the border into the US today. I am aware that I have disregarded the role of violence within Mexico itself, such as the various revolutions and uprisings that occurred in the 20th century, not to mention the rise of drug cartels within the country, and have omitted those details from the historical portion to focus exclusively on the role of legislation within the US on immigration.

to demand proof of legal entry into the US from any suspected of being in the country illegally” – and though it was challenged in the Supreme Court and much of the law was blocked, the “show me your papers” provision was kept (Dear 159). Within *Aida Hernandez*, this issue is one that Aida and her family face, resulting in her first deportation (111-113). Now having all this history in mind, we can now transition to the Mexican family and the social roles women in Mexico embrace versus the role Mexican-American woman reject and explore how the border challenges the role of motherhood.

### *The Traditional Mexican Family and the Border*

Within the country of Mexico, many families are patriarchal, with the father/husband taking lead by being the main financial provider and wife/mother generally taking on the domestic role of caring for both the house and the any children the couple may have. In Jennifer Hirsch’s book, *Courtship after Marriage: Sexuality and Love in Mexican and Transnational Families*, she explores how both generational shifts and the border have impacted the way Mexican boys and girls pair off and build their own families. In chapter three, she discusses the significance of marriage, pointing out the important role it plays for mothers to see their daughters marry *bien* (good/well) (85). A proper Mexican marriage starts with the boy asking “the girl’s parents for their permission” and notes that in the distant past, men would often bring a priest along to talk to the girl’s father to show their intentions as both honest and true (85-86). On the flipside, a bad marriage is one where the couple elopes or runs away together (*irse*), and this brings disgrace and dishonor to the family, more so for the bride’s family than the groom’s (85). This lack in judgement allows the community to place harsh criticism on the bride’s family for failing to educate their daughter correctly and often forces the parents hand to accept the marriage, as a way to salvage both their familial reputation and that of their daughter. One of the most

interesting observations Hirsch makes in generational differences is that older women (over the age of 40) view their matches with a man who can “fulfill his obligations as a husband” in contrast to younger woman who “want a [husband] who is both [a] provider and a good companion” (87).

While marriage is an important feature to starting a family legitimately and correctly, the act of having children is even more significant as the act creates “a real family” where husband and wife “form a lasting connection through the production of children” (Hirsch 210-211). Yet, the route to having children is tricky. For a woman/wife to initiate sex, she is seen as loose, but for a man/husband to initiate, he is taking initiative in the relationship and ensuring his family name is passed on. This has a lot to do with symbolic meanings of marriage for both men and women. Men/husband/father are regarded as protectors and providers, “the father provides a structure that shelters and protects his family when his is not physically present...”, while the house is the female/wife/mother domain and “symbolizes ordered and managed sexuality as opposed to the sexual danger and ferment of the street. It is a female space, the place where a woman belongs...” (Hirsch 100). This extension of female space also extends to modesty, where young girls who begin to turn into women (i.e. puberty) are expected to cover their bodies with a *rebozo* (shawl) to protect from the sexual gaze of men not related to her or come from the same family (98). As the family grows, clear distinctions are made between the treatment of sons and daughters, specifically in what they both can and cannot do. This is reflected in the ways of courtship where boys are allowed to court the girl, but the girl cannot court the boy, lest she risk damaging the family name.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> More information on the topic of gender roles can be found in the entirety of Jennifer Hirsch’s book, *A Courtship after Marriage: Sexuality and Love in Mexican Transnational Families*

Compared to courtship rules in Mexico, the border has complicated relationships by challenging traditional gender roles and expanding on the rights that women have in the United States. One example of this is the lack of reaction older Mexican women have to their husband's infidelity (Hirsch 98). Hirsch notes that older women will "maintain that what they do not see cannot be true and thus cannot hurt them", while younger women view the infidelity as a "betrayal" to their marriage and vows (98, 285). This is certainly a topic discussed in *Caramelo* where many of the matriarchal figures turn a blind eye to their husbands' indiscretions and continue to stay married to their cheating spouses. This most likely has to do with the role religion places over Mexican couples, as Catholic priests often advise women to "be patient," to "pray," and to "just accept their suffering" as "marriage es una cruz (it is a cross [to bear])" (117). From Hirsch's research, some of the women she interviewed reasoned that since they chose to marry this man, to accept him for his flaws and all, that they now had face the consequences of the match (118).<sup>9</sup> The themes of loyalty and disrespect within marriage are reflected in both of my case studies, where the main matriarch in the Reyes family, Soledad, accepts all the indiscretions of her husbands, compared to Aida (and by extension, her own mother) reject this aspect of the traditional Mexican family. In the story of *Aida Hernandez*, though, her mother, Luz, is the cheating figure and breaks the mold of the traditional model and ends up leaving her husband for the United States.

Another reason for these changes comes in the form of female agency and domestic violence. As time has gone on, more and more women are beginning to work outside the house and now earning their own money, which is especially true for Mexican women living in the United States (201-202). This may not seem like a huge difference, but this allows women some

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<sup>9</sup> The actual words from one woman was "*te lo buscaste pues ahora friégate*" (you sought him out, so now you suffer) (118).



financial independence from their husbands and even gave some women the power and strength to divorce (205-8).<sup>10</sup> However, not all women are given this same freedom and this is especially worse for women, specifically mothers, who arrive in the United States with no papers. In many of Hirsch's interviews, she found Mexican women who would describe the act of being struck by their husbands – both those in Mexico and in the United States – and would downplay the impacts of being hit, saying it was not domestic violence and that they needed to be reminded of their place (198). Some women would fight back, understanding that the US legal system would often side with female victims of abuse, but for the undocumented mother, the violence experienced is even worse (198-199). In Hirsch's interview with a woman named Clara, a young undocumented mother, “not even twenty” to “two children under age three”, she admits that without her residency papers and no job experience, she was afraid to report her husband's abuse for fear of deportation and possible separation from her children (199). Having legal residency or US citizenship really challenges the traditional Mexican gender roles, where Mexican-American women know to how to react when faced with domestic violence, while Mexican women simply accept the abuse. Though there are no signs of domestic violence shown within *Caramelo*, domestic violence play's a huge role in both Aida's life as a daughter and as a mother. In *Aida Hernandez*, her mother is also a victim of both her husbands and lovers abuse, which unfortunately cycles through to Aida when she marries the father of her child, while still a teenager, and he hurts her (Bobrow-Strain 95). This suggests that the border has been a game changer in regards to control within the Mexican family, with the documented father/husband using his status to keep the undocumented wife/mother in her place.

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<sup>10</sup> This is found in one of Hirsch's interviews, with a woman named Lucha who could not handle her husbands, Roberto's, infidelity and was able to get a green card for herself and her two young children in the United States, effectively leaving Roberto to restart her life (205).

In Christina Getrich's book, *Border Brokers: Children of Mexican Immigrants Navigating U.S. Society, Laws, and Politics*, she delves further into the role the border plays in having children when parents are undocumented and what it means to grow up in a "mixed-status" home (5). Getrich defines mixed-status families as being

"complicated social units because individual members hold distinct immigration statuses; these statuses differentiate them in terms of their formal membership in society, eligibility for social and healthcare services, ability to work legally, and risk of being detained by immigration officials and/or deported" (7)

and argues that research into the effects of living with "parents without papers" will impact the growth and mental well-being of children with US citizenship (8). Within Bobrow-Strain's work, Aida fits in this odd grey spot of being brought to the US as a young girl – nine-years-old to be exact – growing up with a blend of American and Mexican values, compared to her son who is reared exclusively in the United States. As a young child, Aida's son does not understand border politics and struggles to comprehend how his status differs from her and how it impacts their relationship (Bobrow-Strain 141). Getrich goes further into the history of legislation surrounding these families, with legislation having been proposed that would bar citizenship to anyone born to non-US citizens, and would effectively overturn the Fourteenth Amendment (49). This area of the undocumented versus documented mother plays a huge role in justifying the differences between *Caramelo* and *The Life and Death of Aida Hernandez* and is especially critical in understanding how lack of papers can cause a different kind of pain for both mother and child. I view *Caramelo* as a romanticization of Mexico, a reflection of what it once was, and *Aida Hernandez* as the continuation to the story by telling the reader the role the border has had in destroying familial bonds. By having this background and history of traditional Mexican family

and analysis of how the border interjects itself into the Mexican family, we can now move into the role of the mother figure and how she is the key to healing.

*Mothers, Daughters, and Healing Justice*

Interest and research into the mother figure is relatively varied, with most of the interest placed in the European mother figures and the role she plays, especially in the monarchy. Historically and culturally speaking, women have been “viewed as a man’s property, a tool by which to produce an heir, to provide him with servitude, and to give sexual pleasure” (Castillo 115). This role has become even further complicated through the role of technology – such as IVF and surrogacy – however, in Ana Castillo’s, *Massacre of the Dreamers*, she argues that due to a woman’s ability to give birth, this put’s her at a disadvantage since she must care for all the needs of the child (this includes carrying the child to term/enduring pregnancy, followed by breast feeding, and then continuing to raise/guide the child to adulthood), while the husband/man is allowed to “stive” for something more than just domestic life (115). Castillo complicates this image by discussing the ambiguity of Genesis where Adam has two wives – the submissive Eve (the one the Church reveres and is taught to girls all over the world as the ideal wife and mother figure) versus the sexual Lilith (the forgotten first wife of Adam who challenged the rules of the patriarchy and lost) – and sets the stage for what the perfect mother should strive to be (115-116). Within Gloria Anzaldúa’s book, *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza*, she Chicana-fies these English terms of the ideal mother by describing how

“*La gente Chicana tiene tres madres* (The Chicana people have three mothers). All three are mediators: *Guadalupe*, the virgin mother who has not abandoned us, *la Chingada*

(*Malinche*), the raped mother whom we have abandoned, and *La Llorona*, the mother who seeks her lost children” (244).<sup>11</sup>

Under these definitions, Mexican motherhood is limited to the historical roles of the past and lacks the ability to understand the complexities of 21<sup>st</sup> century motherhood and how the border complicates that role even further. To combat this, I propose three new terms be included to understand this evolving role – the Metiche (the Nosey/Meddlesome Mother), the Egoísta (the Selfish Mother), and the Ingenua (The Naive Mother). These terms are to be viewed from the perspective of the Mexican-American daughter, as she often does not realize the struggles her mother endured, until she herself becomes a mother too.<sup>12</sup> I use these terms to help characterize the various types of mothering styles and how these styles impact children growing up in the United States. I believe these terms will also help in being able to better understand how the border has complicated the role of motherhood, especially in regards to children born to undocumented mothers and how it impacts their ability to achieve the American Dream. For many migrants, the American Dream has been sold as an idea where all are free to endless opportunities and upward mobility is possible if you put the work in to get there. However, many Mexican-Americans come to find this mobility can be extremely hard to achieve and is complicated through various barriers such as wealth inequality and poverty.

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<sup>11</sup> In Ana Castillo’s, *Massacre of the Dreamers: Essays on Xicanisma*, she provides a brief origin story to the three women/mothers. *La Llorona* (the Weeper) comes from Mexican folklore where this mother “drowned her own children to go off with a lover and was then cursed by God to search for them throughout eternity” (118). The *Llorona* is an example of a bad mother who seeks sexual pleasure over her children’s well-being. *La Malinche* – also called “*La Chingada*” translates to “the fucked woman” and reflects a mother who cannot protect her children from the world around them, especially since she gave birth to the first Mestizo (mixed) children (118). In more recent time, her role has been contested, as some scholars view *La Malinche* as a victim since she was sold to the Conquistador, Cortés, and forced to have his children, but other scholars argue that she is a betrayer to the Mexican people as she helped Cortés to take over Latin America (Cypress 15). Finally, the *Guadalupe* is the Mexican’s people version of the biblical Mary (Castillo 120).

<sup>12</sup> *Caramelo* is an interesting case-study, as Celaya does not become a mother, but this is still a theme for her aunt, Norma, and her journey into motherhood and will be further discussed in chapter two.

Surprisingly, interest in the Mother-Daughter relationship has more scholarship, such as Elizabeth Brown-Guillory's, *Women of Color*, that analyzes the mother-daughter relationship in various ethnic groups. In her introduction, Brown-Guillory describes the evolving mother-daughter bond as "a love/hate relationship" and further explains that mothers often see themselves in their daughters and will do everything in their power to try to protect their daughters from the same mistakes they made (2). Brown-Guillory further adds that the daughter will often reject her mother's concerns and will attempt to make herself unique from her mother, causing friction that is "linked to fear and frustration" of the mother trying to guide her in to one day becoming a woman and the daughter trying to be her own independent person (2). Adrienne Rich's, *Of Woman Born: Motherhood as Experience and Institution*, confirms that due to this rejection of the mother, daughters "fear not of one's mother or of motherhood but of *becoming one's mother*" (235). This fear is especially relevant in mixed-status families, where the Mexican mother, in her attempts to share the values of her home country, ends up making the Mexican-American daughter feel conflicted in wanting to both accept and reject American culture, along with also feeling isolated in trying to fit into the Mexican family versus fitting in the American public (i.e. home life vs. school school). In Sonia Saldívar-Hull's, *Feminism on the Border: Chicana Gender Politics and Literature*, she takes the time to analyze the way language also plays a role in establishing further distinction between the Mexican mother and Mexican-American daughter (70). Through Gloria Anzaldúa's "How to Tame a Wild Tongue", Saldívar-Hull explains how the role of English and Spanish can create divides within the family, with the younger generation having an easier time of learning English, compared to the older generation who struggle with the language (68). In chapter five of Anzaldúa's *La Frontera*, she breaks down the role of language even further by discussing the different types of Spanish and

English the bilingual Mexican-American speaks and how the act of speaking English in a Mexican family creates friction (Anzaldúa 76-77). Anzaldúa describes the way in which Chicano/a's speak "pocho/a" Spanish, defining these Spanish speakers as "anglicized Mexican[']s", describing how speaking English creates friction as English is viewed as "the oppressor's language" (77-78). Within both *Caramelo* and *Aida Hernandez*, the power dynamics regarding language are remarkably clear. In *Caramelo*, Soledad views it as a disrespect when her grandchildren speak English in her household and demands that they speak to her in Spanish (Cisneros 28, 47). In *Aida Hernandez*, the ability to speak English clearly is the defining feature to survival in the United States, especially for the undocumented person (Bobrow-Strain 30). Bobrow-Strain describes a particular moment in which Aida has help from one of her teachers, Mrs. Villegas, who takes the time to teach her English by purchasing *Ingles sin barreras* (English without barriers) (30). This act causes friction between mother and daughter, as Aida's mother is unable to comprehend the English language and expresses her frustration in a volatile manner when the Aida and her sister practice their English skills at home (Bobrow-Strain 31). I argue that this is a really important distinction between the 20<sup>th</sup> versus 21<sup>st</sup> century life between Mexico and the United States, and is especially true for Mexican immigrants arriving in the United States. While I myself have never had someone compliment my English-speaking skills, my father – a significantly darker individual, who has significantly more indigenous features – has been on the receiving end of these *compliments* on how well he speaks English, which he views as ironic as he has been living in the US since the age of four. On the flip side of this argument, though, is also the loss of language. In part two of *Caramelo*, whenever Soledad speaks in Spanish, Celaya will usually respond back in English (Cisneros 92). I can relate to these moments in the novel the most, as growing up, I would often respond in English to my maternal grandmothers Spanish.

English is the primary language spoken in my family and though I have very little problems in understanding Spanish, I often struggle to create sentences that are conjugated correctly. This issue of lost language also addressed in *Aida Hernandez* when Gabriel refuses to speak Spanish as he grows too (Bobrow-Strain 212).

To answer the question of healing, we must look at the concept of Healing Justice. Loretta Pyle<sup>13</sup>, a social work educator, defines the practice as a practice of attention and connection, a way of healing a sense of fracturedness or disconnection that may result of trauma, oppressive socio-cultural narratives and practices... It is a practice that asks social practitioners of all kinds to cultivate the conditions that might allow them to feel more whole and connected to themselves, the world around them, and other human beings (xix).

How I have come to understand this term, is that to overcome the trauma, one must first accept that trauma has occurred and to be willing to talk about the trauma in a productive manner. This does not necessarily solely mean that a person has to go to a traditional therapist to come to terms with the trauma endured, but to simply reflect and accept that the trauma does not make the person. Pyle also adds that analysis into oppressive features within the world, like the patriarchy and racism, have “accumulated in the mind-body continuum that is today calling for compassionate and wise attention” (11-12). Pyle argues that Healing Justice is a communal act and I believe this practice can be applied to Mexican mothers to work through their decision to marry and have children. In *Cultural Considerations in Latino American Mental Health*, edited by Harvette Grey, found that Latino/a’s “are more likely to drop out of high school, hold menial

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<sup>13</sup> Since Pyle is a social worker, she works primarily with minorities who have experienced various forms of injustice and inequality in the United States and recognizes that there is simply not enough funding to take care of everyone’s need, so she proposes Healing Justice as one’s own form of self-therapy.

jobs, and earn less [money] when compared to their non-Latino/a White counterparts” (8). This was especially true for Latinas who fall pregnant in high school and drop out to raise their child (9). In one way that Mexican-Americans feel conflicted against their Mexican parents/grandparents is through the concept of “bicultural stress”, which places stress on the Mexican-American child to reject any outside influences within the house (36). This is especially relevant when looking at the way in which Mexicans, especially Mexican women, are taught to work through their troubles – go to Church and pray (Carneiro 139). Healing Justice does not seek to completely replace current practices – certainly, there is place to combine the two – but to simply reevaluate how the pain Mexican’s and Mexican-American’s women feel. Pyle agrees that trauma can occur in many ways, with women facing the additional struggle of conforming to the patriarchal rules (i.e. covering up, policing the body), yet argues that Healing Justice is designed to help in mindfulness while trying to find a place in the world (7-9).



## Chapter 1:

### La Cura: Justicia Curativa

#### (The Cure: Healing Justice)

When we hear the word “healing” we often think of it in the physical sense – you cut yourself, you bleed, you scab, and you may be left with a scar but you are healed. It is tangible, easy to see and understand where the pain once was but has now gone away. But for the hidden cut – the one that does not physically bleed, the one that does not scab and go away – the damage is worse. Within both *Caramelo* and *The Life and Death of Aida Hernandez*, many of the female characters endure so much trauma and stress, it could cut a diamond. In reading their stories, we begin to conceptualize the pain that goes into becoming a mother – both the physical (the act of carrying and birthing a child), cultural (contending with tradition and community values), and emotional (mental health and feelings) – and reconcile with how much sacrifice comes in undertaking the journey into motherhood. Because of their sacrifice, I had to ask – how do we heal our mothers’ wounds? How do we repair the pain of daughters from that of their mothers? The answer is complicated.

In analyzing these two distinct works – one fiction and the other nonfiction – in conjunction with each other, I believe we get to see the complexities of motherhood explained in ways that both involved the emotional and practical, juxtaposed with their reactions to the border. In *Caramelo*, Mexican-American daughter Celaya is the narrator, and we see her take on the world of motherhood around her through both a judgmental and non-judgmental manner, as she plays the role of observer as the Reyes matriarchs share their stories of motherhood with her. This is especially evident when her Aunt Norma (AKA Light-Skin) tells her the story of her

journey into motherhood, recognizing that traditional Mexican society played a huge role in her marriage and eventual divorce (Cisneros 264-275). In contrast, Celaya places a lot of judgement on her paternal grandmother, Soledad, establishing her as the “Awful Grandmother” early on in the novel (Cisneros 3). The border does not play a huge role in this story – it sits quietly in the background, allowing the characters to flow seamlessly back and forth without fanfare or stress – and this is more evident when Celaya’s father is quickly able to get a visa for Soledad to live her son Inocencio and his family (276-277). I say this because Celaya does not give the reader a story describing how difficult it was to bring her grandmother across the border, only that she went from living in Mexico to living the rest of her life in the United States. Cisneros does point to the rising tension happening at the border, but it never fleshes itself out the way it does in *The Life and Death of Aida Hernandez*. Bobrow-Strain’s border is written in third person, which allows for multiple perspectives to be given and for each have their own tone and influence the structure of the story. This creates a bit of a barrier between the reader and characters, as the reader has to read the political and historical information first to understand how the characters were either living through history or how they felt the after effects within changes to legislation, because the characters are real people telling their stories of survival and grit. In *Aida Hernandez*, the border plays a huge role in the development of the characters lives, especially for the undocumented Aida in her journey US citizenship. This is not to say that *Caramelo*’s characters are less real – as Cisneros addresses this in her interview with Ray Suarez about her family tree in the writing of *Caramelo* – but that it is easier to judge a fictional character versus a real person who survived a stabbing (Suarez 1, Bobrow-Strain 3-4).

In Loretta Pyles, *Healing Justice: Holistic Self-Care for Change Makers*, she introduces the reader to the concept of “transformative social practice” which “is process-oriented social

change and healing work that seeks to alter existing political, economic, and social systems while also transforming the individual” (12). Pyle further adds that this practice “blurs the boundaries between helper and helped and recognizes that our fates are linked” (12). This can be interpreted in many ways, but to frame this under my established motherly lens, I argue that in order for mothers to heal, they must be willing to observe and accept how outside influences impact their abilities to protect and guide their children and that those influences are not entirely their fault. For the daughter, she must also accept that her mother is imperfect and that is okay. Within *Caramelo*, there is not a lot of emphasis placed on the historical, though Cisneros did do her due diligence in researching the events that impacted Mexico and at a more direct level, impacted her family. However, Cisneros focuses more on the interpersonal relationships these mothers have with their spouses and children, observing how the influences of one pushes the other (i.e. how Regina pushed her son to move to Chicago, and how Soledad follows in that same path to protect her son as well) to move or react. Cisneros emphasis on the mother places these “invisible” women in the spotlight, highlighting that they have not been forgotten and that their pain, even if it is minor, matters. This is important to understand as children – in this case, daughters – often forget how much of an influence their parents have on developing their behavior, that it would be ludicrous to not think that our fates are linked. By Soledad coming back to haunt Celaya she provides her with the strength and wisdom needed to break the cycle of girl to woman to mother by pointing out that she can accomplish so much more and must to be happy. Soledad may never have been happy in life, but in sharing her story, she guides her granddaughter away from the unhappy path she lived to find a better one for herself.

*The Life and Death of Aida Hernandez* delves deep into the historical and really pushes for the reader to respond and rethink their positions on the border. Bobrow-Strain wants his

readers to feel for Aida, to recognize that she matters. She, and by extension her mother, are flawed characters who made a lot of mistakes when it came to raising their children in the United States, but they did it with the best intentions and with the tools available to them at the time. The border plays an especially crucial role in Aida's life as she goes from undocumented to documented, on top of dealing with poverty and spousal abuse, doing her best to make sure her son does not experience the same pain she did while growing up.<sup>14</sup> Emphasis on the border is extremely important to Aida's story as she, and many others, have had to contend with how much a single piece of paper can control so much of one's life. I believe Bobrow-Strain is not arguing about the piece of paper, but applies a critical eye into how difficult and expensive it is for migrants to acquire US citizenship. At this point, it does not seem like much reform will be happening at the border and while this next administration may attempt to right some wrongs of the past, the damage is already done. As of the moment of this thesis submission, over 500 Latino children have not been reunited with their parents after having been forcefully separated at the border as a way to deter other immigrants from crossing (Simon 1). While indeed shocking, it is not the first and it most likely will not be the last time that we hear about these types of human rights violation on the border (Simon 1). Through transformative social practice, Pyle argues that there is hope for the future. Perhaps the US-Mexico border will not always be so hostile, but to get there, compromises will have to be made and with how divided the United States is at the end of 2020, healing appears so far away and unachievable. Pyle remains optimistic to these social changes and reminds the reader that it is our duty to "change the structures and operations of historically oppressive social systems" that impact us and our fellow neighbors (12). She also reminds the reader that "social change is not inevitable" it just takes patience and

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<sup>14</sup> Gabriel still experiences his own trauma; however, Aida does get him help as a child and does not make him wait till he's an adult to get treatment.

time (Pyle 12). Though I focus primarily on Aida and her mother, Luz's, relationship, Aida's father plays a huge role in his daughter and grandsons' recovery as well, teaching both how to meditate to achieve mindfulness and peace (Bobrow-Strain 213). In no way was this completely perfect, as Aida will forever need therapy and medication to get through her PTSD, but it is a start. In accepting this help, Aida is already taking one step forward in finding healing for herself to be the absolute best mom she could be for Gabriel, and shows how Healing Justice can be combined with traditional therapy to seek relief.

To tell and listen to stories is an act of healing. When we take the time to listen, we give these lost voices agency in the lives they lived. The role of motherhood is a self-less one – “I'm a caregiver, I give to others” – but it does not have to be (Pyle 15). In analyzing all the complex mother figures – Guadalupe, Malinche, Llorona, Metiche, Egoísta, and Ingenua – within the Mexican-American/Chicana genre, we can now fully understand how the trauma the Mexican mother endures is hidden away to ensure her family's safety and happiness. In understanding this, we can help guide the mother to not be afraid of being honest with her feelings and that becoming a mother has not made her invisible or forgotten. The border may have complicated the traditional Mexican family, but life goes on and the Mexican mother will do everything in her power to make sure her children are safe and thrive as future members of society.

## Chapter 2:

### “What’s available to make a woman a woman?” - The complicated role of motherhood in 20<sup>th</sup> century Mexico and United States in Sandra Cisneros *Caramelo*

Sandra Cisneros *Caramelo* covers a wide array of topics and issues within the Mexican family. Much of the scholarship and analysis into the novel has dealt more into the role of language (Spanglish), the Reyes boys relocating to Chicago, and even the role of the Telenova, with very little analysis into the mother figures.<sup>15</sup> Narrated through the young eyes of Celaya Reyes, the youngest of the Reyes family, she is an observer to the struggles of the women in her life, with but the most important matriarch is her paternal grandmother, Soledad Reyes. Cisneros breaks her novel up into three sections, with each section going back and forth in time, with the story being told in snippets that are not said in a singular linear fashion and requires the reader to read carefully, similar to how family secrets may be whispered amongst the adults and never repeated or explained if you did not listen carefully the first time. Section one of the book looks at a young Celaya, somewhere between the ages of five-eight, describing a summer in Mexico where revelations are made, but not to her and only the adults, followed by section two discussing Soledad’s childhood and eventual marriage to Narciso leading to her journey into motherhood, and ends with section three exploring the repercussions of the revelations made in section one and how Soledad’s childhood led to this ending. For the purpose of this thesis, I will be focusing primarily on section two of the novel as this where we learn the most about

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<sup>15</sup> Sources include: González, Bill Johnson. “The Politics of Translation in Sandra Cisneros's *Caramelo*.” *Differences*, vol. 17, no. 3, 2006, pp. 3–19, Peart, Silvia, and Lescher, Dale C. “Spanglish and the Negotiation of Latina Identities in Sandra Cisneros's *Caramelo*.” *Label Me Latina/o*, vol. 6, 2016, p. 1, Graf, Amara. “Mexicanized Melodrama: Sandra Cisneros' Literary Translation of the Telenovela in *Caramelo*.” *Label Me Latina/o*, vol. 4, 2014, p. 1. While some analysis into the mother figure has been done, it has not been done in the context of how the border impacts this relationship.

Soledad's youth and where Cisneros establishes the role of cycles and destiny for Mexican women.

To fully understand the role of motherhood, we must first explore the girl before she becomes a woman and how she completes her transformation into womanhood by becoming a mother. As already referenced in the *Traditional Mexican Family* section of this thesis, Celaya describes Soledad's journey into motherhood by breaking it down as a cycle that all Mexican women are expected to undertake. This cycle starts with first being ignored, to being seen, to going back to being ignored again. To clarify, under the female lens, this cycle starts with the girl as unseen (young, pure, and innocent), to the girl becoming a woman (puberty makes the girl become a sexual object) through marriage and childbirth, and then ignored again after she has done her duty of becoming a mother and caretaker. Celaya sums this up best in chapter seventy, "Becoming Invisible",

The Grandmother only became visible when her body changed and garnered the trophy of men's attentions. But then she had lost their attention as her body shifted and slouched into disrepair after the birth of each child. And when she no longer was vain and cared about taking care of herself, she began to disappear. Men no longer looked at her, society no longer gave her much importance after the role of mother was over (Cisneros 347).

To understand Soledad's journey, and how she reflects the traditional Mexican wife/mother, an analysis into her childhood must be done.

Soledad was born to Ambrosio and Guillermina, a powerhouse couple who complemented each other in the work they completed – he a *rebozo* (*shawl*) dyer and she a *rebozo* knot designer (92-93). By introducing the reader to this seemingly happy couple, we get a sense of what a healthy Mexican partnership looks like, where husband and wife are equal and

help each other to grow. Unfortunately, “when Soledad was still too little to braid her own hair”, her mother passes away, taking with her the skills of rebozo knot making and any skills that would have helped guide Soledad from girlhood to womanhood (94). It is in this instance we are introduced to the missing mother, a mother that a daughter can only daydream about and can only assume would have done if they were still alive. In Nancy Peled’s essay, “Motherless Daughters: The Absent Mothers in Margaret Atwood”, she describes how the lack of a mother will have disastrous impacts on the daughter, starting with how the daughter will be unable to fully protect herself from the “predatory” (in this case, the predatory is the male gaze/sexual advances), and how this lack of know-how will be passed down to the next generation when the daughter without a mother becomes a mother herself (48-49).<sup>16</sup> Due to her mother’s death, Soledad’s father begins to withdraw from his daughter and seeks a new wife, who, once married, quickly takes over the house (Cisneros 94). Soledad describes the shift as feeling as if she were in her own “Cinderella” story, as her stepmother quickly manipulates Soledad’s father to abandon his only biological daughter, but to accept the step-children she had from a previous relationship (95, 118). In Kate Douglas essay, “Writing about Abusive Mothers: Ethics and Auto/Biography”, notes that stories where children are victims of stepmother’s abuse endure a type of trauma that is unique to stepchildren, as the child’s own home is turned from a happy and healthy place to one of pain and suffering (65). This occurs even when the child still has access to a biological parent, as the parent may not be paying attention to their child’s well-being since their time is now spent obsessing over their new partner/marriage versus the child they brought into the relationship (66). With this in mind, it comes at real surprise that Soledad’s father is more than willing to drop his daughter off at his cousin’s home, Aunty Fina, and quickly start his

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<sup>16</sup> Though Peled wrote this specifically in analyzing Atwood’s missing mother figures, I argue that many of her observations can be applied to Soledad’s missing mother as well.



life over with his new wife and her children (Cisneros 95). Since Soledad was not the product of infidelity, her step-mother does not have to accept her within the new family she creates with Ambrosio and reflects the way in which Mexican mothers can enforce power within family by deciding who can stay and who needs to leave.<sup>17</sup> This also reflects how the man/husband allows the wife/mother to dictate what goes on inside the house.

Growing up, Soledad longs to see her father again, hoping and praying that he would send something by mail, but unfortunately this never happens (Cisneros 101). Within her aunt's house, she struggles to find her place, as Aunt Fina has "sixteen or nineteen or eighteen" kids, making it hard to find love and a mother figure, as her aunt is already being pulled in so many directions (99). Though her predicament may seem dire, Soledad's prince is yet to come.

Through her father's abandonment and relocation of his daughter, Soledad's fate is changed and leads her into the arms of her future husband, Narciso Reyes (103). Their chance meeting – an awkward affair, as she accidentally calls him "Papá" in response to Narciso calling her "my queen", the same nickname her father had once bestowed upon her, is a reflection of how lonely Soledad feels and how much she craves to be adored, loved, and protected by somebody, anybody – results in Soledad's ticket to freedom (95, 104). However, before she is to become his wife and future mother to his children, she must first be taught how to be a wife first.

On the "24th of June", Soledad, not even twelve-years-old, is brought to her future in-laws' home, and Narciso introduces her to his father, Señor Eleuterio, and mother, Señora Regina (111-112). At first, Regina is unimpressed with Soledad, viewing her as a reminder of her indigenous roots and questions what skills Soledad comes with as she will now be tasked to

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<sup>17</sup> This is true in regards to raising/rearing young children. When it comes adult children, a mother only has so much influence.

teach her how to take care of a house and how to manage it properly (113).<sup>18</sup> Without even realizing it, though, in accepting Soledad in her home, Regina becomes Soledad's surrogate mother and impresses upon her various types of mother figures, primarily the Egoísta and the Metiche. As an Egoísta, Regina teaches Soledad the value in material wealth, as Regina had married in to the Reyes family – a family that was considered *adinerada* (moneyed/upper-class) – and with money came many freedoms, to which Soledad would inherit through her marriage to Narciso in due time (121). This wealth gave both women power over the house, particularly in the ability to afford outside help to maintain the house, while the wife can pay attention to other things, such as town gossip and rearing children (120). A surprising feature that influences Regina's role as mother is the historical events the Reyes family survives. In 1911, the Mexican Revolution begins and results in many young Mexican men being forced to fight for and against one another, depending on whose side the men were on (the players here being President Madero versus his former general, General Huerta) (128). For “Ten Tragic Days”, Narciso serves just enough time in the army to realize the horrors of war and runs home, effectively deserting the movement (128, 131). This is where the Metiche Mother comes out of Regina, as she desires to both protect and smother her son. To protect him, she sends Narciso to live in Chicago with an Uncle Old, a member of his father's family (133). During Narciso's stay in Chicago – which occurs over a time span of seven to eight years – Soledad continues to grow, growing out of her young, child body, into the body of a woman (134, 153).<sup>19</sup> In chapter 33, “*Cuidate*” (*Take Care*

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<sup>18</sup> Issues of colorism are increasingly part of Mexican culture and connects back to La Malinche where individuals who look more indigenous face more discrimination compared to those who look more European/Spanish. Though important to address, I have decided to not go into this full history of this, as my thesis is exploring the mother-daughter relationship, but would recommend future research into the topic.

<sup>19</sup> Cisneros is never really clear with dates, given that *Caramelo* is told in snapshots that go back and forth in time. I sum up this timeline by deducing that it was either 1913 or 1914 as the year Narciso left for Chicago. It is confirmed that he comes back in 1921, which gives an approximate timeline of 7-8 years.

*of Yourself*), the reader comes to understand how truly innocent Soledad is to her maturing body, especially once Narciso returns to Mexico,

“People said, – Now that you’re a *señorita*, *cuidate*. Take care of yourself. But how was Soledad to know what they meant? ... Hadn’t she taken care of her hair and her nails, made sure her underclothes were clean, ... blessed herself when she passed a church... rinsed her bloody rags in secret when she had ‘the rule.’ But [the people] meant take care of yourself *down there*. Wasn’t society strange? They demanded you not to become... but they didn’t tell you how not to. ... no one told you how to ... well, *how* exactly?” (153)

Soledad’s lack of guidance – the missing mother – has placed her in a situation where she has no real idea on how to react. She has surrounded herself in the daydream about what her life might be – to be loved and adored – but is unaware of the differences between love and lust. Due to this lack of instruction, Soledad is unable to comprehend the consequences of having unprotected sex with Narciso (154). This chapter is a pivotal to understanding Soledad’s journey into motherhood, as she is not married when she has sex with him. Ironically, while the role of marriage and courtship is increasingly important for the traditional Mexican family, Narciso’s and Soledad’s relationship does not begin this way. Regardless, because of this action, Soledad describes how she feels connected to Narciso in a way she had never connected with anyone before, noting that she “could never be lonely” again (154). In some ways, Soledad is right, because from that moment of passion comes her pride and joy – her oldest and most favorite son, Inocencio Reyes. For the first time in her life, she is bonded to something that comes from her and she vows to do everything in her power to protect him (197).

It is in my opinion that all mothers start out as Ingenua’s and Guadalupes. Soledad emphasizes the role of the Ingenua mother, prior to Inocencio’s birth by trusting in her husband

(a marriage forced upon him by his father to restore familial honor), trusting in that dream of a perfect family and a beautiful house, even though Narciso is a serial cheater and lies to her about loving only her (184-185, 189). In the time before she gives birth, Soledad has to reconcile with the reality that even though she is in love with Narciso, he will never be in love with her. It is accepting that reality that brings her more stress as a soon-to-be new mom, “Everyone said motherhood was sacred, but all the everyone’s who said it were men. Soledad did not feel sacred” (190). Even on the day she gives birth, she calls out not to her husband or God, but to her long dead “Ma-má,” a woman she has long daydreamed about but can provide no guidance on how to move forward both as a woman and as a mother (191). Following Inocencio’s birth, Soledad enjoys her brief moment as the Guadalupe mother, a mother who promises to never leave her child and to devote herself to his every need, yet the problem with this type of devotion is that it can easily turn the Guadalupe mother into the Metiche mother. The Metiche cannot stand that her child is growing, especially a son who will one day get married to a “*cualquiera*” and end up leaving his mother for his wife and new family (86).<sup>20</sup> It is this fear of being abandoned by her son – remember, Soledad’s life has already been marked by so much abandonment already – that marks Soledad as a Metiche and she keeps this title all the way until her death, as the Metiche holds on to her anger and bitterness about the world around her for not following or agreeing to her plan for the future. Prior to her death, though, Soledad does everything in her power to try to regain some control over Inocencio, even though he lives in Chicago with his wife, Zoila, and his family (plus his brothers, but they, unfortunately, do not matter as much to Soledad as her first son does) by forcing the lot to come visit her every year in

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<sup>20</sup> The word *cualquiera*, a slang term, can be translated in a lot of different ways, with the most harmless being “a nobody” to the more harsh translation being “whore”/“slut”/“tramp” and pretty much any other derogatory word that can be assigned to women viewed as loose or immoral.

Mexico (5, 251). At the end of part two, though, it is not Zoila who has stolen Inocencio from Soledad – it is Celaya – “And when the Awful Grandmother saw my Father with that crazy look of joy in his eyes, she knew. She was no longer his queen” (232). Without even realizing it, Celaya is unknowingly involved in a tug-of-war between mother and child. I believe it is the birth of Celaya that pushes Soledad to do the unthinkable – expose Inocencio’s past to Zoila in the hopes of him coming back to her, effectively leaving her grandchildren without a father (82-86). How ironic, though, given how Soledad was raised without a traditional family structure, that she would push for her son to leave his family, putting her grandchildren in almost the same boat she was in growing up. In this moment, Soledad combines both the Egoista with the Metiche to achieve a nasty goal of destroying her son’s family to seek the love and adoration that she has long struggled to gain. Perhaps this is the real reason for why she is trapped in between the world of dead and undead –

“Grandmother, why do you keep haunting me?”

-Me? Haunting you? It’s *you*, Celaya, who’s haunting *me*. ... Why do you insist on repeating my life? Is that what you want? To live as I did? ... Ay, Celaya, don’t wind up like me, settling with the first man who paid me a compliment. You’re not even a whole person yet, you’re still growing into who you are. ... Look, he’s a little boy, and you’re a little girl. You’ll find someone who’s brave enough to love you. Some day. One day. Not today. (406-407).

In this moment, we see a broken Soledad who has had to reconcile with all the decisions she’s made, both before and after she became a mother, and how all the things she did or did not do, all the things she said or did not say, have hurt all those that knew her in life and leave her as alone as she did the day her father drops her off at her Aunty Fina’s house. I would even venture

to call her a Llorona as she cries and weeps for a son, who does love her, but chooses to be with his family in Chicago. Elizabeth Brown-Guillory notes that “when a mother looks at her daughter, she sees herself. She is constantly reminded of her mistakes, yearnings, dreams, and successes” and I argue that in watching Celaya venture dangerously close to following in Soledad’s – Celaya run’s off with a boy named Ernie, before he rejects her for the Church and his mother – footsteps she has to make sure that the cycle of motherhood be stopped now before it is too late (Brown-Guillory 2, Cisneros 384-387, 406). Soledad is not saying to never fall in love or get married, but she is trying to protect her granddaughter from a lifetime of loneliness that Soledad went through and to marry for love and happiness and not out of social obligation.

Soledad is certainly not the only other mother character that gets the short end of the stick. All of the women who marry the Reyes boys experience some form of pain and suffering in taking on the role as Reyes wives and mothers to future Reyes children. In Uncle Fat-Face and Aunt Licha’s relationship, Celaya describes the moment in which Fat-Face brings a venereal disease to their home, “a prostitute’s disease” (Cisneros 11). Referencing back to the traditional Mexican family, many of the women interviewed expressed that the fear of disease within their marital bed was a disgrace not only to their marriage, a marriage done before God, but as a failure on the woman’s part for not sexually satisfying her husband (Hirsch 100-105). In Jennifer Hirsch’s et al article, “The Inevitability of Infidelity: Sexual Reputation, Social Geographies, and Marital HIV Risk in Rural Mexico”, her team’s findings suggest that high levels of STD/HIV are found in married Mexican couples, due to the migratory work/jobs that Mexican men take (1986). For many of the women in the novel, having their husbands leave for long periods of time to find work and to provide for the family is normal and they simply have to trust that their husbands have been faithful to them. In Aunt Licha’s discovery of having been infected by her husband –

her only sexual partner – it almost drives to want to kill herself as she exclaims her clear disgust for her husband (Cisneros 11). This break in the relationship even impacts the children, as they watch their mother break down in an uncharacteristically violent manner, forcing them to flee from the house as she wields a knife at Fat-Face (11). Fortunately for Fat-Face, his wife quickly forgives him, reverting back to the Guadalupe mother who does everything in her power to take care of the family. In Uncle Baby's and Aunt Ninfa's relationship, we get our first inter-racial couple, as Baby is Mexican and his wife Italian (12). Due to this, she comes into the relationship with her own cultural values, however, I would label her as an Egoísta because she is not really involved in her daughters rearing and focuses more on the material wealth, rather than taking care of her daughters (12).

Now, for Celeya's parents, Inocencio and Zoila, we get a mixed kind of family, with Inocencio having been raised with traditional Mexican values and Zoila having been raised in the United States, making her our first official, Mexican-American (202). Oddly enough though, Zoila does not embody much of the independent, American woman, as she often sides with the values of being the traditional Mexican wife and mother. This is true in two ways – her lack of ability to work and her reaction to Inocencio's past. In chapter fifty-eight, Zoila offers to get a job to help lessen the financial burden of taking care of the family on just Inocencio, hoping to add more money to buy a house to properly house all seven of their children, versus living in a cramped apartment, but Inocencio views this as an insult, “ – What! A wife of mine work? Don't offend me!” (289). In allowing herself to accept this subservient role, it explains why she continues to stay married to him when her mother-in-law reveals that Inocencio had a child out-of-wedlock, some time before he met Zoila (404). In this twist of fate, Inocencio was not guilted into marrying Amparo (a poor washwoman who worked for the Reyes family in Mexico), most

likely because he fled to Chicago and because this child, Candelaria, was born before his marriage to Zoila, giving Zoila the power to decide who can and cannot be in her family (404). Zoila's reasoning is that she did not know about Candelaria existence when she married Inocencio,

His family kept it quiet, I didn't find out till after I had all your kids. Remember that trip to Acapulco? That's when I found out. ... Your grandmother was the big-mouth.

[Soledad] acted like I knew all along... [grandmother] was nothing by a troublemaker.  
(404)

As a mother, I would define Zoila as a Guadalupe who turned into a Malinche, as the moment Candelaria's parentage is revealed, she begins to push both her husband and Celaya, her only daughter, away. Like Soledad, Zoila places her frustration in Celaya because she is upset by how much of a daddy's girl she is – angry that Celaya cannot see her father for the bad man that Zoila knows him to be – but is also jealous that her daughter has not had to go through the same pain as she has while married to Inocencio (404-405). Both mother and daughter clash on many things – such as schooling and Celaya's future – which places clear frustrations between mother and daughter,

You're supposed to love your mother. You're supposed to think good thoughts, hold holy her memory, call out to her when you're in danger, bid her come bless you. But I never think of mother without dodging to get out of the way, the whoosh of her hand quicker than the enemy machete, the pinch of her thumb and index finger meaner than a carnival *guacamaya*<sup>21</sup>. (Cisneros, 261)

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<sup>21</sup> Translated "macaw"



In this scene, the reader can clearly see how much these differences in values and independence have impacted the way in which Celaya connects with her mother and even rejects when her father jokes that she is much like her (242). Religion also adds to this frustration, to which Celaya notes that one must “honor thy mother and father” but there is “no commandment that says honor thy daughter” (242-243). Given that Celaya does not become a mother at the end of the novel, Celaya proves Rich’s point of rejecting the mother for fear of becoming like her and shows that the relationship between Celaya and Zoila is going to take time to heal.

The one mother not yet discussed is Aunty Light-Skin (AKA Norma/Normita) who, as a single-mother, has had to endure so much. As the only single-mother in the novel, she is mocked and ridiculed for the choices she’s made in becoming a mother. In chapter nine, all three of Norma’s sister-in-law’s quietly mock her, hinting to Norma essentially becoming a prostitute as she sleeps with her boss, Señor Vidaurri, to provide extra money to take care of her daughter, Antonieta Araceli (32-33). The women also mock how her marriage to her daughter’s father was illegitimate, gossiping that there could never have been a marriage since he had already been legally married and not divorced, suggesting that Norma is nothing more than just the other woman and a whore at best (32). It is not until chapter fifty-five that the reader gets to hear Norma’s side of the story, and she starts by clarifying that her marriage was legal and legitimate, even though they could not be married in the Church because he had already been married there before (264-265). Under Catholic guidelines, legal divorces are not recognized and the only real way to be married in the Church again is to go through an annulment, which fully dissolves the original marriage and allows for remarriage within the Church.<sup>22</sup> This is an important distinction

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<sup>22</sup> For more information on the annulment process, check out the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops on their page on Annulments for more information. I was also raised in the Catholic faith and learned about this process when my uncle wanted to remarry in the Catholic Church and he did not want to go through the annulment process.

for Norma as she does not want to be viewed as a loose woman, especially while living in the very Catholic country of Mexico. Their union is further complicated, because of her parent's refusal to accept the marriage, with Soledad placing more displeasure due to his age (he twenty years older) and having issue with him already been married,

“What, are you stupid or just pretending to be stupid?” My own mother said this to me, can you believe it? “What, are you stupid or just pretending to be stupid? As long as his first wife is still alive, your marriage is just paper. You may think you are married, but in the eyes of God, you are nothing but a prostitute.” Those words, they hurt me even now, Lalita. (271)

It is ironic, though, that Soledad places so much emphasis on Norma's marriage, when she had conceived her own son outside of it. Never the less, Norma's journey into motherhood begins here. Like her mother, Norma faces the reality of her husband's infidelity

“...what do I feel on his back but scratches, big welts”

...

“Are you alone? Is there someone with you?”

“Well, of course [I'm alone], my life.”

But Lala, I could hear the sounds in the background. (272-273)

and through these moments, Norma realizes that even though she loves him, he will never love her the same way she does, repeating the same cycle that Soledad endured with Narciso not so long ago. However, instead of staying with him, Norma not only breaks up with him, she makes the decision to leave and face her parents “I-told-you-so's” (273). In this way, I proclaim that Soledad is jealous of her daughter, jealous that she chose to walk away from her husband and also jealous that she will not have to endure the same pain and suffering she went through in her

marriage. In this way, even though Norma does complete the cycle of womanhood, the cycle does not necessarily need to end or stay in marriage. As a mother, Norma spoils her daughter – most likely to make-up for the lack of a father figure in her life – but their bond is extremely strong as Norma goes on to move to Monterrey to be close to her daughter when she marries (239). Because of her sacrifices, I would classify Norma as a Guadalupe with Egoísta, as she did everything in her power to make sure Antonieta’s life was good, but could be viewed as selfish for raising her daughter in her parents’ home instead of raising her on completely on her own. I believe this may be another reason Soledad places so much harsh judgement and criticism on her only daughter – Norma has family to come back to. Where was family when Soledad watched her marriage crumble and needed them most? In this way, I would like to argue that Norma is the kind of woman that Celaya might have become if she had stayed with Ernie (or if Ernie had not rejected her first), to which goes back to the concept of jealousy in which the next generation has more choices available to them than the older generation does (386-387).

In chapter 75, Celaya’s brother, Toto, announces to his family that he has enlisted in the army as a way to gain his independence as a man and his father congratulates him, as he himself also served in the army and is proud to see his son take initiative in his life (361). Yet, for young Celaya, she is left to wonder: “What’s available to make a woman a woman?” (361). The short answer? Become a mother. The long answer? Well, after looking at how all the women in the novel embark in their journey to motherhood, the answer is complicated.

### **Chapter 3:**

#### **“She told her story to reclaim her life” - How the border has shattered the traditional Mexican mother and harms her children**

Given its recent publication, not much scholarly discussion can be found on the Bobrow-Strain’s work, but reviews about the book have been written. In the *New York Times* article by Michelle Goldberg, “She Entered the U.S. Illegally as a Child. She was Stabbed Nearly to Death After Being Deported.”, she writes that Aida is “such a complex and imperfect figure” and views the book solely under a political eye. Though the role of politics on the border is important, as addressed in the introduction of this thesis, the political view often views undocumented individuals as numbers rather than people. Other reviewers agree with Goldberg’s review, looking at the imperfect character of Aida and rate the book in a positive matter that needs to be discussed, but I argue that the book holds more weight than just the political. Aida’s journey into motherhood challenges and complicates what being undocumented has not only on the mother, but on her child as well.

Bobrow-Strain uses his journalistic background to create a story that combines both the historical role of the border with Aida’s personal experiences. He accomplishes this by jumping back and forth in time to explain the history of the border and changes in laws, before finally combining both to show how these changes impact the young Aida. This was done to show how the young, nine-year-old Aida was unaware of how her undocumented status loomed above her, until changes within the state of Arizona lead to her deportation as an adult. However, before I go further into this part of Aida’s story, we must first start with the beginning of Aida’s life, her childhood.

Aida was born in the border town of Agua Prieta, near Douglas, Arizona, to Luz and Raúl, the middle child between her sisters Jennifer and Cynthia, followed by the infant twins, Emiliano and Jazmin (12). She describes her childhood in Agua Prieta as relatively happy, however that was all about to change when her father confronts her mother on her infidelity (14, 67). In this moment, Luz's actions destroy the family, as Raúl is unwilling to forgive her, and this forces her to seek refuge in the arms of her lover, Saul (15, 21). In Jennifer Hirsch's et al article, "The Inevitability of Infidelity: Sexual Reputation, Social Geographies, and Marital HIV risks in Rural Mexico", she discusses the attitudes towards infidelity shifted only slightly based on sex and had more to do with community/social responses (989). In reality, it is reputation that matters more and it seems that when women cheat, she brings more disgrace upon her house and this in turn impacts her children (989). Perhaps in this way, it makes sense for Luz to take her children with her to the United States so that they do not face the judgement of the community, yet at this point in the story, Luz has become an Egoísta, placing her selfish desires over that of her family. Having said that, even I must admit that it is hard to fully place this analysis on Luz as her relationship with Raúl had become increasingly hostile, which Aida will discover sometime after the fall out.<sup>23</sup> At the moment of their marriage falling apart, Raúl asks his daughters a life changing question – "Girls, do you want to live with me here, or go with your mother?" (15).<sup>24</sup> With this question, both Cynthia and Aida look up to Jennifer to decide,

"Mom" she said eventually. "I guess?"

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<sup>23</sup> The reason for this struggle is that while Cisneros's work is primarily labeled as fiction, Bobrow-Strain's work is a work of nonfiction discussing the real life stories of people who lived and experienced these struggles, so for this reason, I struggled with placing judgement on the mothers in this book, but chose to keep this theme up to describe how analysis into both fiction and nonfiction mothers needs to be done so further discussion can be had on the complexity of mothering.

<sup>24</sup> I will note that I do not think it was fair of Raúl to put his daughters on the spot without actually discussing what was going on, however since my focus is on the female view, I would suggest more analysis into male view of the book would need to be done in a separate work.

It seemed logical. Girls went with their mother. No one knew why, Aida and Cynthia nodded in agreement; they followed Jennifer in everything (15).

It is this silent agreement that changes the trajectory of Aida's life forever.

At the time of their crossing, 1996, going across the border was nowhere near as difficult as it is today, with Luz easily obtaining "short-term border-crossing cards" to start a new life near her lover, Saul (16). Saul, a US citizen, was a family friend with an already established life that included a wife and family in Douglas, Arizona, but he quickly finds housing for Luz and her five children (16). Not long after their move, Aida expresses frustration, wondering when they would move back with their father and openly questions why Saul is acting like a replacement to him, to which Jennifer quickly blocks Aida from further inquiry (21). For Luz, though, her struggles were just beginning. As an undocumented mother, Luz is controlled by Saul, as he was able to financially, emotionally, and physically abuse her as he pleases, as they both knew that there was nothing she could do to stop him, unless she wanted to be deported and have her children separated from her (24, 30-33). Saul makes this worse by always promising to get Luz her residency papers in order, essentially forcing Luz to submit to achieve an end goal that never happens under his watch (33). Because of this fear, Luz teaches her girls how to hide, calling out "The *migra* is here!" to hopefully protect them from being ensnared in the claws of Border Patrol (33).<sup>25</sup> Unfortunately, Luz could not shield her daughters from everything. Not long after their move, Aida and Jennifer witness Saul beat Luz, with both of the girls attempting to save their mother from his fists and are nearly beat as well, but Luz protects her children from his rage and pleads with her girls to never step in between again (24). Though the girls were never direct victims of Saul's assault, there was still a ripple effect on all of them. Both Jennifer

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<sup>25</sup> "*Migra*" is slang for "border patrol officers"

and Cynthia begin to withdraw from the family, with Jennifer cutting class and Cynthia slowly becoming quieter in her own home (31, 63). Aida, on the other hand, did her best to remain positive, with one teacher even taking the time to personally teach her and Cynthia English by purchasing *Ingles sin barreras* (English without barriers) with her own money (30).<sup>26</sup> It is through this woman's kindness that give's Aida the ability to accept Douglas, and by extension, the United States as her new home. At this point, it would be appropriate to label Aida as a Mexican-American, specifically as generation 1.5, since she was born in Mexico but raised primarily in the United States and considers Douglas home (Portes et al 239).

Both Aida and Cynthia practice English at home, which creates friction between their mother. As Luz did not have the same luxury of escape via the school system, she was at a disadvantage to her girl's language skills and feels disrespected in her own home (32). In Marta Tienda and Ron Haskin's article, "Immigrant Children: Introducing the Issue", their research found that leaning English plays a huge role in a child's success in the United States (both academically and socially), however it also creates friction in the household, as it creates a divide between the non-English speaking parent versus the English speaking child, often times making the migrant parent feel like the child is rejecting their native language and leaving the parent behind (3-4). Alejandro Portes and Alejandro Rivas agree with Tienda and Haskins, pointing out in their article, "The Adaption of Migrant Children", that since the United States is a "monolingual country", the child has to learn the language to survive and move ahead or they will never be able to progress (231). While Luz may not like it, it is her daughter's mastery of English that would become a valuable asset as she grows up.

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<sup>26</sup> *Ingles sin barreras* was a very big thing in the late 90s/early 2000s, to where even I remember watching these ads as a kid with my maternal grandmother between her soap operas/telenovelas.

As time goes on and Saul's abuse becomes worse, Jennifer leaves her mother and goes back to her father in Agua Prieta, Mexico (Bobrow-Strain 63). At this point, Luz goes from being a Malinche and to becoming a Llorona. As an Egoísta, she selfishly moved her children to a country completely foreign from them, separating the girls from their father, and Jennifer begins to hate her mother for putting her through the trauma relocation and abuse, including being a witness to Saul's abuse, and thus embodies the Malinche as her eldest daughter rejects her. Luz then becomes a Llorona, as she promises Aida that she would be leaving Saul shortly after she finishes the fifth-grade, in the hopes of getting her daughter back (65). While Luz does leave Saul and moves her children back to Agua Prieta, it is not the same life that Aida had growing up, especially since they do not return to living as a nuclear family with Raúl, and Saul eventually comes back to drag Luz back to the United States (66-67). Given all this back and forth movement, living through the trauma of watching her mother be abused and now becoming the person her mother fights with most since her older sister has left, Aida, now only twelve-years-old at the time, has had enough of the pain inflicted upon her by Malinche mother and decides to go back with her father as well (67). When she moves in with him, Jennifer finally reveals to her the real story of their parent's separation: "Mom left Dad because Dad hit her all the time, and at the end Dad hit her because she had been with Saul for years. Emiliano and Jazmin are Saul's kids, not our dad's" (67). There is a lot to unpack with this truth, as Luz's infidelity resulted in children that were not of her husband. In Sofia Rivera-Aragon's et al article, "Jealousy and Infidelity among Mexican Couples", the team points out that when a married woman's infidelity results in children, it is relatively easy for her to hide her child's parentage from her husband (41). However, this also creates stress for the affair partner, as he recognizes that he is leaving his children to be raised by another man and thus taking on another man's



name (41). This follows in tune with Hirsch's et al understanding that a good Mexican woman/wife is supposed to be loyal to her husband and when she breaks his trust, the marriage cannot survive such deceit (990-991). With Luz's betrayal revealed, Aida begins to follow Jennifer's lead in rejecting her mother as well and focuses her energy in becoming her own person. Aida finds Jennifer to be incredibly adept in this, as she guides Aida in her own version of transitioning from a young, innocent girl to a budding woman,

For Aida's thirteenth birthday, [Jennifer] organized a party. Before leaving the house, Jennifer took her aside. Long baby-blue dresses with embroidered butterflies were out. Jennifer dressed Aida in a white tube top and baggy pants that slung low on [Aida's] hips. ... [Jennifer] brushed on white cake foundation and wings of electric-blue eyeshadow. Brown lipstick outlined in even darker brown finished the makeover. ... The new look was good. (Bobrow-Strain 68).

This is a symbolic moment of growth for Aida as she enters the first step into the cycle of becoming a woman, in which Aida rejects the things of her youth/girlhood – the “baby-blue dresses” – and embrace things that would be considered adult-like, such as drinking and engaging in other risky behavior (68-69). With Aida soon spiraling out of control, her father comes to the realization that he cannot help guide his daughter in the ways of being a proper lady and decides to send her back the United States with her mother (69). To keep her family steady, Luz makes solid changes in her life such as officially cutting Saul out for good, working extra hours to provide for her family, and engaging in a much healthier relationship with an older gentleman named Jack (83). As Jennifer Hirsh notes, financial independence is key to the undocumented woman's life and I argue that Luz is doing her best to create a healthy

environment for her children, understanding that her choice to cheat has had severe impacts on everyone and not just her and Raúl.

Now age fourteen, Aida returns to the Douglas a new person, wild and ready to party, and completely unwilling to listen to her mother (Bobrow-Stain 82-83). In Aida's eyes, she has lost all respect for her mother, the woman who took away her happy life in Agua Prieta, pre-infidelity. Luz is still the Malinche, the woman who sold out her body for a few minutes of pleasure rather than focus on her marriage. Perhaps this is too strong of an assessment of Luz – why should she have to sacrifice her own happiness for the sake of her family? – but, to Aida, she is simply not ready to forgive her mother for her sins (84). Don-David Lusterman, a psychologist, notes in his article, “Helping Children and Adults Cope with Parental Infidelity”, that “children want their parents to provide them with security” and that children will often lash out when the infidelity is made known to the children by others and not their parents (1440). Lusterman would most likely agree that the way in which Raúl and Luz handled the fallout of their relationship as completely unhealthy, contributing directly to Aida lashing out, getting so bad she has to go to rehab to work through her drug and alcohol problem (86). It should be no surprise then, due to a lack in stability in her life at home, when Aida clings on the handsome Mexican-American, David Rojas. At the time of their first meeting, he was a senior compared to her being a freshman, but he was kind, having won over her mother and many “agreed that he calmed [Aida]”, taking her under his wing and showing her what her life could be (Bobrow-Stain 82, 84-85). The couple even had a plan of getting through college and bettering themselves, but it is during the “winter of sophomore year” that Aida discovers she is pregnant (89). At this point, Aida presents an interesting take on choosing to become a mother while living in the United States. In John P. Tuman's et al article, “Conscience and Context: Attitudes

Toward Abortion in Mexico”, his team found that the United States attitudes toward abortion may have actually influenced the northern territories of Mexico to be more pro-life than pro-choice (100).<sup>27</sup> In Jane Marcus-Delgado’s book, *The Politics of Abortion in Latin American: Public Debates, Private Lives*, she notes that despite the power of Catholicism, the Mexican government attempts to keep Church and State separate, which was clearly evident in 2007 when Mexico City passed legislation that upheld a women’s right to an abortion in the first trimester of her pregnancy (74). While it was expected that the other states would follow and pass their own legislation protecting this right, the reality was that the exact opposite and “sixteen of Mexico’s thirty-one states” responded by adding the “right-to-life” amendments in their constitutions (75). For the reader, it is never really explained why Aida decides to go through with carrying her child to term, only that she feels like she has to take responsibility for her actions, and maybe this answer is enough (Bobrow-Strain 89). However, I would like to argue that perhaps Aida viewed her pregnancy as a chance to redo her childhood and sees this as an opportunity to get it right.<sup>28</sup> Regardless of the reason, when Aida tells David, his reaction is not one of happiness, as he had envisioned a different future for himself and wanted to focus on getting out of Douglas, rather than building a future with Aida stuck in that small town (90). In her defense, Aida does let David know that she would “[raise the baby] on [her] own” and drops out of high school to prepare for her child’s birth, working and accumulating the necessary things for her child’s arrival (90). When David relents and decides to stay, Aida proposes that they marry and David reluctantly agrees (90). As a Mexican-American, David is most likely feeling conflicted between

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<sup>27</sup> To clarify Tuman’s et al point, the actual quote is “... the influence of northern region may be a function of proximity to the United States (which may entail exposure to diverse religions, and perhaps to missionary activity by evangelical Protestants), resulting in more “pro-life” attitude”, which suggests that this is simply a theory that would need to be further investigated.

<sup>28</sup> As Gabriel grows, Bobrow-Strain notes that Aida had “broken a chain of child abuse” within her family, as she “never [physically] hurt Gabriel” which was a feat that many in the family respected (238).

doing the honorable thing and marrying Aida (the Mexican approach) versus leaving Aida to deal with the kid on her own and possibly do the bare minimum by paying some child support and wiping his hands clean of fatherhood (the American approach).<sup>29</sup> Since we really do not get to delve deep into David's mind, the reader can only make assumptions about why David chooses to keep his inner turmoil hidden. On the day of their child's birth, a boy, Aida is beyond happy, even when faced with the judgement of the nurses for being so young, and proudly names her son Gabriel, after the archangel (91). It is in Gabriel's birth that Aida begins her journey as an Ingenua and Guadalupe.

To Aida, she feels like she's won the lottery – she's married, she has a beautiful baby boy, and she has her own trailer that she and her small family share (91). What more could she want? This had to be the American Dream, right? Unfortunately, that was not to be. Not long after giving birth, Aida soon becomes a victim of abuse under David's hand (95). Not only does David physically and emotionally harm her, he even blocks her attempts at becoming a legal resident by saying it was "too expensive" (95). Like her mother, Aida endures the abuse, viewing his outbursts as normal, yet when David begins to use Gabriel against her, that's when the power dynamics really begin to show,

David homed in on her weakness. He came in one night, high and wild, and grabbed Gabriel out of his crib. The infant's neck snapped back like a wildflower as David tossed him in the air.

Brandishing Gabriel, he shouted. "This is my son and my house. Get the fuck out!"

...

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<sup>29</sup> It should be noted that in the "About the Book" section, Bobrow-Strain makes a point of telling the reader that he had asked David to give his side of the story, but David declined to comment (346).

Aida fought to prevent [David] from harming the boy. When she threatened to leave, David threatened to call the Border Patrol.

“If you leave me,” he told her, “I’ll make sure they deport you, and I’ll keep custody.

They will take you away from your son.” (95)

In already having been raised to worry and fear deportation, Aida is afraid to involve any outside sources, and simply pretends that what she’s going through is normal and that everything is fine (96). Fortunately for Aida, though, her mother catches wind of her daughters struggles, and puts David in his place, not afraid to stand up to him (96). I would argue that this is the moment that allows Luz to be turned back into a Guadalupe in Aida’s eyes, as she saves her child from the evil forces of abuse and welcomes both Aida and Gabriel with open arms (96). At this point of Aida’s young life, she now struggles with single-motherhood – though she briefly returns to David out of desperation to feed Gabriel, but soon leaves after four more months of living with his abuse – but is fortunate to have a roof over her head while living with her mother and her boyfriend, Jack (100 -101). It is in accepting Aida and Gabriel into her home that mother and daughter can begin to heal and work through their emotions and traumas of the past, allowing the wounds to heal and scar over (102).

One of the interesting things Bobrow-Strain does in telling Aida’s story is that he complicates the story by reminding the reader of the big, real world issues of the border happening at the time same time Aida is growing up in the United States. Nowhere is this truer than in the moment that Aida faces her first deportation. In a spat between her and Irma (her current boyfriends ex-girlfriend), Aida does the unthinkable by physically ramming her car against Irma’s vehicle, followed by punching her in the nose in response to Irma’s repeated torments (109). In that moment when her hand makes contact with Irma’s face, Aida realizes she

has now presented Irma with the perfect opportunity to get rid of Aida and have her deported (109). Aida tries to run to her family's business, Movies N' More, where the cops and Border Patrol quickly arrive to take both Aida and Cynthia into custody (110). As luck would have it, Luz does not face the same fate as her daughters as Jack had begun the process of sponsoring her, which is Gabriel's saving grace as he does not have to enter the foster system (110). In going through her first deportation, Bobrow-Strain takes this as an opportunity to explain to the reader how horribly broken the US immigration system is, as the Border Patrol officers do little to explain the forms the girls sign – which effectively waives their rights to an immigration hearing – before being officially deported to Agua Prieta where they reunite with their father (112, 114). Even then, the girls view this as a temporary move and would be back to living their lives in the United States soon.

The one thing that motivates Aida to get back to the Douglas is her son (136). In her desperation, she devises a plan that worked far too well for the time. Tricking Cynthia's American boyfriend to come party at a club called Pachanga's, the girls pretend they lost their ID's at the bar, and hope that since Cynthia's boyfriend would have his ID with him, that the Border Patrol would allow for the crossing (137). Given that the girls were raised in Douglas, they lack a Spanish accent that would have made them stand out, making their ability to pass as Americans too easy (138). Reveling in her success, Aida becomes cocky, accepting an invitation from her cousin to go back to Pachanga's and party, but when they try to cross back to Douglas, her cousin and Cynthia decide to leave her propped up against a wall and promise to come back for Aida with a car as she is too drunk to face any kind of questioning by the Border Patrol (139-140). As harsh as a judgement this may be, I would define Aida's bravery – more like idiocy – as an *Egoísta*. She knows her situation as an undocumented mother is delicate, yet she still takes

that chance by crossing and treating the border like a joke. It is only when she realizes that she will have to spend a week in Agua Prieta that Aida becomes impatient and runs to the border, hoping to trick them again, but the bravery that got her through the first time is lost, and she is denied (142-143). In her frustration, Aida accepts that she will be unable to return to Douglas and begins to concoct a plan that would allow her and Gabriel to live in the Agua Prieta, but there would be another snag in Aida's road (147). Bobrow-Strain takes this as an opportunity to educate his reader on what changes in legislation Mexico had made regarding identification, revealing that shortly after her mother had taken her to live in the US in 1996, Mexico had implemented a new type of national ID known as "Clava Única de Registro de Población (CURP)", so even in her own birth country, Aida was an alien as well (147). In her frustration against the system, Aida takes the risky job of working at Pachanga as their only female bartender, a decision that would change her life in ways no one could have ever imagined (152).

In order to obtain her CURP, Aida needed a solid twenty dollars to file the paperwork and officially become a proper Mexican citizen. Pachanga's was offering that exact amount to work for one night, an offer that Aida happily accepts and is rewarded with at the end of her shift (155). However, with it being such a late shift, she struggles to find a ride home and when a man in a van pulls over and offers to take her home, she naively accepts (156). Little did she know, that this man was not the ride her boss had promised her, but a random man looking to get lucky and when Aida rejects him, he brutally stabs her and she barely escapes with her life (157-158). She is nearly left for dead and her injuries are so severe, she has to be air-lifted to UMC-Tucson to repair the damage (171). Many of the observers – hospital staff, doctors, nurses, and more – all thought Aida was going to die and she very nearly did, but Aida found strength in her son's existence and used that to anchor her to the land of the living, miraculously surviving all three

surgeries reconstructive surgeries (173). Ironically, the stabbing gives Aida access to the United States, where she is given a “thirty-day immigration parole”, AKA a “humanitarian” pass to stay in country as she recovers. This gives her the one thing she has so desperately desired – Gabriel (175). At their reunion, Gabriel begs his mother to never leave him again and she promises that she will never leave him again (175). In this moment, Aida shows herself as both an Ingenua and Egoísta. As an Ingenua, she truly wants to believe that she can stay and, by extension, protect her son from the realities of her world as an undocumented mother to her Mexican-American son. However, as an Egoísta, who knows full well the consequences of being undocumented and should have never made such a promise to her son, knowing there was no way she would be able to keep it. It is in chapter sixteen, Trauma Red, that the reader believes Aida has survived this horrific attack and that her life will be perfect with Gabriel, but Bobrow-Strain reminds the reader that not all is to remain well, and with over half the book left, this chapter ends ominously – “And then the darkest part of her story began” (175).

In ending this way, the reader transitions to a post-trauma Aida, where she slowly becomes a Metiche combined with a Guadalupe. This may seem like an odd combination; however, I justify this Guadalupe-Metiche combo by showing how the intentions of the Guadalupe, to protect and guide, are twisted by the Metiche and instead of protecting, the mother begins to smother. I distinguish her from a true Metiche, as a true Metiche desires to control the child and a Guadalupe-Metiche desires to protect the child and is unknowingly harming their child in the process. This is further complicated through Aida’s change in behavior following her attack (189-199). Unaware of it at the time, Aida slowly begins to show signs of PTSD (her official diagnoses would come later in the story) and she begins to fear time as her memory is shot, mixing up her dates and moments from the past and present (192-193). She begins to fear



Mexico and views it as a threat, with her paranoia slowly eating at her sanity so much that she begins to fall into a cycle of “her brain was betraying her; her family was lying to her; her brain lied to her; her family betrayed her” (193). As survivors of various types of abuse, Luz, Cynthia, and Jazmin had all thought they could handle Aida and her “moods” but soon found themselves walking on eggshells, unsure of how to keep things peaceful when so much “triggered” Aida (196). In choosing the word “moods”, Bobrow-Strain shows the cultural approach in which the Mexican people approach mental health (196). In Jacqueline Kimmell’s et al, “Deconstructing PTSD: Trauma and emotion among Mexican immigrant women”, the team found that Mexican women often described their depression as “*ataque de nervios*” (attack of the nerves/anxiety attack), and their outbursts as extreme “*susto*” (fear/fright) or “*coraje*” (anger) (3). Kimmell et al argues that both *susto* and *coraje* are symptoms of PTSD, with many of the women who had endured “partner violence” were either at the cusp of being diagnosed with PTSD or completely checked all the boxes (4). Part of their study also looked into the DSM-5 definition of PTSD, specifically pointing out that since the DSM did not look at non-Western cultural influences, it could not be used to properly diagnose these women as many had experienced multiple “types of violence” throughout their lives – “sexual, childhood, family, and intimate partner violence” – and this compound of repeated violence lead to higher rates of PTSD within Mexican women (3-4).<sup>30</sup> When Aida finally does see someone to talk about her issues, Rosie a Mexican Social

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<sup>30</sup> Full definition of PTSD diagnosis under the DSM-5: “A person must have been exposed (either directly or indirectly through a relative or close friend) to a “traumatic” stressor (Criterion A), and symptoms must persist at least one month (Criterion F), cause significant impairment or distress (Criterion G), and not be due to medication, substance abuse, or other illness (Criterion H). Also, at least one symptom must meet characteristics of both Criterion B—repeatedly re-experiencing the trauma (through intrusive recollections or nightmares) and Criterion C—avoidance of stimuli associated with the trauma (emotional numbing). Finally, at least two symptoms must meet Criterion D—negative thoughts or feelings that began or worsened after the trauma (such as negative affect or feeling isolated) and Criterion E—heightened arousal (as indicated through hypervigilance or irritability)” (Kimmell et al 2).

Worker who has a story very similar to Aida's, Aida is given the word/terms for all that she has endured – watching her mother's abuse under Saul's hand, her own abuse under David's fist, both weaponizing deportation – as “domestic violence” and “child abuse”, giving her the power to recognize that the trauma she has endured is not normal and not tolerable (Bobrow-Stain 209-210). For Aida, her PTSD is defined as “complex” and comes from living in “poverty [as an] undocumented woman facing the constant [threat] of deportation”, creating an unstable life that was further complicated by struggling to be a good mother to a documented US citizen (211). Though she finds power in having the words to describe her pain, she is not really sure what to do with it besides throwing herself into caring for Gabriel in the way she thinks is best. This is where the Metiche-Guadalupe mother comes out of Aida, as she becomes fearful, almost paranoid, of how her son may be harmed by the world and begins to keep him hidden in the “safety of their curtained bedroom” (197). The impact of her trauma slowly begins to infect Gabriel's life, starting with his regression into a more child-like state that the once bright four-year-old even forgets the alphabet (197). As a witness and his grandmother, Luz attempts to intervene,

“Your son is not okay, Luz said one day. “He needs help. It's not good for him to be closed up here.” To emphasize the point, she picked up Gabriel and started to walk away.

Aida lunged at her mom.

“You don't know anything about what's good for him.” Aida tried to detach Gabriel from his grandmother's arm. “He's my son.”

Luz just kept walking. ... In the kitchen, [Aida] collapsed into the floor holding on to her mother's feet.

“I know you're right, *Mami*. I know he needs to play. Just not right now. Please.” (197).

As mothers, both want to protect Gabriel and see him thrive, but the trauma Aida has endured has clouded her judgement. In Chelsea L. Derlan's et al article, "Mother-Grandmother and Mother-Father Coparenting Across Time Among Mexican-Origin Adolescent Mothers and their Families", found that grandmothers play an increasingly important role in the growth and development of their grandchildren (351). The goal of the study, though, was to determine the coparenting conflicts between mothers and grandmothers (mother and daughter) and found that mothers experienced more conflicts with the father of their child, had more communication with their mother, suggesting that daughters lean more heavily on their mothers for support than the father (359). Even then, though, the damage had already been done. When the Gabriel and Aida are first reunited, Aida had to constantly reassure him that her absence was not his fault and that the cause of her injury was due to some "very bad men" in Mexico (Bobrow-Stain 191). Without realizing it, she instills a fear of Mexico within Gabriel, with it getting so bad that he completely rejects Spanish, associating the language with Mexico and associates the country as being a place full of "bad men" (191, 212). Aida did her best to make-up for it, going as far as to volunteer in Gabriel's classroom, but her undocumented status still leered in the corner, waiting to ensnare her (234). Rosie had suggested that Aida apply for residency papers, but Aida was still afraid and fragile from the trauma she endured. Like Gabriel, Aida associated immigration officials as untrustworthy, blaming them for not allowing her to back in the United States before her attack and thus were partially to blame for Aida's declining mental health (235). As a mother, Aida knew she had to do everything in her power to get better – mentally and financially – for her son, but without residency papers, there was not much that Aida could do to pull herself and Gabriel out of the hole they were in.

On January 5<sup>th</sup>, 2012, Aida made a decision blinded by her motherly love – she shoplifts (239). Due to her undocumented status, Aida has been unable to provide for Gabriel, and on Christmas day in 2011, Aida had nothing to give her son but kisses (238). Though Gabriel showed gratitude in the gifts he did receive, Aida could see the hints of sadness in his eyes and knew she had failed him by not getting him the Lego he had been eyeing (283). With this in mind, on a trip to Walmart to pick up supplies with Luz and her boyfriend Jack, Aida could not help but linger over the Lego sets, “her fingers brushing the tiny [six-dollar] boxes”, and with little effort, she places the box into her purse (239). While six dollars may not seem like a lot to spare, it “was six-dollars more than she had in her empty wallet” (239). In this moment, it is hard to place judgement on Aida. As a mother, she feels like a failure for not being able to get her son the one gift he wanted, her traumatic stabbing holding her back from moving forward in her life, but I also recognize the recklessness in her decision as well. In the chapter 21, “Show Me Your Papers” State, Bobrow-Strain foreshadows Aida’s fate by explaining how Arizona’s immigration laws had evolved and now had a tougher stance against undocumented individuals. This was made through the passing of S.B 1070, a law passed in 2010 that “promised to make it a state crime for undocumented people to be present in Arizona, to apply for or hold a job, and to solicit work on the street” with the provision of “law enforcement officers [having the ability] to check the immigration status of anyone they thought might be undocumented” (221).<sup>31</sup> S.B 1070, nicknamed the “Show Me Your Papers Law”, essentially created an “open season” opportunity for racial discrimination to proliferate in Arizona (221, 224). In Aida’s case, it would be her ultimate downfall, as instead of being straight deported back to Agua Prieta in Mexico like she had been before, she would now be detained and expected to fight her own case to stay in the

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<sup>31</sup> Bobrow-Strain also notes that the legalities of S.B. 1070 was contested in court, yet was still allowed to be used until parts were overturned, as discussed in the *History of the US-Mexico Border* section of this thesis.

United States (240-241). At this point of Aida's story, she is no longer a mother. She loses that role the moment she is arrested and then put into an immigration detention center. However, she also recognizes that this needs to happen. For far too long Aida has been afraid to face the system and now, with both nothing and everything to lose, she has to go through this trauma – the trauma of living in a detention center – to recognize that she is stronger than she thought and to both reclaim her identity as mother and to officially claim the identity as United States citizen.

For 316 days, Aida has to fight tooth and nail to get back to her son (318). Through her journey, she meets many different women who all have dreams of becoming American citizens. What distinguishes her from the rest of them, though, is her ability to speak, read, and write in English (263). In this ability, she found hope. Not too long after being placed in the Eloy immigration detention center, she discovers a “shelf of immigration laws books and pamphlets” and takes the opportunity to learn, along with attending a presentation put on by the Florence Immigrant and Refugee Rights Project that explained their rights and ways to navigate the United States immigration system (268-269). Aida also finds Sandra Cisneros, *The House on Mango Street*, a book she had connected to in her youth and found strength in, hanging on to the quote: “I have gone away to come back” (276). With Cisneros words in mind, Aida uses her planning skills to get out. She also finds strength in the other women she meets, all of them filled with “stories of trauma and separation” (277). While Aida is slowly building her confidence, acquiring the great immigration attorney, Jesse Evans-Schroeder, to fight her case, her time in detention has left an empty hole in Gabriel's life. Aida has become the missing mother and Gabriel again starts to struggle in school (281). In her reluctance to get her residency papers sooner, her son pays the price by being held back and having to start the first grade all over again (308). Aida knows she failed him, remembering the promise she should have never made to him

– “I will never leave you again” (308). This fuels her to fight harder and on the day of her trial, the motions move so fast, that she almost misses the news,

Aida sat bolt upright as the attorneys slid papers into their briefcases. She thought that she’d won, but couldn’t be sure. The judge paused his preparation for the next case.

“Miss Hernandez, do you have any questions?”

“Am I going home tonight to see my son? To hold my son tonight?”

“Yes, Miss Hernandez.”

Jesse signaled that she should celebrate. It was over. She’d won.

...

[Aida had] been relegated to the margins and shadows of her world since she was eight and a half years old; for sixteen and a half years, she’d been fully a part of the United States and yet excluded from it. Now she had a green card and a path to citizenship. (317)

With her citizenship in order, Aida can feel relief in knowing that she will no longer have to worry about any future separations from her son. In her absence, Aida came back as a better mother – a mother who can now provide and not carry the shadow of deportation over their lives. Even with all her trauma – the fear of Mexico would always be there and she would always have to work through her PTSD – she kept Gabriel as her guiding light, the archangel (324). Shortly after getting her papers, mother and son move to New York where she enrolls him in “a public school with a program designed for kids who had experienced early childhood trauma” (328).<sup>32</sup> Her journey to motherhood, complicated heavily by border politics, ends on a relatively neutral note. Having her green card did not take away poverty, nor did it take away her struggles with

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<sup>32</sup> I am aware that sexuality plays a significant role at the end of the book, however I have excluded this discussion to focus on Aida as a mother to Gabriel. I would argue that a separate paper on LGBTQ+ and mothering should be done, but for this purpose of this thesis, only heterosexual relationships were analyzed.

her mental health, but it gave her Gabriel, and for Aida, the now documented mother, that was enough.

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## **Curriculum Vitae**

**Arianna Razo**

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Department of English  
University of Nevada Las Vegas  
Las Vegas, NV 89154  
TextFree: (725) 201-1860  
Email: agrazo64@gmail.com

### Education

University of Nevada, Las Vegas  
B.A., English 2019