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Magdalena Villatoro Sládková

La Familia:

Analýza rodiny ve vybraných dílech
mexicko-americké literatury

La Familia:

The Analysis of Family in Selected
Works of Mexican American Literature

Disertační práce

Vedoucí práce - Doc. PhDr. Markéta Křížová, PhD.

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P R O H L A Š U J I ,

že jsem disertační práci napsala samostatně s využitím pouze uvedených a řádně citovaných pramenů a literatury, a že práce nebyla využita v rámci jiného vysokoškolského studia či k získání jiného nebo stejného titulu.

V Praze, dne 7.března 2011

Magdalena Villatoro Sládková

Abstract

This dissertation reassumes the research and literary analysis conducted in my Master's thesis "Family Ideal and Real: The Change of the Image of the Family in Selected Works of Mexican American Authors" and extends its scope. As an interdisciplinary work, it examines the connections between history, sociology, and literature. Family as one of the central values in the Mexican American community, started to be officially celebrated as such during the Chicano Movement, in the 1960s and 70s. However, the family was viewed as warm and nurturing by some people, and as strict and rigid by others, and this dichotomy is represented also in literature.

After opening the dissertation with a discussion of Charles Taylor's and Will Kymlicka's view of multiculturalism, I move on to the analysis of the Mexican American family and address several statistics, which describe and analyze the position of Mexican American minority in society and also the Mexican American family, focusing especially on the common stereotypes and supporting them or refuting them with research studies on the specific topics.

The literary section of the dissertation analyzes three segments of Mexican American literature: literature by Chicana authors, autobiographical narratives, and children's literature; and assesses the representation of the Mexican American family in selected literary works. The chapter on Chicana authors evaluates the position of the family in story collections by Sandra Cisneros and novels by Ana Castillo. While the first one blames the family for limiting women in their choices and exposing them to abuse, the latter puts emphasis on the power women have in creating a family that is loving and caring. The chapter on autobiographical narratives by Mexican American authors discusses two books by Norma Elia Cantú and Francisco Jiménez, which address growing up in Mexican American families. Both authors view them positively, though their works demonstrate the difference in their social status and also their gender. The chapter on children's literature evaluates a larger body of books and assesses the change in the representation of the Mexican American family in literature for children between 1960s and 2000s. This dissertation thus addresses the different ways of perceiving the Mexican American family in literature and analyzes the reasons for these differences from historical and sociological perspectives.

Abstrakt

Tato disertační práce navazuje na výzkum a literární analýzu provedené v mé diplomové práci „Rodina ideální a reálná: Změna obrazu rodiny ve vybraných dílech mexicko-amerických autorů“, a rozšiřuje její záběr. Coby interdisciplinární práce zkoumá spojení mezi historií, sociologií a literaturou.

Rodina je v mexicko-americké komunitě jednou z hlavních hodnot a začala být jako taková oficiálně oslavována během chicanského hnutí v šedesátých a sedmdesátých letech. Už v té době však byla některými lidmi vnímána nejen jako jako milující a laskavá, ale jako přísná a rigidní. Tato dichotomie je reflektována také v literatuře.

Po úvodu, který představuje multikulturalism z pohledu filozofů Charlese Taylora a Willa Kymlicky, přecházím k analýze mexicko-americké rodiny a zabývám se několika statistikami, které popisují a analyzují pozici mexicko-americké menšiny v americké společnosti a také mexicko-americkou rodinu. Zaměřuji se především na zakořeněné stereotypy, které výzkumné studie na konkrétní témata buď dokládají nebo vyvracejí.

Literární část práce analyzuje tři segmenty mexicko-americké literatury: literaturu chicanských autorek, autobiografické příběhy a dětskou literaturu, a hodnotí zobrazení mexicko-americké rodiny ve vybraných literárních dílech. Kapitola o chicanských autorkách hodnotí postavení rodiny ve sbírkách povídek Sandry Cisneros a v románech Any Castillo. Zatímco první z nich obviňuje rodinu z omezování žen v jejich rozhodnutích a z jejich zneužívání, druhá klade důraz na sílu, kterou mají ženy při vytváření milující rodiny. V kapitole o autobiografiích mexicko-amerických autorů se zabývám knihami Normy Eliy Cantú a Francisca Jiméneze, které popisují dětství v mexicko-americké rodině. Pohled obou autorů na rodinu je pozitivní, i když jejich práce také reflektují rozdíly v jejich sociálním postavení a také odlišný pohled ženy a muže. V kapitole o dětské literatuře pak analyzuji větší soubor knih a hodnotím vývoj ve zobrazování mexicko-americké rodiny v literatuře pro děti od šedesátých let do současnosti. Tato práce tak popisuje různé způsoby vnímání a zobrazování mexicko-americké rodiny v literatuře a analyzuje důvody pro tyto odlišnosti z historického a sociologického hlediska.

Poděkování

Ráda bych na tomto místě poděkovala paní Doc. PhDr. Markétě Křížové, PhD., jejíž odborné vedení, cenné rady a povzbuzování směřovalo tuto práci ke zdárnému cíli. Děkuji panu prof. Dr. Josefu Opatrnému za důležité připomínky a komentáře při přípravě této práce a za inspiraci během studia.

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A z celého srdce chci poděkovat svým rodičům, že mě během studia podporovali a svému muži za neustálou pomoc, podporu a trpělivost nejen během psaní této práce. Děkuji.

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Introduction

Proposal

My Master's thesis "Family Ideal and Real: The Change of the Image of the Family in Selected Works of Mexican American Authors", defended in 2007, focused on the Mexican American family (*la familia*) and its image in literature. Using the combination of the mimetic and the expressive approach to literature I attempted to describe how the reality of the Mexican American minority as well as the experiences of the authors formed the representation of the family in specific literary works by four Mexican American authors: Jovita González' *Dew on the Thorn*, Rudolfo Anaya's *Bless Me, Ultima*, Sandra Cisneros' *The House on Mango Street* and *The Rain God* by Arturo Islas. Because the size of the thesis was limiting, many other literary works and Mexican American authors had to be omitted. They will be, therefore, addressed in this dissertation.

The reason why I want to focus on this specific aspect of the Mexican American population is because the family plays an important role in the society. It teaches children the norms of behavior, and it provides material as well as emotional support to its members, and fulfills the human need for emotional attachment. Minority families in the United States also have the function of perpetuating their unique culture, language, and traditions in a society based on the melting pot theory. This is also true for the Mexican origin family in the United States.

Mexican Americans consider family as one of their most important values. As their importance as a minority began to grow in the United States, social scientists started to focus on the Mexican American family in order to analyze it. Norma Williams in

her study *The Mexican American Family: Tradition and Change* (published in 1990) says that social scientists tend to generalize about the institution of family within the Mexican American minority based on studies that were carried out by Anglo-American anthropologists in the 1950s and 60s. (Williams, 1990: 1) Obviously, their research is not only outdated, but it was also probably biased, and as Williams adds, most of these researches were conducted in rural areas, while contemporary Mexican Americans tend to live mostly in urban centers (Williams, 1990:1). Nevertheless, these negative stereotypes of Mexican American family, which will be addressed in this dissertation, influenced the public view of the Mexican American minority. The Chicano Movement then initiated new interest in the Mexican American family as one of its central values, and the image of the family was recreated in numerous works of art as well as sociological studies as loving and nurturing.

Mexican American family creates strong emotions in the Mexican American community, which often vary considerably. The focus of my Master's thesis was the change of the depiction of family in literary works due to the ideology of the Chicano Movement. The Movement invited artists to create works of art that would represent the Chicano family as an inspiration, and several literary works were written at that time in support of the Mexican American family. On one hand, this depiction of Mexican Americans was a positive thing, as it formed a counterpart to the negative Anglo-American view of the Mexican American family. On the other hand, the movement completely disregarded women and homosexuals and their rights. Therefore, after the turbulent years of the Chicano Movement, some writers addressed these problematic issues in their works. The purpose of my Master's thesis was to show that the depiction of the family in Mexican American literature changed after 1970s, and that this change was directly linked to the family ideology of the Chicano Movement.

However, the issue of the representation of the image of the family in Mexican American family kept intriguing me. Therefore, this dissertation will study the image of family in literary works which could not be addressed in the Master thesis because of the limited space, and also with literary works aside from the influence of the Chicano Move-

ment. First, I will introduce the issue of multiculturalism and its relation to literature. Then I will move to the Mexican American minority specifically and describe the general characteristics of the Mexican American family, the stereotypes, and also its importance for the Mexican American culture.¹ Afterwards, I will show how the Mexican American family is portrayed in literature, and what possibly formed its depiction in literary works in three major literature groups: literature by Chicana authors, autobiographical narratives, and children's literature.

In the second chapter I will discuss two collections of short stories by Sandra Cisneros, *House on Mango Street* and *Woman Hollering Creek and Other Stories*, and two novels by Ana Castillo, *So Far from God* and *The Guardians*. Both of these authors present in their works strong opinions about the specific position of Mexican American women. The topic of this chapter is not feminism and I by no means attempt to examine these literary works on those grounds, because Chicana feminist theory was already analyzed at the Faculty of Arts of this University by Marie Loudínová in her thesis *Being a Chicana: Chicanas: A Cultural Introduction. History. Major Issues. Literary Production. Visual Art*; and by Tereza Kynčlová in her thesis *Mestiza Consciousness and Literary Techniques in Gloria Anzaldúa's Borderlands/La Frontera – The New Mestiza*². Rather I look at how both of these authors depict families in their books.

In the third chapter I will move to the genre of autobiography or autobiographical narrative. It is intriguing how big a number of Mexican American authors use their experiences as immigrants or members of ethnic minority in their work, and how many focus especially on their growing-up and family. Autobiographical literature has a long tradition in the United States, and ethnic writers often followed in the footsteps of the Pilgrim Fathers who introduced it. Jewish American literature, African American literature, Chinese American literature, in all these segments of American literature there are autobiographical stories relating the search for identity or the immigrant experience. In Mexican American literature there is a large amount of coming-of-age stories, which

¹This chapter is an extended and updated Chapter 2 of my Master's thesis.

²See Bibliography

describe family and its impact on the authors during their formative years. In this dissertation I will present autobiographical narratives by Norma Elia Cantú (*Canícula: Snapshots of a Girlhood en la Frontera*) and Francisco Jiménez (*The Circuit*) and analyze how both of these authors present family in their writing.

The last chapter will introduce a topic that has been somewhat neglected in literary criticism, and that is Mexican American children's literature. Unlike the previous chapters, which discussed a limited amount of literary works, this chapter will address eighteen children's books by various authors. I want to depict the change in Mexican American children books published between 1960s up to the present day, focusing especially on their cultural authenticity, the representation of Mexican American characters in these books, and the role that family plays in them.

This dissertation is an interdisciplinary work, because it evaluates the connection between history, sociology and literature. The historical view examines the events preceding and following the Chicano Movement, the period of the self-determination of the Mexican American minority, and also the effect it had on Mexican American studies and literature. The sociological view addresses the position of the Mexican American family within the United States on the basis of sociological studies, statistics, and results of the Census. And the literary approach assesses how are the previous two views reflected in creative writing.

Literature review

The body of literature available has been steadily growing since the 1960's, and therefore it is virtually impossible to address all these monographs and encyclopedias. This review will present the literary sources that were used in this thesis, or books that are considered central to the Mexican American studies.

The theoretical introduction to this dissertation addresses the issue of multiculturalism with the help of Charles Taylor's essay "The Politics of Recognition" and Will Kymlicka's study *Multicultural Citizenship: A Liberal Theory of Minority Rights*, which

will open the field for a more focused discussion of a specific segment of American multiculturalism: Mexican American minority.

In the sociological area I rely on the official data from the U.S. Census Bureau. My other resources were Ronald L. Taylor's *Minority families in the United States: A Multicultural Perspective*, Alma Garcia's *The Mexican Americans*, and Norma Williams's *The Mexican-American Family*, and Clara Rodriguez' *Changing Race: Latinos, the Census, and the History of Ethnicity in the United States*. Apart from these major works I will also present studies published in a number of academic journals, such as *International Migration Review*, *Journal of Marriage and Family*, *Gender and Society*, *Family Relations*, *The Social Service Review*, *Early Childhood Education Journal*, and *Hispanic Journal of Behavioral Sciences*.

The primary sources that will be used in this dissertation were already introduced in the previous section: Sandra Cisneros' *House on Mango Street* and *Woman Hollering Creek and Other Stories*, Ana Castillo's *So Far from God* and *The Guardians*, Norma Elia Cantú's *Canícula: Snapshots of a Girlhood en la Frontera* and Francisco Jiménez' *The Circuit*. The chapter on children's literature presents a number of children's books, among them *Manuel, Young Mexican American* by Carla Greene, *I Speak English for My Mom* by Muriel Stanek, two Anglo-American authors, and children's books written by highly-acclaimed Mexican American authors, such as *Tomás and the Library Lady* by Pat Mora, *Friends from the Other Side/Amigos del otro lado* by Gloria Anzaldúa, *Too Many Tamales* by Gary Soto, and *Santero's Miracle* by Rudolfo Anaya.

There are numerous books of literary criticism on Latino and Mexican American literature that have been written especially after the Chicano Movement when there was a boom in ethnic studies and ethnic literature criticism. Some of them focus on particular authors or particular literary works; others address general themes and topics in Mexican American literature. I shall name *Understanding Chicano Literature* by Carl and Paula Shirley from 1988, Ramón Saldivar's *Chicano Narrative: The Dialectics of Difference* from 1990, *Mexican American Literature* by Charles Tatum from that same year, *Understanding Contemporary Chicana Literature* by Deborah Madsen (2000), *Women Singing*

in the Snow: A Cultural Analysis of Chicana Literature by Tey Diana Rebolledo, from 1995, *Latino and Latina Writers* by Alan West-Durán (2004), and *Mexican American Literature: The Politics of Identity* by Elizabeth C. Jacobs published in 2006. Several encyclopedias about Latinos in the United States have also been compiled in the last ten years, acknowledging the growing importance of this group. Among them are *Encyclopedia of Latino Popular Culture* from 2004, *The Oxford Encyclopedia of Latinos and Latinas in the United States*, published in 2005, *Encyclopedia Latina: History, Culture, and Society in the United States* from 2005, and *The Greenwood Encyclopedia of Latino Literature* published in 2008.

The list of books of literary criticism on children's literature is incomparably less extensive than the list on adult literature or even Mexican American literature specifically, probably because the topic has up to recent years been considered not worthy of serious study. But as children grow in importance in the Western society, so does criticism on children's literature. The books in this area that must be mentioned are *The Cambridge Companion to Children's Literature* by M. O. Grenby and Andrea Immel, *Aesthetic Approaches to Children's Literature: An Introduction* by Maria Nikolajeva, and *Encountering Children's Literature: An Arts Approach* by Jane M. Gangi. The topic of the family in children's literature has been addressed by Ann Alston in her study *The Family in English Children's Literature*. Multicultural children's literature has mostly been discussed in guides for teachers in order to assist them in choosing correct books for their class, literary criticism as such is rather scarce. Ambika Gopalakrishnan in her book *Multicultural Children's Literature: A Critical Issues Approach* and Maria José Botelho and Masha Kabakow Rudman in *Critical Multicultural Analysis of Children's Literature: Mirrors, Windows, and Doors* combine both literary criticism and instructions for teachers.

In the Czech academic environment the issue of Mexican American literature is steadily growing in popularity. The first thesis written on the topic is Kateřina Březinová's *Hispanšská přítomnost ve Spojených státech amerických: chicanská kultura a literatura jako výraz hledání svébytnosti jejích představitelů; historické kořeny; současnost* from

1995. Marie Loudínová addressed Mexican American feminism in her thesis *Being a Chicana: Chicanas: A cultural Introduction, History, Major Issues, Literary Production, Visual Art* from 2002 and Tereza Kynčlová analyzed Gloria Anzaldúa's famous book in her thesis *Mestiza Consciousness and Literary Techniques in Gloria Anzaldúa's Borderlands/La Frontera* in 2005. The same year Březinová returned to Mexican American art in her dissertation *El imaginario chicano: la iconografía civil y política de los mexicanos en Estados Unidos de América 1965-2000*. In 2007 my previously mentioned Master's thesis was defended, followed by Lucie Krpalová's *A Writer as a Curandera and Writing as a Healing Process in the Fiction of Rudolfo Anaya, Sandra Cisneros and Alicia Gaspar de Alba* from 2009. So far the last thesis on Mexican American literature is Lucie Langrová's *Relations between the USA and Mexico and their Reflection in Chicano Literature*, defended in 2010.

Terminology

When talking about Mexican Americans it is very important to define the terms, because this is the first problem that scholars can encounter in the area of Mexican American studies. Different groups used different terms in different historical periods, and these terms have different connotations, which can be very confusing. The most important distinction has to be made between “Hispanic” and “Latino”, and “Mexican American” and “Chicano”. The former two terms refer to the population with roots in Latin America, in any country from Rio Grande to Tierra del Fuego. “Hispanic” refers to the group of people who share the Spanish language, but this term is also viewed as a more problematic one out of these two words, because it suggests only the Spanish ancestry of these people, and does not take into account their indigenous heritage.³ Regardless of this reasoning, this term is frequently used by politicians. “Latino” is not a perfect solution either, because it can refer to the U.S. population of Latin American heritage, but also to the population in Latin America without any relations to the United States.

³The term Hispanic was coined in 1970 by the U.S. Census Bureau to provide data on people of Mexican, Cuban, Puerto Rican, and other Spanish speaking groups in the United States.

The term “Mexican American” refers strictly to a person of Mexican heritage in the United States. It became popular after World War II, when the Mexican origin population wanted to stress the fact that they can be Mexicans as well as Americans, and wanted to be fully integrated into American society. The term “Chicano” became popular in the late 1960s, in the era of the Civil Rights movements. People who used the word wanted to put emphasis on what differed them from the majority society. Nowadays, “Chicano” tends to be viewed as a too political and even radical term, and therefore the term “Mexican American” is used more frequently in the media when referring to the Mexican origin population in the United States.⁴

In this dissertation “Mexican Americans” refers to the Mexican origin population in the United States, and the term “Latinos” to all the Latin American immigrants in the U.S. The term “Chicano/a” will be used predominantly in relation to the people and events associated with the Chicano movement. The following are other key terms that will be used in this dissertation, and their definitions:

Anglo-American will be used to describe a white American of North-Western European origin.

Children’s literature will be used to describe literature written for children as its main and primary audience.

Discrimination For the purposes of this dissertation the word Discrimination will signify making judgment based on a distinction in favor of or against, a person or thing based on the group, class, or category to which that person or thing belongs rather than on individual merit.⁵

⁴Laura E. Gomez writes more on the problematic terminology in her article from 1992 “The Birth of the “Hispanic” Generation: Attitudes of Mexican American Political Elites toward the Hispanic Label.” (*Latin American Perspectives* 19,4: 45—58) After interviewing several Mexican American politicians, Gomez found out that even though these people did not agree with the word “Hispanic”, they used it because it secured them larger support, not just from Mexican Americans, but from other Latinos as well. It is very probable that Anglo-American politicians use the word “Hispanic” for the same reason.

⁵“Discrimination.” Dictionary.com Unabridged (v 1.1). Random House, Inc. 15 Jan. 2011. Dictionary.com <http://dictionary.reference.com/browse/discrimination>

Ethnicity The meaning of the word Ethnicity in this dissertation is a shared cultural heritage, such as religion, language, and customs.

Familism will be used to describe “a social pattern in which the family assumes a position of ascendance over individual interests.”⁶

Gender The word Gender will be used to describe a sexual identity, especially in relation to society or culture.⁷

Minority Minority in this dissertation is used to describe a “culturally, ethnically, or racially distinct group living within a larger society. As the term is used by politicians and social scientists, a minority is necessarily subordinate to the dominant group within a society.”⁸

Oppression Oppression will be used to describe the feeling of being heavily burdened, mentally or physically, by troubles, adverse conditions, anxiety, etc.⁹

Patriarchy The word Patriarchy in this dissertation describes a social system in which the father is the head of the family, and men have authority over women and children.¹⁰

Race Race in this dissertation signifies a socially constructed category that focuses on the biological traits that people share.

Stereotype The word Stereotype in this dissertation denotes a simplified and therefore distorted image of a group.¹¹

⁶“Familism.” Merriam-Webster Online Dictionary. 15 Jan. 2011.
<http://www.m-w.com/dictionary/familism>

⁷“Gender.” The American Heritage® Dictionary of the English Language, Fourth Edition. Houghton Mifflin Company, 2004. 15 Jan. 2011.
Dictionary.com <http://dictionary.reference.com/browse/gender>

⁸“Minority.” Encyclopædia Britannica. 2007.
Encyclopædia Britannica Online. 15 Jan. 2011. <http://www.britannica.com/eb/article-9052878>.

⁹“Oppression.” Dictionary.com Unabridged (v 1.1). Random House, Inc. 15 Jan. 2011.
Dictionary.com <http://dictionary.reference.com/browse/oppression>

¹⁰“Patriarchy.” Dictionary.com Unabridged (v 1.1). Random House, Inc. 15 Jan. 2011.
Dictionary.com <http://dictionary.reference.com/browse/patriarchy>

¹¹“Stereotype.” The American Heritage® New Dictionary of Cultural Literacy, Third Edition. Houghton Mifflin Company, 2005. 15 Jan. 2011.
Dictionary.com <http://dictionary.reference.com/browse/Stereotype>

Theoretical Introduction: Multiculturalism

The aim of this dissertation is to analyze a segment of American multicultural literature. But before focusing on Mexican American literature specifically it is necessary to establish what is multiculturalism and why the culture of minorities should be studied. Therefore, this Theoretical Introduction presents two approaches to multiculturalism that have emerged in 1990s: the theory of Charles Taylor, philosopher and social theorist, who connects multiculturalism with the idea of human need to be recognized, and the liberal theory of multiculturalism, advocated by political philosopher Will Kymlicka's *Multicultural Citizenship: A Liberal Theory of Minority Rights*.

In today's world very few countries are culturally and ethnically homogenous. Multiculturalism is a theory that considers co-existence of different cultures enriching, and multiculturalists propose special rights for minorities in order to improve their often-disadvantaged situation. It is often said that the world is getting smaller as new communication and travel methods bring people closer together. A journey from one continent to another that once took weeks and months is now a matter of mere hours. People leave their homes and move to another continent and another culture with greater ease than ever before and the world is becoming multicultural. Different ethnic groups have to learn to live side by side. In some countries they have lived like that for hundreds of years, in other countries new immigrant groups have appeared during the last couple of decades. While to some people this may seem enriching, others consider it a source of problems.

Charles Taylor, Canadian philosopher and social theorist, tries to get to the core of multiculturalism in his essay "The Politics of Recognition" (published in 1994). According to him, multiculturalism is closely related to recognition, which he calls a vital human need, because it is connected to culture and identity. Every individual's identity, Taylor says in the beginning of his essay, is shaped by presence or absence of recognition. That is why, for example, women in a patriarchal society accept their inferior image as their identity, or colonized nations accept the demeaning view of the colonizers.

Taylor structures his thinking by focusing first on how recognition was achieved in the past and in modern times. According to his theory, social hierarchy used to be the source of recognition. People of high social status received recognition, while people of low social standing had none. In hierarchical societies recognition came from social categories. When hierarchical society collapsed and democratic societies based on universal human rights appeared, each person was to receive recognition based solely on its universal human dignity. Taylor associates this shift in the idea of recognition with the theories of Jean-Jacques Rousseau and Johan Gottlob Herder. According to them, every person has a moral sense of right and wrong, his/her individualized identity, and has to fulfill his/her ideal of authenticity, i.e. live his life in his own way, true to himself, and be recognized as such. For Taylor, the same concept applies to cultures. For example, European colonizers did not have the moral right to force colonized nations to copy their European ways.

According to this theory the key to one's life lies inside. But, as Taylor claims, we define our identity through our interactions with others and through their vision of our lives, in other words, human life is dialogical. That is why recognition becomes important. As it was stated above, after the collapse of hierarchical societies, recognition was not granted to anyone. People can now strive for recognition, but there is no guarantee that they will receive it. And if they do not get recognition, their identity can be damaged, because they accept the inferior image of themselves. Therefore the actual need for recognition was acknowledged.

After clarifying these notions of recognition and identity, Taylor applies them to politics. According to him, equal recognition is appropriate for a democratic society, because the withholding of recognition can be considered a form of oppression. When he speaks about the universalistic concept of "Politics of Recognition", he means a system, which honors the universal human rights, and in which all citizens are granted equal rights and equal dignity. But there is also what he calls the "Politics of Difference", related to the notion of identity, which, on the other hand, does not stress the universal, but the unique. According to the "Politics of Difference", everybody has a unique identity

that is different from everyone else. This Politics, contrary to the universalistic view, asks for acknowledgement for something that is not universally shared. According to Taylor, all humans are worthy of respect for their universal human potential, which is the universalistic view, but also for being capable of forming a unique and distinct identity and culture, which is represented by the “Politics of Difference”. (Taylor, 1994: 44)

However, according to Taylor’s essay, the apparently more liberal view of universalism forces people into a “homogenous mold”, a reflection of one hegemonic culture, where minority cultures are forced to take alien form. (Taylor, 1994: 43) Universalism, as hard as it tries to look liberal and impartial, is actually discriminatory, because it in fact proposes one culture over others; and Western liberalism obviously cannot claim to be completely neutral in terms of culture.

Taylor returns to Rousseau to further explain how the idea of recognition is related to multiculturalism. Rousseau describes the difference between “freedom-in-equality” and hierarchy. In a hierarchical society there is dependence on others, which makes the dependent person “a slave to opinion”. (Taylor, 1994: 43) Rousseau says that in a hierarchical society, there is always division: some people get recognition; some people do not, and this division causes isolation. He argues for a system with a different kind of recognition, which comes from equality, reciprocity, and unity of purpose, where all virtues are equally honored. According to him, society with a common purpose with reciprocal recognition among equals is the solution for the struggle for recognition. (Taylor, 1994: 45)

However, the problem is that for Rousseau’s theory the absence of differentiated roles is crucial and inseparable from the common purpose, which in today’s multicultural world becomes quite rare. Even though for liberalism of equal rights it is hard to accept that different cultures may have different needs that should be accommodated in a society, sometimes they agree that special rights are necessary for a survival of the group, in a way similar to the natural world and survival of different species. The question that inevitably follows is, whether individual rights do come before collective rights.

Taylor quotes Ronald Dworkin, an American philosopher of law, and his essay called

“Liberalism”, where Dworkin says: “Liberal society adopts no particular substantive view about the ends of life. The society is united around a strong procedural commitment to treat people with equal respect”. (Taylor, 1994: 56) Taylor compares this theory to that of Immanuel Kant, who had a similar view of liberalism: human dignity consists in autonomy; each person can determine the view of good life for himself. (Taylor, 1994: 41) Therefore, there is no need for a liberal society to take a stand on this issue; rather, the society should make sure that all citizens are dealt with in a fair and equal manner.

However, what the accommodating attitude towards different cultures brings is the increasing demand to also acknowledge the worth of these cultures, which once again leads back to Rousseau’s idea of recognition. In relation to this Taylor mentions Frantz Fenton’s idea that “the major weapon of colonizers was the imposition of their image of the colonized on the subjugated people”, and according to Taylor, the struggle to change this negative self-image is very important in multiculturalism. (Taylor, 1994: 65)

Taylor concludes his essay by relating this struggle for recognition of minority cultures to the area of education. The canon of majority humanities departments includes mainly white male authors, while women and non-Western cultures and races are omitted. Multiculturalists call for inclusion of these authors not because they want to broaden horizons for the members of the Western culture, but to give women and non-Europeans better image of themselves, showing that their writing is important. In other words, they want to give them recognition, which, as we established earlier, is a vital human need.

However, there is a problem related to this. According to multicultural theorists, all cultures deserve a mutual respect. But the question that Taylor asks is whether all cultures are equally important and whether they all have equal worth. Does liberalism mean that along equal human rights there is also equal culture value? Taylor says that on the one hand to learn about different cultures does broaden horizons, but he adds that on the other hand all cultures can have a period of decadence. Therefore, to demand recognition of equal worth for all cultures is wrong. According to Taylor, people *can* find value, but cannot be *forced* to find it. If people subdued to such pressure, such value would not be worth anything, because it would not be meant as an honest act of

respect. Another problem he sees is that the present standards for judging cultures are Western standards that are not only not applicable to the variety of different cultures in the world, but, judging these cultures by Western standards is actually homogenizing. Taylor concludes by saying that we need to be aware of “our own limited part in the whole human story” and be open to the possibility that all cultures that somehow contributed to this story deserve recognition, even if some of their other features are dislikable. (Taylor, 1994: 73)

The topic that Charles Taylor opened in his essay, i.e. the relation of universal human rights and minority rights, is closely related to the theory of liberal multiculturalism that Will Kymlicka, a Canadian political philosopher, addresses in his book *Multicultural Citizenship: A Liberal Theory of Minority Rights* (first published in 1995). In this book he tries to explain the relation between minority rights and universal human rights, and how individual liberty, democracy, and social justice limits minority rights. (Kymlicka, 1998: 6) Unlike Taylor who from the start treats minority rights universally, Kymlicka begins with a well-arranged and transparent description of multiculturalism and a categorization of national minorities and related issues. He introduces the two main patterns of cultural diversity: national minorities and ethnic groups. According to his division, national minorities are previously self-governing cultural groups incorporated into a larger state, which want to maintain themselves as distinct societies alongside the majority society. Ethnic groups are formed by individual and familial immigration, which form loose associations and want to be accepted as full members of the society. They do not want to form a self-governing nation, but to modify the institutions and laws of a country to become more accommodating of cultural differences. Kymlicka then describes the differences between multinational states, which are created by various national minorities who have lived in the area for centuries, and polyethnic states that are formed by people of different ethnicities who have immigrated in the area, and also the difference between minority rights (usually self-government rights through some form of federalism), and polyethnic rights (e.g. financial support, legal protection). (Kymlicka, 1998: 30-33)

Kymlicka states that minority rights have been disregarded for decades because

the United Nations and similar organizations focus especially on universal human rights. (Kymlicka, 1998: 3) According to him the reason for that was the World War II, where the focus on ethnicity was the main source of conflict. The Universal Declaration of Human Rights that was proclaimed after the war, in 1948, does not include any mention of minority or ethnic rights, because the universal human rights were considered to suffice. As Kymlicka points out, this approach was adapted on the basis of the model of the separation of church and state that was supposed to lead to religious tolerance. The common belief was that in a similar way the shift from ethnicity into the universal humanity would bring ethnic tolerance. As many examples from the post-war ethnic conflicts around the world demonstrate, this was not achieved. Languages, regional autonomy, political representation, immigration policy, national symbols, and holidays are among the many issues that minorities and majorities often disagree on. As Kymlicka says in the introduction to his book, ethno-cultural conflicts have become the most common source of political violence in the world since the end of Cold War. (Kymlicka, 1998: 1) That is why Kymlicka believes that it is important to leave aside the universal humanity that unites us, and focus on the differences that create today's multicultural society. To use Charles Taylor classification, Kymlicka is the supporter of the Politics of Difference.

In his book he points out that many liberals supported the idea of the shift towards universal human rights (this is what Taylor calls the Politics of Recognition), because it seemed like a natural extension of the way religious minorities were protected. Nowadays, individual freedom of worship protects religious minorities and some people believe that in a similar way people should be able to express their ethnicity - in their private life, but with no concern to the state. Just as there was separation of church and state, there should be a separation of state and ethnicity. Yet, according to Kymlicka it is necessary to complement traditional human rights with minority rights.

In *Multicultural Citizenship: A Liberal Theory of Minority Rights*, Kymlicka focuses also on the aspects of this liberal approach to multiculturalism. He writes about political representation and the practical and theoretical difficulties of guaranteeing seats in central legislature for members of national minorities or ethnic groups. He describes

the common preoccupation that group-differentiated rights for minority cultures could inhibit the development of a shared identity necessary for stable social order.

Kymlicka also discusses collective rights and individual rights: Collective right is a right of a group to limit the liberty of individual members or a right of a group to limit power of the majority. According to some liberals, collective rights are in conflict with individual rights, and advocate individual rights only. Kymlicka argues that minorities very often do not have equal position with the majority culture, and therefore special collective rights are necessary for the self-determination of its group members. This is a parallel to Taylor's idea of recognition and its importance for culture and identity.

When talking about group rights, Kymlicka points out the difference between what he calls *internal restrictions* and *external protections*. Internal restrictions limit the members within the ethnic group (e.g. members of the group are required to follow certain religion; or their gender roles are limited) while the external protections protect the minority from the decisions of the majority that can be harmful for the particular ethnic group (e.g. establishing minority language schools or granting special representation to an ethnic group). According to Kymlicka, the liberal theory should accept only external protections, not internal restrictions, because liberalism cannot accept limiting of the rights of an individual. (Kymlicka, 1998: 35)

The two theories about multiculturalism that we have discussed so far are linked to the area of interest of this dissertation, which is an important segment of American multiculturalism: the Mexican American minority, and its family specifically. The history of Mexicans in the United States could be described as a history of discrimination. Even though Mexican origin population is often considered an immigrant group, some of them have lived for many centuries in the area that is now the United States. Therefore they are both a national minority, and an ethnic group.

Since the Mexican-American War, which ended with the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo in 1848, Mexican Americans have had a very disadvantaged position in the American society. "Mexicans were described as lazy, ignorant, bigoted, superstitious, cheating, thieving, gambling, cruel, sinister, cowardly half-breeds," (Weber, 1997: 251) historian

David J. Weber says in his essay on Anglo-American attitudes towards Mexicans. Generations of Mexican Americans have tried to end the discrimination, school segregation, and the denial of their right to vote. Despite these attempts, the white majority resisted. It was not easy to change the prejudices that were deeply rooted in the American nation. As Ramon A. Gutierrez, a Mexican American historian, puts it, Mexican Americans were “socially, culturally, and economically subordinated and territorially segregated by white Anglo-Saxon America.” (Gutierrez, 1993: 46) Pavel Barša, Czech philosopher and sociologist who explores multiculturalism in his book *The Political Theory of Multiculturalism*, confirms that what has been stated above is a reappearing pattern in the American society. There is the white, heterosexual, masculine elite in opposition to the colored, the homosexual, and the feminine. The so-called Puritan values stand in opposition to the inclusive liberal multiculturalism. (Barša, 1999)

In the late 1960s, in the era of the Civil Rights movement, Mexican Americans became organized and started to fight against these prejudices and for their self-determination. The Chicano Movement, as it was called, covered all layers of the Mexican American society: it united poor farm workers asking for fair labor conditions, as well as high school students asking for courses on Mexican American history. The fight for self-determination was eventually successful. Farm workers got their fair treatment, children were not punished anymore for speaking Spanish at schools, centers for Chicano or Mexican American studies emerged at universities across United States; Mexican Americans stopped being ashamed for their culture and their origin. This confirms Taylor’s above-mentioned theory that including a culture in the academia gives it the necessary recognition, and also Kymlicka’s theory that minorities need special group rights to enable the members of particular group to develop self-respect by feeling secure as members of a distinct cultural or ethnic group within the majority society.

Taylor suggests that recognition can be achieved not only through economic and social change, but also through art. As he pointed out, the canon of the majority of the humanities departments deliberately omits women authors and authors of non-Western cultures and races. Inclusion of authors of Mexican American background, and Mexican

American female authors not only widens the canon for the education of the members of the Western culture, but it also gives recognition to Mexican American art and culture, evaluating it as attention-deserving. Study and analysis of Mexican American literature contributes to this.

Chapter 1

Mexican American Family

It is striking how many Mexican American authors felt the need to describe their experience of growing up in a Mexican American family in their novels and short stories. The growing interest in ethnic literature in the United States, which Kymlicka and Taylor advocate, enables readers to get acquainted with the specificities of family life in other ethnic group. But before discussing their literary approach to the Mexican American family, it is necessary to examine the facts on Mexican American family as such. In this chapter I intend to describe its specificities and address monographs and research articles that examine various aspects of Mexican American families, be it child-rearing practices, approach to gender roles, education, acculturation, or the stereotypes associated with Mexican American families. I will focus on their particular characteristics, how they differ from Mexican families and Anglo-American families, and how they change over time. Special attention will be paid to separating the traditional stereotypical views from views that are supported by research.

Alma M. Garcia says in her extensive study *The Mexican Americans* that despite all stereotyping views that perceive Mexican Americans homogeneously, it is necessary to approach the Mexican American community as heterogenous. (Garcia, 2002: 67) Not only do Mexican Americans vary according to the generations that have passed since they left Mexico, but even in Mexico itself various regions and communities show different cultural traits.

Table 1.1: Median Age of Latinos by Origin, 2000 (Ramirez, 2004)

Latinos	Median age
Mexican	24.4
Puerto Rican	27.7
Cuban	40.3
Central American	29.0
South American	33.0
Dominican	29.6
Spaniard	35.8
Other Hispanic	24.8

But of course, there are certain general attributes of the Mexican American family that we can analyze in this chapter. According to a study by Chicano scholar Yolanda Flores Niemann, the few positive images of the Mexican origin population in the United States are predominantly related to the centrality of the family for this ethnic community. (Flores Niemann, 2001: 55-90) Contrary to this statement, other scholars believe that it is the family that very often triggers the negative stereotypes about the people of Mexican descent. (Mirandé, 1997: 748) The Mexican American family is thus viewed as either warm and nurturing or cold and authoritative, and these two contrasting views are apparent not only in sociological studies, but also in Mexican American literature.

The statistics of the U.S. Census Bureau show just how important family is for Mexican Americans. They are a young population with the median age of 24, which denotes a large number of children (see Table 1.1). Their average household size is larger than that of other ethnic groups. There are 3.63 people in the average Latino household, and for Mexican Americans this number is even higher, 4.1 people. (Valdivieso, 1990: 11) This number reflects the high number of children in this population, which is not surprising, because Mexican American women have the highest fertility rate. (Baca Zinn and Pok, 2002: 81) Mexican Americans also show the highest number of married parents (as opposed to single parent household or cohabitation) out of all Latino families. (Rodríguez, Havidán et al, 2008: 78) Mexican Americans have lower levels of education than other Latino groups in the United States and than the non-Hispanic population (see Table 1.2).

Table 1.2: Educational Attainment (%), 2000 (Ramirez, 2004)

25 years and older	High School Graduate or More	Bachelor's Degree or More
U.S. Population	80.4	24.4
Latinos	52.4	20.4
Mexican	45.8	7.5
Puerto Rican	63.3	12.5
Cuban	62.9	21.2
Central American	46.0	9.5
South American	76.1	25.2
Dominican	51.1	10.9
Spaniard	77.0	29.9
Other Hispanic	60.0	11.2

Mexican Americans are also generally concentrated among the working class, which is reflected in the research on Mexican American families. The fact is, however, that majority of research studies in the past has focused on working class families, while research on middle and upper class Mexican American families is rather limited. Contemporary social scientists therefore try to extend this body of research by including also middle class Mexican Americans.

1.1 Family Structure

The traditional characteristics of a Mexican American family were described in 1977 by Alfredo Mirandé, a Mexican American studies sociologist. These characteristics were, according to him, “(1) male dominance; (2) rigid sex-age grading so that the elder order the younger and the men order the women; (3) clearly established patterns to help and mutual aid among family members; and (4) a strong familistic orientation whereby individual needs are subordinated to collective needs.” (Mirandé, 1997: 751) In a study published in 1993 sociologists Denise A. Segura and Jennifer L. Pierce observed similar features concerning the Mexican American family. Apart from familism, involvement of extended family in the daily life of the nuclear family, and strictly defined gender roles,

they mentioned also the working class status and high fertility.¹ (Segura and Price, 1993: 70) The Mexican American family is described in a similar way in Alma Garcia's study of Mexican Americans from 2002. (Garcia, 2002: 101-3) And the above-mentioned Census statistics confirm these views. And, as Alfredo Mirandé adds, these characteristics cannot be ascribed to all Mexican American families, but they would be more likely to depict the Mexican American family than the Anglo-American family. (Mirandé, 1977: 751)

1.2 Familism

Familism is one of the major features of the Mexican origin population; some sociologists even call it the "defining feature." (Baca Zinn and Pok, 2002: 93) Mexican Americans consider their family to be the dominant group in their lives. Alma Garcia divides familism into different classifications: demographic familism describes the number of people living in one household; structural familism involves the multigenerational dimension of families; normative familism refers to the value that family members place on family unity; and behavioral familism refers to the degree of interactions between the nuclear and extended family. (Garcia, 2002: 102) All of these types can be found to characterize Mexican American familism.

The notion "*familia*" has a broader meaning for Mexican Americans. It covers not only the nuclear family, but also extended family, and even fictive kin, which will be discussed in greater details in this chapter. The extended family, i.e. grandparents, aunts, uncles, and cousins, plays a large role in the lives of Mexican Americans. It should not be surprising that a research comparing Anglo-American, African-American, and Mexican American families, found out that the Mexican American extended family is usually the largest and most active. (Baca Zinn and Pok, 2002: 74) Another study points out that it is not uncommon among Mexican Americans that three or four generations live in the same household. (Staples, 1971: 181) Social scientists Segura and Price add that because of the closeness of these extended families, Mexican American children have multiple

¹Nuclear family consists only of parents and children. Other relatives, such as grandparents, aunts, uncles, and cousins belong to the extended family.

mothering figures, since apart from their mothers, grandmothers and maternal aunts often take care of them and are closely involved in child-rearing. (Segura and Pierce, 1993: 75)

Segura and Price point out that people of Mexican heritage “often realize their interests, skills, and desires in the community and *la familia* instead of the larger public domain.” (Segura and Pierce, 1993: 81) The traditional view of Mexican American familism says that it decreases as the level of assimilation and acculturation of a given community increases. However, according to Jack Rothman’s article “Mexican-American Family Culture,” studies have shown that Mexican Americans are more “deeply rooted in family” than Anglo-Americans and African Americans, regardless of their geographic location and socioeconomic status. (Rothman, Gant, and Hnat, 1985: 201)

This degree of family cohesiveness is considered to be one of the main differences between the Anglo-American culture and the Mexican American culture. While the first group puts emphasis on individualism, Mexican Americans are collectivists. The family therefore expects the loyalty of its members, who often feel obliged to bring sacrifices for the benefit of the family. Guadalupe Gibson says in his 1985 publication *The Mexican American Family* that

“Mexican Americans may [often] “drop everything” in response to a call for help, articulated or implied, by relatives [. . .]. This is most often interpreted by Anglos as the Mexican American’s desire to avoid work and responsibility, when in reality they are reacting as very responsible people in relation to their own values.” (Gibson, 1985: 3)

The extremely high dropout rate of Mexican American high school students may be explained in part by this aspect of familism. It is fairly possible that some of these students do not finish their education in order to join the labor force so that they become able to financially help their families.²

Social scientists of Anglo-American origin often believe that the low socio-economic status of Mexican Americans is caused by their familistic orientation and low importance given to formal education. James G. Anderson and William H. Johnson quote many

²Arturo Islas mentions a similar case in his novel *The Rain God*.

of them in their 1971 study, such as David McClelland's conclusion that achievement motivation has its origin in the family so that a child from a family, where the individual development is emphasized is more motivated to succeed, than a child from a family, where children are "subordinate in importance" to their parents. (Anderson and Johnson, 1971: 287) However, Anderson and Johnson's own research among Mexican American and Anglo-American families prove that Mexican American children experience as much pressure to achieve good grades, as do their Anglo peers. They also receive similar help from their parents and both Mexican American and Anglo-American parents place emphasis on good grades, graduating from high school and getting college education. (Anderson and Johnson, 1971: 300-305) Anderson and Johnson therefore conclude that the low educational attainment of this group cannot be attributed to low support on the part of the parents. According to them, one of the reasons might be the fact that families of Mexican origin speak Spanish at home, which puts children in a disadvantaged position when they start school. The study also discovered that Mexican American children, despite the support from their parents, have less confidence in their ability to fulfill their parents' educational expectations, probably due to the low educational attainment and low occupational level of their parents, which give them little hope for their own future. (Anderson and Johnson, 1971: 305) However, their low self-esteem and high dropout rates could be also explained by school discrimination (Orfield, 2006).

Jack Rothman lists several negative feature of familism in his afore-mentioned article "Mexican-American Family Culture". He talks about the high levels of stress, which appear when Mexican Americans are isolated from their families or when their families become dysfunctional. (Rothman, 1985: 204) He also claims that language can be the trigger of the conflict or alienation within the family, when some members speak Spanish only, while the younger generation communicates in English. (Rothman, 1985: 204) And according to him, an important stress factor among many immigrant families can be the different degrees of acculturation within a family. (Rothman, 1985: 203) Traditional Mexican American values, like respect for parents and elders, which is not honored to this degree in Anglo-American society, can become a trigger of conflict in a family.

To prove or reject this acculturation theory, Merrill Silverstein and Xuan Chen focused on how acculturation changes the relationships between adult grandchildren and grandparents in their study published in the *Journal of Marriage and Family* in 1999. (Silverstein and Chen, 1999: 188) They hypothesize that upward socioeconomic mobility merges Mexican Americans into the mainstream society and culture, which leads some family members into isolation and thus creating an intergenerational gap. (Silverstein and Chen, 1999: 188) According to them it is likely that the generation gap between grandchildren and grandparents widens as the grandchildren become more acculturated, their obligation to family weakens, and they prefer English to Spanish. (Silverstein and Chen, 1999:189)

The authors created a set of questions to establish the level of acculturation and familism of grandchild-grandparent dyads. (Silverstein and Chen, 1999: 191) Acculturation was assessed by the importance that the respondents gave to speaking Spanish, celebrating Mexican holidays, have Mexican American friends, marry a Mexican American, worship the Virgin of Guadalupe, have a traditional Mexican American *quinceañera* and wedding. The level of familism was assessed by their opinions about the level of involvement that adult children should have for older parents, which was determined by the answers to the issues of giving home to elderly parents, teaching children about the duty of taking care of elderly parents, and taking care of the financial needs of elderly parents.

The results of the study confirmed that grandchildren are more acculturated than their grandparents and that they feel that the cultural gap between them and their grandparents “reduces intimacy in their relationship”. (Silverstein and Chen, 1999: 192, 196) Even grandchildren who speak Spanish reported this, which shows that intergenerational gap is not completely related to the possible language barrier. It is mainly the “different cultural worlds” that grandchildren and grandparents live in, which creates the intergenerational gap. The authors conclude that socioeconomic benefits of acculturation come hand in hand with reduced social integration with the older generations. (Silverstein and Chen, 1999: 197)

Despite the negative aspects of familism, there are other clearly positive outcomes, especially in relation to Mexican immigrants. Most immigrants come to the United States, because of the fact that their relatives are already there. These social networks, established through family, help new immigrants throughout the immigration process. The members of either nuclear or extended family attract new immigrants to come in search of the American Dream, and over 50% of new Mexican immigrants find a place to live with the assistance of their family. (Garcia, 2002: 102) Living with family helps the newly arrived relatives to settle and adjust to their new environment. Extended family and kinship networks are very important when related to migration. They help individuals reduce the financial and social costs of migration and prove crucial in establishing new existence in the United States. (Hondagneu-Sotelo: 1992: 396) “Familism creates a strong support network that assists the immigrant family in time of need. Families lend each other money, provide child care, assist with the elderly and sick, and join together to celebrate important dates,” Alma Garcia adds. (Garcia, 2002: 102)

Another important feature of familism is the fact that in case of problems, Mexican Americans tend to turn to their family for help. Amado Padilla, professor of Ethnic Studies at Stanford University, observed that Mexican Americans are much more likely to solve their problems inside the family rather than with the assistance of their friends, therapists, or institutions, which is what Anglo-Americans usually do. He quotes one of his informants, who said:

“[Mexicans] are a proud people. They’re the type of people that would rather stay together in a little circle within their own family and try to work out their problems themselves than go outside – even to discuss it with, say, [a] friend. We would really have to be very close in order for a person to tell me what was happening, as far as their child is concerned, or their husband, or themselves. Because they keep that to themselves.” (Padilla, 1979)

When asked about where they seek emotional support, the most common answers of the Mexican Americans interviewed for the study were: “You can’t trust anybody else. Everything is better if kept within the family,” and “You have confidence in your relatives and you know they’ll give truthful advice.” (Padilla, 1979) The fact that Mexican Americans tend to rely on their relatives, while Anglo-Americans consult a therapist, could

be explained by the economic aspect: the majority of Mexican Americans are situated in the working-class, and seeing a therapist would not be affordable for them. However, there are many affordable options where problems of mental health can be consulted, including church organizations or community centers. Considering the extensiveness and cohesiveness of their family networks, it is quite understandable that Mexican Americans feel more comfortable discussing their problems within the family, and turning on them in times of crisis. Jack Rothman points out that relying on help from family members is not a uniquely Mexican American feature, nevertheless the degree of family unity is distinguishable. (Rothman, 1985: 201)

The importance of family for Mexican Americans is apparent also from a study conducted among young Mexican American and Anglo children. To the question “Who do you love?” the Anglo children often named friends and other non-family members, while the Mexican children named only the members of their family. (Mirandé, 1977: 752) This marks yet another dissimilitude between Mexican origin population and Anglo-Americans. Family thus played a larger role in the lives of young Mexican Americans than in the lives of their Anglo peers. On the other hand, some social scientists have observed, that as following generations of Mexican Americans improve their socio-economic status, the familistic orientation becomes “an obstacle to advancement rather than help.” (Gibson, 1985: 7)

1.3 Extended Family

Living with extended family is considered to be one of the key traits of familism, and therefore many contemporary American social scientists focus on the extended family living arrangements in their research. In 1997, *Journal of Marriage and Family* published a study, which compared the patterns of extended family households in the United States between 1970s and 1990s. The authors of the study claim that there was a steady decline in extended family households throughout the 20th century, up until to 1980s, when the extended family households began an upward trend again. (Glick, 1997: 177)

This was caused by the change in immigration to the United States, because by 1980s immigration from Europe and Canada declined, but at the same time there was an increase in immigration from developing countries in Asia and Latin America, where there are strong familistic traditions.

The article lists two types of extended family housing arrangements: horizontal and vertical. Horizontally extended household means that it contains members of the same generation, such as brothers and sisters, aunts and uncles, cousins. If the household is vertically extended, it contains more than one generation of adults. (Glick, 1997: 178) The authors then went on to observe that legal immigrants, who were granted asylum in the U.S. because of the political situation in their countries, were likely to establish vertically extended households because they did not expect to return to their country of origin, and therefore immigrants in various stages of life arrived, often several generations together.

On the other hand, illegal labor immigrants from Mexico show another pattern. They come usually as single and economically active individuals of low socioeconomic status, and often one of the factors that encourage them in migration is the fact that they already have support networks formed by their family members in the United States. These networks are likely to be formed by members of the same generation, siblings or cousins, rather than vertically extended family formed by grandparents. (Glick, 1997: 179) The authors claim that the increase in horizontally extended family household is undoubtedly related to the influx of immigrants from Mexico and their life stages. (Glick, 1997: 189)

Susan Blank also questions the opinion that Mexican Americans live with extended family because it reflects the cultural norm of familism. She conducted a research, in which she compared living arrangements of Mexican immigrants and Mexican Americans by focusing on three household patterns, that have been associated with people of Mexican descent in the United States. The first pattern was based on cultural assimilation, which suggests that over the years and generations that Mexican immigrants live in the U.S., there is a decline in living with extended family and fictive kin. The second relates

household formation to economic resources, saying that Mexican immigrants are more likely to live with extended family when they have limited economic resources, but as their situation improves, they tend to live separately, only with their nuclear family. And the third says that living arrangements may reflect the life stages of individuals: before getting married and having children, immigrants tend to live with extended family, but when starting their own family, they look for independent household.

The acculturation hypothesis was not confirmed by Blank's research of Mexican American households, because there was no statistical difference in simple and extended household formation between recent Mexican immigrants, immigrants who have lived in the U.S. for decades, and people of Mexican descent born in the U.S. Only in the recent immigrant group there is a link between the years in the U.S. and probability of forming a simple household. This is influenced by the fact that recent immigrants have very low or no income, and living with extended family gives them some economic stability at the beginning of their relocation. (Blank, 1998: 47)

Also, the process of immigration disrupts the life stages of newly arrived male immigrants, who, despite the fact that they usually arrive as young adults, wait with establishing independent households. Male immigrants are much more likely to live with extended family, than women. This is because immigrant women tend to come to the U.S. in order to join their husbands, who have already lived for some time in the United States and whose economic situation is more stable. These women, once reunited with their husbands or fiances, tend to seek independent living arrangements. Also, families with children prefer independent housing to living with extended family. (Blank, 1998: 47) Similar facts have been proven also for Mexican Americans, who were born in the U.S. and whose families have lived here for generations. Just like recent immigrants, they are likely to live with extended family only if their economic situation makes it difficult for them to establish independent household. Married Mexican Americans, or those with children, are three times more likely to not live with their extended family. (Blank, 1998: 50)

Blank's research thus uproots the common belief that people of Mexican descent in

the U.S. tend to live in large households, because it is part of their culture. Both recent immigrants as well as U.S. natives of Mexican heritage live with extended family only in case of economic necessity, or before life course leads them into separate independent households. (Blank, 1998: 51) Nevertheless, we are safe to say that is undoubtedly a trait of familism for members of the Mexican minority to open their homes to their relatives in times of economic need or when they recently immigrate from Mexico.

In another study, Jennifer E. Glick, one of the authors of the above discussed research on the patterns of extended family households, tries to find out whether there is a difference between Mexican immigrants and Mexican Americans in the degree of involvement in economic support to and from extended family. (Glick, 1999: 745 – 765) Just like the previous studies suggested, Glick's research confirms that the fact that Mexican immigrants co-reside with their extended family in the United States is not a sign of adherence to cultural traditions, but rather an socio-economic necessity. Recent immigrants have usually limited knowledge of English and are disadvantaged at the housing market. Living with extended family helps them get accustomed to their new situation, while their relatives also help them to find their place in the labor market.

However, Glick stresses the fact that newly arrived Mexican immigrants are not only at the receiving end of the support network. Firstly, it is not uncommon that the new arrivals at the same time provide services to their extended family, such a house chores, in order to reciprocate. (Glick, 1999: 746) And more importantly, they financially support their families in Mexico. These remittances are far from being insignificant, as the value of U.S. remittances to Mexico has grown from 3.5 billion dollars in 1990 to 16.6 billion dollars in 2004, which equals to 78% of the value of Mexico's oil export. (Sana, 2008: 1000) This proves that immigrants maintain close relationship with their families who stayed in Mexico even after they arrive in the U.S., creating a transnational migrant circuit, through which sometimes members of one family travel back and forth from the United States to Mexico and then again to the United States. These family networks and interactions are important also for cultural reasons, as they assist immigrants in retaining the typical culture of Mexico in their new country. Thus, when comparing the

involvement in extended family support of Mexican immigrants and Mexican Americans, Glick concludes that both groups are likely to provide economic support to relatives, but recent immigrants are involved in more networks than American natives of Mexican descent. (Glick, 1999: 762)

1.4 Gender Roles

Apart from familism, male dominance is probably the most common stereotype associated with the traditional Mexican American family. According to the traditional view the ideas of male dominance and female submissiveness resulted in clearly defined gender roles in the family. Children were introduced into the roles they should have as adults at an early age. Boys were expected to be aggressive and never to run from fights, while girls learned to dress neatly and to help their mother take care of the father and brothers. (Staton, 1972: 326) This view was recreated very clearly in the literary works of Arturo Islas and Sandra Cisneros, who criticize imposing traditional gender roles on children. However, according to the research of Olivia N. Saracho and Bernard Spodek, the contemporary studies of Mexican American families show that the strongly differentiated gender roles have been replaced by a more egalitarian view of gender, and children are “no longer socialized into the rigid gender roles.” (Saracho and Spodek, 2007: 227)

The traditional view of the Mexican American family is patriarchal, where the father is the authoritative figure in the family. The concept of *machismo* has also been closely connected to the patriarchal system. In her essay “The Ancient Roots of Machismo” Ana Castillo traces the idea of male superiority in Mexican culture to the Arab influence on Spanish culture, and adds that also the Aztec empire considered women inferior. (Castillo, 1994: 63 – 64) Contemporary social scientists now re-evaluate the stereotypical views of *machismo*. Some consider it to be a “survival strategy” for the men of Mexican origin. (Garcia, 2002: 104) Guadalupe Gibson’s study of the Mexican American family comments on this topic:

“Most important for Mexican American males is to have self-respect. Unfortunately, Mexican American men live in an oppressive and discriminatory society, which does not always give them opportunity to affirm themselves positively through their jobs and lifestyles. They are constantly subjugated to indignities, to insults, and, at times, are almost dehumanized. In their importance it seems that the only avenue open to them to be assertive is through the subjugation of their wives and children.” (Gibson, 1985: 9)

Obviously, this argument would not fly with Chicana feminists. If men justify their oppression of women by the fact that they are racially and socially oppressed in the outside world, then who is bellow women to make them feel better, when they are not only racially and socially marginalized outside of the home, but also oppressed based on their gender by their own husbands? Also, Ana Castillo adds, this argument does not explain why there are “privileged“ men, who treat women as inferior. (Castillo, 1994: 67) Nevertheless, Gibson adds that Mexican American women, who are “sensitive to their [husbands’] needs, accommodate this situation, and often manage to keep the family functioning.” (Gibson, 1985: 9)

This quotation illustrates another concept associated with the Mexican American family: *hembrismo*, the female counterpart of *machismo*. While machismo defines the behavior of the Mexican man, *hembrismo* (from the Spanish word for female: *hembra*) describes exaggerated femininity and submissiveness. (Staton, 1972: 326) A complement to *hembrismo* is *marianismo*, which is a concept connected to the traditional Catholicism of the Mexican community. It refers to the veneration of Virgin Mary as a role model, who sets the standards all women should abide by. In Mexican culture this is especially associated with the image of *La Virgen de Guadalupe*. Guadalupe has always been portrayed as a static figure, her eyes looking down and her hands united in a prayer. Mexican American women are traditionally expected to be like her: very pious, submissive, and devoted to their families.³ Guadalupe Gibson noted that women often accept this role free-willingly:

³After the Chicano Movement, when Chicanas began to protest against the role of women in Mexican American culture, the image of Guadalupe was one of the first to be re-defined, and by using visual art Chicanas presented her as an active woman. See Loudínová, Marie. *Being a Chicana: Chicanas: A Cultural Introduction. History. Major Issues. Literary Production. Visual Art.*

“Some women enjoy playing the role of martyr. They build their self-concept on this premise, gaining self-respect from the sympathy and/or praise they attract from friends and relatives. This becomes their way of coping with what otherwise would be an intolerable situation.” (Gibson, 1985: 9-10)

Clearly, these concepts of *machismo*, *hembrismo*, and *marianismo* are closely related to sexuality. Traditionally, men were allowed sexual promiscuity, while women were expected to be chaste. Guarding a young girl’s honor was an extremely important task, because it was associated with the family honor. Even though it may seem that these concepts only exist in working class Mexican origin families, Alma Garcia claims that several studies have shown that these concepts can be found among Mexican American families in all social classes. (Garcia, 2002: 103-4) The father is the ultimate authority, requires respects from his wife and children, and represents the family on the outside. The mother does chores in the household and plays an extremely important role in the life of their children. Alfredo Mirandé even observes that “while the woman does not have the formal prestige of the man, she has great informal influence in the home.” (Mirandé, 1977: 752-3) This theory is supported by some of the literary works that will be discussed in the following chapters.

Recent studies show, however, that gender roles in Mexican American families tend to be more egalitarian and some scholars even try to redefine the concept of *machismo*. According to them, the traditional view of a *macho* man as the dominant, aggressive, and tyrannical “master of the household“ is outdated. (Saracho and Spodek, 2007: 225) Contemporary research shows that *machismo* is now viewed more as a source of “positive cultural qualities, such as honesty, loyalty, fairness, responsibility, trustworthiness (. . .)”, and the contemporary *machismo*-related roles are the provider, “loving husband, the committed father, and the family man.” (Saracho and Spodek, 2007: 225)

Pierette Hondagneu-Sotelo, American sociologist whose research is focused on gender and immigration, claims in her study “Overcoming Patriarchal Constraints: The Reconstruction of Gender Relations Among Mexican Immigrant Women and Men” that attributing the more egalitarian approach to gender in Mexican American communities to their growing acculturation may be incorrect, since many immigrants still live in seg-

regated neighborhoods and have limited contact with Anglos. According to her, gender roles are changing because of the specific patterns of Mexican immigration. (Hondagneu-Sotelo, 1992: 393)

In her study, Hondagneu-Sotelo examined the way stage migration (i.e. one member of the family crosses first to the U.S. and the rest of the family follows later) influenced gender roles in Mexican American families who came to the U.S. either during the Bracero Program or after 1965. According to her, the families kept the traditional gender roles while in Mexico. When work became scarce, the men, who were expected to fulfill their role as providers, decided to migrate to the U.S., while women had to accept their decision and learn how to take care of the family during their husbands' absence. During these separations, which often lasted for years, the women had to raise children on their own and also overtake the originally male responsibilities: the woman became the provider and the head of the household by seeking income-earning possibilities. (Hondagneu-Sotelo, 1992: 400-401) And even though these periods of time were extremely hard for these women, there were also rewards in the form of new skills and growing self-confidence.

For the men, the experience of being away from home, despite its many hardships, brought more freedom. They were on their own and could decide what to do with the money they earn: they could send remittances to their families, but they could also spend the money as they pleased. Many even started new families in the United States and did not return to Mexico. (Hondagneu-Sotelo, 1992: 400) For these reasons, women wanted to join their husbands in migration. The men opposed, pointing out the harsh living conditions in the U.S., low wages, and bad influences on the children. Because during the Bracero program women could only obtain legal status in the U.S. through their husbands, they had to find arguments to convince them. The absence of immigrant women's networks in the U.S. at that time forced them to rely solely on their male relatives' and husbands' assistance. On the other hand, women, who migrated after 1965, did not have to obtain legal status through their husbands and therefore did not need their husbands' consent to migrate. Also they could use the assistance of other women to help them find arguments into convincing their husbands, and if they failed,

they could rely on these women's networks to lend them money to cover the cost of their travel. Hondagneu-Sotelo says that these were the two crucial factors that empowered the wives of migrants: the increase in female immigration that created women's networks, which then provided them with social and material resources; and the self-esteem, new decision-making power, and autonomy that the wives acquired during the long spousal separations. (Hondagneu-Sotelo, 1992: 406-407)

The change of the women affected the way in which the relationships between husbands and wives resumed after they were reunited in the U.S. And sometimes the men were equally changed. According to Hondagneu-Sotelo's research, men, who arrived in the U.S. during the years of the Bracero program, learned to take on household chores that were previously only done by women. She explains that upon their arrival to the U.S. these men lived in households with other men, and therefore had to learn how to do domestic chores themselves. They learned how to cook, iron, clean, even to make tortillas. After being reunited with their wives, these men often kept doing the chores they had to do while separated. Men, who arrived after 1965, however, often found growing Mexican community and lived with their extended family, where there were women to do domestic work. When their wives from Mexico joined them, they naturally expected them to take over these household duties. Despite the fact that in the families of the later migrants the gendered division of labor persisted, these women, just like the wives of *braceros*, kept the decision-making power and autonomy they acquired during the time of separation. In this sense, stage migration of Mexicans is responsible for creating more egalitarian gender roles. And another research shows that the more egalitarian gender attitudes the men have, the more involved they are in the family life. (Saracho and Spodek, 2007: 227) Hondagneu-Sotelo concludes that even if these changes are minor when judged by the ideal feminist standards, they appear greater when compared to the strictly defined gender roles of the patriarchal families in rural Mexico. (Hondagneu-Sotelo, 1992: 408-411)

Nevertheless, despite these effects that stage migration on gender roles, it is also important to remember that Mexican immigration was and is very diverse. Immigrants

come from various geographical regions and different socioeconomic backgrounds, with different levels of educational attainment and various degrees of professional experience. The constant influx of new immigrants also creates different levels of acculturation. All these factors influence the way gender roles exist within individual families.

1.5 Children and Parents

When talking about family, it is inevitable to touch upon the subject of children. Especially when talking about Mexican American family, which is recognized as child-centered, and where, according Staples' article "The Mexican-American Family: Its Modification Over Time and Space" little children are considered and treated as a real gift from God. (Staples, 1971: 188) Just like the entire Mexican American population, the Mexican American children are a very diverse group, including children of recent immigrants and children from families that have lived in the United States for generations. Nevertheless, we can allow ourselves certain generalizations based on U.S. Census and data sociological studies.

The stereotypical view considers Mexican American parenting to be either very permissive, because of the child-centered character of the Mexican American family, or very authoritarian, because of the focus on the traditional values. (Martinez, 1988: 275) Several studies on Mexican American child-rearing practices stated that Mexican American parents were more permissive and less egalitarian than Anglo-American and African American families. (Martinez, 1988: 279) However, self-reporting surveys were used during these researches, which only shows how the parents themselves view their own parenting practices, rather than directly observing these practices.

In 1988, Estella A. Martínez conducted a new study focusing on child-rearing practices in Mexican American families. The study consisted of observations of several mother-child dyads. During the research the mothers' task was to teach their five year old children to build a toy robot and a toy airplane out of a commonly known toy construction set, while their behavior was observed and classified. Martínez discov-

ered during these observations that the child-rearing practices of the Mexican American mothers actually varied and ranged from permissive (i.e. acceptance of child's actions, no use of punishment), through authoritative (i.e. democratic approach, use of reasoning to guide the child), to authoritarian (i.e. stresses the authority of the parent, uses punishment). (Martinez, 1988: 277) Yet, unlike in the previous self-reporting surveys, only 4% of mothers used permissive child-rearing techniques, while 47% used authoritarian techniques, and 49% of mothers used authoritative practices. The authoritative child-rearing practice stresses competitiveness and individuality and is considered to be typical of Anglo-American parents. The surprising fact is that it is mostly associated with middle class, while the mothers in the study were predominantly working class. Martínez believes that the reason why almost half of the mothers in this study used these practices is most likely their high level of acculturation. The vast majority of them lived in Anglo neighborhoods, and were exposed to the authoritative child-rearing practices in their community and through the media. (Martinez, 1988: 277) The authoritarian approach, on the other hand, is characteristic of parents of lower socio-economical status. This would reflect the current Census data and also the stereotypical views of the Mexican American family, which say that even though parents tend to be very affectionate towards their offspring, the children are soon taught to respect and obey their parents.

But not only the stereotypical view of either permissive or authoritative mother appears to be incorrect. Similarly, the traditional idea of uninvolved fathers is being shattered. According to sociological studies on the role of parents in Mexican American families published in 1970s, the mother was responsible for the household and for child-rearing tasks, while the father was working outside the home, and children were taught not to expect much contact with him. (Staton, 1972: 328) The mother then became “the mediator” between the father and the children. According to these sociological studies, the mother was the central figure in the home and the mother-child relationship was very close, while the father was seen as a “distant authority.” (Mirandé, 1977: 752) However, modern social scientists disagree with this view and claim that this distant relationship between father and children is typical rather of Mexican families, not Mexican American

families. According to them, Mexican American fathers are very active in caring for children, and they even precede Anglo-American fathers. (Segura and Pierce, 1993: 75)

In 2007, Olivia N. Saracho and Bernard Spodek published a study, focusing primarily on the Mexican American father stereotypes. (Saracho and Spodek, 2007: 223-231) In it they claim that studies that were so far published on the topic of Mexican American fathers perpetuate negative stereotypes and myths; they even talk about “victimization” of Mexican American men. (Saracho and Spodek, 2007: 228) According to them the main problem of the previously published studies is the fact that they completely overlooked the culture, language, level of acculturation of Mexican American fathers in question. Apart from that they also used outdated material that offered only the traditional view, which attributed predominantly negative connotations to Mexican American fathers. (Saracho and Spodek, 2007: 224) Despite the fact that the traditional view perceives Mexican American fathers as withdrawn from family life, according to Saracho and Spodek’s research they are actually more playful and sociable with their children than mothers. (Saracho and Spodek, 2007: 226)

Saracho and Spodek say that Mexican American fathers generally do not make differences between their children based on their gender, as was traditionally believed. (Saracho and Spodek, 2007: 225) A study published in *Journal of Marriage and Family* slightly corrects this view, saying that Mexican American fathers, who are more oriented to Mexican culture rather than to Anglo culture, tend to show more gender-typed differential treatment of their children than fathers who have stronger orientation to the main stream Anglo culture. (McHale, 2005: 1265) The authors of the study first assessed the acculturation of the parents and then evaluated all possible constellations: older sister – younger sister, older sister – younger brother, older brother – younger brother, and older brother – younger sister. (McHale, 2005: 1266) The research has shown that children of fathers who were more oriented towards Anglo culture have similar privileges and duties within the family, while in families where fathers are less acculturated older daughters tend to have less privileges and more chores than their brothers. (McHale, 2005: 1267) Another interesting finding was the effect the unequal treatment had on the children

involved: if the children had weak familistic values, they were negatively affected by the differential treatment, while children, who reported strong familistic values, did not confirm links between the unequal treatment and their well-being. (McHale, 2005: 1271)

To conclude their Mexican American father-oriented research, Saracho and Spodek add that Mexican American fathers tend to make differences based on the age of their children. (Saracho and Spodek, 2007: 225) Robert Staples supports this view in his study. According to him, when the children enter adolescence, Mexican American father tends to “avoid demonstrations of affection and demands that the child show him respect.” (Staples, 1971: 188)

1.6 Fictive Kin or *Compadrazgo*

The importance that Mexican Americans give to blood ties was described in one of the previous sections. However, as Alma Garcia points out “[s]trong family loyalties extend beyond the immediate nuclear family and include other relatives and kinship networks.” (Garcia, 2002. 68) One of these networks is fictive kinship called *compadrazgo*, or “ritual parenthood.” (Padilla, 1979)

Compadrazgo is actually a system of godparents, who are required for baptism and confirmation in the Roman Catholic Church. They are supposed to provide “discipline and emotional and financial support when needed,” (Griswold del Castillo, 1984: 42) and in case of death of the child’s parents the godparents are expected to take care of their godchild. In that way *compadrazgo* serves as an insurance system in the community. (Ebaugh and Curry, 2009: 202) The child’s parents tend to choose people of higher economic status than themselves as godparents, to make sure their children would be well taken care of, should the need arise. On the other hand, the *ahijado*, or godchild, is also expected to take care of their godparents when they grow old. Helen Rose Ebaugh and Mary Curry point out in their study titled “Fictive Kin as Social Capital in New Immigrant Communities” that single people or childless couples become godparents of several children through out their lifetime, accepting all the obligations implied, in order

to have somebody to take care of him/them as they grow old. (Ebaugh and Curry, 2009: 203)

Through baptism the godparents enter into a relationship not only with the child, but also with the child's parents, and they become *compadres* and *comadres* (co-parents). This bond is similar to blood ties, and this relationship is extended to the religious, social, and economic realm, as it sets up mutual rights, obligations, and relationships between the biological parents of the child, and the godparents. Helen Rose Ebaugh and Mary Curry say that new relationships are also created between the sponsors, when two unrelated people are chosen for the same child. (Ebaugh, 2009: 196) Apart from baptism, *compadres* play important in *quinceañeras*, which are traditional grand celebrations of a Mexican American girl's fifteenth birthday. This event marks the coming-of-age of a girl, and could be described as a modern version of a coming-out of the young woman into the society. It is also closely intertwined with the Catholic Church, as it symbolizes the renewal of the baptismal vows of the girl, and shows that her parents brought her up as a good Catholic. The *quinceañera* celebration resembles wedding in many ways. It traditionally consists of a mass, where the girl deepens her religious responsibility and gives thanks to her parents for bringing her up. The mass is then followed by a fiesta, often with a traditional Mexican mariachi band. The role of *compadres* in a *quinceañera* celebration is that of sponsors. They may financially contribute to the organization of this elaborate celebration that can be compared wedding also in sizes and expenses. During the mass the *compadres* present the birthday girl with a religious medal, cross, or a ring, that is blessed by the priest. (Garcia, 2002: 73)

Compadrazgo plays an important role also in the weddings of Mexican American couples. The wedding generally takes place in a Catholic church and consists of many cultural practices that complement the traditional marriage ritual prescribed by the Church. (Garcia, 2002: 76) These cultural practices include a series of ritual objects, which play an important role during the ceremony. Apart from the traditional exchange of rings, the groom also gives his bride *las arras*, thirteen golden coins representing Christ and his twelve apostles, which symbolize his promise of financial support. There is also el

lazo, which usually has the form of a large rosary, and is placed over the kneeling couple to represent marriage unity. Both *las arras* and *el lazo* are given to the young couple by *padrinos*, who are usually married couples selected by the bride and groom or their families. Apart from the *padrinos de lazo* and *padrinos de arras*, there may also be other *padrinos*, who bring a rosary, prayer book, and a kneeling pillow that the bride and groom will use during the wedding ceremony. The bride also selects a special person, called *madrina de velación*, to whom she will turn for advice during her married life. These examples illustrate the fact that Mexican Americans during their life, moving from baptism to *quinceañeras*, confirmation, and marriage accumulate a large number of *compadres*, or fictive kin, and thus extend their family networks.

Madrinas and *padrinos* may be relatives, close friends of the parents, or other individuals in the community that the parents consider important. Ebaugh and Curry emphasize that choosing a non-relative to serve as godparent in a baptism is considered a way to strengthen close friendships and “make a public statement regarding the importance of the friendship.” (Ebaugh, 2009: 196) The fact that parents choose a new set of *padrinos* for each child’s baptism, confirmation, *quinceañera*, and wedding, results in the growth of the fictive kin network, which spreads into the wider community, so that eventually everyone in the community might be fictively related to each other. (Ebaugh, 2009: 196)

Segura and Price argue that nowadays the principal role of *compadrazgo* is to represent the family unity, and the economic functions of the relationship are declining. (Segura and Price, 1993: 74) According to Norma Williams’ research the importance of the extended family for Mexican Americans is slowly decreasing as well, especially among the professional class in the urban centers. (Williams, 1990. 65 - 70) It might be said that as far as fictive kinship is concerned, with their increasing socio-economic status, Mexican Americans tend to slowly turn from the traditional collectivism to American individualism. Nevertheless, in some of the literary works that will be discussed here the extended family and fictive kin plays still a very important part.

1.7 Mexican American and Anglo-American Family: The Comparison

Some of the differences between the Mexican American and Anglo-American family have already been addressed in this chapter. In 1971, American scholars Anderson and Johnson noted that Mexican American families differ from Anglo-American families in many demographic features, such as family size, fertility rate, educational attainment, and socioeconomic status. (Anderson and Johnson, 1971: 286) The 2000 Census confirms that even thirty years later these characteristics were still valid.

Mexican American families tend to have more children than Anglo-American families, they have a very active extended family, and their family ties are often considered stronger than in the Anglo-American family, because when problems arise, they tend to solve them inside the family and do not seek help from outside authorities.⁴ Mexican American children tend to be more cooperative than Anglo-American children, who were brought up to be individualistic and competitive. They also show respect to their parents and elders, and consider family cohesion as their central value. (Saracho and Spodek, 2007: 224) The difference in the extended-family structure between Anglo-American and Mexican Americans is based on the fact that Anglos are more mobile, while Mexican Americans tend to stay close to their family. Also the fictive kinship or *compadrazgo* system is not known in the Anglo-American family, but as it was mentioned above, even among the Mexican Americans the fictive kinship is decreasing in importance.

The biggest difference between these two families is often seen in their approach to gender roles. Because of the concept of *machismo*, Mexican American family is often considered to be “rigid and authoritarian,” while the Anglo-American family is viewed as egalitarian and individualistic. (Mirandé, 1977: 748) Alfredo Mirandé claims that several social scientists accept this theory and blame *machismo* for having bad influence on Mexican American children: “This rigid male-dominated family structure [...] fails to engender achievement, independence, self-reliance, or self-worth – values which are

⁴See section “Family Structure.”

highly esteemed in American society.” (Mirandé, 1977: 749)

However, the comparison between the Mexican American and Anglo-American family cannot be accurate, because what is usually being compared is a Mexican American working-class family and an Anglo-American middle-class family. If two working-class or two middle-class families were compared, the difference between them probably would not be so striking. According to Segura and Pierce “male domination/female subordination transcends any one cultural group.” (Segura and Pierce, 1993: 80) Moreover, Alfredo Mirandé claims that “[Mexican-American] middle-class urban families appear to be more equalitarian and to have discarded the more traditional features of the family.” (Mirandé, 1977: 754)

Recently, sociologists have taken a different approach to comparing these two different families. Originally, Mexican American family tended to be compared to the Anglo-American family from the ethnocentric perspective of the Anglo-American social scientists, and therefore it was viewed as a deviance from the norm. Nowadays, sociology views these differences as “shaped by the adaptations of family members to the social situations and contexts in which they are socially located.” (Baca Zinn and Pok, 2002: 87) Thus, Anglo-American family structure is no longer considered to be the norm, from which the Mexican American family structure is deviant. Rather, both families are perceived to be autonomous and developed from two different cultures.

Chapter 2

Family in Literature by Chicanas

The Chicano Movement, a social movement protesting ethnic and racial inequality in the United States in 1960s and 70s, brought attention to many issues that bothered the Mexican minority living in the United States.¹ The Movement sought to define a cultural and political identity and achieve political and economic self-determination through educational reforms, labor unions, and political representation. The movement also inspired cultural and artistic renaissance, as it gave voice to writers, visual artists, and theatre groups.

For the above mentioned reasons the Chicano Movement can be viewed as a very positive occurrence in the Mexican American community. However, there were also aspects that were viewed as not so progressive, especially by the women of Mexican origin. According to them the Movement was a male dominated structure, where women were relegated to secondary roles. It emphasized a general cultural survival, while neglecting the specific gender experiences and their change, and also the change in family roles.

However, the atmosphere of Mexican American empowerment, which emerged with the Chicano Movement, enabled also Mexican American women, who called themselves Chicanas, to start critically examining historical, economic, and social experiences of women of Mexican descent in the United States. The Chicana feminism thus developed in the context of feminist movements of African American, Asian American, Native

¹I deal with the issue of the Chicano Movement in greater detail in my Master's thesis, in section 1.1.7 The Chicano Movement, and Chapter 3, The Chicano Movement: Ideology of La Familia.

American, and also White American feminism, but added Mexican American specificities. The main problem Chicanas saw with the Movement was the fact that it stressed ethnic discrimination as the main issue. According to the women of the Chicano Movement this drew attention away from other problematic areas, such as gender discrimination or social issues.

Ethnicity clearly was an important issue also for women of Mexican American origin, but they were discriminated against not only on the basis of color in the greater American society, but also on the basis of gender within their own community, since the socially constructed expectations for men and women, and the roles they should play, were strikingly different. Although in Chicano Movement racism was the central issue and sexism seemed to be unimportant, it is necessary to realize that racism, sexism, and classism (i.e. division based on social status) are actually intertwined, and this creates a very difficult position for minority women of low socio-economic status, who find themselves on the intersection of all three of these. From this position, Chicanas then voiced their protests not only against political and social issues such as inequality in U.S. – economic, social, racial, educational - but also against the oppression that they were subjected to in the Mexican American community.

Sonia Lopez in her essay “The Role of the Chicana within the Student Movement” traced political development of Chicanas within the Chicano Student Movement. As she says, “the ideal woman in the Mexican culture has been defined as faithful, passive, and obedient”, and this was expected also in the Chicano Movement. (Garcia, 1997: 102) She believes that not only family, but also various institutions, such as Catholic religion, educational institutions, and legal institutions have reinforced this concept of acceptable behavior for women. (Garcia, 1997: 103) There was a lack of leadership roles for women in these institutions, and this influenced also the student organizing during the Chicano Movement.

Therefore, in 1971 the First National Chicana Conference was organized in Houston, where Mexican American female activists talked about the issues they considered crucial for their empowerment. The outcome of the conference were four resolutions that were

to serve as guidelines for future Chicana organizations, and they put emphasis on free access to birth control, education, child care centers which would enable Chicanas to work outside the home, and the role of Catholic Church in the oppression of women in the Chicano community. (Garcia, 1997: 104) According to Lopez, not all Chicanas agreed with the resolutions; about half of them believed that women should be active in the Movement, but still fulfill their traditional role in the family, saying, “our enemy is the “gavacho” (white) and not the “macho”, which again put emphasis only on the ethnic struggle. (Garcia, 1997: 104) Nevertheless, the beginning of Chicana organizing can be traced to the Chicano Movement, Chicana conferences, and Chicana student groups forming on universities around the country.

Anna Nieto Gomez in her essay “Chicana Feminism” says that the notion sounds like a contradictory statement, because apparently a woman can either be a Chicana, i.e. a submissive, obedient woman; or a feminist, but not both at the same time, and those who call themselves feminists are considered traitors of the culture. (Garcia, 1997: 52) Nieto Gomez disagrees:

[W]hen you say you’re Chicana, you mean you come from a particular community, one that is subject to racism and the exploitation of centuries. When you say you are a feminist you mean you’re a woman who opposes the oppression of not only the group in general, but of women in particular. In fact the statement is not contradictory at all, it is a very unified statement: I support my community and I do not ignore the women in my community (who have been long forgotten). (Garcia, 1997: 53)

Chicana feminism according to Nieto Gomez does not signify fighting against men, rather it is a fight for equality. But Chicanas do not address only social status within the Mexican American community, or American society in general. They focus on the cultural aspects of Chicana identity, on the borderland nature of their experience, of having both pagan and Christian roots, both Mexican and American identity, yet not fully belonging to either of them.²

There is an array of female figures in the Mexican American culture that women have been expected to look up to and immitate, or, quite the contrary, warned against.

²These issues are addressed with a great detail in Gloria Anzaldúa’s *Borderlands/La Frontera* and Ana Castillo’s *Massacre of the Dreamers: Essays on Xicanisma*.

The positive image is quite obviously *La Virgen de Guadalupe*, Virgin Mary, patron saint of Mexico, Latin America, and Chicanos. She is first and foremost a mother, an obedient, pious woman, who intercedes on behalf of those who ask for her help. According to Tey Diana Rebolledo, she is often seen as problematic by Chicanas, as someone who “advocates acceptance and endurance, not action.” (Rebolledo, 1995: 53) Therefore they had to reinvent the passive image of the Virgin by uniting her with the ancient Aztec deities Tonantzin and Coatlicue, the mother goddesses, who had power over life and death.

The most common negative archetypes are the figures of *La Malinche* and *La Llorona*. *La Malinche*, called also Malintzín, Malinalli or Doña Marina, was a historical figure, an indigenous woman, who served as the translator of the conquistador Hernán Cortés, and thus helped him to conquer Mexico, her own land, by “giving him knowledge and power over the native tribes”. (Rebolledo, 1995, 64) According to Rebolledo, the word *Malinche* became to signify someone “who betrays her or his country”. (Rebolledo, 1995: 62) Nieto Gomez says that Chicana feminists were also called *Malinches*, because by rebelling against the role they were expected to fulfill, they were betraying their culture and their heritage. (Garcia, 1997: 52) However, *La Malinche* is also called “the mother of mestizos”, because she had a son by Cortés, who was “the first mestizo”, and that is a positive aspect of this figure.

La Llorona, or the weeping woman, according to the legend fell in love with a nobleman and bore him children. When the man had to marry another woman from his class, *La Llorona* in despair drowned their children. She is said to have wandered around bodies of water ever since, crying, and looking for her lost children. Both *La Llorona* and *La Malinche* form the negative mother image. (Rebolledo, 1995: 63) *La Llorona* for murdering her own children, and *La Malinche* because her son was taken from her and was sent to Spain to be educated. Women were traditionally told about these women to be warned against behavior, which could lead to such unfortunate fate. But according to Rebolledo, Chicanas do not accept the negative view of *La Malinche*. According to them, she is a survivor, a woman

“who cast her lot with the Spaniards in order to ensure survival of the race, a woman who lives on in every Chicana today. It was often because of her diplomacy and intelligence that a more total annihilation of the Indian tribes in Mexico did not occur. It is in this capacity as intercessor (translator) and helper that *La Malinche* takes on the attributes of the Virgin of Guadalupe.” (Rebolledo, 1995: 64-65)

These archetypal figures often find their way into Chicana writing, and they are present also in some stories that will be discussed in this chapter. The above mentioned topics show that Chicana writers may have strong opinions caused by the intersectionality that makes them double or even tripple minority. In the following pages I want to discuss how the above mentioned images, as well as their own experiences, shaped the representation of the family in writings by Chicana authors Sandra Cisneros and Ana Castillo.

2.1 Family in Sandra Cisneros

Sandra Cisneros is probably the most popular contemporary Mexican American writer. She was born in Chicago in 1954 in a working-class family; her father was an upholsterer from Mexico and her mother was a Mexican American factory worker. (Amparano Garcia, 2004: 167) Cisneros soon realized that her race and class represented certain barriers to her advancement in the American society: “When I was 11 years old in Chicago, teachers thought that if you were poor and Mexican you didn’t have anything to say.” (Day, 2003: 145) Gender became the third barrier: Being the only girl in her family, Cisneros knew from first hand experience the role that women had in the Mexican American family. Despite these limitations she received her bachelor’s degree from Loyola University, and then was even admitted into the Iowa Writers’ Workshop, a prestigious creative writing program. (Amparano Garcia, 2004: 230) Later Cisneros said about her education: “In retrospect, I am lucky my father believed daughters were meant for husbands. It meant it didn’t matter if I majored in something silly like English. After all, I’d find a nice profession eventually, right?” (Day, 2003: 147) Cisneros published volumes of poetry and prose, drawing on her experience of a double minority:

Mexican in the United States and a woman in the patriarchal Mexican community. Her books are widely read in high schools and universities in the United States, and she has also received several awards for her writing. Sandra Cisneros managed to overcome the barriers imposed on her by her race, class, and gender, and is now a successful writer. *The House on Mango Street* was her first work of fiction. She started working on it when she studied in Iowa, because she felt that her origin alienated her from the privileged students in the program. Then she realized that it was precisely her working-class origin and experiences as a woman in the patriarchal world of the Latino barrio in Chicago that made her unique, and she decided to write about that. (Day, 2003: 148)

2.1.1 *The House on Mango Street*

The House on Mango Street is a collection of vignettes written in poetic fiction, and the author herself has called *The House on Mango Street* a collection of “lazy poems.” (McCracken, 2004: 238) Cisneros says that she wanted her narrative to be nonlinear so that the readers could open the book randomly and each of the stories would be understood. It is set in the urban area of Chicago and describes the family relationships and gender roles not in one specific family, but in the whole neighborhood. Cisneros writes stories about girls and women who live on Mango Street, and who are trying to find their place in the male-dominated world of the Latino *barrio*.

The House on Mango Street, similarly to *The Rain God* by Arturo Islas, elaborates on the image of “*la familia*” as an oppressive institution, and it is focused specifically on the role that women have in the Mexican American family. Making a young Mexican American girl the protagonist gave Cisneros the opportunity to describe the life in the community through the eyes of a child, and explain them with the child’s logic. The story is written in the first person narrative mode, and thus the reader can easily identify with Esperanza Cordero, the protagonist.

Esperanza is a girl on the verge of womanhood, and therefore her growing up and the initiation into her gender role is a very important theme of *The House on Mango Street*. At the beginning of the book Esperanza is still a child. She feels lonely, her

two brothers never play with her outside of their house because “[t]he boys and the girls live in separate worlds.” (Cisneros, 1991: 8) The first stories are focused on her family and on Esperanza’s attempts to find new friends on Mango Street, where her family has just moved in. She soon meets two girls from the neighborhood, Rachel and Lucy, who become her friends.

Their childhood games soon reveal that the girls are entering into adulthood, and Cisneros describes the danger that growing up brings. This realization becomes obvious in the story “The Family of Little Feet.” (Cisneros, 1991: 49) Esperanza and her friends play with used high-heeled shoes, and by wearing them, they literally step into the shoes of adult women. Cisneros describes how the shoes change the girls into sexual objects in the eyes of men: The joy about their new adventure soon changes into fright, when a drunken man, attracted by the high-heeled shoes, offers Rachel a dollar for a kiss. The idea of dangerous sexuality keeps reappearing in the book. In the story “The First Job” an older co-worker uses Esperanza’s nervousness and sexually harasses her. (Cisneros: 1991: 53) “Red Clowns” as a story about rape is the ultimate example of the dangers of sexuality and violence against women. (Cisneros, 1991: 99) The story puts into a sharp contrast the childhood excitement about the carnival and the horrible experience. The depiction of the incident is very disturbing, because Esperanza is unable to express what happened. She does not describe the rape itself, but the fact that her romantic dreams about love and sex were destroyed by this single act of violence.

Marriage as an Escape from Poverty

Esperanza is surrounded by many female characters: her mother, her friends from school, and her female neighbors. Seeing the girls and the women in her neighborhood, Esperanza begins to realize the unequal gender roles in her community. Most of the women who live in the neighborhood are trapped in the male dominated world. The patriarchal system discourages women to become independent and help themselves out of poverty, and for the majority of them, marriage is seen as the only way to improve their social status and to escape the power of their father. According to Cisneros, these

wives and daughters are victims of the patriarchal oppression. Esperanza's friend Sally is repeatedly beaten by her father, whose violence is driven by his desire to control his daughter. According to her father's logic Sally deserves this treatment "just because [she is] a daughter", which can be translated as "just because she is woman." (Cisneros, 1991: 92) Sally's father is afraid that Sally would "make the family ashamed." (Cisneros, 1991: 92) Similar attitude towards family honor is presented also in Jovita González's novel *Dew on the Thorn*, where the patriarch, Don Francisco, says that family honor is more important than the well being of his daughter. It is quite clear that the core of the familistic orientation of Mexican Americans has not changed much over the sixty years that divide these two stories. And Sally, although she should be angry with her father, defends his behavior by saying: "He never hits me hard", as if that could justify his violence. (Cisneros, 1991: 92)

Cisneros shows on the character of Sally that women often learn to accept the patriarchal oppression, and willingly victimize themselves in their relationship with men. In "The Monkey Garden" Esperanza describes an incident that happened in an abandoned garden in the neighborhood. (Cisneros, 1991: 94) Esperanza, Sally, and other children play an innocent game there, but one day Sally suddenly leaves the game and starts talking with the boys. While Esperanza is still a child, believing in the separate worlds for boys and girls, Sally accepts the rules of a new sexualized game that the boys invent. They take Sally's keys, and offer to return them for a kiss. Esperanza, who wants to protect Sally, feels as an outsider because the others laugh at her, and she realizes she has no power over this adult game. Sally is willingly getting involved and does not challenge the rules of the game. When Esperanza runs to ask the mother of one of the boys to interfere, the mother's answer is only: "Those kids." Thus, the mother justifies the behavior of her son and his friends, by using a variation of the phrase "boys will be boys". (Cisneros, 1991: 97) In the previous vignettes about the high heels and Esperanza's new job the girls were involuntarily victimized by the male behavior. In "The Monkey Garden" Sally willingly gets involved in the game and thus she willingly becomes a victim.

This process continues when Sally gets married before even finishing eight grade.

Nevertheless, the marriage has not changed her life. Before, Sally was controlled by her father, now she is controlled by her husband. “Sally says she likes being married because now she can buy her own things when her husband gives her money,” Esperanza says. (Cisneros, 1991: 101) Sally is not allowed to leave the house without her husband’s permission. She does not have her own economic resources, and she does not have her freedom. Cisneros depicts the painful isolation of the newly-wed: “She likes looking at the walls, at how neatly their corners meet, the linoleum roses on the floor, the ceiling smooth as wedding cake.” (Cisneros, 1991: 102) Cisneros consciously compares the room that becomes Sally’s prison to a wedding cake in this sentence. It reflects the fact that women often escape the prison of being a daughter by voluntarily getting into a prison of being a wife.

Sally is not the only girl who imagined that marriage would save her. Esperanza’s neighbor Marin, a young woman from Puerto Rico, dreams about marrying her unemployed boyfriend. This story again shows how women perpetuate their own subjugation to men. Although Marin works and therefore she has the opportunity to be independent, she remains passive: “[She] is waiting for a car to stop, a star to fall, someone to change her life.” (Cisneros, 1991: 27)

Marin hopes that marriage would make her happy, but the married women in *The House on Mango Street* are not happy. They are kept “on a silver string,” isolated from the rest of the community like Sally and like Rafaela, who is locked up at home, “because her husband is afraid Rafaela will run away since she is too beautiful to look at.” (Cisneros, 1991: 79 – 80) Rafaela spends the time by looking out of the window, just like *Mamacita*, another woman who is imprisoned in the domestic space by marriage, and who is isolated from the neighborhood because she cannot speak the language. While the writers of the Chicano Movement considered machismo to be the vital force of the Mexican American family, in *The House on Mango Street* male dominance makes a family dysfunctional and unhappy, and eventually destroys it. This is the example of Rosa Vargas, whose husband left her alone with their many children, without even an explanation, just like the husbands of Izaura and Minerva. These women cannot change their subordinated

position, because men have controlled them since their childhood, and they are taught to accept the role that the community ascribes them.

Education and Art as an Escape from Male Oppression

Most of the women in *The House on Mango Street* let themselves be trapped in the traditional gender role. But Cisneros introduces in her book also other female characters, who can represent role models for the Esperanza. Mrs. Cordero, Esperanza's mother is one of them. In a vignette titled "A Smart Cookie" she stresses the importance of education, knowing that it is the only way out of subordination: "Esperanza, you go to school. Study hard." (Cisneros, 1991: 91) She instructs her daughter to take education as a chance to improve her life, while regretting her own missed opportunity: "I could have been somebody." (Cisneros, 1991: 90) Mrs. Cordero admits to her daughter that she dropped out of school because she was ashamed of her clothes. And now, despite her talent for singing and arts, she is confined to the domestic space. Alicia, another woman in the neighborhood, also believes that education is a way out of subordination. Despite her father's remarks about the role of women, she decides to go to university. Alicia does not passively wait for marriage to rescue her; she is rescuing herself from both poverty and dependence on men. (Cisneros, 1991: 37 - 38)

Cisneros shows that art can also have a liberating power. Minerva, who is a victim of domestic violence, is unable to find the strength to leave her aggressive husband. Because she cannot express herself in real life, she writes poems on little pieces of paper, because her poetry is something that her husband cannot control. Esperanza's aunt Lupe, just like Minerva, believes that art can help women escape the patriarchal oppression. "You just remember to keep writing, Esperanza. You must keep writing. It will keep you free [...]," (Cisneros, 1991: 61) aunt Lupe says, when Esperanza reads her poetry to her. Seeing both groups of women, those who are trapped in marriage as well as those who can see a way out of the patriarchal trap, inspires Esperanza. She realizes that the only way to escape the traditional role of women that she refuses to fulfill is to leave her community.

A House of My Own

The whole book is closely associated with the idea of domesticity. It describes the role of women in the Mexican American family, who are expected to be domestic figures. In the traditional Mexican American family, home is the only place where a Mexican American woman can be active. They should take care of the husband and their children and keep the house clean.³ Esperanza observes the women in her neighborhood and realizes that the concept of male dominance is very harmful to the Mexican American family, and she refuses these traditional gender roles. In the vignette titled “My Name” Esperanza talks about the name that she has inherited after her great-grandmother:

“It was my great-grandmother’s name and now it is mine. She was a horse woman too, born like me in the Chinese year of a horse – which is supposed to be bad luck if you’re born female – but I think this is a Chinese lie because the Chinese, like the Mexicans, don’t like their women strong.” (Cisneros, 1991: 10)

Even as a child Esperanza realizes the injustice of the idea that strong women are considered bad. She accepts the name, but she refuses to inherit her great-grandmother’s “place by the window,” where she spent the rest of her life after she was forced to get married. (Cisneros, 1991: 11) Esperanza refuses the traditional name that represents the traditional role of women. She says she wants to re-baptize herself as “Zeze the X,” a name that is original and not feminine. (Cisneros, 1991: 11) She does not want to be tamed or domesticated and to “lay her neck on the threshold waiting for the ball and chain.” (Cisneros, 1991: 88) She starts a war against these norms in her family. She refuses to be tidy and to clean the house as is expected of a woman and she decides to act like a man. (Cisneros, 1991: 89)

The house is a central metaphor in the novel. It represents the domestic space where women are confined by social norms. Owning a house represents the American dream that all immigrants strive to achieve. For Esperanza a house is a place that would be her own. Since the first vignette the protagonist explains how important it is to her to live

³Marie Loudínová discusses the importance of the domestic space for Mexican-American women in her thesis *Being a Chicana: Chicanas: A Cultural Introduction. History. Major Issues. Literary Production. Visual Art* on pages 27-30 (see Bibliography).

in a beautiful house. The Corderos dream about a typical American middle-class house: “Our house would be white with trees around it, a great big yard and grass growing without a fence.” (Cisneros, 1991: 4) The house on Mango Street is different:

“It’s small and red with tight steps in front and windows so small you’d think they were holding their breath. Bricks are crumbling in places, and the front door is so swollen you have to push hard to get in. There is no yard, only four little elms the city planted by the curb.” (Cisneros, 1991: 4)

Even though this house is far from the house they have pictured in their dreams, the fact that they were able to buy a home is a great achievement for Esperanza’s working-class parents. But she still dreams about a house that she “could point to.” (Cisneros, 1991: 5) Her desire to own a nice house leads the girl to Elenita, the local “witch woman,” whom she asked to look into her future to tell her if she can see a house. According to Elizabeth Jacobs’s analysis, the fact that Esperanza dreams about the mainstream house represents her desire to assimilate into the majority society. (Jacobs, 2006: 111) Despite the fact that she is a child, Esperanza already knows about the social and cultural differences in the society. She does not appreciate the house on Mango Street, although it is *their* house, because it is in the socially segregated working-class neighborhood. Mango Street is a different neighborhood than those that Esperanza can see on television, and she does not like it because the fact that she lives there makes her different from the majority.

It seems that Esperanza wants to enter the majority society because she is ashamed of her working-class origin. In “Bums in the Attic” she even admits that: “I am ashamed – all of us staring out the window like the hungry. I am tired of looking at what we can’t have.” (Cisneros, 1991: 86) She feels she does not belong in the rich area of the town, and at the same time she feels her place is not in Mango Street either. “I don’t belong. I don’t ever want to come from here,” she tells her friend Alicia.

Regardless of the shame she feels, *The House on Mango Street* reflects Esperanza’s deep affection for her community. “All brown all around, we are safe” she says in one of her observations about her neighborhood. (Cisneros, 1991: 28) And even if she dreams about leaving Mango Street and moving into her dream house, she says: “One day I’ll

have my own house, but I won't forget who I am or where I came from." (Cisneros, 1991: 87) She even makes a promise to invite bums inside her house, because she knows "how it is to be without a house." (Cisneros, 1991: 87) Although she wants to leave Mango Street, Esperanza knows she will never forget. "You will always be Esperanza. You will always be Mango Street. You can't erase what you know. You can't forget who you are," an old lady tells her at the end of the book. (Cisneros, 1991: 105) Esperanza promises that she would come back for those she left behind. Cisneros claims: "I am very fierce about people coming from a community having an obligation to the community." (Day, 2003: 147) Esperanza is aware of this obligation, and her narrative can be considered to be her way back to her community, to the lonely women, to the victims of domestic violence, and to the poor immigrant families.

2.1.2 *Woman Hollering Creek and Other Stories*

Sandra Cisneros' interest in the role of women in her community did not finish with *The House on Mango Street*. With a collection of stories and vignettes titled *Woman Hollering Creek and Other Stories*, published in 1991, Cisneros expands the theme she began in her first collection. But while in *The House on Mango Street* the vignettes are told through the perspective of the child narrator Esperanza, who talks about a specific community in Chicago, the tales of *Woman Hollering Creek and Other Stories* cover various geographical locations, historical periods, and each story also has a different narrator, sometimes even multiple narrators.

The book is structured into three sections, titled "My Lucy Friend Who Smells Like Corn", "One Holy Night", and "There Was a Man, There Was a Woman". The first section contains stories about young children, the second contains two stories about adolescent girls on the verge of womanhood, and the third one focuses on relationships between adult men and women, and also on bonds of sisterhood between women.

Even though the stories offer such a broad display of perspectives and focus, there are certain traits that run through the entire collection and unite it, and that is the position of women and men within the Mexican American community, and the relationships

between them and within the community. The book presents in the stories especially two archetypes of women: the powerless victim, and the strong independent woman. The family roles presented in the tales thus repeat these views.

My Lucy Friend Who Smells Like Corn

The first portion of stories in *Woman Hollering Creek* talks about childhood. The title story “My Lucy Friend Who Smells Like Corn” flows almost in a stream-of-consciousness-like way, as the thoughts come to the mind of the protagonist, who talks about all the carefree activities she does with her friend Lucy Anguiano:

“We’re going to trade shoes and wear them on our hands. We’re going to walk over to Jenny Ortiz’ house and say *We’re never ever going to be your friend again forever!* We’re going to run home backwards and we’re going to run home frontwards, look twice under the house where the rats hide and I’ll stick one foot in there because you dared me, sky so blue and heaven inside those white clouds.” (Cisneros, 1992: 5)

But in between writing about childhood pastimes that the narrator does or plans to do with her friend, she also unobtrusively mentions facts about Lucy’s family that complete the picture:

“Lucy and her sisters. Norma, Margarita, Ofelia, Herminia, Nancy, Olivia, Cheli, *y la* Amber Sue. [...] There ain’t no boys here. Only girls and one father who is never home hardly and one mother who says *Ay! I’m real tired* and so many sisters there is no time to count them.” (Cisneros, 1992: 4)

The fact that there is “so many sisters”, mother who is consumed by her household chores, and father who is not precisely involved in the life of his children, the girls have a great amount of freedom, which they can use for their games. Behind this however lies the question of what does the future hold for these girls, with so little parental guidance, and so much independence at such a young age.

In “Salvador Late or Early” Cisneros presents another extreme: a young boy Salvador, who has no time for himself, because he has to help his mother with his two little brothers, Cecilio and Arturito:

“Salvador [...] of the crooked hair and crooked teeth, Salvador whose name the teacher cannot remember, is a boy who is no one’s friend, runs along somewhere in that vague direction where homes are the color of bad weather, lives behind a raw wood doorway, shakes the sleepy brothers awake, ties their shoes, combs their hair with water, feeds them milk and corn flakes from a tin cup in the dim dark of the morning.” (Cisneros, 1992: 10)

Both stories demonstrate how the poverty of these families influences the way children are brought up: The older children have to assume the duties of the parents and take care of their younger siblings, while the younger ones are often left to grow up without much attention from the adults. When the family is in a little better socio-economic position, their life can be portrayed as quite pleasant, as is the case in the story “Mexican Movies”, where the family enjoys going to the cinema together, the children are given money to buy candy, and in the end they are lovingly carried home and put to bed by their parents.

One Holy Night

After showing the different aspects of childhood in a Mexican American family, Cisneros puts in the spotlight a more problematic period, the adolescent years. The two tales in this section, “One Holy Night”, and “My *Tocaya*” are told from the perspective of two teenage girls.

In “My *Tocaya*” the narrator, Patricia, talks about her classmate, whose name is also Patricia, and by commenting on the events that brought them together, uncovers the complicated world of relationships between girls in high school. In the title story “One Holy Night”, the protagonist, who calls herself “Ixchel”, recounts how while selling fruit and vegetables from a pushcart, she fell in love with a much older man who told her his name was Chaq Uxmal Paloquín, and was from an ancient Mayan royalty. He seduced her and then disappeared, and while attempting to find him and bring him back in order to marry “Ixchel”, her family found out her was a serial killer. The story is told retrospectively, when the girl is in Mexico in San Dionisio de Tlaltepango, where she was sent to avoid the gossip in their old neighborhood. Coincidentally, her mother was sent

to the United States from San Dionisio many years ago for the same reason, when she, as a young girl, got pregnant with Ixchel.

“Ixchel” did not live up to the standard of the traditional gender roles in Mexican American families. She did not try to imitate Virgin Mary by saving her purity for marriage. Her head was filled with romantic ideas about love, which she believed Chaq Uxmal Paloquín could fulfill. Even though there already was an unwanted teenage pregnancy in her family, apparently nobody talked to “Ixchel” about relationships between men and women and about practicing safe sexuality, (Cisneros, 1992: 28), as is obvious from her confession:

“Then I understood why Abuelita didn’t let me sleep over at Lourdes’s house full of too many brothers, and why the Roman girl in the movies always runs away from the soldier, and what happens when the scenes in the love stories begin to fade, and why brides blush, and how it is that sex isn’t simply a box you check M or F on in the test we get at school.” (Cisneros, 1992: 30 - 31)

The way her family reacts also shows that they were unprepared for this situation. “Ixchel’s” Grandmother and Uncle, who bring her up, blame each other:

“Abuelita says it’s Uncle Lalo’s fault because he’s the man of the family and if he had come home on time like he was supposed to and worked the pushcart on the days he was told to and watched over his goddaughter, who was foolish enough to look after herself, nothing would have happened, and I wouldn’t have to be sent to Mexico. But Uncle Lalo says if they had never left Mexico in the first place, shame enough would have kept a girl from doing devil things.” (Cisneros, 1992: 28)

The Grandmother expects Lalo to be the “man of the family”, even though she is (or should be) the matriarch. She did not teach “Ixchel” about possible dangers, yet places the responsibility for the unfortunate event on her son. Lalo, in turn, idealizes Mexico and believes that the culture of his home country would put enough stress on female behavior to prevent young girls from taking the wrong path. Clearly, Lalo cannot admit that the very reason why his family left Mexico was that his sister was expecting a child out of wedlock.

“Ixchel” who was alone while living in the United States, even though living with her family, is again alone in Mexico, though surrounded by even more family. Nobody talks to

her about motherhood and things that await her; only a local *curandera* prepares her for the delivery through mystic rituals, which “Ixchel” does not understand. Her romantic ideas about love are transformed to romantic ideas about family, and even though she talks to her younger cousin from a position of an “experienced” woman and describes sexual relationships in a degrading manner, she is still in love with the man who could have murdered her.

There Was a Man, There Was a Woman

In the light of this bleak view of the future of Mexican American girls, presented in “My Lucy Friend Who Smells Like Corn” and “One Holy Night” Cisneros presents another possibility in the stories from the third section of the collection.

The first one is the title story of the whole collection, “Woman Hollering Creek”. Its main protagonist is Cleófilas Enriqueta De León Hernández, a young woman from Mexico, who married a man from across the border and followed him to Texas. Cleófilas is an avid viewer of telenovelas, which shape her ideas about love and passion. Being an only daughter in the family of six brothers, without a mother who would advise her in the area of relationships at least with her example, Cleófilas is not ready for the real married life, which in no way resembles the passionate love between man and woman shown on television shows.

They live in an old house, near a stream called Woman Hollering Creek, or *La Gritona*. In the beginning the name of the creek seems comical to Cleófilas, and she does not pay much attention to it. She even laughs: “Such a funny name for a creek so pretty and full of happily ever after.” (Cisneros, 1992: 47) But as her marriage becomes more and more problematic, and she is overcome by feelings of loneliness, she starts spending more time by the water. In her home town in Mexico she had a network of friends and places to go to, but in Seguin she is isolated, because she does not have a car. Her only company is her baby boy, and two old neighbors called Soledad and Dolores, whose names represent Cleófilas’ loneliness and pain.

Cleófilas’ husband becomes abusive soon after the wedding and treats her violently.

Even though she always thought she would never tolerate such behavior, when she is really exposed to domestic violence, she closes down, becomes silent, and always forgives her husband, who cries out of regret each time. Cleófilas does not fight back to stop these attacks, but she begins to open her eyes to the reality of her marriage, and to her husband, who is so different from the men in telenovelas: “This man who farts and belches and snores [...] this man, this father, this rival, this keeper, this lord, this master, this husband till kingdom come.” (Cisneros, 1992: 49) She does not have a say in anything, and her only concern must be to serve her “master”, while he either works or enjoys himself at the ice house. Cleófilas starts to realize her subordinate position in their household, and at the same time notices the subordinate position women have in her community, and also all the violence committed to women:

“This woman found on the side of the interstate. This one pushed from a moving car. This one’s cadaver, this one unconscious, this one beaten blue. Her ex-husband, her husband, her lover, her father, her brother, her uncle, her friend, her co-worker. Always. The same grisly news in the pages of the dailies.” (Cisneros, 1992: 52)

Reading about the unfortunate fate of these women, and being the victim of domestic violence herself, she starts thinking about possible ways out of her unhappy life. She thinks about returning home, although that would bring shame to her father’s house, and family honor is important to her. She even contemplates suicide, while sitting by the creek, imagining La Llorona calling her. Then a way out unexpectedly opens in front of her at a doctor’s appointment for her second pregnancy. The doctor discovers all the bruises on Cleófilas’ body, listens to her story, and decides to help her. She arranges for her to be picked up at a gas station close to her house, and taken to the bus station in San Antonio, where she can board a bus home to Mexico.

As the doctor’s friend, Felice, drives Cleófilas with her baby across the Woman Hollering Creek, she gives out a cry and then explains to her startled passenger how empowering it is for her, knowing that this creek was named after a woman. This completely changes Cleófilas’ view of the name of the creek. She always thought the hollering denoted sadness or despair, but riding over it with Felice, an independent and strong

woman, gives the name a whole new meaning, because now it is a cry of freedom and empowerment. The fact that Cleófilas took the uneasy decision to leave her husband and start a new life without him is a big advancement for a woman who has always been taught to obey the authority of men. She steps up, rebels against the traditional role she was assigned, and determines her own future. But her freedom is limited, as Cleófilas is returning to her father and brothers, so she will never achieve the level of independence that Felice has.

“Never Marry a Mexican” is a story about a woman named Clemencia, who is entirely different from Cleófilas. Clemencia is a strong, powerful woman, an artist, who has had an affair for a long period of time with Drew, a married white man. She is not ashamed for being a seductress, she is proud of it, and laughs at the man’s wife, who has no idea her husband is having an affair. The title “Never Marry a Mexican” are the words her mother used to say to her, because of Clemencia’s father. Clemencia is taking the advice further and claims: “I’ll never marry. Not any man. I’ve known men too intimately. I have witnessed their infidelities, and I’ve helped them to it. [...] I am guilty of having caused deliberate pain to other women. I’m vindictive and cruel, and I’m capable of anything.” (Cisneros, 1992: 68) Instead of marrying, Clemencia has illicit sexual relationships. She refuses to compromise her freedom, and therefore she only “borrows” men from other women. (Cisneros, 1992: 69)

The white man who she has the affair with calls her Malinalli or Malinche, after the indigenous women who according to the legends was the translator and lover of the conquistador Hernán Cortés, and who helped him conquer the Aztec empire. Like Malinche, Clemencia has a relationship with a man of different ethnicity, a relationship, which can never develop into marriage. And even though Clemencia on numerous occasions stresses that she is strong, independent, and does not want to marry, the way she writes about her “Cortés” Drew makes it clear to the reader that as much as she tries to hide them, she has very deep feelings for him. They are especially apparent when she describes how he ended their relationship, and suddenly the phrase “never marry a Mexican” gain new meaning, as she becomes the Mexican in question.

To achieve an irrational feeling of vengeance on a woman who was nothing but a victim of their affair, Clemencia stuffs gummy bears into Drew's wife's personal items, as if marking her territory and showing her that she has been there. But her real revenge for being rejected by Drew is seducing his teenage son. She starts a relationship with him and has him wrapped around her finger, but threatens that one day she will "snap her teeth". (Cisneros, 1992: 82).

"Bien Pretty" is another story about a woman who was rejected by her lover. Lupe, an educated Chicana and an artist, moves from California to Texas and soon upon her arrival starts a relationship with Flavio, a pest control worker from Mexico. When he reveals he has two wives and seven children in Mexico and has to return to them, she needs a long time to recover from this disillusionment. But unlike Clemencia, who creates an elaborate revenge plan, Lupe grieves silently. She cannot stop thinking about Flavio, considers buying herbs and candles for relief, and starts watching romantic telenovelas. Through the process she realizes that women who are presented on these programs should not be considered role models for their viewers:

"I started dreaming of these Rosas and Briandas and Luceros. And in my dreams I'm slapping the heroine to her senses, because I want them to be women who make things happen, not women who things happen to. Not loves that are *tormentosos*. Not men powerful and passionate and women either volatile and evil, or sweet and resigned. But women. Real women. The ones I've loved all my life. *If you don't like it, lárgate, honey*. Those women. The ones I've known everywhere except on TV, in books, and in magazines. *Las girlfriends. Las comadres*. Our mamas and *tías*. Passionate and powerful, tender and volatile, brave. And, above all, fierce." (Cisneros, 1992: 161)

Lupe decides she must start living her life, forget about hurtful past, and be strong, not for the future, but for the present. The story ends with the description of Lupe's sunset ritual when she climbs up on the roof, where already hundreds of grackles, black Texas birds, are waiting for the sun to go down. She watches the sky changing colors, enjoying the present moment.

Both Clemencia and Lupe are educated, independent women, and they both have gone through a painful break-up. Cisneros shows how each of them deals with it in her own manner. She does not judge which way is better, she just describes their actions

an presents their inner monologues, and lets the readers make their own opinion. While Clemencia is consumed by her pain and hatred, lusting for revenge, Lupe comes out of her sadness as a reborn person and learns to live her life in a new, and probably more fulfilling, way.

In “Little Miracles, Kept Promises” Cisneros lists notes which religious people address to various saints and leave them at their shrines, altars or statues, to either ask them for intercession, or to give thanks for one. Not surprisingly, many of these notes revolve around relationships. Barbara Ybañez asks Saint Anthony of Padua to find her a man “who isn’t a pain in the nalgas”. (Cisneros, 1992: 117) She is rather specific in her petition:

“Can you send me a man man. I mean someone who’s not ashamed to be seen cooking or cleaning or looking after himself. [...] Not one who’s never lived alone, never bought his own underwear, never ironed his own shirts, never even heated his own tortillas. [...] I’ve put up with too much for too long, and now I’m just too intelligent, too powerful, too beautiful, too sure of who I am finally to deserve any less.” (Cisneros, 1992: 117 - 118)

Barbara Ybañez knows what she wants, and does not want to compromise her expectations. She realizes that it is hard to find a man, especially a Mexican American, who could live up to their standards, which is why she turns for a celestial intercession.

Teresa Galindo, a young girl, prays exactly for the opposite thing of *La Virgen de San Juan de Los Lagos*. She explains how last year she prayed for “a guy who would love only me” (Cisneros, 1992: 122), but now that the Virgin granted her this petition, she wants out of the relationship: “Please, Virgencita. Lift this heavy cross from my shoulders and leave me like I was before, wind on my neck, my arms swinging free, and no one telling me how I ought to be.” (Cisneros, 1992: 122) Teresa has experienced what it means to have a boyfriend and realized that this is not what she desired; she wants her freedom back. According to Cisneros, a relationship with a man is presented as the only possibility for young women, but what looks appealing from afar may be a different story entirely when experienced first hand.

The last note in the story is the longest. It is written by Rosario (Chayo) De Leon, who explains the evolution that happened inside her from rejecting the Virgin

Mary because she disagreed with the way her culture used Her to control women, into accepting that *La Virgen de Guadalupe* is only one of the many faces of this powerful goddess, combining many female Aztec deities with the Virgin. Chayo explains how this helped her to come to terms with her own existence one the border between two cultures, with her opinions about religion, culture, and gender roles, which are being constantly attacked by her family:

“What she do in there all by herself? It don’t look right. Chayito, when you getting married? Look at your cousin Leticia. She’s younger than you. How many kids you want when you grow up? [. . .] You’ll change. You’ll see. Wait till you meet Mr. Right.” (Cisneros, 1992: 126)

Chayo wants to be a painter, and she does not find the role that her community expects of her attractive: “I don’t want to be a mother. I wouldn’t mind being a father. At least a father could still be artist, could love *something* instead of *someone*, and no one would call that selfish.” (Cisneros, 1992: 127) She refuses to accept these double standards and with the help of Guadalupe – Tonanzin recreates herself. As a gift, she leaves at the shrine a braid of her hair, which represents her rejection of the traditional role of women in her community.

Cisneros wrote a collection of stories, in which she presents a variety of fates of Mexican American women. Some are accepting of their subordinate position, some are overly dominant, and others are caught somewhere in between, looking for their position in the society, attempting to find balance between their “*Mexicanidad*” and all the limitations that belonging to this community implies, and their womanhood. Cisneros does not describe the family as an institution that serves women. Quite the contrary, according to her stories, family is limiting, because it gives women only few socially acceptable choices for their life’s vocation. Moreover, family fails to fulfill the role that it should, it does not warn its members against danger, it does not protect them, it causes pain and despair. Cisneros’ heroines who escape the influence of their families are powerful and independent, values that she stresses as key.

2.2 Family in Ana Castillo

While Cisneros in her two collections addressed the issues of family in short stories, presenting various characters, Ana Castillo as a novel writer in *So Far from God* and *The Guardians* focuses always on one family specifically. Her approach to writing about family differs in many ways from those of other Mexican American authors discussed here. Other authors frequently turn to their own childhood for inspiration, either relating the actual events in the form of a memoir, as Francisco Jiménez does in *The Circuit*, or using it as a source of inspiration for a story, like Sandra Cisneros in *Caramelo*, but always using the first person narrative, where the narrator is also the main character in the story. Castillo's method is rather unconventional. Even though her novels do follow the lives of a Mexican American family, it does not retell the story of Castillo's family and her childhood. Instead, it is an allegorical depiction of the Mexican American culture within the mainstream society. Castillo does put the life of a Mexican American family in the spotlight, but the family only serves the purpose of illustrating several aspects of the lives of Mexican Americans in the Southwest.

Ana Castillo is one of the most prominent Latina writers in the United States. She was born in a working-class neighborhood in Chicago on June 15th 1953. Castillo's family is originally from the Southwest (Ruiz and Sánchez Korrol, 2006: 128) and in her literature she often returns to the US/Mexico borderlands, where also both novels that will be discussed in this chapter are set.

Castillo first discovered her voice as a poet and a feminist in the 1970s, during the era of the Chicano Movement (Kanellos, 2008: 208). Her first poems were published individually in *Revista Chicano-Riquena*, a literary magazine for Mexicans and Puerto Ricans in the United States, where she criticized the racism and sexism that she as a woman of color experienced in the society (Telgen & Kamp, 1993: 84). Towards the end of 1970 Castillo published two collections of poems that were later followed by collections of short stories, essays, and novels, many of which have received high critical acclaim not only because of their themes, but also because of their unusual narrative strategies. Her

first novel from 1986, *The Mixquiahuala Letters*, is an epistolary novel composed of thirty-eight letters exchanged between two women. Each letter is numbered and Castillo offers a different order of reading for different types of readers, the “Conformist”, the “Cynic”, and the “Quixotic”. *So Far from God* is told in third person, and the omniscient narrator uses colloquial speech, which make her seem as an elderly gossipy neighbor or relative. Castillo’s latest novel, *The Guardians*, tells the story through four different narrators using the first person, where one narrator’s account is always interrupted by a different perspective and mode of speaking of another protagonist.

Apart from the experimental narrative style of her writing, Ana Castillo is most known for her open criticism of the negative experience of Chicanas and other women of color and Mexican Americans in general in the United States. She uses various forms of writing and her publications cover a wide range of themes. According to Bernadette Marie Calafell these include “Chicana archetype, history, myth, sexuality, magical realism, Third World feminism, and indigenism.” (Calafell, 2005: 276-277)

Castillo’s collection of essays *Massacre of the Dreamers: Essays on Xicanisma*, published in 1994, can be used as a theoretical companion to *So Far from God*. The ten essays of the collection are based on her dissertation work from the University of Bremen, where she got her PhD in 1991, because in the Republican era of 1980s no American university accepted her Chicano-focused project proposal. In these essays she addresses the same topics that are treated in the novel, however without the ironical tone and humoristic ways of the narrator from *So Far from God*. Rather, Castillo is confrontational, much like Gloria Anzaldúa in *Borderlands/La Frontera*. In the novel, the issues that are crucial for contemporary Chicana feminists (or Xicanistas, as Castillo calls them) are present, but the themes of men of the Chicano Movement, exploitation of women workers, the Catholic Church represented by men, and the difference between the majority white society, and the Chicano Amerindian society are discussed to serve the allegorical purpose of the story. However, in *Massacre of the Dreamers* she offers open criticism of the injustices that indigenous women face in the white world, especially the internal colonization, racism, sexism, and class difference. At the same time she offers

solutions in return to indigenous spirituality and its history of patriarchy, and in rewriting the passive views of *La Virgen de Guadalupe* into a powerful goddess, syncretizing the Catholic saint and female Aztec goddesses. She rejects the dichotomies that rule the world today, and instead she looks beyond the black/white, virgin/whore to see the whole. In the Oxford Encyclopedia of Latinas, Bernadette Marie Calafell says: “Castillo’s work largely centers on empowering the voices, history, and experience of third world indigenous women, whose creativity has been silenced and appropriated by sexist cultures through racism, oppression, and psychic oppression.” (Calafell, 2005: 276). Castillo herself says: “I was a Chicana protest poet, a complete renegade – and I continue to write that way.” (Day, 2003: 133)

2.2.1 *So Far from God*

So Far from God was published in 1993. It can be called a novel of magical realism, because it recounts many events that resist any common sense explanations, but are made believable by the narrator’s matter-of-fact way of speaking about these occurrences. The structure of the novel alludes to the classical novels: it is divided into chapters, and the title of each chapter is actually a short synopsis of what will happen in the chapter: “*An Account of the First Astonishing Occurrence in the Lives of a Woman named Sofia and Her Four Fated Daughters; and the Equally Astonishing Return of Her Wayward Husband*” (Castillo, 1993: 19). This was typical of 18th century satirical novels, such as Henry Fielding’s *Tom Jones*. And satire is a very important feature also in *So far from God*.

The novel can also be described as a coming-of-age novel, because it follows the change of an abandoned woman with four little daughters into a strong-willed social activist and founder of an international organization – someone who can be called, in the line of thought of Gloria Anzaldúa, La Chicana. Ana Castillo thus creates a character that can become a role model for contemporary Chicanas – the new Chicana mother, who takes a stand to take care not only of her biological family, but also of her community.

The novel focuses on the lives of Sofia and her four daughters. Three of the girls

are named Esperanza, Caridad, and Fe, after theological virtues, hope, love, and faith, respectively. These names follow the tradition of the 15th century allegories in the tradition of John Milton's *Paradise Lost*. Sofia's name is a Greek word for wisdom, and Sofia's husband is Domingo, a name, which clearly hints at male dominance. Ironically, Esperanza, Fe, and Caridad all lose their lives because of the virtue they are named after, and in Sofia's home male dominance is overruled by female wisdom.

Despite its traditional form, *So Far from God* has some characteristics of a post-modernist novel, given that it addresses many contemporary themes, such as gender roles, politics, political organizing, spirituality, environmental racism, labor exploitation, sexism, homophobia, faith, and religion, all in the combination of the satire and allegory. Many of these topics were of course crucial to the Chicano/a Movement and still affect Mexican Americans today. The narrative form using the satirical third-person omniscient narrator is very similar to the narrator of *Tom Jones*, but unlike the polished narrator of Henry Fielding, Castillo's narrator is very clearly a woman, who is candid, mixes Spanish and English, and sometimes even uses incorrect grammar, such as double negatives. According to B. J. Manríquez the narrator is a *mitotera*, a telltale, who in the parody of the allegoric form reveals the absurdity of the characters' lives, and who is "feigning a sympathetic attitude while belittling the person's action and personality in private to her *comadre* who in this case is the reader." (Manríquez, 2002: 40)

The title of the novel, which alludes to the famous quote attributed to Porfirio Díaz "*¡Pobre México! ¡Tan lejos de Dios y tan cerca de los Estados Unidos!*" (Poor Mexico! So far from God and so close to the United States!), points to the fact that the Chicano community is in a very similar position. Castillo criticizes many of the hardships that these women have to endure in the United States, but her criticism is well masked by the humorous way of the narrator's storytelling. Another trait of postmodernism is that the exclusively female characterization: the novel focuses predominantly on the five female characters, while male characters are not given much space or have mainly negative roles in the story.

Characterization

The novel opens with the unexplainable death and resurrection of Sofia's youngest daughter, and then, as in a family saga, follows the lives of all four daughters and their mother for the period of twenty years. Sofia is a very devoted, nurturing mother, who supports her daughters and takes care of them, just like the traditional Mexican American mother should. However, she is also the matriarch. Since her husband left her, Sofi has become the head of her household, and this empowered her in a way she would not even dream of, had her husband stayed.⁴ Sofi is not only able to single-handedly bring up her daughters, take care of her household and a small farm, and run a meat market, but she also stands up to patriarchal authorities. When during her own funeral her youngest daughter, who will later be known as La Loca, sits up in her casket and flies to the church roof, and the shocked priest asks "Is this an act of God or of Satan that brings you back to us, that has flown you to the roof like a bird? Are you the devil's messenger or a winged angel?", Sofi screams at him:

"Don't you dare start this about *my* baby! If our Lord in His heaven has sent my child back to me, don't you dare start backward, thinking against her, the devil doesn't produce miracles! (...) ¡hombre necio, pendejo...! (Castillo, 1993: 25)

It is her strong maternal feelings that allow her to confront the priest, a man and a Church authority, like this. Similarly, the narrator reveals towards the end of the novel that Sofi's husband Domingo did not leave her, but it was Sofi, who sent him away, after she discovered that he was a gambler and was betting away her land: "Go hombre, before you leave us all out on the street!" (Castillo, 1993: 214) Sofia is not afraid to take a stand to protect her children.

Esperanza

Castillo shows on the female characters in *So far from God* that women can be safe only if they stay within their culture. Three of Sofia's daughters die either because of

⁴Similar to the empowerment of Mexican women through stage migration (see Hondagneu-Sotelo, Pierette. "Overcoming Patriarchal Constraints: The Reconstruction of Gender Relations Among Mexican Immigrant Women and Men." *Gender and Society*. Vol. 6, No. 3. 1992. 393.)

their struggle to be successful in the white world, or in attempt to escape the violent masculine domain. Esperanza, Sofia's only college educated daughter is career oriented. She gets a master's degree in communications and becomes a local television broadcaster. Her career takes off when she accepts an offer to be an anchor on a television station in Washington, D.C., and later she is sent to Saudi Arabia to report from the war zone. Her desire to be successful in the white and male dominated world of war reporters proves to be fatal: Esperanza goes missing and the family has no information about her. Caridad, who has psychic abilities, can sense her sister's presence at night, but can only translate it as her sister's desire to come home. After many months La Llorona, a mythical woman from Mexican legends, appears to La Loca and tells her that Esperanza is dead. After that, the spirit of Esperanza returns home. Despite all her career success and personal aspirations to make it in the dangerous white male dominated world, in the end it is her family and her home she needs to be close to.

Fe

Fe's character represents the quest for the American Dream. Out of Sofi's four daughters, she is the only one who "stays earthbound" (Castillo, 1993: 85), who is only interested in material things. She works in a bank, saving money to be able to buy a house after she marries her fiancé, Tom. She feels different from her family because of her ambitions, she even asked her coworkers, not her sisters, to be her bridesmaids in the wedding, despite the cultural traditions of her community. But after Tom breaks up with her only a short time before the wedding, when everything is prepared and she already has her wedding dress, Fe suffers horrible shock and screams every waking hour for months. And it is her family, her mother and her sisters, who take care of her during this time. At last Fe does get married, to her own cousin, Casimiro, and after the wedding they

"settled into a three-bedroom, two-car-garage tract home in Rio Rancho with option to buy. They furnished it all new, sold Fe's car and bought a brand-new sedan model, right out of the showroom, for the occasions when they went out together to nice places like the Four Seasons Hotel to dance on Saturday nights." (Castillo, 1993: 176-177)

The start of their marriage is the beginning of the American Dream for Fe. She changes jobs and starts working in a new company in order to earn more money to be able to pay off all “the long-dreamed-of automatic dishwasher, microwave, Cuisinart, and the VCR” (Castillo, 1993: 171) that she and Casey bought on credit. She works with chemicals, and because she is a “steady and dedicated worker type” (Castillo, 1993: 177) - the narrator even calls her “the queen of utilization and efficiency” (Castillo, 1993: 181) - determined to be a good employee and earn raises, the supervisors offer her more bonuses if she works with even a more powerful chemical. Fe experiences several health problems that worsen with time, until she finds out she has cancer. This is what ultimately opens Fe’s eyes to realize that she was a victim of work exploitation. She worked with illegal poisonous chemicals without having been given proper information on how to handle them, while all she wanted was “to make some points with the company and earn bonuses to buy her house, make car payments, have a baby, in other words, have a life like people do on T.V.” (Castillo, 1993: 189)

In her desire to fit in the white society, Fe forgot that she was a brown woman, which put her in a double disadvantage position. Her supervisors did not consider it necessary to study all the safety procedures and explain them to her. To the company foreman, Fe was just a machine working with chemicals that can be easily replaced; she was *dehumanized*.

Fe tried to escape her home all her life because she was ashamed of it, “with its smell of animal urine and hot animal breath and it’s couch and cobijas that itched with tick and fleas” (Castillo, 1993: 171), a home that represented a life in harmony with nature, not a white sterile home that Fe longed for in her American Dream. When her desire to “have a life like people do on T.V.” fatally affects her health, Fe realizes she wants to “go nowhere else but back to her mom and La Loca and even to the animals” (Castillo, 1993: 171). After the white culture, which she so desperately wanted to fit in – and thought she did, failed her by exposing her to those hazardous chemicals, she suddenly sees how warm and nurturing her own culture, the one she rejected many years ago, really is. And it is Sofi, who makes Fe seek medical care and then gets her a lawyer.

Sofi makes her home the place where family members get support and help, and where even the “prodigal daughter” is welcomed with love and care. The country, which is supposed to represent home for its citizens, turns her back on Fe. The country officials start examining the chemical that was used in the company, but are only concerned about “who was to blame for the illegal use of the chemical” but “not the least bit concerned about her who was dying in front of their eyes because of having been in contact with it.” (Castillo, 1993: 187). In the end they even drop the case and the work at the company continues as if nothing ever happened.

Caridad

Sofia’s second daughter, Caridad, represents Chicana spirituality and *lesbianismo*. Her character undergoes three major changes throughout the novel. Being the most beautiful of Sofia’s daughters, she gets married after high school, but after finding out her husband is not faithful, she aborted her pregnancy and had the marriage annulled. After that, the first change occurs: she seeks chance sexual encounters and becomes a mere sexual object for men in the area, and so many are not surprised when one night she is left horribly mutilated by the side of the road. Later it is revealed that it was not a man, who attacked her, but a dangerous mythical spirit called *malogra*. It is her mother and her sister Loca, who take care of another daughter/sister in trouble.

The second change occurs when Caridad’s body is miraculously recovered and her healed body appears in Fe’s never-used wedding gown. The white dress symbolizes a new beginning for Caridad, “a second chance at life.” (Castillo, 1993: 51). The new Caridad is gifted with the ability to foresee certain events in the future and insists on moving out of her maternal home. Together with her mare Corazón she moves into a trailer park owned by doña Felicia, a local *curandera*, or healing woman. The horse is a metaphor for Caridad’s own heart. “Sofia was more concerned for Caridad’s Corazón, who had never been away from home in Tome, than for her daughter, who had shown and uncanny ability to survive anything.” (Castillo, 1993: 44) the narrator says, meaning that her mother was worried more about Caridad’s heart and soul, rather than her body.

Of course, the inevitable happens and Corazón runs away, breaks a hoof and is shot by the sheriff. This sad event marks the third transformation of Caridad. After the death of her Corazón, she slept for many days, gaining strength to become an apprentice of doña Felicia, who believes that Caridad would be a great healer.

“Caridad was incapable of hating anyone or anything, which is why doña Felicia had elected her the heiress to her healing legacy. Hating came quite easy in this life of injustices, doña Felicia figured, but having an abundant heart took the kind of resiliency that a *curandera* required.” (Castillo, 1993: 77)

Doña Felicia’s *curanderismo* was a complex art, syncretizing Catholicism, belief in spirits, and knowledge of herbs and natural remedies. The narrator even includes in her story the cures for several illnesses that can be treated by a *curandera*, such as *empacho*, *mal de ojo*, and *limpias*. They all come from the realm of local spirituality and herbology, but doña Felicia stresses that it is imperative for a healer to have faith and start her treatment deep prayer to God, because He is the source of all healing. Because religion is such an important part of *curanderismo*, the week before Easter doña Felicia takes Caridad along for a pilgrimage to Chimayo, a place in New Mexico, where the famous statue of the Cristo Negro de Esquipulas was found and a shrine was built to commemorate the miracle. On this pilgrimage Caridad falls in love with a woman. The narrator is completely unjudgmental in describing this event, she does not talk about homosexuality at all, and instead, she presents it as a very natural spiritual experience. Meeting this woman is another transforming experience for Caridad, as her dead heart (Corazón) is renewed. After returning from Chimayo, Caridad sleeps for days and then disappears on her way to a local spa. A year later, around Easter, doña Felicia’s deeply religious godson Francisco el Penitente and his two friends find her living in a cave in the mountains like hermit. She refuses to return with them, and when they try to make her go by force, they realize they cannot overcome her strength and persistence. The account of this event gets blown out of proportion and instead of in church, people crowded in front of Caridad’s cave, calling her *Santa Armañita* and begging her to cure them. Caridad hides from them and resumes her interrupted journey to the spa, where she meets the woman she fell in love with, Esmeralda.

In the meantime, Francisco el Penitente develops an obsession with Caridad. For him she is the representation of the divine on Earth and calls her the “Handmaiden of Christ.” He keeps vigil in front of Caridad’s trailer and soon finds out that in the same way Caridad spends every night in front of Esmeralda’s house. Francisco follows Esmeralda and abducts her (it is another irony, because Esmeralda works in a rape crisis center and gives advice on how to avoid dangerous situations). The narrator does not reveal what Francisco told her, but it was something that urged Esmeralda to take Caridad with her to visit her grandmother in the mountains. Francisco follows them and in an attempt to escape from him both of the women commit suicide by jumping, hand in hand, from the mountain. To add to the mystery, their bodies are not found, but according to the narrator they entered into the earth, where they “would be safe and live forever.” (Castillo, 1993: 211)

La Loca

La Loca is different from her three sisters. The most dramatic event of her life happened when she was just a little child, when she died and came back from the dead, supposedly as a result of an attack of epilepsy. As she announced to the priest and the crowd of mourners at her own funeral, she had been to heaven, hell, and the purgatory and God sent back to life to pray for people in her community. And this is what she does. After her journey to hell and back, Loca is left with intolerance towards humans, she dislikes their smell, and therefore she never leaves her mother’s house:

“(…) Loca had never left home and her mother was the sole person whom she ever let go near her. Loca went only as far as the stalls and riding the horses along the acequia and walking down to the acequia on foot. That was it.” (Castillo, 1993: 221)

She stays on the lot, takes care of the animals, cooks, helps Sofi butcher animals for her *carnicería*, and especially prays for her sisters, which is her sole purpose in life. La Loca is a very devoted sister. She doesn’t let her sister touch her, but she takes care of them whenever they need her. When Fe is abandoned by Tom, she starts screaming

and screams at the top of her lungs for months, it was La Loca, who, together with Sofi, stayed by her side and took care of her:

“She sewed a padded headband for Fe so that when she banged her head against the wall, as she increasingly did while she screamed, she wouldn’t hurt herself as bad. She also prayed for her, since that was La Loca’s principal reason for being alive, as both her mother and she well knew.” (Castillo, 1993: 32)

Apart from being very helpful in taking care of her older sisters, working around the house, and helping with the animals, Loca also has talents the origins of which nobody understands. She could train horses since she was five or six years old (Castillo, 1993: 221), and she herself learned how to play the violin, although she never took music lessons (Castillo, 1993: 222). And even though she never leaves the house, La Loca is also socially conscious after what happened to her sister Fe in the factory, and when she hears a news story about a garment company being unfair to its workers, she tears the label from her pair of jeans in protest. Like her sisters, La Loca also does not die a natural death. Unexplainably, despite the fact that she never was in touch with anybody outside her family and avoided human contact entirely, she contracts AIDS. Dr. Tolentino, local doctor and psychic, as well as doña Felicia and other *curanderas* try all treatments and remedies they know, but all in vain. After Loca’s death, Sofi has no more children to care for, but because of public demand she starts an international organization called MOMAS, her greatest achievement in life, which was otherwise so complicated. MOMAS is an abbreviation of Mothers of Martyrs and Saints and it unites mothers whose children produced miraculous happenings or were martyred in any way. Creating this fictional association demonstrates Castillo’s emphasis on the spiritual aspect of motherhood.

Sofia

For Sofi, her family (and not only her biological family, but also her community), is everything. Her daughters did not make her life very easy with their supernatural diseases: first the mysterious death and miraculous resurrection of her youngest, then Fe’s screaming and Caridad’s mutilation, Esperanza’s kidnapping and murder, Caridad’s

suicide, Fe's cancer and Loca's AIDS, and of course her husband's gambling which in the end costs Sofi her home, it all certainly appears to be an unbearable amount of suffering for one mother. Sofia usually does not complain about her troubled life, she goes about her work at home and at the butcher store. And although she may seem always active and full of faith, she makes sure Domingo knows the full extent of her hard work as she tells him:

“While you were gone, doing who knows what – gambling your soul away, dancing with every loose... woman you ran across, and who knows what else – I have been hanging the rumps of pigs and lambs and getting arthritis from the freezer and praying to God to give me the strength to do the best by my girls alone and with the wits I had left after what I'd been through with them, starting with when La Loca died!” (Castillo, 1993: 111)

To her priest she also confides the difficulties with her children:

“God gave me four daughters (...) and you would have thought that by now I would be a content grandmother, sitting back and letting my daughters care for me, bringing me nothing but their babies on Sunday to rock on my lap! But no, not my hijitas!” (Castillo, 1993: 84).

Because of the patience that she was granted “to endure the particular life she has been given” (Castillo, 1993: 85) and having faith that has “kept her going” (Castillo, 1993: 139), she managed to bring up her four daughters and take care of her house and the *carnicería* on her own. If their social status and historical circumstances were not so different, she could be compared to the heroine of *Gone With the Wind*, Scarlet O'Hara, who was also considered a very unusual literary character for that time, given her strength and endurance with which she managed to survive all the hardships in the male dominated world.

Sofi has known her husband Domingo since she was a young girl. They started their relationship after her *quinceañera* and got married, without the consent of Sofia's family, when she was eighteen. She was very much in love then, but soon she realized that Domingo was a gambler, who has “little by little hocked all of Sofi's jewelry” and even sold the lot her grandfather gave them as wedding present “without even consulting Sofi” (Castillo, 1993: 105). After the birth of their fourth child, Sofi was forced to take

a stand and sends Domingo away. Taking this rather drastic measure enables her to save the house and the meat market, however she pays the price of being looked at with pity by her neighbors, and being called “La Pobre Sofi” and “La Abandonada” (Castillo, 1993: 215). Domingo returns the day of Caridad’s “Holy Restoration” and their marriage slowly resumes where it left off. Castillo’s sense of humor shines through however when the first thing Sofi tells Domingo after he comes back after being absent for twenty years is “Did you forget something?” (Castillo, 1993: 110)

Domingo

Domingo, one of the few male characters in the novel, is not portrayed in an entirely negative way. He is a gambler and for twenty years he left his wife alone with four children without supporting them and without maintaining any communication, but at the same time he has some likable characteristics. He loves his daughters. He is patient with La Loca’s peculiarities, and he builds a house for Caridad. And as the narrator reveals that even after all the years he is still in love with his wife:

“Sometimes when Sofi wasn’t looking Domingo indulged himself in watching her, like when she ran around in fishing boots feeding the horses, or when she was squatting at work in her vegetable garden, or when she came home from the Carne Buena butcher shop, bloody apron and all, and what his reminiscing eyes saw was the radiant señorita whom he had made fall in love with him the night of her quinceañera.” (Castillo, 1993: 109)

However, he lacks the spiritual dimension that is inherent to all the other female characters (with the exception of practical Fe). He wants to make La Loca fly like she did when she came back from the death, and uses Caridad’s gift of fortune telling for the sole purpose of playing the lottery. He is a material person and needs to see miracles happen with his very eyes in order to believe, and if they happen, he only uses them for material gain.

Domingo also fails to realize that Sofi has matured and developed in his absence. He still sees her as a fifteen-year old girl, but obviously she is not, and she has outgrown him mentally. He still calls her “silly Sofi”, a nickname she used to like in the past. Of course Sofia is quite the opposite of silliness. The fact that Domingo calls her that reflects

not only the fact that he does not understand her, but also his patronizing behavior. Sofi, who is aware of her strength refuses to tolerate this and she speaks in protest: “(...) don’t call me ‘silly Sofi’ no more (...) Do I look like a silly woman to you, Domingo?” (Castillo, 1993: 109-110) His reply does not make much improvement: “You look like a beautiful woman to me...especially now, with that glow of sunset in your face...” (Castillo, 1993: 110) Clearly, Domingo is unable to view his wife as a rational being, to him she is simply silly or beautiful. And when she announces her intention to run for the mayor of Tome, with all her strength and determination (“I am running for mayor of Tome, of course! And furthermore, I will be la mayor of Tome! I swear on my parents’ grave – may they rest in peace – even if it’s the last thing I ever do!” (Castillo, 1993:142)) Domingo thinks she is saying that merely in order to ridicule him.

The Matriarchal Family

Sofi completely contradicts the idea of a submissive, passive, and obedient Mexican American woman who models the *Virgen de Guadalupe*, praying, with her eyes timidly looking down. Sofia does not look down. She looks straight ahead, making decisions that need to be made in order to protect herself and her daughters, even though it is completely unheard of in her community. She makes a decision about whom to marry despite her family’s disapproval, and when her husband has a gambling problem, she also makes the decision to live without him. She takes matters into her own hands, when she sees injustice in her community, and with her enthusiasm and determination manages to change the face of her community.

It was undoubtedly the need to be an active head of her family when she lived alone what empowers Sofi. She realized how able she is, and seeing the needs of the Tome community, where people are forced to sell their land and where produce is poisoned by pesticides, pushed her to take leadership:

“I have been living in Tome all my life and I have only seen it get worse and worse off and it’s about time somebody goes out and tries to do something about it. And maybe I don’t know nothing about those kinds of things, but I’m sure willing to work for community improvement!” (Castillo, 1993: 138)

With the help of her *comadre* Sofi started her “campaign”. She talked with the residents of Tome about their problems and need for economic self-sufficiency of the town and timely manages to organize them to follow her and complete several of these “community improvement” enterprises, such as agricultural cooperatives, organic produce, and projects against drugs in school. She does not become the official mayor, but people call her la mayor Sofi out of respect. This determination and her leadership skills take Sofi from local activism to international level, as she establishes the organization of Mothers of Martyrs and Saints.

But despite all her successful activism and involvement outside of the home, Sofi’s main role is that of a mother. She devoted herself to her children when they were young, which made her give up her social life: “(...) la pobre Sofi had never had one moment of fun all those years while she was alone, no birthday or New Year’s Eve fiesta, no Christmas posadas” (Castillo, 1993: 133) Even after her daughters grow up, she is there for them whenever they need her. She is not overprotective, though, so when after Caridad’s disappearance the news of her living in the mountains appear, Sofi does not rush there, because just in knowing that Caridad was safe, “her heart was calm” (Castillo, 1993: 88). Sofi also refuses to perpetuate the negative female stereotypes so characteristic of Mexican culture. She never told her daughters the story of La Llorona, a mythical woman

“who had left her husband and home, drowned her babies to run off and have a sinful life, and God punished her for eternity (...). Sofia had not left her children, much less drowned them to run off with nobody. On the contrary, she had been left alone to raise them by herself. And all her life, there had always been at least one woman around like her, left alone, abandoned, divorced, or widowed, to raise her children, and none of them had ever tried to kill their babies.” (Castillo, 1993:161)

According to Sofi the only purpose of the story of *La Llorona* is presenting a negative female stereotype to young girls – a stereotype of an immoral, unfaithful woman and a bad mother. Sofia is a woman, who has had a very hard life, but her motherhood has been unaffected by her circumstances. That is why she refuses to accept the popular image of a negative mother figure. Rather than bringing up her daughters with the help

of similar myths, she leads them by her example.

On the cover of *So Far from God* Sandra Cisneros' summary reads like this: "a novel roaring down Interstate 25 at one hundred and fifteen miles an hour with an almanac of Chicanismo — saints, martyrs, t.v. mystics, home remedies, little miracles, *dichos*, myths, gossip, recipes — fluttering from the fender like a flag." With these words she captured the fast pace of the story and many of the themes used in the novel, but not the major one. And that is motherhood. Castillo demonstrates on the character of Sofia that despite many crisis and tribulations that come with her disadvantaged position of double minority, a Mexican American woman can be determined, powerful, and successful, without ever stepping aside from her role of a mother.

2.2.2 *The Guardians*

The Guardians was published fourteen years after *So Far from God*, but the novels share several themes. For the purposes of this dissertation the most important theme is that of negative outside forces that disrupt families. *The Guardians* tells a story of a family broken by the criminal activities, drug smuggling, and people trafficking, at the border between the United States and Mexico, in the El Paso/Ciudad Juarez area. The narrative technique is an experiment, just like in other Castillo's novels. The story is told from the perspectives of four protagonists: Regina, a widowed teacher's aide in her 50s; Gabriel (or Gabo), her 16 year old nephew; Miguel, a thirty-five-year-old teacher; and Miguel's grandfather, El Abuelo Milton. This technique enables the reader to see the line of the story from multiple perspectives and to compare how different characters view the situation they all have to deal with, and also how they perceive each other. Passages that are told by Regina, Miguel, and Milton are written as a monologue. Gabriel's passages are different; they are written as prayers and addressed to Saint Pius XX, a Franciscan saint who strongly religious Gabriel prays to.

Like in *So Far from God*, Ana Castillo uses allegorical names for the characters in this novel. The name Regina alludes to the Virgin Queen of Angels, because she, despite her low socioeconomic status, keeps her dignity and integrity, and the other characters

perceive her as a queen. Her second name Ana is also symbolical. Saint Anne was the mother of Virgin Mary, and is the patron saint of late in life mothers, which is what Regina becomes at the end of the story. Gabriel, Rafael, Miguel, Regina's girl friend Uriel, and Regina's grandfather Metatron are all named after archangels. And Miguel's grandfather is named Milton, which, given Castillo's interest in using symbolic names from *Paradise Lost*, quite probably hints at John Milton, the most famous author of allegories in Anglo-Saxon literature.

The novel's opening is not so accelerated as that of *So Far from God*, where the reader is from page one drawn into the sequence of hard to believe occurrences. *The Guardians* opens gradually, with Regina, the narrator of the first chapter, disclosing in a stream-of-consciousness manner various facts about her life on the outskirts of a small fictitious New Mexican town called Cabuche (the name comes from the name of the fruit of a barrel-biznaga cactus), near the border with Texas and Mexico. Regina also reveals her concern for her brother Rafael (Rafa), who went missing during an attempt to cross the border from Mexico to the United States. She fears something bad happened to him, and soon the events spin off and Regina, Gabriel, Miguel, and el Abuelo Milton, create a new, provisional, family, in search for Rafa.

Regina

All the members of this new family are drastically different. The "fifty-plus-year-old" (Castillo, 2007: 11) Regina is a paradoxical case of a widow and a virgin, whose husband was deployed and killed in Vietnam right after their wedding, before they could consummate the marriage. Her husband's death was not the first tragedy in Regina's life, nor the last. Regina grew up with her two brothers on a hacienda in Mexico, which belonged to her paternal grandfather Metatron. She experienced the life of a small town elite, had a private teacher and bright future ahead. After her father and her brother Gabriel were killed by a wild bull, her grief-stricken grandfather expelled her family from the hacienda and they were forced to join the thousands of migrant workers who come illegally to work in the harvests in the United States. Regina feels different from other

people in her community:

“I am not saying that I am better than other people who crossed over to this side, risking their lives in the river or through the desert, just because I started learning Latin when I was a girl. But life would have been much different for us if it hadn’t been for that bull.” (Castillo, 2007: 29)

Her elitist upbringing also explains her interest in art, politics, society, and the environment.

Regina’s mother was a very opinionated lady and made her daughter feel inferior throughout her life. She always had more expectations of her sons than her daughter, Regina recalls her mother saying

“Rafa’s got a mind for mathematics. He’s got a good hand for drafting. He could have done anything her wanted...but you, hija,” she always said without finishing, and then she’d add a little laugh. Just enough to make me feel like she was sitting on my chest.” (Castillo, 2007: 206)

After the death of her mother Regina has lived alone in a house in the desert, without friends, and without any potential suitors. Like Sofi in *So Far from God* she is very active. She works as a teacher’s aide in a middle school in Cabuche and takes every chance she gets to make some extra income apart from her low teacher’s aide salary. These endeavors include selling used clothes, sewing, selling pizza, or making pies, only to fail again and again not so much due to her lack of persistence, but rather because of the softness of her heart:

“For a while I had it in my mind that I was gonna get rich selling fresh eggs. Everyone started asking me for eggs, all the neighbors, the teachers at the school, but no one really wanted to pay for them. Then I started feeling for the poor familias I worked with at the school and gave them free eggs.” (Castillo, 2007: 7)

After each failed attempt Regina thinks of a new one, but the results are always the same.

Regina, despite her low social status in the United States, is very environmentally and politically conscious. She sends letters to the White House to complain “about how things are being run up there” and “the president’s latest pick for a Supreme Court

judge”⁵ (Castillo, 2007: 7-8). Apart from politics, Regina is also very concerned with nutrition, she grows her own vegetables and says that “spicy, greasy sausage is no good for your health, and what’s bad for your arteries cannot be good for your mental well-being neither.” (Castillo, 2007: 8) Regina’s social consciousness enables Castillo to be very critical in *The Guardians*, just as she was in *So Far from God*. She addresses many social issues that are inherent to the life in the borderlands, this *Nepantla*, or place in between, as Anzaldúa calls it. Through the character of Regina Castillo talks about immigration, drug trafficking and people trafficking, about kidnapping, killing, mutilation for organs, harsh treatment of Mexican field laborers, and other issues that are so inherent to the Mexican-populated border area.

Regina obtained residence in the United States, because her husband was a U.S. veteran. But her brother Rafael and his wife did not have the necessary documents and they were forced to illegally travel back and forth between Mexico and United States and work as migrant farm workers. Because of the danger of border crossing and the hard labor in the fields, they frequently left their son Gabo with Regina in New Mexico, and after the death of his mother Gabo stays with her for even longer periods of time. Apart from Gabo, Rafa is Regina’s only living relative; therefore she is very concerned about his disappearance.

In order to get advice on how to find some information about her brother, Regina befriends Miguel Betancourt, a history teacher in her school and a Chicano activist. Their friendships starts growing and the depth of the sentiment slowly changes just as Regina’s way of talking about him: at first she calls him Mr. Betancourt, then “Miguel Mike Mr. Betancourt“, then “Miguel Mike”, and eventually “Miguel My Honey”. She tells him Miguel is her favorite archangel and he reveals to her that he indeed was named after the archangel (Castillo, 2007: 27).

Regina is infatuated with Miguel. Together they start a project on growing pesticide free vegetables in a poor local community. The fact that they share similar views about the world deepens their friendship. Apart from trying to help her locating missing brother

⁵The novel was written during the George W. Bush presidency.

and their project, Miguel keeps Regina company, and he also does practical chores around the house.

Miguel

Miguel is a handsome man “tall, like a poplar tree, so healthy and full of life and vigor and future” (Castillo, 2007: 30). Like Regina, he is politically conscious. He is an activist, calls himself a Chicano, and his academic interest lies in the negative effects of the American involvement in modern Latin American history. Like Regina, who had a complicated relationship with her judgmental mother, Miguel had a complicated relationship with his father, who was a colonel in the military, active in training Latin American soldiers in “torture and political repression” (Castillo, 2007: 32). After the death of his father the family fell apart, as later did Miguel’s own family. His wife Crucita had an affair with a protestant minister and they got divorced, but they still get along and bring up their two children together.

Regina and Miguel first meet at a church bazaar where she was in charge of one of the booths. Her shyness and beauty caught his attention, but she does not encourage him in anyway. They do not talk until months later, at work, when she decides to take him into confidence concerning her brother’s disappearance. It is a very surprising move for Castillo, to suggest this uncommon relationship between a thirty-something man and a fifty-something woman. And while Regina is well aware of the age difference, Miguel never mentions it, so the reader is left wondering, whether he really never thinks about it, because he does not give importance to age in the male-female relationships, or whether it is plain wishful thinking on the author’s side.

Miguel is in many ways a macho. He is educated in the area of humanities but at the same time he is a strong attractive man, who knows how to handle dangerous situation at the border, and also knows how to ride a horse cowboy-style. His self-confidence thus suffers significantly when his ex-wife Crucita is kidnapped. He begins to realize his shortcomings. The cultural norms imposed on a man in the Mexican American culture make it difficult for Miguel to expressing his feelings, which might have been one of the

reasons for the break-up of their marriage: “I knew I loved [Crucita] and the kids, I knew I wanted to look out for them as best as I could. I just didn’t know how to show how I feel.” (Castillo, 2007: 186) After Crucita is kidnapped, Miguel tries to be the strong man his culture expects him to be. When he feels the need to cry, he suppresses it: “Men don’t cry, my grandfather would have said. I had always been told that by him, the colonel, the priests in school, back when they gave you a good whack for looking at them cross-eyed. Everywhere and from everyone you had to take it like a man.” (Castillo, 2007: 197) He thinks he “failed [his] whole family miserably” by not making his ex-wife safe enough; he feels he “could not even keep Crucita from harm’s way.” (Castillo, 2007: 187) After that Miguel decides to stop all his contacts with Regina in order to protect her. At that time she realizes how she misses him, and even admits to herself that she “adores him”.

Gabo

Gabo, Regina’s nephew, is a very unusual boy. He had to spent most of his childhood without his parents, which strongly affected him at that young age: “I was so upset, being left behind, I was too small to understand how mis padrecitos were trying to spare me from working en los files (Castillo, 2007: 39)”, he confesses in his prayer to Padre Pio. Later, his mother Ximena goes missing while crossing the border, and is found later, killed by one of the gangs active around the border, her body mutilated for organs. Losing his mother at very young age makes Gabo’s life even harder. Regina is aware of this and tries to be as much mother to him as possible, knowing at the same time that “The job of a mother (even a substitute one like me) never ends” (Castillo, 2007: 121), she admits. She makes sure he receives education, and has many plans for his future that includes traveling to Italy and New York City and Washington, D.C. in order to continue his education. She wants him to get away from the poverty and prejudices that Mexican Americans suffer from in the area: “I was determined to see that my Gabo got out. Stand on my shoulders, I’d say to mi sobrino. On my cabezahead⁶, if you have to.” (Castillo,

⁶Apart from frequent code-switching, or changing from English to Spanish, Castillo also plays with language by creating conjoined English/Spanish words, e.g *cabezahead*, *lazyflojo*.

2007: 181) Even though Gabo does not share her plans, he truly appreciates what she does for him: “You have been more mother to me than I could have asked for. . . more than I deserved”, he tells her. (Castillo, 2007: 173) He knows at the same time that she does not understand his desire to enter the religious life, no matter how hard he tries to explain to her that he needs to find out what God wants from him. At sixteen years of age he has already been through many turmoils and he has found the Catholic Church to be his refuge. His plan is to join the Franciscan order after graduating from high school, prays for signs from God, and wishes to be graced with stigmata.

Gabo is a good student, an avid reader, very religious, and therefore it looks like a quite far-fetched plot that Gabo’s best friend is a gang member. It seems fairly unusual that a gang member would befriend a “nerd”, as Jesse Arellano calls Gabo. Gabo, however, prays for him and believes that God sent him Jesse as a “mirror to [his] own spiritual shortcomings.” (Castillo, 2007: 46) Gabo earns his friend’s respect after an incident when Jesse hits him in the face with a basketball, lying that it was an accident. Gabo describes the episode in his prayer, saying:

“Next thing I knew, Santito, he was pleading for me to let go when I had his neck locked between my thighs. (I learned that movida at school, trying to get on the wrestling team.) After that, there were no more accidental slam balls from my new best friend.” (Castillo, 2004: 44)

Apparently, Gabo is not such a “nerd” after all, and he does not incorporate in his daily life the New Testament teaching about showing the other cheek. He is capable of defending himself when faced with violence. Nevertheless, he prays for Jesse and the whole gang, los Palominos, every night “for God’s light to enter their demented souls. Even if they do not have mothers and fathers who care, I beseech God y todos los santos that they find a way to forgive themselves.” (Castillo, 2007: 46)

At the same time Gabo’s priest Juan Bosco confides in him that he is leaving priesthood in order to marry his secret mistress. This is another stroke for Gabo’s disturbed life: “My father is missing. My mother has been taken from me. My hermana, too. I turned to my spiritual adviser and what was her now telling me? God was not enough for him.” (Castillo, 2007: 82) Finding himself in such a difficult situation, he decided to

make “a pact with the Devil” (Castillo, 2007: 81) and asked the gang for help in locating his father. Soon after that some of the gang members are arrested for drug abuse, and Gabo loses contact with them. Later, Regina is called to his school and is told by the principal that Gabo has lost interest in his studies and started wearing a monk’s robe. Gabo reveals in his prayers that he found the robe in the church and believes it was sent to him as a sign. He wears it to school, and starts preaching the Gospel to his fellow students, especially to a girl called Tiny Tears, who is a teenage mother and a member of the gang. She has tattooed tears under her eyes, each of them representing somebody she killed and got her nickname after a popular doll from 1950s and 60s. Gabo believes he has to show Tiny Tears the beauty of God’s love, but, uninterested, she leaves, just as Gabo collapses and stigmata appear on his hands. Regina is very concerned, therefore Miguel, the only father figure Gabo has, decides to talk to him “guy-to-guy” (Castillo, 2007: 168) and makes him promise he will stay away from the gang. Miguel’s ex wife is kidnapped soon after that.

El Abuelo Milton

El Abuelo Milton, Miguel’s grandfather, is half dead and half blind, but his hearing is apparently good enough to distinguish such minor sounds as that of Regina’s skirt “rustly moving against what had to be a pair of fine and shapely legs.” (Castillo, 2007: 71) Likewise, he reveals that even though he cannot see in the daylight, his sight is quite good in the dark. Milton becomes involved with the “family” through Miguel. Milton likes Regina and Gabo, he believes that the boy is very special. He knows Regina has dreams for her nephew’s future and shares some of his wisdom with her: “You know, señorita, you should never force your personal beliefs on your children. The first chance they get, they go off and do just the opposite of what you wished for them.” (Castillo, 2007: 74) Soon, Gabo asks him for help, after the police caught him looking for his father in El Paso. Since then, el Abuelo Milton begins to refer to Gabo as his “adopted grandson” (Castillo, 2007: 142) and attempts to help him in any way possible. He lends him his car and walks the street of El Paso with a photograph of Rafa, trying to find

information about him.

When Miguel's ex-wife is kidnapped, it is again his grandfather who gets him out of his depression by pushing him to start actively looking for her, knowing that the police will not do enough to find his ex-wife.

The "New" Family

The four people become very close through all the trials imposed on them by the border society that they live in. They form a family, where the members support each other despite not being related. Castillo creates this "new" family as a counterpart to all the broken families in the novel. Gabo notices how in his school the gang replaces the children's biological families, who are not interested in their children's lives:

"What kind of mother and father are at home [...] who wouldn't ask what happened to their hija when she returned half the chava she was when she left? Beaten up and raped by kids who told you they were going to be your "familia" from now on. What kind of family does that?" (Castillo, 2007: 46)

The protagonists do not have an ideal family life either. Regina's chance for a family on her own was ruined by the Vietnam war, Gabo's and Miguel's families are destroyed by the drug wars between the cartels operating around the border. Their family is disrupted and at the same time created by the dangerous occurrences in the region. At age sixteen, Gabo has lost both his parents; he becomes an orphan of the border. This situation brings to life the new family, one that is united if not by blood ties, then by love, compassion, and faith. Gabo and Regina are only extended kin, and they have no family relations to Miguel and his grandfather. But they all need each other for different reasons and creating this surprising union is beneficial for all involved. Regina, for example, says about Gabo: "I had no idea how lonely I was until one day I found myself at my Singer stitching up his jeans, talking my head off, and he, so patiently sitting nearby listening to it all." (Castillo, 2007: 12) Regina, Miguel, Milton, and Gabo create a family that tries to resist the disruptive effect of the borderland violence. Together they plan Gabo's sixteenth birthday party, which unexpectedly becomes a nice family event. On the day of Santa Ana, Regina's patron saint, "the three men in her life, an old one, a very young

one, and one in between” (Castillo, 2007: 153) take her to a local rodeo, where Miguel also participates. Regina is amazed that “One day he is a political activist Chicano, todo bravo and defiant. Next, he comes out like a nineteenth-century vaquero. The original southwestern cowboy.” (Castillo, 2007: 155) At the rodeo Gabo also sings “Salve Regina” for his aunt. It is a wonderful day for everybody, and the four characters really do form a loving family, because they do not have anyone else. As Gabo says, “Everyone needs familia. And when your familia goes away or when they die on you, then a good friend around helps (Castillo, 2007: 43).”

The three men, together with Juan Bosco, work together in order to find the whereabouts of Miguel’s ex-wife and Gabriel’s father. They manage to find the location from Jesse Arellano. Gabo, Miguel, and the priest go there and leave Abuelo Milton by the phone. He calls Regina and alerts the police, because he realizes how dangerous this endeavor is. Regina hurries with the police to catch up with Gabo, Miguel, and the priest, but the priest’s car got there sooner. In the house they found Miguel’s wife and Tiny Tears, both drugged and victims of sex abuse, and el Toro Arellano, leader of the gang, drugged and asleep. When the police arrives and calls them out, Tiny Tears kills Gabriel by stabbing him with a piece of glass. Later, the police found Rafa’s dead body in the body traffickers’ house in El Paso.

Once again, the family is destroyed by the borderland violence. Regina loses her beloved nephew the same day she learns about the death of her brother. She stops communicating with Miguel, because she cannot bear to talk about what happened. Miguel wants to be with Regina and is willing to do anything, realizing how much she means to him: “All I know is that it will be one long, lonely life if I don’t ever get that woman back.” He goes to therapy and tries to get rid of the “hard-ass cultural baggage crap” (Castillo, 2007: 203), in other words he wants to get in touch with his feelings so that he does not repeat the mistakes he did in his relationship with Crucita.

One of the major themes of the novel appears in the end: Forgiveness. Regina starts reading the Bible, because she can feel Gabo talking to her through the words. She forgives Tiny Tears and visits her in prison, where she is waiting for her trial, and she

takes care of her baby. She believes that “there are always enough frijoles in the pot to feed everyone.” (Castillo, 2007: 209) Finding out that the little girl does not even have a name, she baptizes her, and gives her a name: Gabriela, in honor of her nephew. Never having a child of her own, she now does becomes the late in life mother, that Santa Ana is the patron saint of.

Forgiveness is one of the key concepts of Catholicism, and Catholic symbolism is self-evident in the novel. Regina’s name alludes to one of the titles of Virgin Mary, the Queen of Heaven, and even the fact that she is a virgin, who becomes a mother, points to Saint Mary. Gabo, of course, is a Christ figure. He believes he needs to show God’s love to the sinners around him, and even has stigmata as a proof. In the end he is murdered, he dies for the sins of the drug and body traffickers. The story itself becomes an allegory of compassion and forgiveness. The title of the novel, *The Guardians*, may have the readers believe that novel is about guardian angel, as the majority of the characters are named after angels. But there are other meanings, too. Regina is Gabo’s guardian when his father is missing; Miguel is Regina’s guardian when she needs his help. In the end, it is the Franklin Mountains that overlook the border area, which the story is set into, and that the narrators so often make reference to, who appear to be the natural guardians of the community:

“Like giants, they take the sun and play with people’s eyes, changing colors. Like shape-shifters, they change the way they look, too. They let the devoted climb up along their spines to crown them with white crosses and mementos. They give themselves that way, those guardians between the two countries.” (Castillo, 2007: 5)

2.3 Family in Castillo and Cisneros

In her stories from *The House on Mango Street* and *Woman Hollering Creek and Other Stories* Sandra Cisneros focuses on the role of women in the Mexican American community, from their childhood, throughout the teenage years, and into adulthood.

According to the stories presented in these collections, Cisneros sees Mexican American families as rather dysfunctional and ruined by rigid gender roles, which prevent women from making their own life choices. The characters in their short stories either surrender to the expectations of the community and accept the position that was prescribed for them, or find their own way to achieve either spiritual independence through art and education, as Alicia, Lupe, and Esperanza in *House on Mango Street*, or actual independence by openly standing up to the norm, as Chayo, Felice, and Clemencia in *Woman Hollering Creek and Other Stories*. Even though Cisneros does include an occasional image of family, which does not seem to be disturbed by problematic issues, such as those in “Mexican Movies”, or certain notes from “Little Miracles, Kept Promises”, on the whole Cisneros, however poetically, creates rather a disapprobatory picture of the Mexican American family. In *Woman Hollering Creek and Other Stories* she created female characters, who are intelligent, powerful, and independent, but also women, who struggle, and who may never achieve independence, as well as young girls who grow up without sufficient guidance and care of the family, and whose lives may be forever changed because of it.

According to Cisneros, it is possible that a family can create a solid base for the future, or loving memories, but those are only rare examples in her vignettes and short stories. In the vast majority of them, family fails its female members by not protecting them enough, moving them from the prison of being a daughter to the prison of being a wife, and rejecting them if they rebel and attempt to take a different path.

Castillo takes a different approach. She also criticizes male superiority, but that does not make her give up on the institution of family in general. In *So Far from God*, Sofi’s home is a healing place. Fe, Caridad, and Esperanza all returned to their mother, the matriarch and center of their family, whenever they needed advice or comforting. And Sofi, while being a strong woman, who successfully leads her family, her community, and her organization, is still first and foremost a mother, which makes her a very unusual character for a Mexican American literature and for the Western literature as well. Castillo criticizes those who do not understand women and those who confine them to the

second-class rank status, be it men, corporations, or the Catholic Church. Male characters in the novel are those who destroy the family because of their lack of understanding, lack of consideration, lack of compassion. Castillo uses Fe's character to demonstrate how leaving one's culture in an attempt to enter another culture can become fatal. The character of Esperanza illustrates how wars take the lives of those who get only remotely involved.

But more than a critique and warning, *So Far from God* is a resounding ode to womanhood and especially motherhood. According to Castillo, women do not have to leave home to gain power: Sofi and La Loca never leave home, but they do have integrity and strength. Despite all the hardships, Sofi managed to find balance between the traditional culture of Mexico that considers women inferior, and the modern culture of the United States that exploits women of color. Sofi is active and hardworking and can achieve things, but she is also spiritual, compassionate, and nurturing, which gives her another dimension. Sandra Cisneros in *House on Mango Street* and *Woman Hollering Creek and Other Stories* criticized the Mexican American family for its machismo and rigid gender roles, without offering a solution. In *So Far from God*, Castillo shows a different approach: return to indigenous rituals, spirituality, and nurturing motherhood. According to Celafell, Castillo's writing attempts to change the traditional image of the Mexican American family, with its patriarchy imposed by the Catholic Church, by a family that is matriarchal and nurturing, where female spirituality and sexuality is not oppressed, and where mother is the center and the guiding principle. (Celafell, 2005: 276)

The family in *The Guardians* is destroyed since the beginning. The reader finds only the skeleton of what could be a wonderful Mexican American family. But throughout the story the characters reconstruct it by forming a new family for themselves, one that would make them strong enough to fight to the negative attacks from the outside world. But no matter how well they feel together, and regardless of the effort they put in the making of their new family, they cannot succeed. In the border area, where murders happen on a daily basis, the officials are just too indifferent, which makes the evil is

even more powerful. It is a vicious circle in which the family is just doomed to be an insignificant player.

Gabo's death may initially look as the end of the family. He is dead. Rafa is dead. The violence won. There is nothing that can be done, and the other protagonists may just return to lead their lonely, pathetic lives. But that does not happen. Gabo's death turns out to be sacrificial. He dies so that the rest of his family can live. It is a turning point that starts the healing process of the other characters. They begin to learn from their own mistakes. Miguel starts seeing a therapist, hoping to learn to talk about his feelings, which he believes will open his way to Regina's wounded heart. Regina, who was firm in her negative attitude towards religion, begins to read the Bible in order to spiritually reconnect with her beloved nephew and also to find forgiveness in her heart. In return she receives Tiny Tears' baby daughter. There is hope that in the future, when both Miguel and Regina heal, they might create a real family.

Castillo describes in both novels, *So far from God* and *The Guardians*, how the ideal state of living in a loving and nurturing family is disturbed. There are many factors that influence the wellbeing of the family, be it cultural norms, career, gender roles, quest for the American Dream; or even violence and gangs. Up to this point, Cisneros agrees, according to her the family really is disturbed, does not fulfill its role in society anymore. However, according to her the family is disturbed especially from within. Through her stories she encourages women to be independent. Castillo, on the other hand, still believes in the power of the family. When different forces disrupt family life, it is still the family the characters turn to, because they cannot or do not want to deal with the hardships on their own. Castillo thus demonstrates in both novels how important family is for the Mexican American culture.

Chapter 3

Mexican American Family in Autobiography

Growing up in a Mexican American family created a great source of inspiration for many Mexican American writers and scholars. Autobiographical writing specifically is very common in Mexican American literature, and especially drawing on one's childhood memories is quite a recurring theme. Some authors return to their childhood years merely for inspiration, taking individual memories and transforming them in their work of fiction, like Sandra Cisneros in *Caramelo* or Arturo Islas in *The Rain God*. Others want to chronicle certain era of a unique minority culture in a particular space because they feel they need to give these traditionally silenced people a voice. And others simply want to record their family history.

Some of these writers do not consider their own life experiences interesting or exciting enough, but they write the story of their parents or grandparents, based on their account of the events. This is often the case with second or third generation immigrants, who want to record the experiences of their parents or grandparents who crossed the border. They remember the stories they were told as children or when they were growing up, and weave it together using their imagination and various narrative techniques, creating a fictionalized memoir. This is the case of *Macho!* by Victor Villaseñor and *The Horse in the Kitchen: Stories of a Mexican American Family* by Ralph M. Flores, where the

authors recorded the stories they heard from their fathers, who once crossed the border to the United States.

In this chapter, I will not talk about those writers, who only use fractions of their memories to enhance a work of fiction, or those who wrote the stories of some other family member as if they were their own. I will focus on two pieces of autobiographical narrative that actually recreate an image of a specific time period in the lives of the authors and where family plays an important role: Norma Cantú's *Canícula*, published in 1995, and Francisco Jiménez' *The Circuit*, published in 1997. But before talking about the two specific books that I have selected for this study, it is necessary to first have a look at the genre of autobiography, ethnic autobiography in general, and Mexican American autobiography in particular.

3.1 Autobiography

Autobiography is a genre that is said to have started with St. Augustine's *Confessions*. St. Augustine writes about his life, taking the reader on a spiritual journey through important events that preceded and followed his conversion. This approach of recording and retrospectively evaluating one's life laid the foundation of the genre. In an autobiography the author invites his readers to follow his life and see certain events through his eyes. Eleonora Chiavetta lays out the main features of the genre in her book *The Language of Autobiography: Discourses of Gender, Class and Ethnicity*:

“the need to go through one's life, following chronological sequencing; the retrospective glance that fixes important moments that may be considered decisive for a change of direction in one's life; the need to find a logical pattern, a scheme, in what could be seen as a sequence of disorderly, unconnected events; the choice of oneself as subject of narration with an unknown public, thus revealing one's thoughts, feelings, positive and negative deeds.” (Chiavetta, 2007: 12)

From this point of view the autobiography appears to offer the true account of events, because it tells the story and life experiences of the author. However, we must bear in mind that an autobiography, no matter how true-to-life it may appear, is always

fictionalized. The author offers in his autobiography only his view of things. And as the saying goes, there are two sides to every story. Sometimes he might even change certain facts as a matter of auto-censorship, or he might unknowingly misinterpret some events. Therefore, autobiography should always be read as a work of fiction. Chiavetta calls autobiography a “threshold genre” which crosses boundaries between fact and fiction and memory and history, and summarizes it as “the recounting of one’s life, the story of one’s experiences, events, feelings, as lived and felt within, and determined by, a social context.” (Chiavetta, 2007: 8, 11) Social context is therefore considered an important factor in creating an autobiography, and it is crucial especially for ethnic autobiography, and specifically, in our case, Mexican American autobiography.

There are many kinds of autobiographical writings and also various degrees of autobiography within these writings. The two major genres are autobiography and memoir. According to the encyclopedia Britannica, autobiography is a “biography of oneself narrated by oneself.”¹ Memoir, according to the same encyclopedia, is a “history or record composed from personal observation and experience. Closely related to (and often confused with) autobiography, a memoir usually differs chiefly in the degree of emphasis placed on external events; whereas writers of autobiography are concerned primarily with themselves as subject matter, writers of memoir are usually persons who have played roles in, or have been close observers of, historical events and whose main purpose is to describe or interpret the events.”²

Based on these above-mentioned definitions, both Cantú and Jiménez fit more properly into the category of autobiography, rather than a memoir. They focus on their own personal experiences, Cantú writing individual memories while going through family photographs, Jiménez chronologically narrating his childhood memories as an immigrant and migrant worker. Because both authors admit that while their stories do describe their life, they also changed some facts in their writing, we will call their books an “autobiographical narrative”, acknowledging both the autobiographical aspect, as well as the

¹6.4.2010 <http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/44709/autobiography>

²6.4.2010 <http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/374349/memoir>

fictional. And because both authors focus on their Mexican American background, an even more fitting labeling term will be an “ethnic autobiographical narrative”.

3.2 Ethnic Autobiography

In her article “Representing Ethnicity in Autobiography: Narratives of Opposition” Betty Ann Bergland says that while autobiography constructs a life, ethnic autobiography constructs a life and a community. (Bergland, 1994: 87) According to her, ethnic autobiographies are “shared responses to historical conditions over extended period of time. (Bergland, 1994: 87) The rise of ethnic autobiography was related to the creation of new ethnic studies departments and the redefinition of the literary canons at the universities in the United States after the Civil Rights movement of the 1960s. These autobiographies captured a different American experience than in the previously published autobiographies of white men, such as Benjamin Franklin or John Adam’s. (Bergland, 1994: 67-68)³ She points out that these new autobiographies, written by those who had been “conquered, enslaved, occupied, excluded, discriminated against, marginalized”, provide a much more complex and multicultural insight into the American life than was previously the case, and they prevent possible simplistic or unified view of American society. (Bergland, 1994: 68, 70)

Apart from the fact that these ethnic autobiographies were eyes-opening for members of other ethnicities, they were also extremely important for the self-determination of those previously marginalized. Will Kymlicka and Charles Taylor support this theory in their writings, especially in Taylor’s “Politics of Recognition”, where he talks about the human need of being recognized by others. Including ethnic writings in the canon and publishing autobiographies of ethnic experiences gives minorities the recognition that they had lacked in the past, it shows that their unique experience matters and is important in order to create a true image of the whole. According to Bergland, the need for

³Bergland, Betty Ann. “Representing Ethnicity in Autobiography: Narratives of Opposition”. *The Yearbook of English Studies*. Vol. 24. Ethnicity and Representation in American Literature. Modern Humanities Research Association.1994. 67-68.

sharing the previously silenced stories through ethnic autobiographies comes as a response to the “systematic denial of history and memory” by the majority. (Bergland, 1994: 69) Ethnic autobiographies thus become “narratives of opposition to prevailing ideologies”. (Bergland, 1994: 71)

Chiavetta says that in the western culture there has always been the contrast between fiction and truth. Nowadays, with autobiographical works by women and by members of ethnic minorities there also appears to be the contrast between the “canonized truth” and “hidden truth”. Ethnic writers reconstruct their memories and recreate the past that was not only forgotten, but also systematically suppressed. According to Chiavetta, writing about these “hidden truths” not only strengthens the identity of the speakers, but also is a source of “empowerment of a collective subject.” (Chiavetta, 2007: 15) Bergland even believes that writing about the unpopular part of history is important not only for the oppressed culture but for the society as a whole: “Because ethnic autobiographies point to the multicultural complexity of the United States, they illuminate the richness and complexity of that culture – the tragedies and injustices as well as the resistance and resilience of its people.” (Bergland, 1994: 93) Ethnic minorities are viewed inaccurately, when their story is being told from the perspective of those in power. By having their ethnic autobiographies published, writers coming from ethnic minorities have the opportunity to tell their side of the story, the one that has been silenced and forgotten, to create their own image, and confront the distorted image and stereotyping that the majority imposes on them. And by reading stories by ethnic writers, the reader gets a more accurate and a more just image of society, especially in multicultural countries, such as the United States.

Mexican American literature specifically confronts the American majority with their own view of the Anglo conquest of the Southwest. The winners write history, and therefore American historiography has long neglected those facts about the conquest that were unflattering for the United States. Mexican American autobiographers have seized the opportunity to address segregation, land dispossession, inhumane condition of the migrant workers, or the harsh unjust treatment of the domestic workers. This is how their task

receives a political dimension.

In order to depoliticize their writing, or make it less controversial, ethnic authors of autobiographies often emphasize youth or describe solely their childhood years, because this allows them to elaborate on the common themes of a young person in between two worlds searching for his/her identity, or the young immigrant/member of ethnic minority trying to achieve the American Dream. This is frequently the case with autobiographical writings by Mexican American authors who often write about their childhood and formative years, rather than taking a firmer political stand and describing contemporary situation. But as Bergland says, even when describing childhood and youth, ethnic autobiography becomes an instrument “of collective opposition to oppressive power”, which documents “the effects of long-term struggle on ethnic lives and communities.” (Bergland, 1994: 87).

3.3 Autobiographies written by women

Autobiographical writing by women, similar to that of ethnic minorities in general, presents another view of the history of mankind. Throughout history women were considered second-class people, confined to their homes and kitchens, denied education and public roles. Being able to speak about their lives in a specific time period as seen from the female perspective opens a whole part of history that has not been talked about.

Men and women generally view things differently, and therefore there is also difference between autobiographical writing by men and women. According to Chiavetta’s research, the main difference between autobiographies written by men and those written by women is the focus. While men tend to concentrate on their studies, work, and professional success, women tend to write about the personal aspects of their lives and often shift focus to other people in their life, because in Chiavetta’s opinion they “lack the sense of their singularity”, which is so common in men’s autobiographies. (Chiavetta, 2007: 13) Men also usually write in an organized, coherent, chronological order, while women circle around fragmented experiences in an attempt to recreate “the puzzle of life

out of small segments.” (Chiavetta, 2007: 14) The reasons why men and women turn to the genre of autobiography are also different. Men usually want to recreate the important events of their lives; they describe the road that led to their achievements and success, they demonstrate their individuality. Women, on the contrary, speak from the position of the silenced. They generally want to present their story as a part of an oppressed, marginalized group, rather than emphasize their individuality.

In this sense, ethnic autobiographies written by female authors display the position of a group that is marginalized as women and as a minority. Denise A. Segura even talks about “triple oppression” when talking about Mexican American women, because it is based on three factors: race, class, and gender. (Segura, 1990: 47) In *Home Girls: Chicana Literary Voices*, Alvina E. Quintañón says that autobiographical writings of Chicana writers like Gloria Anzaldúa confronts traditional Anglo-American feminism, which has disregarded race, class, and ethnicity and mainly centered on the problems of white middle class women.⁴ Anzaldúa’s *Borderlands/La Frontera* is an exemplary autobiographical work written by a culturally displaced and marginalized woman. It is not a typical autobiography, because it does not focus on Anzaldúa’s achievements or chronologically follow her life. Rather, Anzaldúa presents her fragmented memories that have triggered her thinking and spirituality, as well as her anger about inequality. *Borderlands/La Frontera* is a cultural and linguistic rebellion against the dominant Anglo society who want Anzaldúa to forget her history and forget her language. She does not let herself be closed by cultural or linguistic conventions. It is a sexual rebellion against the traditional Mexican American community. She openly writes about her sexual orientation, and she switches from English to Spanish without providing a translation. Rather than autobiography it is quite an experimental, reflexive, confrontational, and spiritual autobiographical narrative.

⁴In her article “Feminism: The Chicano and Anglo Versions – A Historical Analysis” Marta Cotera looks at the origins of the Anglo Feminist Movement and Chicana Feminism, and uncovers the political agenda that lies behind the women suffrage movement. According to her, the struggle for women vote was not based on the idea to make women equal citizens, but rather an attempt of the conservatives to counterpart the vote of immigrant and minority men, who were likely to vote for socialist ideologies. Chicana women and other minority or poor women were not allowed to vote until the Voting Rights Act of 1965.

3.4 Mexican American Family in Autobiography

Unlike in the Anglo society, where writing of autobiographies had a long history, and preachers, thinkers, and politicians alike wanted to share the story of their lives in order to inspire people, the Spanish speaking community in what is now the American Southwest did not have such tradition. Genaro Padilla investigated the origins of autobiographical narratives written by Mexican Americans in his book published in 1993 *My History, Not Yours: The Formation of Mexican American Autobiography*. According to Padilla, Mexican Americans needed a strong impulse to feel the need to record their lives for the following generation. As Padilla points out in his article “The Recovery of Chicano Nineteenth-Century Autobiography”, such impulse was the Mexican American War. Even though some critics consider writings of Spanish explorers and colonizers to be the first Mexican American autobiographies, and others even believe that indigenous poems where the speaking subject is “I” are autobiographies of sort (Padilla, 1988: 287-288), according to Padilla the events around the Mexican-American War mark the true beginning of autobiographical writing in the Mexican American community:

“Chicano autobiography as a distinct cultural utterance begins with that historical moment when the United States violently appropriated northern Mexico in the mid-nineteenth century. The war itself and the rapid Americanization of the West set off a social, political, economic, linguistic, and cultural shockwave which generated a rhetorical situation in which Mexicans inscribed themselves upon history as a warrant against oblivion. The violent transformation of a well-established society as much as forced many individuals into an autobiographic mode.” (Padilla, 1988: 288-289)⁵

Facing the new order brought in by Anglos, people of Mexican origin felt the need to record the life of the past before it would be disrupted, transformed, and forgotten. Padilla believes that recording history, often in the form of oral testimonies, was a psychological process for the Chicanos, an attempt to restore dignity and integrity that was lost. Often, these original autobiographies lose the subjective “I” and replace it with a collective “We”, stressing the importance of the community, and the shared purpose. (Padilla, 1988: 289)

⁵Padilla, Genaro. “The Recovery of Chicano Nineteenth-Century Autobiography.” *American Quarterly*. Vol. 40, No. 3. The John Hopkins University Press.1988.

Padilla focuses in his study especially on autobiographical writings collected in California in the 19th century by an amateur historian Hubert H. Bancroft, who gathered oral histories and autobiographies between San Francisco and San Diego. According to Padilla, an important place in this collection is held by autobiographies of men who held power in California, however, there are also many accounts written by women, who thus not only described the day-to-day life from the female perspective, but also provide an invaluable view of the gender relations in California at that time. Whether male or female, Padilla says, their autobiographies or personal stories illustrate the incredible paradox of “a regime that mouthed a rhetoric of democratic ideals but practiced unrelenting hostility in its relations with them.” (Padilla, 1988: 292)

The majority of Mexican American autobiographies from the 19th century were written by the rural aristocracy, the rich land-owning class, who wanted to record life in the area as they and their ancestors knew it, thus creating a portrait of the society before the American occupation, and making a testimony about the process of the occupation. Other personal narratives were written by those, who served in the army or took part in the military activities, and who wanted to present their view on their role in the events preceding the Mexican-American War.

Obviously, even though these autobiographical narratives are extremely important because they provide a view at a society that disappeared, or tell the unknown side of the story of Mexican American War, they overlook the lower classes, who were most affected by the drastic change, and yet who did not have the opportunity to record their own story because of lack of education.

Contemporary Mexican American writers, unlike those in the 19th century, often come from this lower-class background, being sons and daughters of migrant farm workers, factory workers, or recent immigrants. Because they received education, they were able to write down their memories and their own view on the life in the United States. Padilla compares the narrative ground to a battleground. (Padilla, 1988: 292) And it indeed is a battleground, on which the oppressed, occupied, discriminated people fight for objectivity and for justice. This was the case in the autobiographical writing of the Mexi-

can landowners in the Southwest, who attempted to record the discrimination and hostile behavior they felt from the incoming Americans, as well as in the autobiographical writing of contemporary writers, who grew up facing similar discrimination and segregation a whole century later.

Francisco Jiménez and Norma Cantú are from this generation of Mexican American authors, and they both wrote autobiographical narratives in which they captured the life of Mexican Americans a hundred years after the Mexican American War. In their books I will focus especially on the role that the family plays in the autobiographical narrative. Special attention will be paid to how the individual family members are depicted, and whether the author draws a negative or a positive image of the Mexican American family.

3.4.1 Francisco Jiménez: *The Circuit: Stories From the Life of a Migrant Child.*

Francisco Jiménez is a Mexican American writer and a professor at Santa Clara University in California. He was born in Mexico and when he was a child his family moved to the United States to work as migrant farm workers. *The Circuit* is a book of short stories about his childhood in a family of migrant workers in California in the 1940s. Southern California has always attracted Mexican immigrants. Many came to work in the fields as part of the official Bracero Program, while others entered the country illegally, often accompanied by their families. These often very touching stories are generally silenced in the mainstream media. In the retrospective view on the life of his childhood Jiménez uncovers one of those “hidden truths” that Chiavetta talks about. The reactions that the author receives from his readers stress the importance of telling these stories:

“Children of migrant parents or grandparents thank me for writing about their family’s experiences. “Your story is the story of our family”, they say. Others who have not gone through the migrant experience comment that my work has given them a deeper appreciation for and understanding of the plight of farm workers.” (Writing, 2001)

The Circuit is composed of twelve stories, which follow the life of young Francisco, called Panchito, and his family from the moment they decide to move from Jalisco, Mexico

to California in search of a better life, until the moment they are found by the immigration officers and face deportation. Jiménez tries to tell the stories from the point of view of a child in order to make the readers “hear the child’s voice, to see through his eyes, and to feel through his heart”. (Jiménez, 1997: 115) His narrative is therefore simply descriptive, Panchito does not evaluate anything nor does the adult Jiménez appear between the lines to give his opinions on certain events from a different perspective.

In an interview for the journal *Writing* Jiménez said that the stories *The Circuit* are semi-autobiographical, because they are based on his childhood experiences, but he sometimes changed certain details. (*Writing*, 2001) Jiménez returns into his memories and recreates his past as a migrant farm worker and his struggles in the new country. The book is written in a simple language, because Jiménez tries to create the impression that the narrator is a child. Unlike in Cisneros’ *The House on Mango Street*, where the story is also told through the perspective of the child protagonist, Esperanza, who is describing present the situation of girls and women in the Mexican American community, Jiménez focuses especially on his own experiences as a migrant child. *The Circuit* is interesting not only because of the realistic description of the life in the fields and labor camps, but also because it shows the importance of the family.

From the point of view of a his much younger self, Jiménez follows the journey of his family from Mexico to California, and then from labor camp to labor camp, describing the hardships his family had to go through, struggling to find work or working as pickers of crops, the children moving to different school every season, never staying long enough in one place to settle in. In a simple manner, Jiménez chronicles the daily life of his family, his adaptation to the life in the United States, and also encounters with people who influenced him.

Panchito’s family, like thousands of other families at that time, dream of the life in California. “I did not know exactly what California was either,” Panchito says in the opening paragraphs of the book, “but Papá’s eyes sparkled whenever he talked about it with Mamá and his friends. “Once we cross *la frontera*, we’ll make a good living in California,” he would say, standing up straight and sticking out his chest”. (Jiménez,

1997: 1) The family has very idealistic expectations about their future, and the image of Panchito's father "standing up straight and sticking out his chest" is in a vast contrast with the image of a tired farm worker, his broken back bending over crops in the unbearable heat of the California sun, which is what their future in California would be, inevitably. The family sells everything they have to buy train tickets, and travel to the border where they illegally cross to the other side to start their American Dream.

The family soon finds work in the strawberry fields. In the United States the family grows, and Panchito and his older brother Roberto are soon followed by three other boys, Trampita, Torito and Rubén, and a daughter, Rorra. Every couple of months, when the current crop is over, the family packs all their belongings in boxes, loads them on their old truck, and moves to another area, looking for work on different crops. They live in tents or simple shacks, in very poor living conditions, suffering the heat in the fields, and the unjust treatments of farmers and contractors. Jiménez' description of the life of migrant workers is very similar to that of Steinbeck's in *The Grapes of Wrath*. However, the life of Mexican migrant farm workers was even more complicated than that of the "Okies" that Steinbeck wrote about, because Mexican workers were often illegal, suffering the constant fear of "la migra", and they often did not speak English, which made them very vulnerable, as Jiménez describes in the story *Learning the Game*.

The two main settings that appear in the stories are the fields and labor camps, where the family works and lives, and the schools, where Panchito attends irregularly, depending on the season and the current crop. These two settings illustrate the contrast between Mexican collectivism and American individualism that Panchito faces. While in the camp and in the field he is just part of a bigger unit, his family, in the school he is on his own. Through Panchito's eyes we can see the typical scenes from a migrant child's school experience. He does not know a word of English, and therefore he has a hard time understanding the teacher's directions and also making friends. He feels alone in the classroom and in the schoolyard during recess. His family, who he can always turn to for help, cannot be of any assistance him in this situation. However, with the help of kind teachers Panchito learns to speak English, which makes school attendance more

enjoyable for him.

The family plays an enormous role in the book. As Jiménez admits in the interview, one of the reasons why he wrote the book was to chronicle his family history, and therefore *The Circuit* is not only his story, but also the story of his family. Throughout the book Jiménez shows how important the family is for its members and also how each member is essential for the functioning of the family. During every stage of moving and field working, the family members have to cooperate. Everyone has a specific task that contributes to the benefit of the whole family. When they move from labor camp to labor camp everybody works together on making the move fast and smooth. Jiménez illustrates one of the frequent moves in the title story “The Circuit”:

“That night, by the light of the kerosene lamp, we unpacked and cleaned our new home. Roberto swept away the loose dirt, leaving the hard ground. Papá plugged the holes in the walls with old newspapers and tin can tops. Mamá fed my little brothers and sister. Papá and Roberto then brought in the mattress and placed it in the far corner of the garage.” (Jiménez, 1997: 64-65)

Based on this description the readers can see that the family divided the duties based on gender roles: the mother feeds the younger children, while the father and older sons prepare their new home for the move-in. Nevertheless, everybody has a share of the work, and each member of the family has a specific area they are responsible for. This is also true when working in the fields is concerned. While the parents and Roberto pick cotton, Panchito has to take care of his baby brother Trampita. He does not want to do that, because he feels he would be more useful if he could work in the field with the rest of the family. However, his father explains to him that his part of the job is to take care of the baby. (Jiménez, 1997: 11) Panchito is upset, because he wants to help earn money, but soon he learns that everybody’s job is important for the family as a whole.

One of the important factors that contribute to the unity of the family is religion. When Baby Torito becomes sick, the whole family prays together for his recovery “in front of a faded picture of the Virgen de Guadalupe, which was tied with string to the canvas above the mattress.” (Jiménez, 1997: 27) Despite the daily prayers Torito’s condition gradually worsens and he has to be taken to the hospital. The parents then make a

promesa, a traditional Roman Catholic custom in which a person makes a promise to a saint in return for a favor. The father then announces to the children: “Your Mamá and I have made a promise to el *Santo Niño*. (...) We’ll pray to him every day, for a whole year, if Torito gets well.” (Jiménez, 1997: 33) And when the baby recovers, they do keep their promise and every day pray together as a family to Santo Niño de Atocha.

Panchito’s family is patriarchal. His father is the head of the family, the figure of authority, and the respect of his wife and children is very important to him. He is the one who makes all the important decisions, including the decision to leave Mexico and cross to the United States. He then leads the family on the journey from Jalisco, and successfully guides them through the desert to cross the border. However, the moment Panchito’s family enters the United States, the father loses his power. They are now in a foreign land whose language they don’t speak, and they are completely dependent on contractors or farmers for work. It becomes difficult for the father to be the provider his culture taught him he must be, and he realizes he is losing his ground. In the beginning, the father is worried about supporting his family because of the unfavorable outside conditions, such as the weather, or bad crops. When stressed, Papá smokes, and Jiménez often uses the act of smoking to show the way his father feels, without having to be overly descriptive: “Papá passed most of his time worrying. He smoked one cigarette after another and complained about the rain because we could not pick the cotton when it was wet. (...) Even the thought of rain gave him a headache.” (Jiménez, 1997: 37) He also becomes easily irritated by noise. In the story “Death Forgiven” the father even kills their pet parrot because he could not stand the loud noise the bird made. Panchito understands why he did that: “He had been in a terrible mood the last few days because he was not sure where we would work, now that the grape season was almost over.” (Jiménez, 1997: 49), but still describes how horrible that experience was for him as a child. However, the title of the story shows that he had forgiven his father.

Things worsen when it is his health that makes it impossible for the father to work in the fields anymore:

“For days when I got home from school, I found Papá lying flat and com-

plaining about not being able to pick cotton because his back was killing him. [...] He constantly worried that we would not have enough money saved at the end of the cotton season to carry us over the winter months.” (Jiménez, 1997: 46)

It must have been very hard for the father, who was brought up in a culture, which believes that the man is the provider, to realize that he cannot fulfill his role: “I am useless; I can’t work, I can’t feed my family; I can’t even protect you from la *migra*.” (Jiménez, 1997: 96) But because the family sticks together, they find a solution – a full time employment for Roberto, the oldest son.

Despite the fact that the father believes he is failing to be the provider, he still has the respect of his family. All the children are well behaved in his presence. When Panchito wants to have his own picking sack, and his father does not want to permit it, Panchito knows that he shouldn’t insist on it. (Jiménez, 1997: 52) The father also serves as a good example for his children, regarding his relationship with the farmers. In one of the stories the father decides to stay with the current farmer even if the crop was bad, rather than moving to a new farm, because he “thought it was the right thing to do.” (Jiménez, 1997: 43) The goodness of his heart, hidden under the surface of authority and responsibility, also appears in the story “Christmas Gift”, where he buys an embroidered handkerchief from a poor couple. Buy purchasing it, he does two acts of kindness: he helps the couple in need, and he surprises his wife for Christmas.

Just as the father perfectly fits the description of a traditional Mexican American father, Mamá is the archetypal caring and nurturing Mexican American mother. She is tender and loving, and even when Papá loses his patience, she is always there to calm him down. Apart from her daily work in the fields, she always fulfills her role as wife and mother, waking up early in the morning to prepare tortillas and beans so that the family can have warm breakfast and lunch to take to the fields, providing support and loving care to all the family members. When the father is upset because he cannot find work or has back pain, the mother works as a mediator in the family. She consoles him, saying: “We’ll manage, *viejo*”. (Jiménez, 1997: 6) The mother understands what is he going through, and knows how to react when he is worried. She is attentive to his needs

and especially makes sure the children do not disturb their father: “Remember, he does not like noise,” she tells the children. (Jiménez, 1997: 54)

Even though she has to work hard in the fields like the other members of the family, and take care of the household, she always makes time for her children. When she works in the field and only has a half hour lunch break, she makes time not only to eat her lunch but also to feed and take care of her youngest baby: “Holding him in her left arm, Mamá nursed Trampita while she ate with her right hand. She then laid him on the back seat of the car, changed his diaper, and kissed him gently on his forehead as he closed his eyes and fell asleep.” (Jiménez, 1997: 9) After that, she returns to the field to continue her work.

Mamá is also very industrious and finds ways how to increase the family income, even when she is pregnant and cannot work in the fields anymore. She starts preparing lunch and dinner meals and then sells them to the other farm workers. She has to wake up early to have the meals ready before the workers leave to the fields and at the same time takes care of the young children.

Trampita is soon followed by more siblings, but although the family keeps growing fast, the parents and older siblings always make sure that everything is ready. In the story “Miracle in Tent City” Jiménez says that even with limited resources and “always tired from all the work she did, [Mamá] made sure everything was ready for the new baby.” (Jiménez, 1997: 24) She created a crib from an old box that the children found in the dump, lined it with an old blanket, made a pillow from an old flour sack, and asked the father to seal the sides of the tent to protect the new baby from animals. Jiménez demonstrate that despite their difficult economic situation and hard living conditions in the work camp, the mother manages to create a warm home, and it is mostly to her credit that everything is prepared to lovingly welcome the new member of the family.

While the father is rather strict, and often in a bad mood due to their complicated situation of seasonal work and illegal immigrant status, Mamá is more joyful and optimistic, and can find a reason for laughter in every day situations. Jiménez illustrates it in the story called “Cotton Sack”, where the mother drags her long white canvas sack

for picking cotton, and bursts out laughing, saying “This is the prettiest wedding dress I have ever seen,” [while] holding her stomach to ease the pain from laughing so much.” (Jiménez, 1997: 52) Sometimes both Mamá and Papá joke together, like on the occasion where the father gives Panchito a penny for his collection, saying: “It was made in 1910, the year I was born.” The mother reacts, chuckling: “It’s a very old penny!” to which the father jokingly replies: “It’s only a couple of years older than you, *vieja*.” (Jiménez, 1997: 82) These episodes are however rather sporadic, because the constant stress and worry about their future does not allow the father to enjoy the simple things in life.

A large family with many children is not always peaceful and quarrels and fights between children are inevitable. As an empathic mother, she knows how to handle these situations without raising her voice. In one such incident Panchito’s little sister Rorra took pennies from his coin collection to buy chewing gum, which obviously makes Panchito very angry. His mother tells him a story to help him realize that even though he lost the pennies, he has a sister: “So you see, *mi’jito*, Rorra is more important than the pennies. Don’t be so hard on your little sister.” (Jiménez, 1997: 88) With her story, the mother manages to settle the dispute.

When his health problems prevent him from working in the fields, the father becomes more and more worried. Mamá is the one who, together with her two older sons, tries to create a plan for their future. She supports Roberto, her oldest son, in finding a year-round job that would bring home a fixed income every week, and in the end the family, after years of seasonal jobs and traveling all over California, finally settles down. She stops being the submissive woman she is supposed to be according to the Mexican tradition, and she takes the agency. At the same time, she doesn’t confront the father directly about her concerns not to add to his worries, and not to undermine his self-esteem and authority. She is very accommodating to the individual needs of the family members, and to the collective need of the family.

Jiménez demonstrates the importance of family for Mexican Americans also in “Learning the Game”, the only story in which other migrant workers get into the spotlight. In this story he presents two grown men who speak about their family and share

their emotions. Panchito describes an episode in which the family meets a new laborer, Gabriel. During lunch break, Panchito's father starts a conversation with Gabriel, and the first question he asks is: "Do you have a family, Don Gabriel?" This illustrates the top position that family holds in the Mexican American value system. From their conversation it is obvious that both men love their families very much and they are by no means embarrassed to talk about it. They both understand how important family is. In the following scene Jiménez demonstrates the striking difference between his father and Gabriel, and the contractor they work for. When the contractor threatens to fire Gabriel, he begs him not to, saying "I have a family to feed." "I don't give a damn about your family!" answers the contractor. (Jiménez, 1997: 76) Jiménez thus creates a sharp contrast between the family men and the cruel contractor.

The Circuit, via the family of Panchito, truly creates a monument for the family of migrant farm workers. Every story shows the love that the family members have for each other. They are poor, they only have seasonal work, and they live in constant fear of the immigration officers, but they are modest and do not ask for much more than they already have. Panchito's mother summarizes it in the story "To Have and to Hold": "We're safe and we have each other, *gracias a Dios*." (Jiménez, 1997: 93)

Even though according to Chiavetta male autobiographers focus principally on themselves, Jiménez indisputably dedicates a large space in his book to his family, even though the way he constructs the characters is rather one-dimensional. The portrait of his Mexican American family that he created in *The Circuit* is very favorable, because he completely neglects the issues of gender roles. His family is strictly patriarchal, and the mother does not seem to protest in any way, nor does she seem unhappy with the situation. According to Jiménez' view, everyone in the family knows his place and fulfills the role that is prescribed for the position. Feminist critics might argue that gender roles in the family are seen as unproblematic only because of the male perspective of the author. On the other hand, Jiménez' persona Panchito is a young boy, who does not question these issues. The adult Jiménez never appears to give a commentary or add more future perspective to Panchito's story or to identify possible injustice, unlike Cantú frequently

does in *Canícula*. The problems that add drama to the stories come from the outside world, in the form of health problems, contractors, or immigration officers. The family sticks together through all of them, supporting and helping each other. In the interview for *Writing* Jiménez spoke about the reasons why he wrote the book, and he said:

“I wrote *The Circuit* to chronicle part of my family’s history but, more importantly, to voice the experiences of a large sector of our society that has been frequently ignored. Through my writing I hope to give readers an insight into the lives of migrant farm workers and their children, whose backbreaking labor picking fruits and vegetables puts food on our tables.” (*Writing*, 2001)

The family doesn’t know anybody when they arrive to the United States, and the migratory nature of their work prevents them from becoming a part of a community, where they could create more ties and relationships. Jiménez’ main point was to show that they managed to survive in the United States, and even establish themselves in the new country, only because they were a family.

3.4.2 Norma Elia Cantú: *Canícula: Snapshots of a Girlhood en la Frontera*

Norma Elia Cantú is a Mexican American writer, and a professor of Chicano literature at the University of Texas at San Antonio. She grew up in the Rio Grande Valley and in her autobiographical novel in vignettes, *Canícula*, she returned to this border region of her childhood. Cantú takes a completely different approach to autobiography than Francisco Jiménez does in *The Circuit*. She combines family history, oral history, and autobiographical narrative with actual photographs and documents. However, the author attempts to make the book not look entirely like an autobiography. The introduction to the novel is written almost as a disclaimer. Cantú says:

“In *Canícula*, the story is told through the photographs, and so what may appear to be autobiographical is not always so. On the other hand, many of the events are completely fictional, although they may be true in a historical context. For some of the events, there are photographs; for others, the image is a collage; and in all cases, the result is entirely of my doing. So although it may appear that these stories are my family’s, they are not precisely, and yet they are. But then again, as Pat Mora claims, life en la frontera is raw truth,

and stores of such life, fictitious as may be, are even truer than true.“ (Cantú, 1995: xi)

This gives the reader a very ambiguous idea about whether *Canícula* really is a story of Cantú's family, what is truth and what is fiction, and how s/he should relate to the text. Also the fact that Cantú's persona is called Azucena, rather than Norma, adds another question to the confusion. But in an interview with Gabriella Gutiérrez y Muhs, Cantú admits that *Canícula* indeed is a story of her growing up:

“The story emerges out of, or I write it out of, a need of coming to terms with my own coming of age. It is a Bildungsroman. [...] So it seems to me a very obvious avenue to take this little girl, and see things from her eyes. Who's been an adult, looking back at photographs, positioning herself in photograph as a child and then telling the story from that childhood point of view, and then all of the sudden critical? I think that we, all of us, negotiate our existence in that same fashion. We tell our stories to each other, and to ourselves, of how we grew up.” (Gutiérrez y Muhs, 2007: 20)

Cantú herself labels the book a “fictional autobioethnography” because it offers not only the fictionalized account of the life of her family, but also the specific way of life in the Texas/Mexican borderlands in general. In the interview with Gutiérrez y Muhs she summarizes the novel by saying: “It's an ethnography of a community as seen from a little girl, from some participant observer, if you will, of the community, cultural lines.” (Gutiérrez y Muhs, 2007: 20) The cultural aspects of the book are truly very engaging. Cantú frequently uses Spanish, and with a great eye for detail describes food specific to the region, games, nursery rhymes, and customs.

Cantú decided to chronicle her “girlhood” with the help of actual photographs and documents from her personal life. The use of photography is influenced by *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography*, published in 1980, in which the French literary critic Roland Barthes, grief-stricken by the recent death of his mother, discusses the emotional effects some photographs have on the person looking at them. In a similar way, Cantú decided to write an autobiography inspired by the memories evoked by old family photographs. She even addresses Barthes in the prologue to *Canícula*, where she offers the background story on how the book came into existence. She begins with a short

note on the death of Roland Barthes, acknowledging him as her inspiration for her work. Then she proceeds to describe how seeing the old family pictures of her Spanish boyfriend in Madrid makes a young woman, who is quite likely Cantú herself, think about her own family, and then, after returning to Texas, she goes through her own family pictures with her mother, “the mother filling in gaps for the daughter, of before, of the times before and during that she has forgotten, or changed in her mind – the family, the neighbors, celebrations, events.” (Cantú, 1995: 2)

Cantú is not the only Mexican American author to use photographs in her writing. Poet Pat Mora uses photographs of her family in the beginning of her imaginative memoir *House of Houses*. Arturo Islas also used photography in the beginning of his 1984 semi-autobiographical novel *Rain God*:

“A photograph of Mama Chona and her grandson Miguel Angel-Miguel Chico or Mickie to his family-hovers above his head on the study wall beside the glass doors that open out into the garden. When Miguel Chico sits at his desk, he glances up at it occasionally without noticing it, looking through it rather than at it.” (Islas: 1984, 3)

This excerpt shows that the photograph is a trigger, which starts the narrative about Miguel Chico and his family. Cantú uses photographs in a similar way, but she uses not just one, but several, and places the photographs throughout the text. In the interview with Gutiérrez y Muhs she says that writing with the help of photographs started as an exercise for her students: “I would have my students remember a photograph at such and such an age and describe it using five senses and then elicit a story out of that. I came through time to practice my own teaching, and I started writing my own.” (Gutiérrez y Muhs: 2007, 22) When describing the photographs and talking about the characters, places, or events that are depicted in the pictures, sometimes she draws the readers attention to certain details that might otherwise be overlooked. She tries to employ all the senses to make the image more vivid, to describe for the reader the colors that cannot be distinguished in the black and white image, or to the heat, the taste, the smell, that accompanies the moment when the picture was taken.

Canícula is designed as a retrospective view of the author’s life. The narrator goes through old family photographs and remembers stories and events from her childhood

in the borderlands. Sometimes the picture that the narrator talks about is reprinted in the book, sometimes she describes a picture that the reader cannot see, and the scene is then recreated for him. Cantú admits that she did not have the photographs with her while writing the novel, and after the manuscript was finished, she started looking for the specific pictures, only to find that the way she remembered them does not correspond to the actual images. (Gutiérrez y Muhs: 2007, 21) The discrepancy between Cantú's memories in contrast with the actual photographs is another important feature in the book, because it adds to the ambiguity of the space between fact and fiction. As Chiavetta pointed out, women autobiographers tend to be more fragmental in their writing and they usually focus on other people, such as family members, neighbors, and friends. We have seen that Jiménez also write about his family. But the degree to which these writers make other people focus of their writing is dramatically different. Jiménez's family mainly creates a setting for Panchito. Cantú on the other hand carefully records the history of her parents, grandparents, and aunts, making sure she gives every little detail, sensation, or memory she has of them or the related events. And she includes not only her relatives, but also family friends, comadres and compadres, neighbors, classmates.

Cantú's writing is fragmentary and unorganized, just as individual memories come to her and trigger other memories. Her vignettes are like pieces of a mosaic, with which the reader can start putting together the image of a Mexican American community living in the Rio Grande Valley, in the borderlands. The memories are not written in a chronological order; the first vignette is from the time when the author was nine, the third one from when she was one year old. She skips between years, jumping from her teenage years to babyhood and back; sometimes a memory of an event at a time when she was young reminds her of a similar event years later. Cantú does not attempt to make her narrative chronological, nor does she try to tell a story with a plot. She puts together random memories of special events such as birthdays, weddings, funerals; important family moments like birth of new siblings, illness, purchase of a car; and common everyday life pictures of cooking, sewing, going to school, playing with friends. Her vignettes are more than anything else an attempt to preserve the memories, recreate the events and

the feel of the days passed through all the senses.

The language of the novel is very unique. She switches from English to Spanish and refuses to italicize her Spanish, as is customary in bilingual writing, making the reading process probably more complicated for some readers. At the same time this demonstrates that for Cantú, languages are important, she is familiar with both of them and switching between them comes naturally to her. Even the English has a feel of Spanish and in the interview with Gutiérrez y Muhs she gives credit to Sandra Cisneros, who introduced her to the technique of looking at English as if it was Spanish, without making a literal translation. (Gutiérrez y Muhs, 2007: 26)

Even though the book is Cantú's autobiography, it is her family and her community, who play the main part in *Canícula*. The majority of the stories that Cantú shares with the readers revolve around members of her large family living on both sides of Rio Grande, in Texas and in Mexico. Describing the involvement of distant relatives, neighbors, and friends in her family's life proves that the saying "It takes a village to raise a child" is certainly true when talking about the Texas/Mexican borderlands communities, as Gutiérrez y Muhs mentions. (Gutiérrez y Muhs, 2007: 27) Cantú remembers her sisters, Dahlia, Esperanza, Margarita, Azalia, Teresita, Rosa, Xóchitl, brothers Rolando, David, and Tino, her parents, her aunts Luz, Nicha, Cande, uncle Mase, maternal grandmother Bueli and paternal grandparents Mamagrande and Papagrande, great-aunts Chita, Piedad, Chole, Nana, Cuco, and multiple first and second grade cousins. The family cherishes the strong relationships they have, and maintains the ties despite the physical distance that separates them, and despite the years that have passed since half of the family moved to Texas, while the other stayed in Mexico.

Many of Cantú's vignettes talk about the daily life her family led in the area around Laredo. Even though for the most part of the narrative the father is employed in a local smelter and the mother stays at home, taking care of the children and securing extra income by sewing, in their early years in the U.S. the whole family worked as cotton pickers. Cantú describes this memory of cotton picking in the first vignette called "Las Piscas". The picking takes place on a "hot, hot, hot August day", in the part of the

summer that is called *canícula*, which is the title of the book. The way she recreates the memory for the reader is quite different from Jiménez, who focuses rather on the hard fieldwork and his plot as such. Cantú, on the other hand, uses her senses:

“A long row of cotton to be picked, capullos de algodón, nothing moves; the dust has settled on the green leaves and on my skin. El olor a sudor, mi sudor, heavy odor of sweat I wear with the blue plaid flannel shirt. [...] Sun so bright it hurts my eyes, barely look at it and I see bright red spots.”
(Cantú, 1995: 3)

This technique, in which she describes the hard labor in the field using her senses is much more engaging for the reader. With these few sentences Cantú manages to immediately take the reader into the fields with her to demonstrate how her working class family makes a living.

Cantú’s Christmas memories also remind the reader of the Christmas story in *The Circuit*, where Panchito’s mother cries when packing a mere bag of candy for her children, while what Panchito’s Christmas wish is a ball. Cantú recounts her experiences as a child from a working class family of multiple children:

“Christmas past. [...] That year we all got two gifts; the many other years when we were laid off poor and there were no gifts: the year when we didn’t have a tree until the very last day of school I won my classroom’s tree; the year we didn’t have a tree at all until I went and decorated a mesquite branch. I could see Mami’s tears beneath her hopelessness, and the younger kids’ skepticism [...]” (Cantú, 1995: 87)

This excerpt illustrates the difference between Azucena and Panchito. Azucena is the oldest of her siblings, and therefore she actively takes part in preparing Christmas, making it her responsibility to create a beautiful Christmas for her parents and her younger siblings, even if they have limited or no resources. Panchito is the second oldest, but still is just a little boy, who allows himself to dream of an expensive gift, not realizing that his parents cannot afford to buy him such presents.

Despite their low socioeconomic status, Azucena’s family does have a rich social life. There are multiple family celebrations and cultural events each year, and the whole family attends. They are able to be social, because they are not migrant workers. They settled down in Laredo, several relatives also live in the area, and they soon create relationships

with the neighbors, which later become *compadres* and *comadres*. Azucena's paternal grandparents, Papagrande and Mamagrande live in Monterrey, not too far from the border, and they visit each other frequently. And therefore, while the life of Panchito's family is only divided between work camps and fields, Azucena's non-migrant family can enjoy eventful life outside work and school, even if they do have limited economic resources. In the story "Outings" Cantú illustrates how the growing family limits the variety of social activities that the family can do, but they still find a way to enjoy their Sundays together. The family enjoys each other's company, and spends quality time together, even though their economic situation may not be very good. (Cantú, 1995: 90)

In the same vignette Cantú also mentions Mass as a beginning of their Sunday together, and this stresses also the religious aspect of their family life, which is very important. Both of her parents are very devoted Catholics, and her father goes to Mass every day before going to work. Many of the stories in *Canícula* are therefore related to religious events, even though Cantú admits that as she grew up she started to question the teachings of the Catholic Church. Nevertheless, she still attends religious family event, and stresses that the cultural aspects of Catholicism, rather than spiritual, is very important for her.

Like Jiménez' family, the family of Norma Cantú came to the United States from Mexico. In the story "First Steps", the photograph of one-year-old Cantú triggers a narrative about how the family moved to Texas:

"I am about to take a step – on my first birthday, bald, wide-eyed, and chunky, wearing a handmade pale pink satin dress Mami embroidered with beautiful smocking on afternoons that fall of 1947 when my father had gone al norte to Gary, Indiana, with her cousins Meme, Abelardo, and Moy to find work. [...] Papi didn't last up there in that cold, harsh place [...]. Came home that spring of '48, determined, ready to make the move to the U.S. side, but not too far north, not too far away from the family." (Cantú, 1995: 28-29)

In this story the author also nicely relates the love her father has for the family. The need to stay close to the Mexican border, close to Monterrey, where his parents live, appears in several other instances in the book. When the family already lives in Texas and their *compadres* plan to move to California, Cantú's family also considers moving, but

“Papi would not move so far from family. When [the compadres] came back to visit a year later, Papi regretted not moving – they were doing so well [...]. But it was too late, Mami was pregnant again. School had already started. Bueli had died. No, it was better to stay here, “Mas vale malo por conocido, que bueno por conocer.” (Cantú, 1995: 121)

Even if life in California might have been more beneficial financially, the family prefers to stay in the land they know, near their relatives, and in their community.

The father is truly a family man and adores his children. Cantú recalls several moments when the affection the father has for his daughter is very apparent, sometimes it even causes a little disagreement between the parents, as in the story “The Beach”, where the family visits relatives in Corpus Cristi:

“Driving on Shoreline Drive I see the beach. [...] I cry and scream and make Papi stop so I can see the water. He takes my four-year-old hand [...] I sink, walking, running through the sand. [...] And Papi carries me back [...]. Mami scolds Papi for spoiling me, granting me every whim, giving in to my crying.” (Cantú, 1995: 118)

But the love between the father and his daughter is mutual. In a story of a parade, where the father holds a one-year old Cantú, she describes how she felt in her father’s arms: “So comforting, so secure to be held aloft and feel the security, the strength of his arms.” (Cantú, 1995: 37) Equally, Azucena loves her mother, and maternal grandmother Bueli, who lives in their household. In the story “Piojos” she admits that she would sometimes pretend to have lice “so I could lay my head on Mami or Bueli’s lap and feel their gentle fingers caress my hair lovingly and find nothing.” (Cantú, 1995: 125)

This love and care can be seen in the relations with all the other family members. As Cantú goes through the old family photographs, the respect and love she has for her relatives is self-evident. As is typical for a Mexican American family, even distant relatives are involved in the life of her family. In a story about the funeral of her mother’s cousin, Mase, Cantú remembers how supportive he always was:

“Maximiliano. To many, plain Max; to us, Tío Mase, Mami’s cousin, Tino’s first communion padrino. I hear his throaty laugh, his mango sweet voice, “Es Todo” and “Way to Go” forever encouraging and forever proud of us all. His legacy for his daughters and for a distant niece: his laughter, his comfort, his solid support. (Cantú, 1995: 49,51)

And there are several other vignettes dedicated to distant relatives, where Cantú illustrates that bonds between family members even on the extended level remain close and strong. The extended family takes interest in the children's education and future. Her Mexican relatives enroll Azucena to a beautician-training center in order to increase her qualifications, and even though finances are scarce on both sides of the family, "Tía Luz pays the tuition so Cousin Lilia and I gain a skill." (Cantú, 1995: 127) Cantú also records with a great affection the sentimental need to hold on to stationery that commemorates important events in the family that she sees in her relatives, who keep every greeting card, wedding invitation, and birth and graduation announcements that they have received. (Cantú, 1995: 111)

Cantú is especially appreciative when she writes about the women of her family. They were good wives, good mothers, and good housewives. She acknowledges the hard work they had to do daily to keep the family functioning. She also admires the wisdom that comes with old age, and the patience and endurance with which these women carry the pain and sadness that life brought. This is very apparent in the way Cantú describes the photograph of her paternal grandmother, Mamagrande:

"The photo shows a woman sitting surrounded by children – they're her sons and daughters, grandsons and granddaughters. [...] In the photo the tired woman almost lost among the children. The work – endless. From cooking daily meals - sopa de arroz, guisados, postres for lunch – and fancy festive meals – cabrito, mole, tamales – to keeping the linens whiter than white, fighting the dust and the grime of life on a ranch of a town. [...] Her pains and her joys buried in her heart, her hands ever busy crocheting, embroidering, knitting, quilting. The work never stops, her handkerchief a la mano in her apron pocket ever ready for the tears of joy or pain. (Cantú, 1995: 3)

Cantú depicts very accurately the responsibilities and the hard life of a mother and grandmother of a big family. Azucena, unlike her female relatives, did not get married and did not have children. She comes from a loving and nurturing family and has so much appreciation for the women for her family. The sadness of knowing that she will not be following the pattern of wife and mother appears in the story "Nena of Three". Here Cantú describes the sad eyes that look at her from her photograph taken at three years of age: "Does one know what is to come, even at three? All those brothers and

sisters, all the work and the worry. What will happen to the photo once I'm gone, who will remember the sad child? No child will think fondly of it as its mother's photo." (Cantú, 1995: 54) But even though she remained single, or maybe because of it, Cantú has incredible appreciation for the marriages around her that last long, are fruitful, and full of love. She talks about her parents' wedding with a great affection: "November. Not a good month for a wedding. Could rain and ruin everything. Could turn cold. But it doesn't. Stars shine in the clear, crisp night, and it's a good wedding, a good marriage." (Cantú, 1995: 108) Similar love and appreciation appears in the vignette which commemorates the fiftieth wedding anniversary of her grandparents:

"In the family picture for Mamagrande's fiftieth wedding anniversary, Tati and I are the babies on Mamagrande and Papagrande's lap. There must have been relatives come to celebrate with Mamagrande and Papagrande. [...] The family. Extending sideways uncles, aunts, cousins; and back into the past parents, grandparents, great-grandparents; and forward children, grandchildren, to today. The Bodas de Oro – golden anniversary celebrating survival, celebrating endurance, celebrating family." (Cantú, 1995: 82-83)

But not all memories are happy ones, and there are many sad moments in *Canícula*. Such a large family may bring a lot of joy, but it is always accompanied by an equal amount of pain. One of the hardest moments for Azucena's family was the death of her brother Tino, who was killed in Vietnam. The whole family was affected by this tragedy, and the parents heartbroken. In the story "Nun's Habit", where Azucena contemplates the possibility of a religious vocation, she says: "Sometimes I'm sure Papi wonders what would've happened if Tino had gone to the seminary in high school. Would he have graduated, not gone to war, not get killed?" (Cantú, 1995: 117) The death of their son brings the feeling of guilt and the never-ending torturing flow of "what ifs".

Unlike Jiménez, who does not notice any gender related issues, Cantú is very attentive to the role of women. Many of the stories reflect the different behavior that is expected or tolerated of men and women. When Azucena's maternal aunt, Tía Nicha, tells her about her grandfather's affair with another woman, who according to their superstitious neighbors had cursed Bueli to limp, Azucena is shocked (Cantú, 1995: 109). The same grandfather has however very different standards for the women in his family.

While it was acceptable that he has an affair, his granddaughter is punished for similar behavior:

“Elisa, the black sheep, the one Papagrande never forgave, the oldest of the grandchildren, she is my favorite cousin. She who at sixteen was seduced, “salio con su domingo siete” and was ousted by Papagrande from the family. Tío Luis not standing up for his daughter and Tía Tere, rosary in hand, praying night and day, moved the family to Saltillo.” (Cantú, 1995: 77)

But even if one branch of the family considered Elisa a castaway, another branch of the family was there to help her: “Elisa left to L.A. as soon as the child was born. She found family, Andrea, Mamagrande’s cousin, and Javier took her in.” (Cantú, 1995: 77) The family is always ready to step in and offer their home to other family members in need.

And it is not only the family, but also the community who is very involved in the lives of their neighbors. The community is especially important for the women. They are the housekeepers, cooks, caregivers, and their large families provide much space for joy as well as despair. They carry a large weight on their shoulders for their entire lives. Confined to their homes, without any professional or social life outside their community, these women create their own support network, where they share everything that makes them happy or sad. In the story “Comadres” Cantú makes a tribute to these women:

“Tres Mujeres. Vecinas. Comadres. Three women. Neighbors. [...] The three comadres sharing worries, joys: each morning after the dishes are done, the clothes hung on the line, the beans cooking. Sharing chismes, dreams, gossip, advising each other. [...] Aging into comfort and discomfort they celebrate their children’s successes: each high school diploma, each college degree, each wedding, each well-paying job, each recognition, each award, each promotion finds them jubilant. They weep for their children’s failures, layoffs, divorces, dropouts, miscarriages, drugs, fights, DWI’s, fines, alcoholism, family disturbance calls, moves to far away cities – Chicago, Houston, Dallas, St. Louis. They share it all, offer sympathy and prayers. Vecinas. Comadres. Mujeres.” (Cantú, 1995: 35-37)

Cantú illustrates in this story the strength of *comadrazgo* – the fictive kinship system in which these women are bound by ties created through sacraments that their children received in the Catholic Church, where they served as *madrinas*. And even though the

relationships were born from the solemn and sacred mysteries of the Church, it plays a large role in the common simple things of their daily life. The *comadres* listen and help each other carry the problems that life brings. “Vecinas. Comadres. Above all, women sharing life, tending to each other. Teaching each other to mother, to survive, to understand, to live.” (Cantú, 1995: 36)

Women in the community take the role of *madrinas* very seriously. They have limited financial resources, and sponsoring the child’s baptism or first Holy Communion means being also financially responsible for the child’s attire or religious objects as gifts for the ceremony or to commemorate the event. Cantú describes one such event in the story “Ahijada”. Her mother was chosen to be the communion sponsor for a neighbor’s daughter, and even with the limited resources she has, the mother manages to fulfill her responsibilities: “Mami made the dress and the veil, worked hard crocheting baby booties and sweaters to save the money to pay for the candle, the rosary, the missal for Frances.” (Cantú, 1995: 121) Being a *madrina* is not only an honor, but also a social role in the community. *Compadrazgo* thus fortifies the ties between neighbors by religious sacraments.

Even those members of the community who are not related by fictive kinship become united during important events in other families in the neighborhood. Births, weddings, and funerals are attended by the neighbors. In the story “Martha’s Mamagrande” Cantú portrays the funeral of the grandmother of a friend. The mourning ritual does not end with the burial. All the neighbors continue keeping the family company for nine days after the funeral, and pray for the deceased: “Every evening right after sunset, we gathered at the Valdezes and knelt, squeezed in their living room where the coffin had been. And we prayed the rosary every night, the mirrors remained covered, the candles lit for those nine days.” (Cantú, 1995: 68)

Many of the vignettes make the life in the community seem like a wonderful place. The friendships between neighbors become consecrated as they become *compadres* and *comadres* and the relationships grow much stronger. There is always somebody the family can ask for help, and the community makes the place feel very safe. However, Cantú also

notices certain negative features of growing up in the Mexican American neighborhood. She is very attentive to the treatment of women in the community and notes down several instances where women are treated oppressively. She specifically remembers the case of their neighbor and *comadre* Fina:

“She was a U.S. born and married to a real Mexican macho who wooed her back to Mexico with promises of wealth. Wouldn’t leave his mother’s side when comadre Fina gave him the ultimatum – she pregnant with her ninth, Lucía, who lived only three years. Así es la vida. No he didn’t come join her in the United States until Lucía died; his own mother died after his daughter.” (Cantú, 1995: 18)

Also her cousin Elisa, the one who was cast out of the family, married a *macho* man:

“Elisa didn’t marry until her daughter married. And then it was to a Chicano widower whose wife had died of cancer, whose children were grown up and gone, who claimed to love her. Yet he never ate restaurant food but waited every evening till she got home from work and cooked and served him his favorite meals. She washed, ironed, and daily laid out his clothes, down to the very handkerchief he would carry that day. She’s never stopped working although she has risen above the minimum wage pay she earned for over twenty years.” (Cantú, 1995: 78)

Cantú cannot understand why women are willing to compromise themselves in abusive relationships. She realizes the unequal role that women have in her community, and the different expectations and activities suitable for young girls and women. She recorded however some cases of the women in her family who stand up for themselves. Her mother buys Azucena shoes that the father considers them shoes for a “*puta*” and wants them to return them. “But Mami’s on my side, after all we spent her hard-earned money on the shoes [...]” (Cantú, 1995: 61) And in the end the father surrenders and Azucena keeps the shoes. Also her sister Dahlia manages to convince their neighbor who only hired boys for yard work, to hire her too: “[...] Dahlia was jealous of the boys’ jobs; why not hire the girls, too? She fought and argued with Don Vicente. [...] She got her way. Soon she too was working on the Baca’s yard, getting paid just like the boys.” (Cantú, 1995: 65) Such instances are scare though, as gender roles in the community are still defined very traditionally.

A portion of the vignettes is dedicated to growing up. Cantú manages to describe very vividly the concerns and worries of a teenager growing up in an ethnically stratified area. She is much more personal than Jiménez, and openly talks about her inner preoccupations as a teenager.

“I stare into the camera a shy skinny twelve-year-old anxious about body hair and developing breasts that seem to be growing out one larger than the other. Anamaría my best friend confides that that is her fear, too, for as oldest sisters we have been carrying babies almost all our short lives; since December we’ve been consciously shifting the babies from the right to the left so we won’t have one breast larger than the other.” (Cantú, 1995: 22)

This confession combines the natural worries about the changes that appear in the life of a young girl, and the specific position that she is in as the oldest daughter in a Mexican American family, with all the duties and responsibilities that come with it. Azucena is also confused about the different attitudes to the changes that she sees in her American and Mexican class friends. In the story titled “Body Hair” she writes about the American girls who consider shaving absolutely essential, while the women in her community don’t: “[...] Mami doesn’t shave or pluck her eyebrows either, neither did her comadres until much later. [W]e don’t yet shave, much less pluck our eyebrows, or wear makeup – our parents forbid it.” (Cantú, 1995: 61) It must have been a great consolation for Azucena having around her friends, who come from the same community and see things in a similar way. Jiménez’ Panchito does not have any Mexican friends at school, there is no one who would share his experience, and that is another factor that contributes to his loneliness.

3.5 The View of Family in *The Circuit* and *Canícula*

Family plays a major part in both of these autobiographical narratives. Both Jiménez and Cantú have positive memories of spending their childhood in the middle of a large and loving family and both dedicated a substantial portion of their narrative to their family members. However, when compared to the extent to which Cantú writes about her family in *Canícula*, it is clear that Jiménez predominantly focused on his own

experiences in *The Circuit*, and thus confirms Chiavetta's theory of male autobiographers being more self-centered.

Both authors create a very affectionate image of their families. Cantú writes hers with a feeling of nostalgia, because the way of life in the borderlands has changed significantly since she was a child, and because many of the relatives she talks about have already passed away. She also dedicates whole vignettes to individual members of her family, sometimes without even mentioning herself in the story, unlike Francisco Jiménez, whose portrait of his family in *The Circuit* is much less detailed, and most often they only serve as a background to display his own emotions and experiences.

Cantú openly writes about many serious issues in her community, and provides a lot of criticism of social concerns, such as unequal position of women and discrimination of bilingual children in the education system, as well as local politicians, who neglect many areas that need their attention and at the same time misuse their power. (Cantú, 1995: 30-31) Jiménez, on the other hand, never raises a finger to identify any problematic issue. When he addresses a concern, it is related to an individual issue, and he is exclusively descriptive, without offering any commentary on the topic. As far as troubles within the family are concerned, it is quite a different matter. Cantú never mentions any problematic issues within her nuclear family, while Jiménez frequently talks about stress, anxiety, and uncertainty that his father feels, and their negative effect on the atmosphere in the family.

The difference is however quite understandable. Jiménez' family is going through a big change and he considers it necessary to note down all the aspects while describing the process of relocation and adaptation. He also tried to position himself back in his childhood years and tell the story of his life from that perspective, remembering his emotion from that period of time. Cantú is in a different position. Similarly to Jovita González, she is documenting the era of her childhood, the daily life and culture of the borderlands, which has changed significantly since then. Her view is rather nostalgic, because her childhood was very happy, spent in the middle of a loving family and a large friendly community. Jiménez, on the contrary, is remembering the hardest time of his life. During the migrant years the whole family struggled economically and they were

quite alone in the United States, without anybody to help them or at least offer words of support.

The difference in their immigrant status also plays a large role. While Cantú's family are all legal residents, which allows them cross the border between Laredo and Nuevo Laredo freely on a daily basis, Jiménez' family are illegal immigrants. Cantú describes many events that her family attended in Mexico and considers both countries her home, but for Jiménez the transition is not that simple. They risked by coming illegally to the United States and the vision of going back to Mexico is linked to deportation and thus becomes something the family tries to avoid at all costs.

There are many similarities that can be found between *The Circuit* and *Canícula*. Both autobiographical narratives were written by immigrants from Mexico, they describe the same time period of 1940's and 1950's, and both authors described their childhood. But there are also many differences. The writing style of both books is different, and so is the focus, because both writers have contrasting experiences. Jiménez wanted to draw the public attention to the lives of migrant farm workers, whose daily labor is hard and unappreciated. In his stories he demonstrates that he lost his childhood in labor camps, and life as migrant farm worker would have been unbearable without his family. Cantú, on the other hand, had a very joyful childhood. Even though she comes from a working class family, she lived a settled life, surrounded by family and friends, and therefore her writing focus more on life within the Mexican American community and related folklore. She herself says that the reason why she wrote *Canícula* was to demonstrate the strength of Mexican American culture: “[...] I use a lot of ethnography to substantiate my position that our culture is a resistant culture. That we survive because of our culture.” (Gutiérrez y Muhs, 2007: 19-20)

Chapter 4

Mexican American Family in Children's Literature

The major focus of this dissertation so far has been mostly literature for adults, but literature for children has also seen a major shift in the depiction of Mexican American families. Children's literature criticism is usually understood as a way to evaluate what books are suitable, informative, educative, and enjoyable for children of different ages.¹ This chapter however aims to study the representation of Mexican American characters in literature for children, with special attention being paid to the image of family. To show the changes that have occurred in the area of Mexican American children's literature, this chapter will present an ample range of texts, published between 1968 and 2008 and written by a wide variety of authors. These texts will be evaluated on the basis of cultural authenticity to assess how the Mexican American characters and their families are represented.

There are many ways to classify books based on content, style, form, and many other characteristics. Denise I. Matulka in her book *A Picture Book Primer: Understanding and Using Picture Books* (2008) divides children's books into picture books, which tell the story through pictures; picture storybooks, which are characterized by equal balance of text and pictures, but where text has primary function, and illustrated books, where

¹For more information on children's literature criticism see Karin Lesnik-Oberstein, ed. *Children's Literature: New Approaches*. London: Palgrave Macmillan. 2004.

pictures have mainly a decorative function. In picture books, the pictures fill in the gaps in the story, while in storybooks and illustrated books, the story is easy to follow with the text alone. (Matulka, 2008: 4) Based on these definitions, the book selection chosen for this chapter consists mostly of picture books and picture storybooks. I have selected them because I wanted to evaluate how are Mexican American families represented in these books that are aimed at the youngest readership.

According to the American Association of Library Services to Children, a picture book is a book, which has children as the potential audience, and “essentially provides the child with a visual experience. A picture book has a collective unity of story-line, theme, or concept, developed through the series of pictures of which the book is comprised.”² Matulka says that “A picture book is one in which text and pictures work together to tell a story” (Matulka, 2008: 4). Barbara Bader in her history of American children’s literature *American Picturebooks from Noah’s Ark to The Beast Within*, characterizes picture books in the following words: “A picture book is a text, illustrations, total design; an item of manufacture and a commercial product; a social, cultural, historical document; and, foremost, an experience for a child.... On its own terms the possibilities are endless.” (Bader, 1976: 1) That is why it is important to look at how multicultural topics are addressed in picture books, because the message of the books is communicated not only verbally, but also visually through the illustrations. As Bader says, they are social, cultural, and historical documents, and at the same time they are one of the first views of the world that are made available to a child. The way socially important themes are portrayed in the books affect the child, and they can shape their view of the world, as well as of themselves.

When reading children’s books from the multicultural perspective it is necessary to bear in mind the a socio-political and historical context to understand why the books

²American Association of Library Services to Children annually awards the Randolph Caldecott Award, named after nineteenth century illustrator, Randolph Caldecott, to the illustrator “of the most distinguished American picture book for children published by an American publisher in the United States”.

Randolph Caldecott Medal. American Association of Library Services. [Nov.28th, 2010] <http://www.ala.org/ala/mgrps/divs/alsc/awardsgrants/bookmedia/caldecottmedal/caldecottterms/caldecottterms.cfm>

were written in this manner, whose point of view is presented as normal, if there are any assumptions being made about a specific ethnicity or culture, gender or class, and whether somebody's perspective is silenced and why. Multicultural children's literature attempts to fight the fear of the "Other" by focusing on those who have been previously underrepresented.

4.1 Multicultural Children's Literature

Multicultural literature as a branch of multiculturalism developed from the civil rights movement, as Charles Taylor explains in his essay "The Politics of Recognition" (Taylor, 1994). In the preface to *Critical Multicultural Analysis of Children's Literature: Mirrors, Windows, and Doors* (2009) Maria José Botelho and Masha Kabakow Rudman say that the subtitle of their book is a metaphor. According to them, literature can mirror the world of the reader, or open a window to view a new world, and even open doors which provide escape from the reader's daily life: "The mirror invites self-contemplation and affirmation of identity. The window permits a view of other people's lives. The door invites interaction." (Botelho and Kabakow Rudman, 2009: xiii) They believe that children need to see the reflection of themselves in the stories they read in order to affirm who they and their communities are, but they also need windows, in which they can see something different, a world or a way of life they do not know. (Botelho and Rudman, 2009: 1) This is very important when talking about multicultural literature, because it is closely related to Charles Taylor's idea of the politics of recognition.

Ambika Gopalakrishnan, a professor at California State University, analyses multicultural literature for children in her book *Multicultural Children's Literature: A Critical Issues Approach*. According to her,

"multicultural children's literature is literature that is not of the mainstream in the United States. Rather, it is about groups who have been previously underrepresented and often marginalized by society as a whole, especially in depictions in children's literature in the United States." (Gopalakrishnan, 2010: 5)

Gopalakrishnan says that the need for multicultural literature for children becomes greater with the shifting demographics in the world (Gopalakrishnan, 2010: 8), and shares the opinion of Charles Taylor when she says that “multicultural children’s literature validates all sociocultural experiences, including those occurring because of language, race, gender, class, ethnicity, and ability.” (Gopalakrishnan, 2010: 29)

Multicultural children’s literature is especially important because of the growing diversity in classrooms around the world, especially in multicultural societies like the United States. It enables children from different ethnicities and culture to affirm their existence while reading books that they can relate to. According to Gopalakrishnan multicultural literature gives equal representation and validation to voices that have been silenced. (Gopalakrishnan, 2010: 34)

Nevertheless, not all books about children from minority cultures can be acknowledged as validating all sociocultural experiences. Some books perpetuate stereotypical views of various communities and describe cultural traits superficially without understanding their meaning. Gopalakrishnan therefore asks who has the right to write about certain issues, cultures, or ethnicities. (Gopalakrishnan, 2010: 22) The early development of multicultural children’s literature started with inclusion of different cultures only in order to introduce more variety in the books (Gopalakrishnan, 2010: 23), but according to her that was not enough, and “a more inclusive” (Gopalakrishnan, 2010: 24) approach was necessary to depict children from all cultures and all socioeconomic backgrounds in a more conscious way.

The beginning of the movement to include more ethnicities in children’s literature is traced to an article in *The Saturday Book Review* written by Nancy Larrick in 1965 and titled “The All-White World of Children’s Books”. In this article the author criticized the fact that there are no heroes of color in literature for children, and thus inspired more studies and literary production for children aimed at multiculturalism (Gopalakrishnan, 2010: 25). Throughout the 1960s and 70s there was a steady progress in the area, but according to Gopalakrishnan only in the 1990s the quality of multicultural children’s literature actually improved.

To explain her point, Gopalakrishnan divides the development of multicultural literature into different levels which describe the approach towards the topic of the book: the so-called tourist approach, the additive approach, and the transformative approach. The first one introduces the reader for the first time to a specific culture, for example its festivals and food. The way these books are structured gives the readers a sense of visiting a foreign country, hence the name “tourist approach”. An example of this way of looking at multicultural literature is a storybook *Gus Was a Mexican Ghost* by Jane Thayer (New York, 1974), which is a story about a museum director who took a vacation in Mexico, followed by Gus, a ghost from his museum. It describes various aspects of Mexican culture, such as music, festivals, and food from the point of view of a tourist, which both the director and the ghost are. Books, which were written about Mexican Americans, but were aimed at the Anglo-American audience, introducing Mexican American children for the first time to Anglo-American children, can also be put in this category. *Manuel, Young Mexican American* by Carla Greene, is an example of tourist approach book, as it rather superficially introduces young American readers to the specificities of the Mexican American culture and to the fact that it is possible to be Mexican and American at the same time.

The second level, the additive approach, presents folktales from different corners of the world, which add another stratum to the knowledge that the readers have gained through the tourist approach.

The third level – called also the transformation approach - helps readers view different issues and themes from another perspective. According to Gopalakrishnan this approach is “an attempt at an Anti-Bias and equitable education” (Gopalakrishnan, 2010: 28), a try at an authentic and appropriate account. The transformative approach tries to show stories not only about Mexican Americans, but also from the point of view of Mexican Americans, such as *The Circuit* by Francisco Jiménez, which talks about the life of migrant farm workers.

The three above mentioned approaches help us understand the development of multicultural literature. However, to evaluate children’s books on the basis of authenticity

Gopalakrishnan introduces a different categorization, which will be crucial for evaluation Mexican American children's literature in this chapter. She divides multicultural children's literature into "melting pot books", "socially conscious books", and "culturally conscious books" (Gopalakrishnan, 2010: 29). Gopalakrishnan introduces this categorization by another definition of multicultural children's literature. In her view, multicultural children's literature is literature that is "by and about diverse populations and includes different perspectives." (Gopalakrishnan, 2010: 29).

Melting pot books can also be called "culturally generic" or "universally themed", which means that what makes them multicultural is plainly the fact that they talk about the universal experience of being a child, despite the color, race, culture, or ethnicity of the protagonist.

Socially conscious books focus on the other hand on the specific experiences of a cultural or ethnic group. The point of these books is to introduce this group to the mainstream audience in order to educate them and raise awareness about the specific problems and difficulties that the group in question had to face or is still facing. (Gopalakrishnan, 2010: 31) According to Gopalakrishnan Socially Conscious Books are those which depict a social issue, which makes the readers more "empathetic and sympathetic" toward the group. (Gopalakrishnan, 2010: 31-32)

Culturally conscious books, also called culturally specific books, talk about traditions, customs, and experiences that are particular to a certain culture or ethnicity. Gopalakrishnan stresses that the key aspect in these multicultural books is authenticity, because they are told from an insider's perspective. (Gopalakrishnan, 2010: 33)

According to this classification melting pot books offer nothing more than an outsider's perspective at differences in class, values, or personal experiences, and they do not engage the reader in a critical dialogue. Socially conscious books make the readers aware of social issues and engage them in the critical dialogue, but are still rather of universal nature; and culturally conscious books offer insider perspectives on specific cultural conflict.

With this introduction we get to the important issue of cultural authenticity. Ac-

According to Gopalakrishnan, melting pot books and socially conscious books are often written by outsiders, by writers who are not members of the specific group they are writing about. (Gopalakrishnan, 2010: 33) They may have good intentions, but may unintentionally misinterpret some customs or cultural traits by using their imagination or superficial knowledge as a guide in the writing process. Culturally conscious books, on the other hand, are written by insiders, by authors who know the culture from within. Gopalakrishnan says that “[c]ulturally conscious books are insider perspectives that really teach us about specific nuances of cultural conflict that help us engage in critical dialogue in order to question larger power relations.” (Gopalakrishnan, 2010: 33) Cultural authenticity is also closely related to the notion of validation. Representing children from minority cultures in literature gives value to their experiences and culture. (Gopalakrishnan, 2010: 34)

Of course, authenticity is often based on individual perception of the book, and what may be culturally authentic to one reader, may seem as stereotypical representation to another reader. Therefore, Gopalakrishnan maintains that “authenticity is determined by how close the author’s perspective is to the reader’s perspective”. (Gopalakrishnan, 2010: 37) Nevertheless, according to her there are some clues that can help us evaluate multicultural children’s literature by assessing the author’s and illustrator’s perspective, multidimensionality of characters and plot, possible stereotyping, and the use of authentic language. (Gopalakrishnan, 2010: 39) These will be useful when evaluating the selection of Mexican American children’s literature chosen for this chapter.

4.2 Mexican American Children’s Literature

This chapter evaluates eighteen children’s books written by different authors and published in a span of forty years, between 1968 and 2008. The stories are targeted at youngest readers and to continue with the metaphor introduced by Botelho and Kabakow Rudman, they provide both mirrors and windows to their audience.

4.2.1 Melting Pot Books

The earliest books in my selection that focus on Spanish speaking families tell stories not of Mexican, but about Puerto Rican children living in urban areas in the United States. They were written by Ruth A. Sonneborn and published by the renowned publishing house Viking Press in New York. Both picture storybooks, *Seven in a Bed* and *Friday Night is Papa Night* depict the stereotypical setting of poor working class Latino families. *Seven in a Bed* starts with a very common situation that immigrant families face: the father arrives to the United States sooner to get a job, and the family joins him later. Even though the origin of the characters is not mentioned anywhere in the book, it is quite clear, that the family is from Puerto Rico. They arrive by plane and, unlike Mexican immigrants; they do not have to go through any immigration procedure, because Puerto Rico is a U.S. territory. The family in this story consists of a mother, four children and a baby, and they also bring three other children who come to visit their aunt. They all have to stay in a small one-room apartment, and the simple story line is based on the fact that all seven children have to sleep in one bed, which obviously does not go smoothly as they giggle and squeeze each other.

Even though it is an innocent story for young children, we can see traces of social stereotypes. The focus is on a poor immigrant family with many children. The mother has the traditional role of providing comfort to the rest of the family, she is the nurturer in the family in every sense of the word: ““First we must eat,” said Mama. She opened the big basket she had carried all the way from home.” (Sonneborn, 1968: 10). The father is the authority in the family, he gets angry when the children don’t sleep and giggle in the bed, and the children obey him: “Papa stood next to the bed and watched them. And perhaps because they were a little scared of Papa when he used his angry voice, or perhaps because they were really tired after the long day’s trip, the seven children soon closed their eyes and slept.” (Sonneborn, 1968: 21) Even though the plot is amusing, the setting and the characters convey the stereotypical view of immigrants.

Friday Night is Papa Night (1970), another book by Ruth A. Sonneborn, tells a similar immigrant story of Pedro, his three siblings and their mother, who every week

anxiously await the return of their father, who works two jobs to support the family, and only comes home for the weekend. One day, he doesn't come on time, and the family is very worried. When he finally arrives and the children ask what happened, he explains:

"I'll tell you what happened. My friend Juan who works with me got sick. I took him to the hospital. Then I went to tell his wife. I couldn't get home sooner. You understand, niños?"

"We should have a phone," Carlos [one of the children] said. "Everyone else has a phone."

"I know, but a phone costs money," Mama said." (Sonneborn, 1970: 18)

Again, clearly, the family is depicted as poor. Pedro does not have a bedroom, ("He was glad his bed was in the kitchen where he could watch Mama work." (Sonneborn, 1970: 4)), the family does not have a phone, so the father cannot let them know that this Friday he will be late, and the Father has to work two jobs. With this stereotypical imagery comes also the Latino concept of *familism*, the love within the family is depicted in a very natural way.

Both books present a very stereotypical view of immigrants, without offering any background information as for the possible reasons for immigration, or without explaining more about the culture that the characters represents. They are clear examples of the melting pot books, since they offer non-Anglo characters merely for the sake of variety, without providing the readers with a more social or cultural context.

Most of the earliest books that focus on Mexican American children are also melting pot books. Florence W. Taylor is an author who wrote prolifically about Mexican American topics for children. Her series of books about a migrant Mexican American family of six who comes from Texas to Illinois to harvest vegetables was published in 1971, in the era of the activism organized by Cesar Chavez and the movement of the United Farm Workers. In her stories, Taylor describes the life of migrant workers as picturesque. Parents are happy to work; children can go to school and play together. Even the aspects of migrant life that were very difficult, like riding on the back of a truck across the country, living in very simple buildings with hundreds of other workers, and listening to the never-ending "clanging, chugging noise" (Taylor, 1971: 2) of the canning factory for which they work, are described as simple part of life – no social aspect is

brought up, and the reader might almost think that the story is set in a summer camp and not a work camp. In contrast, Francisco Jiménez, who spent his childhood in similar work camps, presents a completely different view in his autobiographical book *The Circuit*. The explanation for Taylor's surprising approach to writing about the world of migrant workers is a simple acknowledgement at the beginning of the books that reads "with gratitude to the canning company officials involved (...)". Apparently Taylor's books were written with the help of those who were responsible for the conditions of the migrant workers; therefore there is no wonder that her representation of the life of the migrant workers and the work camp was rather favorable.

One of the books from the series is called *What Is a Migrant?*. The story opens with the Fuentes family arriving to Lockton, Illinois and Felipe starts going to school, while his parents work in the fields and a baby sitter organized by the canning company takes care of Felipe's younger siblings and other small children. The main plot of this book is an incident, in which Karen, an Anglo girl from Felipe's class, calls Felipe "a filthy Mexican migrant." (Taylor, 1971:17) This gives their school principal (and the author) an excellent opportunity to teach Felipe and Karen (and the readers) about who migrants are:

"Karen, what is a filthy Mexican migrant?"

Karen squirmed in her chair. "I don't know. That's what Grandmother King calls the people who come to work for the canning company. She says they never should have come to Lockton."

The principal frowned. "Karen, I know your grandmother well. But she is wrong about these people. Look at Felipe."

Karen scowled but looked at Felipe. "Now you can see that he isn't filthy," Miss Miller said. "In fact, he's quite clean, Karen. So the word filthy doesn't apply to him." Turning to Felipe, she asked, "Where were you born?"

"In Texas, ma'am. In the Rio Grande Valley," he replied.

"Were your parents born in Texas too?" the principal asked.

"Yes, ma'am."

Miss Miller now turned to Karen. "You see, Felipe is an American, just like you are. It's true his ancestors came from Mexico. I suppose people call the migrants Mexicans, because they speak Spanish and look like the people of Mexico. But they are Americans, not Mexicans."

Karen sighed but did not reply.

Miss Miller continued, "Do you know what the word migrant means, Karen? [...] A migrant is a person who moves from one place to another to work for

a time. Sometimes moving with the seasons.” She looked at Felipe. “Why did your parents come to Lockton?” “To work in the fields for the Midwest Canning Company,” he answered. [...]

“Karen, why did you leave your home in St. Louis and come here to stay with your grandmother?” Karen brightened. “Because my parents went to Central America to do some work for the University.” (...)

“You’ll be here about six months, your grandmother told me,” said Miss Miller. “That’s about as long as Felipe will be here. In a way, you are a migrant too, Karen. And so are your parents.” Karen looked puzzled. “But Miss Miller, my father is a professor. He is doing important work in Central America.”

“I’m sure he is,” Miss Miller replied. “Felipe’s parents are doing important work here too. (...) Any honest work is important.” (Taylor, 1971: 21)

The didactic purpose of this story is obvious. In a similar mode the principal scatters the frequent objections to allowing migrants to work:

“And Grandmother says the migrants take the work away from our people.” Miss Miller frowned and said sharply, “Your grandmother knows we don’t have people here anymore to do field work.”

“What happened to them?” Karen asked.

“Stooping in the field day after day is hard work,” Miss Miller explained. “The old farmhands left because they could get easier jobs elsewhere. So the canning company brings families from Texas. Without these workers, the farm owners couldn’t raise enough vegetables to make a living.”

Karen nodded her head. “Then the owners wouldn’t get any money from their farms.”

“That’s right, Karen,” the principal agreed. “And the women couldn’t afford to buy dresses from your grandmother each season. Remind her of that.” (Taylor, 1971: 23)

The story provides a textbook-like example of discriminative attitudes towards Mexicans and again employs many stereotypical realities: poor family, many children, and also the Mexican American familism.

Taylor’s writing is in sharp contrast with Francisco Jiménez’ depiction of the life of migrant farm workers. While Taylor tries to especially educate her readers and descriptions of life in the labor camp are very pleasant, Jiménez, who writes from his own experience about the hard labor and the worries of his parents. According to Taylor’s books, the childhood of Mexican American farm workers was very happy, filled with education and games, and their parents were optimistic about their situation. Using Gopalakrishnan’s terminology, Taylor’s “Felipe Adventure Story” series lacks cultural authenticity,

and it uses the tourist approach to multiculturalism - introducing the (Anglo-American) readers to a different culture, with a lesson on racism.

Manuel, Young Mexican American (1969) by Carla Greene, which was already mentioned in the introduction to this chapter, is another story aimed at young Anglo readers at the end of 1960s that provided examples on how to treat Mexican American children. It is a story about Jimmy, an Anglo boy, and his friend Manuel. Jimmy is a captain of a school baseball team and Manuel wants to join, but he doesn't know how to play baseball. Jimmy's dad tells Jimmy that he should teach Manuel how to play, so Jimmy trains with Manuel and helps him get better. He meets Manuel's family and learns about Mexican culture and food, which amazes him. Yet, he is still reluctant to let Manuel join the team. When he talks about it with his dad, he realizes, that the reason for denying Manuel a place on the team is because he still thinks Manuel is different, and is worried what would the other boys on the team say. Suddenly, he feels ashamed and the next day he lets Manuel join the baseball team. This book is aimed mainly at American readers. If we keep working with the metaphor of mirrors and windows, this book is a window for American children to learn about Mexican Americans. The story tries to remove the fear of the Other by introducing Manuel and his family as nice and friendly people, and it is very educative for children who have not learned yet either about Mexico or Mexican Americans. Through Jimmy's eyes the Anglo-American children learn how to accept Mexican American children. The author is very obvious in her "tourist" approach as she introduces the educative part of the book:

"I think Mexican people are very nice," said Jimmy. "I would like to find out more about them."

"Why don't you get a book about Mexico at the library?" suggested his father. The next day, Jimmy went to the library and got a book about Mexico. He learned many things about Mexico and the Mexican people. Here are a few things that Jimmy learned:" (Greene, 1969: 19)

The book then talks about Mexican history, the Mexican-American War, and introduces various aspects of Mexican culture. It also focuses on Mexican food and explains in a simple way how it is prepared ("An *enchilada* consists of a cornmeal pancake called a *tortilla* rolled up with chopped meat mixed with a spicy sauce." (Greene, 1969:43))

Similarly to Taylor in her story about Felipe, Greene takes the opportunity to explain to her readers that people, who look like Mexicans can actually be American citizens:

“Manuel you will have to learn to bat better if you want to join my team,” said Jimmy. “Didn’t you play baseball in Mexico?”
“I have never been to Mexico,” said Manuel. “I was born here in Los Angeles.”
“But I thought you were Mexican,” said Jimmy.
“My parents came from Mexico,” said Manuel. “But I was born here, so I am an American.” (Greene, 1969: 7-8)

When Jimmy is surprised that Manuel will take part in the celebration of Mexican Independence Day even though he is an American, the author points out that this is a very common thing:

“Many Americans celebrate festivals of their home lands. The Irish celebrate St. Patrick’s Day. The Chinese celebrate the Chinese New Year. (...) This is one of the freedoms of all people who live in the United States of America. They don’t need to forget the land of their ancestors in order to be good Americans.” (Greene, 1969: 28)

Also the theme of baseball is very important in the book. Presenting this all-American sport as something that Jimmy and Manuel have in common makes it easier for the readers to accept Manuel. The story ends with Jimmy letting Manuel join his team and the author summarizes how enriching diversity is:

“In the past few weeks he had learned that while it is nice to have friends who are just like you are, it is even more fun to have some friends who are a little different. It takes many kinds of people to make a great country like the United States of America. The more kinds of people we are friendly with, the richer our lives become.” (Greene, 1969: 46)

This is a very important message, related to the Melting Pot theory, that is central to *What Is a Migrant?* and *Manuel, Young Mexican-American*. They are both books about integration, aimed primarily at Anglo audience. They provide glossaries and introduce Mexican Americans and their culture to American children, and are therefore clear examples of what Gopalakrishnan calls the melting pot books.

4.2.2 Socially Conscious Books

Socially conscious books focus on social issues associated with particular cultural or ethnic groups. Unlike melting pot books, which try to educate about cultures and ethnicities, socially conscious books want to show social experiences that different groups have in the United States. The socially conscious books that will be discussed in this chapter were written in the 1970s, 1980s, and 2000s, which shows quite a large span of time, showing that it was an important theme in multicultural children's literature. They are *Benito and the Bootstraps* by Janice Fine and Lois Watt, *I Speak English for My Mom* by Muriel Stanek, and *Home at Last* by Susan Middleton Elya. These books are an attempt at cultural inclusion of Mexican Americans, as they provide realia that they can relate to. But again they bring up the question of cultural authenticity, because the authors are Anglos.

Benito and the Bootstraps is a rhymed story with a moral of learning and it also describes the hard living conditions of the Mexican minority:

“Benito was born and brought up in a slum,
Where Papa worked hard, yet he earned a low sum.
Four brothers were younger and had to be fed.
They slept side by side, in a big, iron bed.
Their home was a glum two-room, cold-water flat,
Where leaky old faucets dripped down, pitta-pat.
The walls had big cracks, for a lack of repair,
The ceiling was peeling; the floors were all bare.
Benito wore shirts that had started to fade,
But proudly wore sweaters his Grandma had made.
His pants were twice-mended; his coat was worn through;
He sometimes had holes in the sole of his shoe.” (Fine and Watt, 1970: 2-3)

Benito often skips class, because he doesn't understand English very well. Once a man from school tells him that he is at risk of being expelled from school and needs to “pull himself by the bootstraps”. Barefoot Benito never heard this expression before and thinks he needs to get bootstraps to avoid expulsion. After getting himself into trouble, when he accidentally breaks a blue glass boot in a Novelty Shop while he is looking for the magic bootstraps, he talks to his teacher who explains what the expression means.

Benito decides to work for the man in the Novelty Shop to pay for the damage and starts studying hard.

“I think I know now what my bootstraps can be.
The magic was not in the glass boot of blue.
The magic is learning that makes dreams come true.
Today is the day I will make a new start,
With bootstraps of learning inside of my heart!” (Fine and Watt, 1970: 47)

This is a strong message for young readers, showing the importance of education.

Two other books in my selection, *I Speak English for my Mom* and *Home at Last*, also stress the importance of learning, but this time they focus on the immigrant parents. *I Speak English for my Mom* (1989) by Muriel Stanek is a book that describes a very common occurrence for children of immigrants: they have to learn English at school, while their parents don't have many opportunities to adapt to the new language. Therefore, the children often have to accompany their parents to different errands and help translate. *I Speak English for my Mom* tells a story of a Mexican girl Lupe who lives in Chicago with her mother. They came to the U.S. because her father wanted Lupe to have brighter future; it was his last wish before he died. Lupe now speaks both Spanish and English, but her mother only speaks Spanish, and therefore Lupe has to translate to her mother and speak for her whenever necessary. The book suggests that Lupe might even lose a part of her childhood because of that: “If a stranger says something to Mom in English [...] I tell her in Spanish and then answer for her in English. I feel grown-up.” (Stanek, 1989: 1) Having this responsibility sometimes costs Lupe her free time that she would like to spend playing with her friends:

“One time I was playing rope with Graciela and Julie when Mom came home early from work with a terrible toothache. “You will have to come and speak for me,” Mom said. “I must go to the clinic and see a dentist right away!” “But I want to play,” I told her. “¡Necesito que vengas ahora!” my mother said, which means, “I need you to come now!” “I wished I didn't have to go with her that day.” (Stanek, 1989:13-14)

Just like some of the previously mentioned stories, this book describes the hard life of poor immigrants. Similarly to *Friday Night is Papa Night* the poverty of the family is illustrated using the example of a telephone: “At home we have a telephone. But we

don't use it often because it costs too much." (Stanek, 1989: 7) And the seriousness of their situation becomes more evident in relation to Lupe's mother's job:

"One Friday when Mom comes home from work, she is very worried. "What's the matter?" I ask. "Business is not good at our factory," she says. "Everyone got a cut in pay." When we count the money that night, there is just enough to pay the bills. "You are a good worker," I tell her. "You can get a better job downtown in a big factory." "But I need to know English to work downtown," Mom says." (Stanek, 1989: 17)

This is how Lupe's mother arrives to the conclusion that she needs to learn English. Lupe cannot go with her to work every day, she needs to learn English on her own. When they see an advertisement for free English classes in a local high school, Lupe's Mom decides to attend the night school. "Now every Tuesday and Thursday evening, I stayed at Claudia's house while my mother is at school. Afterward Mom tells me about her English class, and I help her with homework. We are beginning to speak a little English to each other." (Stanek, 1989: 23-25) "*Buenas noches*," I say to her. "Good night," says Mom. (Stanek, 1989: 25)

The other book focusing on adult language education is *Home at Last* (2002) by Susan Middleton Elya. Its story is quite similar to *I Speak English for My Mom*. Eight-year-old Ana moves from Mexico to the U.S. together with her parents and her little twin brothers. Her father found work in a canning company with Ana's uncle Luis, but Ana's mother is very homesick. Her isolation is caused also by the fact that she does not understand English. At first Ana cannot speak English either, but she goes to school and soon starts learning. She goes shopping with her mother to translate for her. The clerk at the shop is too busy and charges them too much for the chicken, and Ana and her mother are unable to explain that there was a mistake. In another incident Ana's teacher sends a note written in English cursive, which Ana cannot read, and her mother cannot understand. And another day Ana's father doesn't come home on time while her little brother is sick and Ana's mother doesn't know what to do and where to ask for help. All these events make her want to return to Mexico, but they have to stay in the United States. After that she decides to start learning English. Ana's father finds English classes and Ana's mother starts attending and learns something new every class.

When she goes shopping and the clerk again charges too much for the chicken, she is able to say “Chicken on sale” and the clerk notices his mistake, apologizes and charges the right price. After this little victory Ana’s mother can finally say “We’re home.” Both picture storybooks, *I Speak English for My Mom* and *Home at Last*, stress the importance of learning the language of the country the characters live in. It describes the very common situation when immigrant children learn the language faster than their parents and then have to serve as mediators and must take on responsibilities that their peers from English-speaking families do not have.

Stories in my selection that were written by Anglo-American writers have certain things in common: they introduce Mexican Americans as low-income people, who struggle in their farming or factory jobs, have hard time learning the English language, and particularities of immigration as well as culture are either overlooked or described in a simplified way. Using Gopalakrishnan’s classification of children’s literature, these books fall into the category of socially conscious books. They introduce multicultural characters without substantially developing them, they serve merely as generic figures that help introduce the topic of immigration and minorities, poverty and isolation due to a language barrier, but they lack cultural authenticity. This is one of the reasons why American authors of Mexican origin began to focus on literature for children. Even authors, who are well established with adult audience and who received public acclaim for their more serious work, such as Gloria Anzaldúa, Sandra Cisneros, Rudolfo Anaya, Pat Mora or Gary Soto, thought it important to turn their attention to Mexican American children in order to provide them with books which would not perpetuate stereotypes that were so often find in books written by “outsider” authors.

4.2.3 Culturally Conscious Books

Of course, poverty is an issue for many members of the Mexican community in the United States. Nevertheless, Mexican American authors tend to be more sensitive to nuances within the culture, because they can relate to the personal experiences of their readers; their books are culturally authentic. Mexican American authors focus on social

issues, as well as cultural, describing traditions and customs, and retelling legends and folk tales.

Very good examples of the socially focused stories told from a culturally conscious perspective are *América Is Her Name* by Luis J. Rodríguez, *Tomás and the Library Lady* by Pat Mora, and *Friends from the Other Side/Amigos del otro lado* by Gloria Anzaldúa. These books show social issues that are specific to Mexican Americans and Mexican immigrants in the United States, written from the point of view of Mexican American authors.

Luis J. Rodríguez' book *América Is Her Name* from 1997 tells a story of a young girl named América, who lives in Chicago with her parents, uncle, and three siblings. They are from Oaxaca, Mexico and are illegal immigrants. América lives in a poor neighborhood with high level of criminality, where things such as gunshots happen in broad daylight. While her parents work, América goes to school, but her teacher, Miss Gable, is not nice. She often raises her voice and does not try to help her students.

“América sits at the back of the room and says nothing. América used to talk all the time. In her village, she greeted the animals in Spanish mixed with a few Mixteco words. She sang to the morning. She recited the many poems taught her since she was a baby. She had a voice – strong, open and free. Somehow, in Chicago, she has lost this voice.” (Rodríguez, 1997: 8)

What makes this story different is the author's sensitivity to the culture. For example, he distinguishes between Mexican immigrant from different states: “On her way to school América smiles at the man from Guerrero who sells “helados”, real fruit ice cream sticks. She waves at the barber from Michoacán standing outside his shop waiting for customers.” (Rodríguez, 1997: 3) Rodríguez shows here that there is variety even within Mexico, and he acknowledges their individual identity by naming their home state, and not labeling them as “Mexicans” in general.

Also the issue of legal and illegal immigration appears in the story. The teacher calls América “an illegal”, but América does not understand why:

“How can that be – how can anyone be illegal! She is Mixteco, an ancient tribe that was here before the Spanish, before the blue-eyed, even before this government that now calls her “illegal”. How can a girl called América not belong in America?” (Rodríguez, 1997: 8)

Rodríguez in a few words presents the absurdity of the illegal status, which is a topic that many immigrant children can relate to. He also describes how their situation of immigrants and factory workers makes the family very vulnerable and how this affects also the atmosphere within the family:

“When América gets home, she hears her dad yelling. He has been laid off from the factory. The family gathers around the wooden table in the small kitchen. Her mother tells her father angrily: “I was called a ‘wetback’ at the market today. No matter what we do – we don’t belong.” (Rodríguez, 1997:13)

Her situation in her class and at home being so unpleasant, América is very happy when her school invites a Puerto Rican Poet, Mr. Aponte, for a special program. The poet encourages the class to recite poetry in Spanish. América starts, and the whole class applauds at her performance. Mr. Aponte then asks the class to write about their lives and memories and feelings, saying that there is poetry in everyone.

At home, América starts writing a poem, but her father tells her to stop it, because according to him it is useless. América’s mother asks América to write something for her, and América tells her to write something too. They both spend every afternoon writing together, and América’s brothers join them too. Her uncle recognizes América’s talent, but the father still does not approve. Few days later, América gets the best possible grade on her writing assignment for the first time. Everybody at home is very proud of her achievement, even her father, and her uncle says that she will be “a real poet”. “A real poet. That sounds good to the Mixteca girl, who some people say doesn’t belong here. A poet, América knows, belongs everywhere.” (Rodríguez, 1997: 23) Rodríguez finishes his story with a message of hope and inclusion. Many children from immigrant families may have a feeling that they do not belong, and the author tells them that there are some universal values and goals, and achieving them can make them feel significantly better about themselves and even improve their social position.

Gloria Anzaldúa, one of the most influential Chicana writers, famous especially for her book of essays *Borderlands/La Frontera*, also wrote children’s books. She knew that children from the border region needed a book that would provide a mirror to their

experiences, and a story, that they could relate to. *Friends from the Other Side/Amigos del otro lado* is a bilingual story, in which Anzaldúa talks about the topic of illegal immigration; drawing upon her own experiences of growing up by the border with Mexico. (Anzaldúa, 1993: 1) The book is about a young Chicana girl called Prietita, and Joaquín, an illegal immigrant from Mexico, who lives in very poor conditions. Prietita becomes his friend, and when other children call him a wetback (“Hey man, why don’t you go back where you belong? We don’t want any more *mojados* here.” (Anzaldúa, 1993: 8)), she defends him. Later, when the border patrol comes in the neighborhood looking for illegal immigrants, Prietita takes Joaquín and his mother to a local *curandera*, where they hide during the raid. She also promises to help find better work for them. Anzaldúa shows in this story the complexity of the borderland, where old residents and new immigrants meet, and where old traditions, such as *curanderismo*, are part of the daily life. Apart from that, the story also brings an important universal message of helping those in need.

Pat Mora, another prolific Chicana writer and poet for adults, wrote several children’s books, one of them being *Tomás and the Library Lady*. The book is based on a real story of the author Tomás Rivera, who was a migrant farm worker as a child, and whose love for reading was encouraged by a kind library lady. In the beginning of the story Mora describes the hard life of Tomás’s family, the long travel from Texas to Iowa, and the heat and back-breaking labor in the work camps. But the story itself is not about the work of migrant workers, but about books and reading. Tomás’s grandfather likes to tell stories, and he encourages his grandson to go to the library and learn new stories, because Tomás already knows all the stories that his grandfather tells him. The following day Tomás goes to the library, where the kind librarian provides him with books of his interest. Reading helps Tomás forget about his hard life, and he dives into the stories. The librarian allows him to check out books even though he does not have a membership, and in the camp Tomás reads the stories to his whole family. He goes to the library as often as he can, and even starts teaching the library lady some Spanish words. When they have to leave Iowa, Tomás comes to say good bye to the kind lady, who gives him another book as a good bye present. This story shows the love of reading and education,

and how the encouragement of a stranger can make a difference in one's life. Tomás Rivera, who spent his childhood as a migrant farm worker, grew up to be a university chancellor and an acknowledged Mexican American author.

As was mentioned previously, culturally conscious books focus not only on social issues, but also on the cultural content, and tell stories about various aspects of the Mexican American culture, including traditions, and legends. *The Perfect Piñata* by Kelli Kyle Dominiguez (2002) is a bilingual book about a specific Mexican birthday tradition.³ Marisa is about to turn six and to celebrate her birthday according to the Mexican custom her mother takes her to a *piñata* store to choose a *piñata* for her. Marisa chooses one that has a form of a butterfly, and she likes it so much that she plays with it the whole week. But when the day of her birthday comes and she is supposed to hit the *piñata*, she cannot do it because she grew fond of the butterfly. Luckily, her mother came up with a surprise solution: she filled a plastic bag with the candy and toys so that Marisa can enjoy the birthday tradition without breaking her butterfly. Everyone takes turns in hitting the plastic bag *piñata*, until the bag breaks and candy falls out, and Marisa is very happy with the way her birthday party turned out. Dominiguez describes Mexican realia in a natural way, so that Mexican American children can relate to the story, while children from other cultures can learn about other ways of celebrating birthdays.

What Can You Do with a Rebozo? by Carmen Tafolla is a picture book aimed a youngest readers presenting the various uses for a traditional Mexican shawl called *rebozo*. On each page it shows a picture along with a simple phrase describing how different members of the family use the *rebozo* to play dress-up, as a sling for a baby, as a shawl to warm somebody up on a cold day, to wipe stains, cover a child's eyes for *piñata*, etc.

The author uses a simple concept of showing things that children can see around themselves, while presenting the entire multigenerational family. In the end the author sums up the history and uses of *rebozo* and asks the readers what they have done with

³A *piñata* is a wire construction covered with paper and created into a form of any imaginable object. It is filled with candy and hung up on a tree, while blindfolded children take turns trying to break it with a bat, in order to make the candy fall out.

their rebozos. The author obviously expects that her readers are familiar with rebozos and have their own experiences and stories to tell, the book is therefore clearly aimed at children of Mexican heritage.

Gary Soto, one of the most prolific writers of children's books with Mexican American themes, writes stories that are universal, but are set into his native Mexican American community. In my selection I have included his Christmas-themed picture book called *Too Many Tamales* from 1993. It is a story where the plot is set directly into the preparation of traditional Mexican Christmas meal, tamales. Maria is helping her mother make *masa* for tamales, a rather complicated task, and in the meantime tries on her mother's diamond ring. She then forgets about it, and when all the tamales are steamed and ready to be served, she cannot find the ring and realizes that she probably dropped it into the *masa*. While Maria's mother is in the living room with all the aunts and uncles who arrived for the Christmas dinner, Maria and her cousins eat all of the twenty-four tamales, carefully looking for the ring, only to later find out that the ring is still safe on Maria's mother's finger. Even though they have ruined the Christmas dinner, nobody is angry and everybody gets ready to make new batch of tamales together.

While this story deals with a very specific Mexican realia – the exhausting work of making tamales on Christmas Eve – there are no explanations as to what are tamales and how Mexican American Christmas is different from Anglo-American Christmas. Clearly, unlike many of the previously discussed stories, this book is directed at Mexican American readership that is familiar with all the traditions. Many of the melting pot books that were discussed in this chapter described the hardships that immigrants endure and the poverty of farm and factory workers, thus actually making them sound as typical characteristics for Mexican Americans. Soto, on the other hand, creates a middle class setting, and if tamales were replaced by some other complicated dish, typical for the American culture, and the name Maria was changed to Mary, the story would work perfectly well for Anglo-American readers. Generally speaking, while books published between 1960s and 1980s create settings specific to Mexican American working class, newer books create settings, where only certain cultural realia or names have Mexican American connotations. Other

stories by Gary Soto, such as *Snapshots from the Wedding* (1997), *Big Bushy Mustache* (1998), and *My Little Car* (2006) all talk about Mexican American children and their families, but they do not stereotype them into poor, uneducated people.

A very important section of children's literature with Mexican American themes is formed by legends and popular tales. One of the most traditional legends is the story about La Llorona, the weeping woman, who is said to have drowned her children and her ghost now wanders around bodies of water, weeping, looking for her children.⁴ This legend shows a negative mother figure, an antithesis of the loving and self-sacrificing mother that is so valued in Mexican American culture. Gloria Anzaldúa decided to protest against this view of *La Llorona* and in her bilingual story *Prietita and the Ghost Woman/Prietita y La Llorona* she presents her own view of the weeping woman. According to Chicana feminists, the legend of La Llorona was created to perpetuate the negative mother image, to warn young girls from following her example, and also to scare children into obeying their parents. Anzaldúa therefore takes a completely different approach to this legend and pictures La Llorona as a positive spirit. In her story, Prietita's mother is sick, and Prietita asks Doña Lola, the curandera, for help. The curandera knows of an herb that will cure Prietita's mother, but she has ran out of it. She draws an image of the herb for Prietita, and asks her to go to the woods to look for it. In the woods Prietita gets lost. She hears a crying sound and remembers the story of La Llorona that her grandmother used to tell her. She follows various animals trying to find the plant, but this only gets her deeper into the woods. Suddenly, she sees a woman dressed in white across the lake. In a trembling voice she asks the woman for the herb, and the woman points to a plant on the ground. Prietita picks a few branches and then lets the woman lead her out of the woods. When she gets to the road, Prietita wants to thank her, but the woman disappears. Soon she is found by her family and the curandera who are looking for her.

"How did you find your way out of the woods?" asked Doña Lola.

"A ghost woman in white was my guide."

"La Llorona!" said Prietita's cousin, Teté. "But everyone knows she takes

⁴See Pérez, Domino. "Caminando con La Llorona: Traditional and Contemporary Narratives." In *Chicana Traditions: Continuity and Change*. Cantú, Norma E. and Olga Nájera-Ramírez, eds. University of Illinois Press: Urbana. 2002

children away. She doesn't bring them back."

"Perhaps she is not what others think she is," said Doña Lola. (Anzaldúa, 1995: 28)

With the final comment from Doña Lola Anzaldúa wants to stress the fact that there are always two sides to every story, and that children should not believe everything they hear, but create their own opinion according to their experiences. It is a very strong story, which completely changes the traditional view of La Llorona.

Chiles for Benito / Chiles para Benito by Ana Baca is a bilingual legend about the gift of peppers, or chiles, which is framed by a story about a girl and her grandmother: Cristina and her grandma wake up early to pick up red chiles and make them into *ristras*, or clusters. While doing this rather tedious work, the grandmother tells Cristina a story of her father Benito, when he was a little boy. Benito was going to a local fair with his cow, he was sure she would win and with the prize money they could buy seed for the crop. But the cow kicked the judge and therefore did not win anything. Benito was upset and said he would sell the cow for a penny, if someone would buy her. A short man with a big green bird with a red beak appears and the bird says he would buy the cow for a pouch of magic seeds. Benito went home and sowed all the seeds. The plants soon started growing but brought no fruit. All the neighbors complained that it is weeds and that it will ruin their crop. Benito tried cutting the plants, but they seemed to only grow faster. Suddenly, after a few days, he saw strange red fruit hanging from the plants. He tasted it and found it hot but sweet! He started collecting the fruit and invited the neighbors to collect as many as they wanted. Suddenly the short man appeared again together with the green bird, this time with no beak! He said that the red fruit was chile and he showed them how to cook them to prepare tamales, beans, red chile sauce and calabacitas. Before the short man left, he told Benito to share the chiles and recipes with everyone. When the grandmother finishes her story, they both eat red chile tamales for dinner. And as a little bonus, the book provides the recipe (again, both in English and Spanish) for the red chile sauce.

This picture storybook stresses the relationship between a child and his or her grandparents. Mexican American families are traditionally multigenerational, and grand-

parents are very involved in the lives of their grandchildren, unlike in Anglo-American families, where individualism is stressed and bonds between grandparents and grandchildren are not strengthened on a daily basis. Many of the culturally conscious books for Mexican American children stress the relationship between children and their grandparents. Another bilingual picture storybook that focuses on a legend while stressing the intergeneration relationship is *The Santero's Miracle: A Bilingual Story* by Rudolfo Anaya published in 2004. It tells a story of a young boy, Andres, who is staying with his grandparents over Christmas holiday in a small village in the mountains of New Mexico. His grandfather, Don Jacobo, is a *santero* - he carves saints from wood during winters and then sells them in Santa Fe during the summer. It is a traditional New Mexican craft, and Andres is proud to help his grandfather. Andres' parents and sister are supposed to join them in the mountains for Christmas, but because of too much snow this remote area is unreachable by car. At the same time, Don Jacobo's neighbor, Leo, gets very sick and he needs to go to the hospital, but because of the weather the ambulance cannot get to the town. Don Jacobo doesn't know what to do. He prays to San Isidoro, patron saint of farmers, whose woodcarving he is working on, to make a miracle and help Leo. When they wake up the following day, they see that all the roads are clear of snow! Nobody knows, how did that happen, but the woodcarving of San Isidoro has wet and muddy feet and so do his oxen. Small footprints lead from the outside to the saint - it really is a miracle. The ambulance can come for Leo, and Andres' family can come to spend the Christmas holiday.

Anaya's book weaves together a miracle story with modern times, putting an emphasis on the traditional art and strong bonds within a family and within a community. A miracle story is a common part of the Anglo-American Christmas tradition, but Anaya adapts this miracle story to the New Mexican realia, creating a Mexican American Christmas story.

As was demonstrated with all the previous books, family plays a very important role in Mexican American children's books. Diane Gonzales Bertrand is an author of bilingual picture storybooks for children, where family is central. She came from a middle class

Mexican American family. She started writing books when she realized there are no books for Latino children about middle class families, that most of children's literature stereotypes Mexican Americans into working class status. She decided to write books that were inspired by her own childhood and her growing up in a big middle class Mexican American family. ⁵ *Family/ Familia*, published in 1999, is a story about a big family reunion of the Gonzalez family in San Antonio. In the beginning of the story, the narrator, a young boy named Daniel, says: "Sometimes when we worked together, my father liked to tell me family stories. I listened, but didn't really care. Sometimes I even felt bored. What did those people have to do with me?" (Gonzales Bertrand, 1999: 1) In the summer they go to San Antonio for a big family reunion, where all the branches of the family from Texas and from Mexico are invited. Daniel is absolutely not excited, and is bored during all the activities that his relatives planned. Later, his distant cousin, Brian, who does not even look Latino, but who sings beautiful mariachi songs, starts talking to him and the two become friends. Suddenly, the reunion becomes fun for Daniel, and he also feels proud to be part of such a big family, when one of his relatives makes a toast to the family:

"We all come from the same trunk of a family tree. Our grandparents, Ramón y Teresa, produced six children, They had children and grandchildren. We must not forget that all of us are branches of a strong tree. ¡Viva la familia González!" (Gonzales Bertrand, 1999: 23)

In the final raffle Daniel wins a framed picture of his great-great-parents, which now has a very deep meaning for him. Gonzales Bertrand closes the story with Daniel's thought: "We were all part of the same family, *la familia* González. We lived in different places, and some had different names, but we were all connected. And I was the lucky one who got to hold that connection in my arms all the way home." (Gonzales Bertrand, 1999: 25)

Uncle Chente's Picnic, published in 2001, is another book of Gonzales Bertrand's. It tells a simple story about how a sudden storm changed the picnic plans of a family,

⁵Cynthia Leitich Smith. "Interview with Children's and YA Author Diane Gonzales Bertrand". [Nov. 29th, 2010] http://www.cynthialeitichsmith.com/lit_resources/authors/interviews/DianeGonzalesBertrand.html

but it did not stop them from having fun. Uncle Chente, a truck driver, is coming to see his family on 4th of July and the family makes a special picnic for him. They prepare everything in the backyard, but because of the storm they have to move the party inside the house. Then the electricity goes out, so everybody agrees to move the party to the porch and eat there. Even though the celebration did not go as planned, the whole family has a good time listening to Uncle Chente's stories.

The book is full of Mexican American realia, the family sings Mexican songs like "Los pajaritos del verano", and they eat *frijoles and jalapeños*. At the same time, the reason for the celebration is Anglo-American, it is the celebration of the Independence Day on the 4th of July, and the family used decorations with red, white, and blue, and there are also hamburgers. Gonzales Bertrand fulfills her mission of providing Mexican American children with books about big Mexican American middle class families, which combine both the Mexican and the American cultures.

4.3 Mexican American Family in Children's Books

In this chapter we have seen a broad range of literature, which focuses on Mexican American children and youth. Some of the books were concerned with historical and socio-political context of Mexican Americans and their status of recent immigrants, second and third generation immigrants, and even those who have lived in the United States for many generations. Some of the stories were set in the rural areas, while other focused on urban life style.

The approach toward the themes depicted in the books varied according to the insider/outsider perspective of the author. In the earliest books the authors wanted to educate their readers and present them a different culture to read about, those were the melting pot books. Socially conscious books focus especially on the immigrant topics, such as the need of establishing a sense of home in a new country, hard living conditions, learning English and accessing formal education. Culturally conscious books often describe similar themes, but they pay special attention to the representation of the culture

they describe. In addition, they describe customs and tradition of the Mexican American community, as well as their legends and folktales. These books also often stress maintaining Spanish language by including Spanish words in the text, or even offering the story in both languages.

Arranging the books discussed in the chapter by publishing date clearly shows the change in attitude toward Mexican American characters in literature, because in many ways these texts are reflections of the times in which they were written. The earliest stories were clearly not directed on Mexican American (or Latino in general) readers, but Anglo-American children. It is almost a didactical material that teaches about diversity, Mexican American history and culture. The later books written by Mexican American authors are far less didactic, even though the authors clearly try to fight against the frequent stereotypes of Mexicans by presenting characters that are resourceful and family minded.

As was stated before, children's literature has an incredible influence on a child's view of the world. That is why authors of multicultural books for children consider it crucial to focus on minority characters in their books to teach their readers that diversity is not only acceptable, but even positive feature of contemporary society. In a similar way it is important to teach the youngest readers about the roles of men and women within a family, because as Kimberly Persiani – Becker says in her essays "Gender, Sexuality, and Equity", children create their ideas about gender and equality in their early formative years. "They are developing attitudes toward the appropriateness of toys, activities, and occupational roles based on gender." (Persiani – Becker, 2010: 102)

Almost everyone remembers books from their childhood where the gender roles were depicted traditionally: mother stays at home doing housework, while the father is the one who leaves for work early in the morning and comes back late in the afternoon. Also activities that boys and girls did in those books were strictly gender-specific: girls played with dolls, while boys did sports and adventurous things.

Gender roles are a very important issue in Mexican American families. As was previously mentioned, they are traditionally male dominated, while women are relegated

to secondary roles. The family is ruled by the concepts of *machismo*, *hembrismo*, and *marianismo*. While in the multicultural children's literature with Mexican American characters the religious aspect is often overlooked, the traditional gender roles can be seen more often than not. The melting pot books that were discussed in this chapter all depict mothers as caretakers and homemakers, while fathers work and provide for the family. Such is the case in *Manuel, Young Mexican American*, where Manuel's mother prepares lunch for the children and teaches Jimmy about the specificities of Mexican cuisine, or in *Seven in a Bed*, where the mother carries a big basket full of food, making sure the children have enough food for their journey. In the socially conscious books in this selection the situation is very similar, as was shown for example in the story *Home at Last. I Speak English for my Mom* talks about a single mother, who has to resume certain "male-specific" duties such as a daily factory job, and such situation is presented as something that one has to do out of necessity, but not as a standard, and the story depicts the negative aspect in which this affects the family.

However, in the culturally conscious books the authors attempt to change the perspective and create some modern approach to gender roles. Gary Soto's *My Little Car* (2006) tells a story about a girl who got a pedal car for her birthday, a toy that in the traditional children's literature would be given to a boy. But Soto tells a story of a girl and her car and not even once does he stop to explain why. The girl also does not treat her car very nicely, as would be expected of her gender, quite the contrary; she crashes it and does not clean it. But Soto thinks it important to show situations that are may not be common in children's literature, but happen quite regularly in real life. Similarly, in *What Can You Do with a Rebozo* an illustration depicts a father, who puts a dirty rebozo in the washing machine. This is, according to the traditional division of gender roles, a female task, but Carmen Tafolla considered it important to show that man also take part in housework. A quite a recurring theme in stories for children, especially in the most traditional fairy tales, is a feeble, passive woman, who has to be rescued by a strong, active man. In *Amigos del Otro Lado* Gloria Anzaldúa fights against this stereotype by creating the character of Prietita, who saves Joaquín first from being attacked by a group

of boys, and later even from the Border Patrol.

Apparently, these authors want to provide their readers with a different attitude towards gender roles. They present characters, which widen the array of activities that are considered appropriate for men and women. Persiani – Becker says that this is crucial, because children need to read books, which teach them about equity. Her essay introduces a list of points that children’s books should follow, such as presenting characters whose personalities are irrespective of their gender, not evaluating achievements based on gender, and different characteristics should be presented as “human rather than gender specific” (Persiani-Becker, 2010: 114).

In her essays “Gender Roles in Children’s Fiction” in *The Cambridge Companion to Children’s literature*, Judy Simmons talks about popular female characters, who reject their femininity, such as Jo March in *Little Women* by Luisa May Alcott or Georgina/George in Enid Blyton’s *Famous Five*. According to her these characters dislike whatever it is that makes them feminine, and desire to embrace their individuality, even if means to engage in activities that are considered male-specific (Simmons, 2010: 147). However, Soto, Tafolla, or Anzaldúa are not trying to reject the femininity or masculinity of their characters. They are merely widening the list of activities, which should be, according to them, acceptable for each gender.

But just as gender roles within the Mexican American family change in children’s literature, so does the image of the family. Books with older publishing date or stories written by authors, who are neglectful towards cultural specificities of the Mexican American community, often tend to describe nuclear families only, disregarding the fact that close-knit extended family ties are central to Mexican American culture. Culturally conscious books, on the other hand, portray extended families and especially stress the relationship between children and their grandparents, as does Rudolfo Anaya in the already mentioned book *The Santero’s Miracle* or Gary Soto in *Grandma and Me at the Flea / Los Meros Meros Remateros*, which is a story about a young boy, whose grandmother sells things at a flea market and through interactions with her fellow vendors he learns what a wonderful and kind person his grandmother is.

Kimberley Reynolds says in her essay “Changing Families in Children’s Fiction” that from a historic point of view, a change in depiction of families has already happened in literature. Up until the seventeenth century, families were portrayed as extended and even formed by people unrelated by blood, whereas later authors started to write about nuclear families. (Reynolds, 2010: 193) Of course this change describes literature by European and Euro-American authors about European and Euro-American families, and even Anglo-American authors who wrote melting pot books on Mexican American children followed that pattern, being influenced by the individualism of the families in their own culture. It was not until culturally conscious books began to be written, when extended families and even fictive kin started to be depicted in Mexican American literature for children.

Conclusion

The aim of this dissertation was to extend the literary analysis conducted in my Master's thesis and discuss the representation of the family in works by selected Mexican American authors. The thesis only analyzed four literary works, this dissertation allowed for the evaluation of a broader segment of Mexican American literature.

The introduction to the thesis presented the general theoretical background to the study of multicultural literature, based on the writings of Charles Taylor and Will Kymlicka. According to them it is crucial to focus the differences of communities that create today's society and study ethnic culture in order to broaden the knowledge of the majority as well as to acknowledge the value of the minority in question, which is essential for its self-determination. This provided the background for the topic of my dissertation, proving the importance of the study of minority culture, in my case Mexican American culture, specifically its literature, with a focus on the representation of the family.

The Mexican American family has the specificity of being considered either very nurturing, and thus judged positively, or, quite the contrary, viewed as a negative institution, which limits its members. In this dissertation I wanted to demonstrate how Mexican American authors represent these views in their works. To be able to talk about the image of the Mexican American family in literature, it was necessary to first focus on the Mexican American family as such. In the first chapter I therefore presented several statistics and research studies, which describe and analyze the position of Mexican American minority in relation to family. The statistics showed the importance of family for Mexican Americans, based on the median age, household size, and fertility rate. The following research then assessed the pattern of the family, based on the notion of

patriarchy, familism, and a high level of involvement of extended family. This chapter also closely described the institution of *compadrazgo*, which appeared in Norma Cantú's *Canícula*. Mexican American families are often presented as ruled by *machismo* and oppressive towards women. However, according to more recent studies that were addressed in this chapter, gender roles in Mexican American families become more egalitarian due to acculturation and the specific pattern of Mexican immigration.

After establishing the basis of the research by describing the Mexican American family, it was possible to move to the literary analysis and examine the way in which the family is described in specific works by Mexican American authors. The first area of literature I focused on were four literary works written by Chicanas. First I introduced the history of the Chicana movement, and then I addressed two collections of short stories and vignettes by Sandra Cisneros, *The House on Mango Street* and *Woman Hollering Creek and Other Stories*, and then two novels by Ana Castillo, *So Far from God* and *The Guardians*. Even though both authors center their writing on female characters, their view of family is entirely different. The picture that Cisneros creates in her stories is rather negative. She accuses families of being dysfunctional and not serving their protective and nurturing purposes. According to her the family is limiting for women, allowing them only one possible life path, and therefore becomes a source of stress and pain in case women choose a different life style. She emphasizes education and art as a way to independence and power, and suggests that women who live alone are more likely to achieve satisfaction than women who have a family.

The image of family in Ana Castillo's novels is quite different. Unlike Cisneros, who believes that the family is internally damaged, Castillo suggests that the family is still the safe haven, which protects and nurtures its members and it is only disturbed by outside forces which intend to break the unity that has been considered sacred for centuries. In *So Far from God* the daughters always return home to their mother, who is the central force of the family, and Castillo pays special attention to the indigenous spirituality, which gives strength to the women in the novel. And even though Sofi loses her daughters one after another, she never stops believing in the power of the family and never stops being

a mother, despite her other, possibly more socially important, roles. The importance of the family is the central theme also in *The Guardians*, where Castillo demonstrates the urge of the characters to recreate a family that has been destroyed by violence in the U.S.-Mexico borderlands. The fight of the characters against the evil things happening around them might seem futile, but the death of Gabo may represent a ray of hope for the future, hope that there is a chance for the family after all. Castillo therefore supports the theory that family is important for the Mexican American minority, but she suggests alternative families – one that is matriarchal, and one that is formed out of necessity.

The following chapter examined the role of family in autobiographical narratives by Mexican American authors. After addressing the ethnic autobiography in general I moved to the analysis of Norma Elia Cantú's *Canícula: Snapshots of a Girlhood en la Frontera*, and Francisco Jiménez' *The Circuit*. These two books are strikingly different: Cantú wrote stories about the individual members of her numerous family, sometimes without even mentioning herself. Jiménez on the other hand always puts himself at the center of the story, giving his family only the roles of supporting actors. Cantú's narrative is about the possibly happiest time of her life, while the latter recorded the hardest part of his life. Cantú's family did not have to struggle because they always had relatives to turn to for help. Also, as residents of the United States they never faced the fear of deportation, unlike the family of Jiménez, who were illegal immigrants. Both authors also have different motives for their narratives. In *The Circuit* the main theme is the hard life and working conditions of migrant farm workers, in *Canícula* Cantú recorded the slowly disappearing specific culture of the borderlands.

Cantú idealizes her family because she had a nice childhood. She does not mention any negatives, at least not in relation to her nuclear family. Jiménez obviously does not feel nostalgia about his childhood, because he spent it working in the fields, and experienced first hand the uncertainty and stress of his parents, who were not sure how to provide for their children. But even though their accounts differ in such a large number of aspects, both authors described their memories of growing up in loving Mexican American families, and made the life of their family the central topic of their writing.

The last chapter introduces the representation of the Mexican American family in children's literature, evaluating the view in three categories of multicultural children's literature: melting pot books, socially conscious books, and culturally conscious books. A wide array of picture books and story books for children, published between 1960s and 2000s, is presented in this chapter. When read closely, there is a clear change in the depiction of families in those books based on the time in which they were published. The oldest books often fall in the area of melting pot books, where the multicultural themes only serve the purpose of creating a sense of variety. The families in this category are presented as one-dimensional, fitting in the traditional gender roles, and no other aspects are mentioned. The families in the socially conscious books also respect the gender division, even though in some cases single-parent families are presented, where the mother has to assume both roles, however, this is viewed rather negatively. Culturally conscious books are more resourceful in representing Mexican American families, introducing not only nuclear families, but also extended family members, who have great impact on the children characters in the stories. Culturally conscious books do indeed depict the importance of family for the Mexican American minority, and try to depict these families accurately, with all the cultural connotations.

In these three chapters this dissertation attempted to present the different ways of representing the Mexican American family in Chicana literature, autobiographical narrative, and children's books, employing not only literary view, but also historical and sociological perspectives. Analyzing the way family is portrayed in these books proved that Mexican American family indeed is a controversial topic. Even authors, who come from the same line of thought, like Cisneros and Castillo, or authors, who in a similar form describe the same time period, like Cantú and Jiménez, show different attitudes towards family. The difference can also be seen in writings by other authors. Since every one of them has their experience with Mexican American family, they feel competent to present their subjective point of view on the issue. The frequency and extent, with which the image of family appears in Mexican American literature, manifests that it indeed is a vital aspect of the culture, whether it is portrayed negatively or positively.

The research presented in these pages deals however only with a fraction of Mexican American literature. There are many more areas for study that would provide interesting topics for further research. One of them is definitely the area of Mexican American gay authors. While lesbian authors have been addressed extensively because of the openness with which writers such as Anzaldúa wrote about their sexual orientation and how it affected their position in their community as well as their worldview, Mexican American gay authors tend to be far less open, but their work provides an equally appealing subject matter. Comparative analysis of the image of the Mexican American family in writings by authors such as Arturo Islas, John Rechy, or Tomás River would significantly extend the study of the representation of family in Mexican American literature.

Another attractive topic would be the image of family in early Mexican American literature by female authors. Writers such as Jovita Gonzalez, Maria Critina Mena, and Cleofas Jaramillo, who described the slow but dramatic change of the borderland region during the beginning of the 20th century, offer a fascinating view of the popular culture in the borderlands, life of the Mexican American community, its hierarchy, folklore, and the way this shaped the family. Mexican American folklore itself would provide an appealing topic, since the Southwest is a great source of legends, ballads called *corridos*, proverbs, riddles, and rhymes. Determining the traditional role of family in the Mexican American community judging by the way it is represented in the folkloric expression of the borderlands would create a captivating picture of the border region.

Aside from the area of literature and folklore, analysis of Mexican American family in American popular culture could reflect upon many of the contemporary television shows, such as *George Lopez*, *Ugly Betty*, or *Desperate Housewives*, where Mexican American families are in the spotlight or at least form one of the main characters. The fact that there are so many, as well as their popularity judged by the TV ratings and awards received, demonstrates the growing impact of the Mexican American minority on the nature of popular culture, as well as the centrality of the family for this group.

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