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ADRIANA MACEDO NADAL MACIEL

MIGRATION, CULTURE(S) AND IDENTITY(IES) IN SANDRA CISNEROS: THE CROSSING OF BORDERS

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ADRIANA MACEDO NADAL MACIEL

MIGRATION, CULTURE(S) AND IDENTITY(IES) IN SANDRA CISNEROS*:* THE CROSSING OF BORDERS

Thesis presented as a requirement for obtaining a Doctor of Letters degree by the Graduate Program of the Faculty of Letters of the Pontifical Catholic University of Rio Grande do Sul.

Supervisor: Profª. Drª. Maria Tereza Amodeo

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To my beloved sister Andréia. Your memory is a treasure I carry with me.

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There is no start.
No finish.
Everyone wins.

Sandra Cisneros

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BANCA EXAMINADORA:

_____
Profª. Drª. Maria Tereza Amodeo (PUCRS)

_____
Profª. Drª Sandra Sirangelo Maggio (UFRGS)

_____
Profª. Drª Vera Lúcia Lenz Vianna da Silva (UFSM)

_____
Profª. Drª Leila Assumpção Harris (UERJ)

_____
Prof. Dr. Norman Roland Madarasz (PUCRS)

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ABSTRACT

The experience of migration and the construction of hybrid identities is the main theme of this thesis, which aims at showing how these aspects are represented in some of Mexican American writer Sandra Cisneros' literary texts, namely the novel *Caramelo*, the short story *Woman Hollering Creek*, and the poem *Jarcería Shop*. The identification and the discussion of cultural aspects that are present in this process are also approached since they are a key element in the analysis presented here. The dynamics of migration, its causes and consequences are part of many controversial discussions in industrial societies of our times. This is an important discussion especially in a powerful nation like the United States of America, not only because it is the greatest recipient of immigrants in the world, but also because it carries the mark of the conquest of the American Southwest. Conceptions of culture and identity are intertwined in these reflections for the reason that they do not dissociate from these discussions as they are involved in the constitution of symbolic forms. The texts chosen for this study are of three different genres and they bring social and cultural practices of characters who experience migration in different forms, but who have in common the search for a better life. They illustrate the difficult crossing from one culture to another. In view of the fact that their main characters are female, they also offer reflections upon being a woman and accepting her own roots while inserted in a different environment and often times facing sexism, racism, and social prejudice. Cultural Studies provide the main theoretical framework used in this analysis. Stuart Hall's *The Question of Cultural Identity* and his *Essential Essays* provide conceptions and reflections on migrant communities, cultural identities and dislocated subjectivities. Alberto Melucci's *Il gioco dell'io* is considered in the discussion of identity in global society. Terry Eagleton and John B. Thompson's ideas and presuppositions around the conceptions of culture(s) are also included in this study, among other authors such as Denys Cuche, who approaches the notion of culture in the Social Sciences. The investigation demonstrated that the characters' experiences of migration and relatedness to it are crucial to the understanding of their internal conflicts which result from the presence of rather opposed cultural values. Additionally, not only cultural aspects matter in these characters' construction of hybrid identities, but also, and most importantly, the strong bond that connects them with their ancestors.

Keywords: Migration. Culture(s). Identity(ies). Chicano literature.

RESUMO

A experiência da migração e a construção de identidades híbridas é o tema principal desta tese, que visa mostrar como esses aspectos estão representados em alguns textos literários da escritora mexicana-americana Sandra Cisneros, nomeadamente o romance *Caramelo*, o conto *Woman Hollering Creek* e o poema *Jarcería Shop*. A identificação e a discussão dos aspectos culturais presentes nesse processo também são abordadas, uma vez que constituem um elemento chave na análise aqui apresentada. A dinâmica da migração, suas causas e consequências fazem parte de muitas discussões polêmicas nas sociedades industriais de nossos tempos. Essa é uma discussão importante principalmente em um país poderoso como os Estados Unidos da América, não só por ser o maior receptor de imigrantes do mundo, mas também por carregar a marca da conquista de seu Sudoeste. Concepções de cultura e identidade se entrelaçam nessas reflexões, uma vez que não se dissociam dessas discussões, pois estão envolvidas na constituição de formas simbólicas. Os textos escolhidos para este estudo são de três gêneros diferentes e trazem práticas sociais e culturais de personagens que vivenciam a migração de diferentes formas, mas que têm em comum a busca por uma vida melhor. Elas ilustram a difícil travessia de uma cultura para a outra. As obras *A identidade cultural na pós-modernidade* e *Da diáspora*, de Stuart Hall, fornecem concepções e reflexões sobre comunidades migrantes, identidades culturais e subjetividades deslocadas. *O jogo do eu*, de Alberto Melucci, é considerado na discussão sobre a identidade na sociedade global. As ideias e os pressupostos de Terry Eagleton e John B. Thompson em torno das concepções de cultura(s) também estão incluídos neste estudo, entre outros autores como Denys Cuche, que aborda a noção de cultura nas Ciências Sociais. A investigação demonstrou que as experiências de migração das personagens e o relacionamento com a mesma são cruciais para a compreensão de seus conflitos internos, os quais resultam da presença de valores culturais bastante opostos. Além disso, não apenas os aspectos culturais importam na construção de identidades híbridas desses personagens, mas também, e com elevada importância, o forte vínculo que os conecta com seus ancestrais.

Palavras-chave: Migração. Cultura(s). Identidade(s). Literatura Chicana.

CONTENTS

1 Introduction: The Starting Point

Writing a thesis is a great opportunity to put one's love for something to the test. It involves an arduous effort and a great degree of renunciation in order that the object can be construed, and the investigation fulfills its purposes. Furthermore, as writing is a social act, it is critical that it resonates somehow, not only bringing academic contributions to its readers but also evoking in them impressions of the positive and sometimes contradictory sentiments the writer feels about the theme.

Considering, on one hand, that a scientific work always starts from the curiosity of observing the world and taking into account, on the other hand, the idea that, according to Barthes, "the text is an object of pleasure and fruition once it gives you comfort and discomfort" (20), I begin with myself and with the backgrounds of how the Mexican American world attracted my attention and how Sandra Cisneros's literature captivated me.

Going to the United States for the first time, just after the tragic and historical day of September 11, 2001, I was surprised by the number of people that I saw who did not conform to what I considered a "typical American", that is, light-skinned people, with rosy cheeks and blue eyes, carrying surnames like Smith or Williams, or any other Anglo-Saxon last name I had seen in my courses and written material to study English in Brazil. Many of the people I had encounters with were instead more dark-skinned, dark-eyed and carried last names like García, Chávez or Martínez. Moreover, they sometimes spoke an English I had only heard in movies, like La Bamba, for instance, but had never heard spoken while I was studying American English. I was struck by

all that and was amazed at all the colors and the rich cultural blend I was getting in touch with.

I had reached Texas without knowing much about it – in my childhood I had seen the TV movie series called *Dallas* and I remembered how fancy and rich the protagonists were, going back and forth on big ranches with oil wells and wearing equestrian outfit and stylish cowboy hats. I can still remember the TV series soundtrack, which started just after the Brazilian TV show *Fantástico*[1], on Sunday evenings. It was time to go to bed but we, the children, insisted on watching a little more the stories involving JR and the beautiful Sue Ellen. I also remembered that Texas was the state where President John F. Kennedy had been assassinated and the place where Presidents George Bush senior and George Bush junior had beautiful ranches. I had seen that on TV. And that was practically everything I knew about that peculiar place in the United States.

I went to this small town, named Beeville, located in South Texas, in the Coastal Bend, near the city of San Antonio, just to name a more known city nearby. My husband was a PhD student doing research in Animal Reproduction at the Texas A & M Experiment Station, located in Beeville, and I went there to accompany him during this time. As we started arranging our accommodations for that period, I noticed that there was something very interesting about that place. It was certainly different from everything I had learned about the United States.

What first called my attention was the *Tex-Mex* culture, something I had never heard about before. People had *tacos* and *burritos* for breakfast and ate *carne guisada*, *enchiladas* and *quesadillas* for lunch at the college cafeteria. Flour or corn *tortillas* were served with everything (and they are products that sell more than bread

[1] The most watched Brazilian TV program on Sunday nights, on air since 1973.

in supermarkets). The food was all hot all around and if you were not used to eating spicy food as I wasn't, you could suffer at the beginning. Many were the names of businesses written with Spanish words or Spanish proper names: *AztecFord*, *Taquería Vallarta*, *Ortiz Roofing*, *Joe Hinojosa Paint & Remodeling*, *Car Buying with Carmen Huerta,* just to name some. Some of them included the statement *Se habla Español* or *Sí, hablo su idioma*, thus appealing to clients of Hispanic origin who prefer to negotiate using their mother tongue.

I also noticed that Spanish was the second language in many governmental offices, and, to my surprise and bewilderment, I often heard people speaking English with Spanish words in the middle of the sentence (*Is that your hija?)* or the opposite, people speaking Spanish with English words included (*Yo soy El Army*) and sometimes there were words or expressions or even weird sentence structures which were neither in Spanish nor in English and would only be understood in that particular place – *troca* for truck and *mi abuela's casa* for my grandmother's house. As I traveled around, the town names really called my attention: *El Paso, Refugio, Lavaca, Palacios*. When observing people on the street, in grocery stores or at the college, I realized that many of them did not conform to that stereotypical image I had of Americans and, in terms of skin complexion, eye and hair color, were more similar to people like me: a Brazilian young lady.

Taking all this into consideration, I must say that I sometimes asked myself: am I in the United States or in Mexico? Or am I somewhere in-between? And then, in my Spanish class at Coastal Bend College I learned with Mrs. Past, the Spanish instructor, that I was in a place that *had been* Mexico. And things started making a lot more sense. Texas had belonged to Mexico. Not only Texas but a great part of what is now the American territory, that is, the states in the American Southwest. So, a great part

of what was once part of Mexico is inside the United States. That started explaining why things were like that. All that influence and “Mexicanity” which I saw in that place could not be *only* the result of immigrants crossing the *Río Grande.*

Something then intrigued me: why is the United States, the most powerful nation in the world, usually associated with the Anglo-Saxon culture if a great part of its territory was once part of Mexico? Why did Mexicans or Mexican Americans suffer from discrimination if they were, let us say, in their original land? Why were those dark-skinned people treated as second-class citizens for so long if their ancestors were there since pre-Columbian times?

The answers to these questions I asked myself have to do with power and dominance, of course. We can find some of the answers in the roots of the conflicts which occurred in that region in the middle of the nineteenth century when the United States won the Mexican American war and purchased great part of the Mexican territory for a very low price, fifteen million dollars, according to historians George Tindall and David Shi in the book *America: a narrative history*, a publication of 1997. Some of the answers are also in the different immigration policies that allowed Mexicans (and other groups of immigrants) to enter the United States because the country needed a cheap workforce in order to develop its economy. And another answer lies in the fact that the American artistic manifestations that reach other countries seldom have grand representations of people of Hispanic origin. American movies, songs, or pop culture in general, until recently, with exceptions of course, have mostly depicted typical Americans as blonde and blue-eyed while the bad figures often times have been *Latinos*. The interesting thing is that many of these *Latinos* are American citizens since they were born in the United States of America. But, unfortunately, for many people, they are still seen as the Other.

However, mainly after the 1960s, in the wake of the Civil Rights Movement, the great and growing community of Mexican Americans – the Chicanos - with their richness of traditions and values have shown their creativity and the traits of their culture through many artistic manifestations. We can say that this art flourishes, at first, because of an internal necessity of emotional outburst and the need to fight for inclusion in a society that deprived this group of effective participation.

In the literary field, poets and novelists who approach this theme of living between these two cultures - Mexican and American – arise. One of the first to be recognized by the Literary Criticism was Rodolfo “Corky” Gonzalez, author of the epic poem *I am Joaquín*, in which he portrays the school experiences of young Hispanics, who were punished for speaking Spanish and for pronouncing their names correctly in their mother tongue.

Alberto Ríos and Rolando Hinojosa are other authors who bring to discussion problems related to living between two cultures. Beginning in the 1970s and 1980s, a considerable number of women writers started publishing - not only themes related to the migrant experience but also themes that include feminine and feminist issues. Among them we can cite Lorna Dee Cervantes, Gloria Anzaldúa, Denise Cháves and Sandra Cisneros, who explore traditional strengths of the Mexican American community and call the attention for the triple oppression of Chicanas as colonized women.

Even being still considered by many people literature of ethnic groups, the *Chicano* literary movement has crossed the borders of the canon and has found its room inside American Literature. The literature written by Mexican Americans, Chicano Literature, despite the fact that it gained more visibility after the Chicano Movement in the 1960s, had started much earlier.

Every piece of literary text written after 1848 by Mexican Americans about the experience of living between these two cultures can be taken as Mexican American Literature and consequently, Chicano Literature. According to critics Héctor Calderón and José David Saldívar, in the introduction of *Criticism in the Borderlands,* if Mexican American artistic forms were limited to political borders, they exist in written and oral forms since the Texas war against Mexico, in 1836, with more awareness in terms of cultural differences after the Mexican American war, which lasted from 1846 to 1848 (2). The researcher Sonia Torres explains in the book *Nosotros in USA* that there are records of Mexican American texts written in Spanish, dating from the nineteenth century (21).

Fascinated by this Mexican American universe, I can still remember when I asked Mrs. Past, my beloved Spanish instructor at Coastal Bend College, for reading suggestions. She promptly suggested that I read Rudolfo Anaya's *Bless me, Ultima* and Sandra Cisneros' *The House on Mango Street,* books that showed me that American Literature went much further than what I had studied or seen in academic anthologies at the university in Brazil. Sandra Cisneros' *The House on Mango Street* – one of the texts that I ended up analyzing in my Master's research, awoke in me the desire of studying narratives and other texts that not only bring the experience of migration but that also approach the construction of identity in this difficult journey of crossing cultures.

Taking this context into consideration, the present study, which was carried out at the Graduate Program of the Faculty of Letters of the Pontifical Catholic University of Rio Grande do Sul, is a cultural and theoretical analysis of Sandra Cisneros's literature. Its original contribution to knowledge stands on the attempt to think together migration, culture, and identity and how they are represented in three of Cisneros'

literary works, of three different genres, texts which were published in distinct moments of the Chicana author's literary career.

This research aims at showing how experiences of migration and the construction of hybrid identities are represented in three of Cisneros' literary works, namely the novel *Caramelo*, published in 2002, the short story *Woman Hollering Creek*, published in 1991, and the poem *Jarcería Shop*, published in 2022. As I center my attention in discussing these themes, I also understand that it is important to identify and examine cultural aspects that are present in this process.[2]

Taking the challenge to draw from historical, cultural, and literary contexts information, concepts, and reflections that lead us to better understand the themes discussed here, this research departs from a dialectical and interpretative approach in the sense that it deals with some of the central points of the comparatist concern, which are, according to the comparatist researcher Tania Franco Carvalhal, "heterogeneity, dynamic processes of cultural transformations and interpenetrations, as well as intersections of discourses" (67).

Considering that literature converses with other sciences on condition that it leans on interpretation to build a dialogical bridge with literary critics, I bring in this thesis elements of the sociohistorical context and their developments to support the reflections proposed. It is also relevant to point out here that the experience of reading Sandra Cisneros' literature as an ethical event accompanied by an aesthetic consciousness improved my comprehension of how powerful literature can be to make us review conceptions and preconceived ideas.

We acknowledge that Sandra Cisneros' literature has already found its room in American Literature and has been extensively studied in the academia in the United

[2] Since this thesis is written in English, I have chosen to use the Modern Language Association (MLA) format because it may help its circulation.

States since its entrance in the mainstream. However, we understand that the intended outcomes of this study may contribute to advance knowledge in the sense that it shares three expressive texts which reverberate their meanings and seek for even more visibility as they try to bring together literature and life as well as they attempt to bridge fiction and reality.

Having said that and in the light of what has been exposed so far in this introduction, I begin outlining the basic organization of this thesis, which has five chapters.

Following this introduction, I present, at first, a historical overview of migration and its main causes, calling the attention not only to the impacts of this phenomenon in the academic production of intellectuals but also in artistic manifestations, mainly in literature. Subsequently, I direct my attention to the situation of the United States and their Hispanic population, focusing on Mexicans and Mexican Americans, the Chicanos, whose relations with migration are thought-provoking and peculiar. I then bring a panorama of the development of Chicano literature within the United States Hispanic literature, showing that this literary production started long before the Chicano Movement of the 1960s. A section with information about Sandra Cisneros' personal life and her career as one of the most relevant Chicana writers closes the chapter and we start to understand how voices like hers surpassed barriers and could be heard outside the *barrio*.

The third chapter is dedicated to the examination of conceptions of culture and identity. It seeks to show how the notion of culture has undergone changes in its meaning throughout the social transformations of our civilization. The concepts presented are found in the works by intellectuals such as Terry Eagleton, John B. Thompson, Denys Cuche, Raymond Williams, and Michel De Certeau, relevant names

in the cultural scene. There is also a brief description of how the Cultural Studies searched for consolidation as a discipline as well as how some of its basic principles can be applied to the literary criticism. Cultural elements which are used in the interpretative study are anticipated so that they can resonate in the texts problematizing the difficult transit between two different realities. Furthermore, conceptions of identity are presented and discussed in this chapter. Among scholars like Homi Bhabha, Stuart Hall, and Zygmunt Bauman, Alberto Melucci provides ideas which account for an important source of research on identity issues. The chapter closes by offering reflections on how we can understand the human being who inhabits the contemporary world, approaching the idea of the fragmented and mobile identity of the postmodern subject.

In the fourth chapter, I attempt to reveal how the ambience of migration and cultural issues constitute, in an organic form, Cisneros' *Caramelo*, *Woman Hollering Creek*, and *Jarcería Shop*, verifying the adjustments and the accommodation of the social forces which are involved in the construction of hybrid identities, commenting some elements involved in the difficult crossing from one culture to another. Concerning the novel *Caramelo*, the attention is focused on the significance of family relationships and the effects of power on family life, also centering the attention on the *rebozo* (a Mexican shawl) serving as a metaphor for the familial connections present in the novel. The analysis of the short story *Woman Hollering Creek* concentrates on the several borders crossed by the main character and regards the legend of *La Llorona* not only as an element of identity but also of liberation. The study of the poem *Jarcería Shop* is centered on the speaker's search for home in Mexico of her ancestors and in her heart as well. The symbology of the objects she orders is what reconnects her with her Mexican cultural heritage and her Indian ancestry.

In the final chapter, the resumption of the main discussions of this thesis is carried out. In this section, the conclusions and the final reflections of this study are presented in a way that the discussions developed throughout the study and its problematizations are reviewed.

By bringing together insights into the nature of the migration process and the experience of being a migrant expressed in literature, this thesis seeks to explore issues that illuminate the attitudes and challenges of Mexican Americans. Additionally, given the breadth of the term “culture” and the developments concerning the notion of identity, we believe that the understanding of these conceptions is a productive way of identifying good topics for consideration in Cisneros’ literature.

I would like to point out that this is the research of a Brazilian Ph.D. candidate who comes from the very Southern part of the country and who, from a naturally partial viewpoint, sees all the issues proposed and investigated in this thesis with the heart of a *fronteriza*[3]*.* Being born on the border of Brazil and Uruguay, the daughter of a Brazilian mother and a *doble chapa*[4] father, this blending of cultures has always made part of my existence, going much further than understanding Portuguese and Spanish (or *Portuñol*[5]) on both sides of the border. I hope that the analysis proposed here contributes to the discussion of matters that not only have to do with languages and contemporary literatures themselves but also with societies, and here I am referring to the American, Mexican, and Mexican American societies, reflected in the literary pieces analyzed in this thesis.

[3] *A fronteriza*: a borderlander; someone who embodies two languages and cultures and moves smoothly between them (Urias 2018).
[4] *A doble chapa*: a person from the border Brazil-Uruguay who has double nationality, Brazilian and Uruguayan (Dorfman 261).
[5] *Portuñol*: a spontaneous register resulting from the occasional blending of Spanish and Portuguese because of momentaneous communicative needs (Garcia 555).

2 Migration, Literature, Mexican Americans

2.1. A Glance at Migration and Literature

Migration, a subject that has been the topic of several social and political discussions in many countries all over the world in recent years is not something new and has been with us since ancient times. Anthropological studies like the one carried out by John Fleagle in *Out of Africa I: the First Hominin Colonization of Eurasia,* a publication of 2010, suggest that pre-modern migration started when the *Homo erectus* began moving out of what is now called Africa about two million years ago. In many parts of the Scriptures, we learn about migratory experiences and one of the most celebrated crossings for the Judeo-Christian world is told in the Book of Exodus, when Moses led the Hebrews out of Egypt towards the Promised Land, a journey that lasted forty years of wandering in the desert. History books and sociological studies like the ones carried out by researchers like Massimo Livi Bacci in *A Short History of Migration,* published in 2012 and by Robin Cohen in *The Movement of Humankind from Prehistory to the Present,* a publication of 2021, indicate that a great number of communities moved searching for more fertile land and better environment conditions to grow their crops and raise their stock.

Other reasons for migration included natural disasters, slavery, human trafficking, wars and conflicts of all orders, including the search for religious freedom, which was the case of the Pilgrims to America in the seventeenth century. Another relevant reason that made people move, and now we are mentioning the following century, i.e., the eighteenth century, was industrialization. After the beginning of

industrialization many people moved from rural to urban areas with the purpose of working in factories. This phenomenon began in Britain during the time we call the Industrial Revolution and then it spread to other countries. People then started going from one place to another so that they could find opportunities to work or to find an occupation that resulted in a better wage, which meant, at the time, a job in industry and not a job to work on the land anymore, a situation that happens until our present days.

The abolishment of slavery in the Americas in the nineteenth century, together with long periods of food scarcity in Europe, as well as the improvement of transportation to travel overseas, attracted European workers to the agricultural areas in the Americas, where some governments passed laws granting areas of land to the newcomers. There was also the impact of the European empires. Imperialism and, therefore, colonialism led to the migration of people from the center of the empire to the colonies and then the migration of people from the colonies to the center of the empire. In the nineteenth century, large migration flows, especially labor migration, had their importance in the consolidation of several nation states. Later, because of this, policies to control those flows of migrants were adopted by nations that were considered central, especially when this phenomenon started turning into reasons for conflicts.

> The fact is that with the constitution and consolidation of the nation states in the nineteenth century, the demarcation of borders acquires growing importance and the modern ideology of the “national security” is born. It is important to point out that it is from this ideology on that the question of immigration starts to be treated as a “problem”, already in the twentieth century, with consequent

> policies of control of migration flows as well as stronger border control, done by the countries of the so-called “center”. (Porto and Torres 225)[6]

It is also relevant to mention that the consequences of wars, genocides, conflicts all over the world and diverse economic crises, some of them caused by the phenomenon of postcolonialism, had an enormous impact on migration. For the sociologist Stuart Hall in *Essential Essays*, “long before the age of European expansion (from the fifteenth century onward) and with increasing intensity since – the migration and movement of peoples has been the rule rather than the exception of global history, producing societies which are ethnically or culturally ‘mixed’” (98).

People have moved for many reasons and these constant movements modify the social foundations of a country, especially the country that receives a substantial number of immigrants. In this process, migration not only influences aspects of the new nation’s economy, politics and geography but it also influences its culture. “Among the huge number of the migrants, there have always been intellectuals and artists who had left their land willingly or by force and chosen another spot of this infinite world to live in” (Fatemeh and Abdolali 681).

Stuart Hall, the Jamaican intellectual who is one of the founding fathers of the Cultural Studies, migrated to England in his student days and is known in the academic world for his writing about the postcolonial diaspora and the cultural debate that comes with it. Another intellectual who experienced migration himself is Edward Said. Born in Palestine, he migrated to the United States with his family at a very young age and, from a privileged and at the same time painful point of view, he approaches a series of themes that are of relevance to migration studies. Both authors, along with some

[6] Originally written in Portuguese and translated by me.

other names like Homi Bhabha and Gayatri Spivak, who also had the experience of moving to central countries, are important figures in postcolonial studies today.

However, before the theme of migration caught the attention of intellectuals in the academic environment, many artistic manifestations had been produced, several of them in the literary field. If we consider, for example, some works written during the British Empire by authors like Rudyard Kipling (1865-1936) and Joseph Conrad (1857-1924), we can say that the theme of the movement of people has been present in literature for a long time. In the United States, for instance, Cuban author José Martí (1853-1895) and Puerto Rican Pachín Marín (1863-1897), who lived as immigrants in the mid-nineteenth century, wrote their texts approaching this theme.

Representations of migration in literature, or migration literature, go beyond reflections upon changes in places of residence. According to a scholar from the Department of Romance Languages and Literatures at the University of Notre Dame, “some of the constant themes that emerge in these works include nostalgia, transculturation, discrimination, racism, uprootedness, hybridity, and survival” (Moreno 1). In dealing with these issues, migration literature provides visibility to the complexities surrounding not only the problems concerning migration itself but also the problems involving culture and identity.

It is interesting to mention that what was once called literature of exile has had its identity reconfigured for that of migrant. Salman Rushdie, for instance, has adopted the term “(im)migrant to describe both his literary production and his personal experience of transculturation”, as it is stated by Carine Mardorossian in her article *From Literature of Exile to Migrant Literature* (15). Some other scholars argue that the term “migrant” problematically centers attention on the ethnic origin of the author and, in this sense, Sandra Vlasta, from the Johannes Guttenberg Universität Mainz

proposes “literature in the context of migration – providing analysis of texts and their content independent of the author’s background” (qtd in Burge 8). Regardless of what the reason of people’s dislocation is, the concept of migration as it is understood today includes voluntary or involuntary movement, so the experience of exile, forced migration and asylum seeking are also part of this idea and are represented in migration literature, as the scholars Fatemeh Pourjafari and Abdolali Vahidpour state:

> Whatever may be the geographical location of the migrant writer, in the mental landscape the writer is forever entangled among the strings attached to poles that pull in opposite directions. Even if a writer intentionally attempts at justifying one end, simultaneously, but unconsciously, there arises a longing for the other. This is the point that the fascination of the literature of migration lies in and that’s the point that cultural theorists and literary critics all agree. (685)

A question that arises is whether all the texts written by migrant writers represent indeed, migration literature. Another question is whether texts written by the second or the third generation of immigrants can be included in this category. Moreover, when we think about the specific situation of the Mexicans who, after the Mexican American War (1846-1848) and the Treaty of Guadalupe-Hidalgo in 1848, from one day to another, started living in alien territory without physically changing places of residence, we may say that the texts written by Mexican Americans about the experience of having the border crossing them, might be included in migration literature, especially because of the themes approached, several of them related to the migrant experience itself. Concerning this subject, the researcher Amy Burge, from the University of Birmingham’s Department of English Literature, informs that

> Gallien posits that refugee literature includes also the publications of former refugees turned residents or nationals, as well as those who have not experienced forced displacement, arguing that these tangential approaches are part and parcel of the corpus and provide a broader picture of the refugee crisis. White argues for two levels of migration literature: individual authors, and literary responses on a societal scale to the movement of people. Soren Frank also suggests a move away from migrant literature towards migration literature, arguing literature of migration is not written by migrants alone and that this shift supports a move away from authorial biography as the decisive parameter, emphasizing instead intratextual features such as content and form as well as extratextual forces such as social processes. (9)

These studies about migration are extremely relevant nowadays in a sense that the world has been changing a lot due to the innumerous situations that come with this phenomenon. Umberto Eco, one of the greatest intellectuals of our times, deceased in 2016, in a sort of prophetic essay, entitled *Migration, Tolerance, and the Intolerable*, which was originally published in 1997, assured that Europe, in a not very far time, would be a multiracial continent since it was already facing a great mix of cultures.

The author tells us to get prepared for the following millennium and not to get surprised if Europe becomes like New York (where the white population is on the way of becoming a minority) or some Latin American countries with different cultures coexisting – while some groups share their culture and customs, others live in separate districts and speak their mother tongue. But all of them “come together on the basis of some common laws and a common lingua franca, English, which each group speaks

insufficiently well" (pos. 962). He distinguishes the migratory movements between migration and immigration. In his perspective, the first are considered uncontrollable dislocations of certain people who abandon a place in order to settle in another, radically changing its culture. He mentions the example of the Italians and the Irish in America in the nineteenth century and also the example of the Turkish today in Germany.

According to Eco's ideas, the concept of immigration, on the other hand, refers to more politically controlled movements usually involving planning, acceptance, restrictions or encouragement. In this case, the individuals accept and assimilate the local culture more easily. As examples of migration the author mentions the barbarian peoples who invaded the Roman Empire in the fifth and sixth centuries and the European migration towards the American continent around eleven centuries later. Something that he points out is that although the European migration towards America was in part politically planned, he uses the term "migration because the European whites did not adopt the customs and the culture of the natives, but rather founded a new civilization to which even the natives (those who survived) adapted" (pos. 980). He adds that when there is migration there are no ghettos and the mix of people from different origins in uncontrolled.

> It is possible to distinguish immigration from migration when the entire planet is becoming the territory of intersecting movements of people? I think it is possible: as I have said, immigration can be controlled politically, but like natural phenomena, migration cannot be. As long as there is immigration, peoples can hope to keep the immigrants in a ghetto, so that they do not mix with the natives.

> When migration occurs, there are no more ghettos and intermarriage is uncontrollable. (pos. 994)

Today, due to this great mobility happening in many countries all over the world, it is difficult to define if they are classified as immigration or migration. What is sometimes seen as immigration, is actually, according to Umberto Eco's ideas, migration. In face of this difficulty to define whether certain phenomena arise from migration or immigration and considering that the effects and changes they bring to the industrial societies in terms of culture and identity construction are similar, we are going to use both words in this study. Following Eco's ideas, the word "immigration", in this study, is used more in terms of territorial movement of groups of people who go from one country to another while the word "migration" is used in a broader sense, since this concept brings the idea of cultural changes in the new territory.

In the case of the Americas, which is the territory approached on this study, official documents inform us that there have been three significant periods of immigration in our contemporary era. According to the Organization of American States (OAS) reports on international migration in the Americas, issued in 2017, the first of these periods goes until around 1950, when the countries of the entire American continent were destinations for immigration from Europe.

Many were the reasons that made whole families leave the old continent but there was something in common: the longing for a better life, which is, in other words, the search for survival. The idea of the "American dream" was not only limited to the territory of the United States but it included the other receiving countries in the Americas, especially nations like Canada, Brazil, and Argentina. The second period is from around 1960 on, when an increasingly intense emigration began from the

countries of Latin America and the Caribbean – which were facing continuous political and financial crisis - to developed countries like the United States and Canada in North America and also to Spain in the European continent. The third period mentioned in the OAS reports on international migration has to do with the few past decades, when a moderate trend of intra-regional migration has developed and has seen countries like Argentina and Chile become regional migrant-receiving countries.

Among the modern industrial nations, the United States is certainly the country that has the largest immigrant population. According to the 2020 American Community Survey reports available in the United Census Bureau webpage, the number of foreign-born populations in the United States represents 13.5% of the U.S. population, and the Hispanics are the largest racial or ethnic minority group. However, when we mention the Hispanic population including people who immigrated to the United States at some point in their lives, and people of Hispanic descent who were born in the U.S., the 2020 Census declared that the Hispanic or Latino population in the United States was 62.1 million in that year.

Facing this information and the knowledge that the United States is the greatest recipient of foreign-born population of all times, one might think that this great number of Hispanics in the American territory is *only* the result of immigration. No, it is not. A great part of what is today the American territory belonged to Mexico until 1848, when, at the end of the Mexican American War both countries signed the Treaty of Guadalupe-Hidalgo and Mexico had to cede a considerable share of its land to the United States. Different from what had been established in the Treaty, the Mexican population who lived in the occupied territory became a kind of second-class citizen and had its culture subjugated to the Anglo culture, suffering a kind of internal colonialism. Moreover, the expansionist policy adopted by the American government

at the end of the nineteenth century and its interventions in countries like Cuba and Puerto Rico had an important role in a massive migration of people from these countries to live and work in the United States.

The implementation of dictatorships in several Latin American countries after World War II also influenced in the arrival of so many Hispanic immigrants in the United States. A great number of people who were against the political regimes imposed to their countries of origin sought, in the United States, the possibility of living in a democracy and with freedom of speech. Later, mainly from the eighties on, even though they had the possibility of going back to their homelands after the end of the dictatorships, many of these people preferred to stay in the United States. Their countries of origin were immersed in problems such as unemployment, corruption, and violence and these people had already adapted to the American way of life.

Among these factors that have driven (or still drive) migration to the United States, one cannot fail to highlight the propaganda of the American dream, widespread since the first written records of the Pilgrims, used as an incentive to European immigrants in the nineteenth century and widely publicized by the media, mainly by the American cinema, from the twentieth century on. The idea of prosperity and financial success still populate the minds of many poor Latin Americans, who, without obtaining visas to enter the United States, countless times, spare no effort and risk their own lives to cross the border without official documents, thus elevating the number of illegal immigrants.

In *An Outline of American History*, issued by the United States Department of State, there is an old immigrant saying which affirms that “America beckons, but Americans repel.” As the current wave of immigration spills into the American

mainstream economically, politically, and culturally, the debate over these issues is increasingly sharpened.

These historical events and considerations, which are not only related to conquest, dominance, and power but are also important elements in the construction of a nation resonate in its traditions and manifestations of various types. In the literary field, the works written by those who are, in several ways, part of the experience of moving from one place to another offer powerful insights on not only the nature of the migration process itself but also on other issues such as the construction of cultural identity. In the publication *Writing across worlds*, the geographers Russell King, from the University of Sussex, John Connel, from the University of Sydney, and Paul White, from the University of Sheffield bring together their concerns as social scientists with the field of migration studies and literature.

> The migrant voice tells us what it is like to feel a stranger and yet at home, to live simultaneously inside and outside one's immediate situation, to be permanently on the run, to think of returning but to realise at the same time the impossibility of doing so, since the past is not only another country but also another time, out of the present. It tells us what it is like to traverse borders like the Rio Grande or 'Fortress Europe', and by doing so suddenly became an illegal person, an 'other'; it tells us what it is like to live on a frontier that cuts through your language, your religion, your culture. (xv)

The social context, with all its conflicts and ills, with a diversity of feelings and motivations, influences the artistic creation and thus, the representations in literature. As we configurate a theoretical discussion about migration experiences and the

construction of cultural identities among the Hispanics, and more specifically, about the Mexican Americans in the United States, we cannot help relating events, traditions and the people who played an important role in the history of the American continent. As an instrument of social interaction and reflection upon different cultures and contexts, literature offers to us the possibility of exploring the biography of a place and its population in a sense that the past can be revisited so that the present can be better understood via literary texts.

In this study, we are concerned about showing that through literary production, we are able to find elements that question what has been established around determined certainties since literature brings the possibility of subversion, of breaking barriers and crossing several kinds of dividing lines. The representations of migration, culture, and identity in Sandra Cisneros' literature, illustrate the difficult crossing of borders, whether they are geographic, cultural, linguistic or concerning identity. Moreover, her work offers reflections about being a woman and, despite the confrontation of sexism, racism, and social prejudice, finding her own voice and identity by writing.

2.2 Hispanics, Latinos, Chicanos: We Are All Americans

Despite the large representation in the population of the United States, the Hispanics are still considered an ethnic minority by the group of Anglo descendants, also known by the acronym WASP (White Anglo-Saxon Protestants). In spite of the idea of the "melting pot", spread mainly after the migrations of Europeans in the

nineteenth century, the Hispanic population still suffers racial and social prejudice. Hispanics are historically considered as belonging to an inferior race, having been harassed through segregation and marginalization. The WASP group got used to seeing them as subalterns, since they are the ones who usually perform the heaviest services, they are among the least prepared professionals and the population with less formal schooling. Speaking Spanish, until recently, as it was an indication of Hispanic origin, was a source of shame. Furthermore, there are reports that even the children and adolescents of Anglo origin were not encouraged to learn Spanish as well. In an autobiographical essay called *Hunger of Memory: the education of Richard Rodríguez*, published in 1982, the Mexican American scholar tells how a minority student who started school knowing only fifty words in English became a Ph.D. professor at a high cost, that is, with a painful alienation from his past, his parents, and his culture. His story demonstrates how excruciating this assimilation can be. An example of this pain can be demonstrated in the following excerpt:

> When relatives and Spanish-speaking friends of my parents came to the house, my brother and sisters seemed reticent to use Spanish, but at least they managed to say a few necessary words before being excused. I never managed so gracefully. I was cursed with guilt. Each time I'd hear myself addressed in Spanish, I would be unable to respond with any success. I'd know the words I wanted to say, but I couldn't manage to say them. I would try to speak, but everything I said seemed to me horribly anglicized. My mouth would not form the words right. My jaw would tremble. After a phrase or two, I'd cough up a warm, silvery sound. And stop. (28)

There is, in the United States, a policy of classifying people into groups, according to their ancestry. The hegemonic discourse classifies other Americans into ethnic groups, often times placing in the same level people who do not identify themselves as peers. Even having the Spanish language as a common trait, there are several Hispanic groups in the United States and the characteristics of their countries of origin are quite different.

The classification into ethnic categories is the result of the position that some groups occupy in relation to the others, because, according to Denys Cuche, a French professor of Ethnology at the University of Paris V, not all groups have the power to nominate and to nominate themselves (186). However, this ethnic label given to the Hispanics has not reached a consensus yet because of all the differences that exist among them. Professor Suzanne Oboler, a Peruvian American, in her book *Ethnic Labels, Latino Lives*, states that millions of people of a variety of national backgrounds are put into a single “ethnic” category, and no allowances are made for their varied racial, class, linguistic, and gender experiences (1).

Because the word “Hispanic” identifies the relation with the colonizer, there is also the use of the term “Latino” once it makes references to cultural characteristics. In spite of the debate over the term as well, Oboler brings the ideas of David Hayes-Bautista and Jorge Chapa who defend the use of the term Latino arguing that “the main unifying factor among the peoples of Latin American descent in the United States is political”(4). For the Italian sociologist Andrea Semprini, the term “Latin American” makes “an explicit reference to one of the sources of European civilization and its use in place of ‘Hispanic’ is the substitution of one ethnocentric term for another” (71).

Among Mexican Americans, there is the use of the term “Chicano”. Alfredo Mirandé and Angelina Enríquez in *La Chicana: The Mexican-American Woman* affirm

that the term “Chicano” is used to designate persons of Mexican descent living in the United States. While some argue that it derives from the Nahuatl for “Mexican” or “Aztec”, others say that it is a distorted or Americanized version of “mexicano”, meaning a tainted or contaminated *mexicano*. Mirandé and Enríquez observe that the word seems to have had a paradoxical meaning, that is, pejorative when used by outsiders and positive when used by insiders (10). Today, the term brings the pride and the appeal of the Chicano Movement of the sixties, the *Chicanismo*, which grew out of the Civil Rights Movement. Among the most exalted groups in relation to their Chicano pride, the choice is the term “raza”, the Spanish word for “race”. *“¡Viva la raza!*” is like a rallying cry for them.

The designation “Mexican-American”, for Mirandé and Enríquez is more palatable to Anglos than “Chicano” because it lumps such persons with the other hyphenated American groups, for instance, the Italian-Americans, reinforcing the idea of the melting pot (11). “Chicano”, however, emphasizes the singularity of this group because unlike the people who entered the United States voluntarily, Chicanos’ entry in the country was something demanded by the circumstances, that is, the result of the American takeover of the Southwest.

It is interesting to point out here that the Anglo conquest transformed the Mexicans who lived in what is today the American Southwest from a colonizing to a colonized people and brought about the almost total disruption of their way of life, as Mirandé and Enríquez observe:

> Power and control of major social institutions shifted from the Mexican to the Anglo-American. Treaty provisions guaranteeing the protection of land titles, water rights, and the cultural and religious autonomy of displaced Mexican

> citizens were either ignored or wantonly violated. Life that had once centered on the *presidio*, *rancho*, rural village, or collective now revolved around towns and cities and was motivated by a capitalistic ethic which stressed individualism and competition rather than collectivism and cooperation. (68)

Consequently, what was being historically and politically constructed in a region that had already suffered conquests and that, after military conflicts, had gained its independence from the Spanish crown, had a setback under this new subjugation. The researcher Rodolfo Acuña, in the fifth edition of his work entitled *Occupied America: A History of Chicanos*, published in 2004, observes that "apart from the impact of losing over half of their territory, the Mexicans had lost a measure of dignity. The wars left a legacy of hate" (58). For this historian, the consequences of this conquest go much further than the material losses. Besides losing a territory two-and-a-half times as large as France, containing rich farmlands and natural resources such as oil and several important minerals, Mexicans' respectability was enormously affected.

It is interesting to point out here that Mexico had already been marked for having endured dominance and subjugation. For the writer and philosopher Octavio Paz, in his book *The Labyrinth of Solitude*, Mexico suffers an inferiority complex because of its history of conquered people and also because it was created by miscegenation. As he mentions "the great betrayal with which the history of Mexico begins" (93), he poses the idea that the anguish of Conquest continues to subconsciously influence the Mexican thought.

Mirandé and Enríquez draw an interesting parallel between the conquest of Mexico by the Spaniards and the colonization of the American Southwest. The researchers mention that both the conquering Spaniards and the Anglos saw native

culture and institutions as inferior and worked towards imposing their own. They both used military force to have control and to render people who were politically and economically powerless. They were also driven by the idea that they had a divine mission and that they were the "chosen people who were subjugating an inferior race and culture" (9).

However, there are important differences which are also pointed out by Mirandé and Enríquez. While the conquest of Mexico is an example of a classic type of colonialism, in which a foreign power subordinates a distant place, the Southwest conquest was a kind of "internal" colonialism since the territory that was obtained was limitary with the United States (9). Moreover, in this internal colonialism, native elites and native institutions were dismantled, different from what happened in the classic colonialism, when these segments served as intermediaries between the crown and the colony. And finally, while the classic colony is legally recognized, the internal colony has only an informal existence (Mirandé and Enríquez 9).

Chicanos, then, were not colonized in the classical way. In their case, "the colonizer settled in the occupied lands and relegated the native people to the margins" (Torres 20). Because of the characteristics of the annexation of part of the Mexican territory in the United States, Chicanos suffered this different and unusual colonization, which made them residents of the United States, with formal equality but having to put up with an informal discrimination. According to Mirandé and Enríquez,

> The effects of internal colonialism are more devastating, precisely because the existence and legitimacy of native institutions or culture are not recognized. Informal mechanisms destroy the native way of life. One of the most effective

> mechanisms of destruction is benign neglect. The culture, values, and language of Chicanos have no formal or legitimate standing within American society. (10)

Around this conception of internal colonialism, we may observe that there were mechanisms of social oppression that cooperated for the obliteration of the Chicanos' identity and the disrespect for their culture. The employment of discriminatory policies associated colonialism to cruel and uncivilized practices, like racism, for instance, with consequences which are felt until our present days. Moreover, once this dominance was regulated, it generated prejudiced attitudes that strongly impacted the social and cultural practices of the Chicanos, thus harming their institutions as well as their way of life.

Deriving from this notion of dominance and from these relations of power between Anglos, the dominant culture, and the Chicanos, together with other groups of Hispanic people, positive and negative sets of values and beliefs produced differences in the social imaginary, which keep on being present in the social organization, thus generating injustices among the ones who are in uneven conditions. Labeling people from the standard defined by the ones who have power to nominate other groups operates in a way that endorses the functioning of societies through their differences and their relations of inferiority and superiority.

On the assumption that literature is an organic means in which sociohistorical and cultural views can be represented and registered, the literary texts belonging not only to Chicano literature but to the U.S. Hispanic literature in general bring the voices of those who had been silenced for so long throughout history. Despite the fact that Hispanic literature became more known and recognizable with the advent of

postmodernism[7] since it allowed silenced voices to be heard, this literature has an old history and, as Nicolás Kanellos, the general editor of *Herencia: The Anthology of Hispanic Literature of the United States*, highlights, "is so overwhelming that it would take thousands of scholars researching for many years to fully recover, analyze, and make accessible all that is worthy of study and memorializing" (1).

Concerning Chicano writing, diverse social practices are represented in this vital and distinctive literary field, which has been greatly influenced by its rich oral tradition in the *corrido*, or ballad form, especially when it comes to poetry. The themes of identity, social discrimination and the border culture are associated with the Mexican American world through different landscapes and ways of life that also stress traditional strengths of the Mexican American community. Moreover, this literary panorama is also delineated by the issues which are of concern of the Chicano Movement, like land property, rights for workers, educational and political equality, and also the struggle of Chicanas as members of a minority group and as women.

2.3 The development of Chicano Literature within U.S. Hispanic Literature

When we think about the United States of America, we usually associate the country with a population of fair skin complexions and to the WASP (White Anglo-Saxon Protestant) culture. We ignore, or maybe forget that great part of the United

[7] According to Brian Duignan in the Encyclopedia Britannica, postmodernism is defined as a late twentieth century movement in philosophy and literary theory that generally questions the basic assumptions of Western philosophy in the modern period (roughly the seventeenth century through the nineteenth century). It is characterized by broad skepticism, subjectivism, or relativism; a general suspicion of reason; and an acute sensitivity to the role of ideology in asserting and maintaining political and economic power. According to Baldwin et al, prefacing modern(ity, ism) with post- implies in some ways that the modern has been superseded, or that new activities are built upon the modern bases. Postmodernity might then refer to a society that still contains some modern aspects (it is not traditional) but which has added or developed a greater role for the mass media of communication or consumption (400). However, authors like Giddens, for example, reject this idea and suggest that the best description is late modernity.

States was settled by the Spanish following Columbus' arrival in the Americas and that during almost all the first half of the nineteenth century that part belonged to Mexico.

The Treaty of Guadalupe-Hidalgo, which is mentioned in this study, and the expansionist politics adopted by the United States from that time on gave another configuration to that territory. The Mexicans who lived in the region where is now the American Southwest when the Treaty was signed in 1848, were incorporated by the United States and became, quite abruptly, a type of second-class citizen in their own land. These Mexicans, who became Mexican Americans, were supposed to receive the same rights of American citizens.

However, instead, they suffered a kind of internal colonialism and were put to the margins, suffering not only racial but also social prejudice. Moreover, the expansionist politics of the United States, their influence, whether political or economic, over many other nations, especially the ones in Central and South America, made so many people of Latino and Hispanic origin migrate to the United States in search for a better life. A great number of these Hispanic immigrants is originally from Mexico, as this population keeps an ancestor bond with that land (it seems that they feel they are not breaking any law, since that part of the territory crossing the *Río Grande* is part of their lost continent), but Hispanics of Puerto Rican and Cuban origins are also in a great number due to the connections with the United States following the Spanish American War, which ended in 1898.

Among these misperceptions that we have about the United States and its literary production is that the literature produced by the Hispanic people in the United States is something relatively new. Although it has become more known since the second half of the twentieth century, when the literature of ethnic groups became more visible and started being studied at universities due to the impacts of the Civil Rights

Movement, the Hispanic literature itself started in the region where is now the United States a long time before, back in the 1500s, when that place was still called New Spain and Juan Ponce de Leon, a Spanish *conquistador* wrote his first diaries of travel. Then, many are the written records left by explorers, missionaries, and colonists, who introduced the Spanish language in the area which would later become the United States.

> The introduction of Western culture to the lands that eventually would belong to the United States was accomplished by Hispanic peoples: Spaniards, Hispanicized Africans and Amerindians, mestizos, and mulattos. For better or worse, Spain was the first country to introduce a written European language into an area that would become the mainland United States. (Kanellos 2)

By the time Mexico became independent from Spain in 1810, printing presses had been introduced, bringing progress to communications and publishing. During the Mexican period, considerable progress in terms of literate culture and education had been achieved by the population of that region, which already had publications of catechisms and other books, as well as newspapers. After the annexation of Texas, the Mexican American War, and the Treaty of Guadalupe-Hidalgo, we should consider that the texts written by Mexican Americans are already part of what has become Chicano Literature.

Although this study focuses more on the theme of migration and the construction of cultural and hybrid identities due to the characteristics of the texts being analyzed, we must remember that even though these are very relevant subjects in Hispanic Literature of the United States, the themes approached go much further and reach the

time long before these last forty or fifty years, when the Chicano Movement emerged and, along with that, the field of Hispanic literature became more known and studied in the academy.

> This literature incorporates the voices of the conqueror and the conquered, the revolutionary and the reactionary, the native and the uprooted or landless. It is a literature that proclaims a sense of place in the United States while it also erases borders; it is transnational in the most postmodern sense possible. It is a literature that transcends ethnicity and race, while striving for a Chicano, Nuyorican, Cuban American, or just Hispanic or Latino identity. (Kanellos 1)

By analyzing the literary texts which are classified as Chicano Literature, we can say that they developed out of the experience of being colonized and of suffering racial and social oppression. It is a literary expression that maintains a strong bond with Native Hispanic Literature, not only because it makes a lot of use of bilingualism but also because of the reference to the mythical place called Aztlán. Acuña explains that "some Chicanos say that it was in what is today the Southwest; others say it was in northern Mexico, around Zacatecas" (14).

Considered the earliest autobiographical account written by a Mexican American in the English language, *Personal Memoirs of John N. Seguín, from the Year 1834 to the Retreat of General Woll from the City of San Antonio 1842*, which was published in 1858, shows the conflicts suffered by Juan Nepomuceno Seguín (1806-1890), a native-born Texan member of the military and politician, who, after serving in the Republic of Texas and after becoming mayor of San Antonio, was considered a traitor and ended up seeking exile in Mexico. As Kanellos observes, Seguín was the

embattled and disenchanted political figure of the Texas Republic, who ultimately experienced great disillusionment in the transformation of his native land by Anglo-Americans, as it can be read in the following excerpt:

> A victim to the wickedness of a few men, whose imposture was favored by their origin, and recent domination over the country, a foreigner in my native land, could I be expected stoically to endure their outrages and insults? Crushed by sorrow, convinced that my death alone would satisfy my enemies, I sought for a shelter amongst those against whom I had fought; I separated from my country, parents, family, relatives and friends, and what was more, from the institutions, on behalf of which I had drawn my sword, with an earnest wish to see Texas free and happy. (qtd. in Kanellos 107)

In his narrative, Seguín attempts to demonstrate his sorrow over the persecutions he suffered because of his principles and political position. Additionally, the reader can observe that there is pain in his discourse, mainly because Texas, his own homeland, became a place of dissension and enemies.

Tensions and intercultural conflicts between Anglos and Texans of Mexican descent are illustrated in some other texts of this time and they appear in the *corrido* (ballad) tradition. Among the most known *corridos* are *Joaquín Murieta* and *The Ballad of Gregorio Cortez*, both written anonymously and both dealing with an epic Mexican American hero defending himself "against the injustices perpetrated by Anglos" (Kanellos 116). The Hispanic writer and anthropologist Américo Paredes (1915-1999) published an academic study entitled *With His Pistol in His Hand: A Border Ballad and Its Hero,* analyzing the *corrido* tradition and "narrating the heroic deeds of the

legendary figure of Gregorio Cortez, who confronted *los rinches* with only his courage and his gun", as Torres observes in *Nosotros in USA* (35). This classic work, published in 1958, "speak well for individual scholarly research combined with the interests of a bicultural, working-class community, a combination that helped mold Chicano studies in the seventies" (Calderón and Saldívar 5).

It is interesting to mention here that Américo Paredes' work is not only recognized in the field of Chicano critical expression. Besides being one of the most respected Hispanic scholars in the United States, he was also a fictional writer, publishing poems in Spanish in immigrant newspapers before writing novels in English. Some of his poems and novels, written between mid-1930s and 1950s, were only brought out to the public in the 1990s, perhaps due to their tone of social complaint.

Conrado Espinosa (1897-1977) is one of the first Mexican American authors writing about the immigrant experience. In his novel *The Sun of Texas,* published in 1926, he reveals the struggle of immigrants who, after suffering a lot in following their American Dream working in cotton fields, face the dilemma of returning to their land or not. For Kanellos, this novel of immigration, like many others of its kind, reveals the plight of the immigrant who discovers that the American Dream has turned into the American Nightmare, as it can be noticed in the following passage:

> He would continue day-dreaming, but a scream – a death cry – brings him back to reality. He regains his senses and sees how his woman falls, flat-out on the furrow, like an abused bag of meat without a soul. He sees how the children surround her and hears sobs. He sees how the foreman smiles from the awning that shades him and, furious and enraged, leaves the sack and runs towards

> his family. He lifts his wife so that someone can give her water; it is a lukewarm, nauseating water. He calms his children. The foreman laughs. (Espinosa qtd. in Kanellos 366)

As it is indicated in this segment, the family is not only suffering because of the conditions of the harvest, which caused extreme physical pain in one of the family members. The suffering is also because of the way they are seen and treated by their boss, who does not show any compassion at the situation and, instead of helping, mocks at them.

Newspapers and editorials are also part of the roots of Chicano literature and had an important role in developing an ethnic consciousness among the Mexican Americans. In California, for instance, *El Clamor Público*, which lasted from 1855 to 1859 and was founded by Francisco P. Ramírez wished to open the Hispanics' eyes for the fact that they were being treated as a race apart. Among its purposes was the defense against the negative viewpoint that Mexicans were unintelligent and uneducated and that they were incapable of developing their own lands, an idea that arose out of the Manifest Destiny[8].

El Clamor attempted to present an image of refinement and education that had been achieved by the Hispanic world and it also promoted the learning of the English language for the development of a "bicultural and bilingual citizenry for Mexican Americans" (Kanellos 8).

In Texas, Laredo's *La Crónica* became one of the most influential Spanish language periodicals at the turn of the century. Nicasio Idar and his eight children,

[8] The cultural belief that American settlers were destined to expand their territory. According to Tindal and Shi, at its best, this much-trumpeted notion of "Manifest Destiny" offered a moral justification for American expansion, a prescription for what an enlarged United States could and should be. At its worst, it was a cluster of flimsy rationalizations for naked greed and imperial ambition (395).

through the newspaper, led social and political causes for the Mexican Americans, going against racism and segregation and emphasizing the need for Mexican Americans to educate themselves. His daughter Jovita Idar (1885-1942) wrote about women's issues and defended the idea that women should obtain education and should become economically independent of men, as it is expressed in her article *We should work,* published in 1911:

> The working-class woman, recognizing her rights, raises her head with pride and confronts the struggle; her period of degradation has passed. She is no longer the slave sold for a few coins, no longer the servant. She is an equal to man, his companion; he is her natural protector and not her master and lord. (Idar qtd. in Kanellos 144)

We cannot help mentioning the native Hispanic press that also developed in the region of New Mexico, where the population of Hispanics outnumbered the population of Anglos in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. From within the group of newspaper publishers and editors, in fact, "sprung a cohesive and identifiable corps of native creative writers, historians, and publishers who were elaborating a native and indigenous intellectual tradition, which is the basis of much of the intellectual and literary work of Mexican Americans today" (Kanellos 9). History books and biographies registering life histories of important people as well as the evolution of New Mexicans are important documents of this endeavor to reinforce and consolidate Nuevomexicanos' identity. It's interesting to remark that during this period, there were some women authors who wrote about the culture and folklore of their regions with the intention of preserving their Hispanic heritage. In New Mexico, Nina Otero Warren,

Fabiola Cabeza de Vaca, and Cleofas Jaramillo represent, in their texts, this sort of nostalgic and ideal perspective.

In Texas, the authors who published with cultural preservation purposes were Adina de Zavala and Jovita González, women who came from privileged backgrounds – Adina de Zavala was a Texan statesman's granddaughter and a researcher on the history and legends of her region; Jovita González was a teacher and the first Mexican American woman to receive a master's degree in Texas. According to Torres, in her 2001 publication, even though they were quite criticized later by the Chicano critics because of their excessively romantic tone, their literature reveals their concern about the new way of life that was being gradually established by the Anglo culture (21).

In the 1960s, Luis Valdez (1940-), with his theater company *El Teatro Campesino*, inspired Chicano activists and used theater as a means of calling people's attention to the everyday problems of farm workers. As Sonia Torres reflects in *Nosotros in USA*, "*El Teatro Campesino* emerged strongly bound to the Farm Workers Movement and took the dramatization of the day-to-day of *campesinos chicanos* to its stage, as well as their struggles, like the famous grape boycotts in California" (22).

Tomás Rivera (1935-1984), another strong name and one of the first leaders of the Chicano literary movement, won the Quinto Sol literary prize with … *y no se lo tragó la tierra/… and the earth did not devour him*, published in 1971. About this novel, the researcher Hector Calderón emphasizes that it is "more than a denotative or literal representation of a period, for through the fragmentary plot readers are forced into reconstructing a historical logic and producing for themselves situations in which choices and judgements have to be made about traditional Chicano culture" (104). Alberto Ríos (1952-), a name of great prestige in poetry, due to his border background, shows in his poems reflections on what is to live in two different cultures. According to

Baym et al, “flavored with the music of Spanish and English, Ríos’ poems create a new landscape: a contemporary America beneath which lives an older way of life and the country of the imagination we discover in genuine poems” (2802).

The feminine voices are, as expected, in a lower number than the male authors. However, especially after mid-twentieth century, there was a considerable increase in the number of publications by women writers. Among the first Hispanic female authors of more expression in the United States, besides the names already mentioned in this study, there were writers who approached problems of class and gender, and some faced a lot of difficulties to see their texts published.

Leonor Villegas de Magnón (1877-1955), for instance, considered one of the very few women memoirists of the Mexican American and Mexican traditions, had her texts published only by her granddaughter, after years pursuing recognition. Maria Cristina Mena (1893-1965), who was born in Mexico and was sent by her family to live in New York City when she was only fourteen, acted as a translator of Mexican culture for readers of several American magazines. Being criticized by some for propagating stereotypes, she started showing the readers the problems faced by daughters and wives restrained by strict gender roles (Kanellos 429).

Sara Estela Ramírez (1881-1910), a Mexican teacher and poet who moved to the border city of Laredo, Texas, at a young age, left passionate speeches on behalf of labor and liberal causes at organizing meetings for farm workers, miners, industrial workers, and women.

Maria Luísa Garza (1887-1990), under the pseudonym of Loreley, criticized the Americanization of Mexican women in the United States through her regular column entitled *Cronicas Femeninas* in a newspaper in San Antonio, Texas.

In the wake of the Chicano Movement of the 1960s, a movement to liberate Chicanas started being shaped a decade later, as their male-female relations still relegated women to subordinate positions. Reflecting on the condition of the Chicanas while discussing identity issues and cultural matters within their communities, authors like Gloria Anzaldúa, Pat Mora, Denise Chávez, Cherrie Moraga, and Lorna Dee Cervantes emerged, situating themselves as voices against discrimination and oppression.

Gloria Anzaldúa (1942-2004) and Cherrie Moraga (1952-), as they published *This bridge called my back* (1981), created a space for exploring issues affecting the lives of women of color in the United States, “positioned as they were between the racism and classism of the mainstream feminist movement and the sexism of male-led ethnic movements” (Kanellos 247). Gloria Anzaldúa’s *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza*, published in 1987, became a must-read in Latino Studies for its distinctive hybrid nature. Her text, a blending of different genres like autobiography, poetry, history, mythical narratives, and theoretical knowledge written using different styles and blending English, Spanish, and other local dialects, “explores a mixed language that, according to Anzaldúa herself, is the only way in which the *mestiza* can legitimize her ethnic group”, according to Torres in her 2001 publication (32).

Showing great respect for Mexican cultural traditions and bringing the sensations caused by the nature of her homeland in Texas, Pat Mora (1942-) has an extensive production as a contemporary Chicana writer, being the author, among other genres, of numerous children’s books. Lorna Dee Cervantes (1954-), an author from California, is considered one of the greatest figures in Chicano poetry. The themes she uses range from social issues, identity, female independence until they reach broader themes like the difficulties of writing.

Denise Chávez (1948-), a New Mexican writer, is another important figure to be mentioned here, and along with Sandra Cisneros, has her name in the Norton Anthology of American Literature, a reference that gives great prestige to her work. The excerpt about her, when commenting Rudolfo Anaya's praise on her fiction saying that she is very well ranked in Chicano literature, adds that "it could be argued that the more universal quality of her voice and her situation as a woman is at least as strong as any regional or ethnic appeal" (Baym 2549).

Sandra Cisneros, the author of the texts which are the object of this study, belongs to this same generation of Chicana writers. Having her own writing style which shows her trademark lyricism, Cisneros shares with her contemporary women writers the themes that are common to the Mexican American world. Together, they divulge their stories and reflections on cultures, families, traditions, while they call their readership's attention to feminine issues, becoming ambassadors of a literary movement that celebrates art and diversity.

2.4 The House on Sandra Cisneros' Street

In large American cities, especially in those considered to be large industrial and commercial centers, there are neighborhoods where communities composed of the so-called "ethnic groups" live. Among these diverse populations we can point out the Hispanics or Latinos. In small and simple houses, there are generally large and poor families, many of them are of immigrants who share humble dwellings. Some of them are people born in the United States, so they are American citizens and then "documented" workers while many of them work as "undocumented", which means not having labor rights or governmental social assistance. A lot of them, especially

Mexican immigrants, are called *mojados* (or *wetbacks*), in a derogative way, a reference to the fact that these people had to cross the border by swimming the *Río Grande* River and got wet in the process.

For many of these Hispanics, despite several advances in terms of governmental public politics in the latest decades, the effective participation in the society is still an aspiration. For a considerable part of them, the American dream of success and prosperity is yet to come true: it is as if they lived in a world apart but within the most powerful nation on the planet.

It is in this difficult reality of the *barrio* that Sandra Cisneros, one of the most widely read and recognized Hispanic writer in the United States, was born in. The only girl among seven siblings, Sandra Cisneros was born in Chicago in 1954, the daughter of a Mexican immigrant, Alfredo Cisneros Del Moral, and a Mexican American mother, Elvira Cordero Anguiano. She grew up amid financial difficulties and witnessed sad and joyful stories in her community, living day by day with everyone's struggle to survive and long for a better position in society.

Both these *barrio* stories and the people she met have inspired her to write her texts, which bring themes such as the neighborhood life, the immigrant experience as well as issues related to identity, and topics dealing with feminism, love, oppression, and religiosity.

Concerning her formal education, Sandra Cisneros has obtained a degree of Bachelor of Arts at Chicago's Loyola University and a graduate degree in Creative Writing, issued by the University of Iowa's Writers Workshop. She has lived for many years in San Antonio, Texas, where she has also worked as a teacher, making use of her position to spread Chicana literature, mixing cultural issues with themes which are also relevant to the feminine world in her texts.

A few years ago, she moved to the city of San Miguel de Allende, in Mexico. The author, in her work, seeks to show the richness of characters that exist in this blending of cultures – Mexican and American. For this reason, Spanish words, Mexican holidays, typical Mexican food, and the devotion to the Virgin of Guadalupe are present in the lives of characters who, with the same love and respect devoted to their roots and their ancestors' culture, sing the American national anthem, and recite the Pledge of Allegiance to the United States of America.

Undoubtedly, Sandra Cisneros is today one of the most important Hispanic writers in the literary scene of the United States. Her name, as well as other names of Mexican American authors such as Alberto Ríos and Denise Chávez, appears in the Norton Anthology of American Literature, a basic book of reference in literature courses in colleges and universities all over the country, a fact that indicates that these authors are already part of the so-called American mainstream.

The House on Mango Street, her best-known book, has sold more than five million copies and it is required reading in American high schools, particularly in the South and Southwest, where the Hispanic community is more numerous. Celebrated as one of the great promoters of Chicana literature, Cisneros makes it clear that the presence of ethnicity is not only in what she writes. When posing for photos, she likes to wear items of Mexican women's clothing, such as a *rebozo* (a kind of shawl) or dresses worn in that country's folkloric ballet. Other times, she appears wearing earrings with the image of the Virgin of Guadalupe or any other ornament, for instance, a necklace, that refers to her ethnicity.

When she was still living in Texas, the fact of painting her Victorian-style house violet created a two-year court dispute with San Antonio authorities. Some of her neighbors in the historic district of King William claimed that the color was "historically

incorrect." Cisneros, however, arguing that violet is a pre-Columbian color, and it has a great significance for Mexican cultural heritage, managed to put an end to the debate. The controversy even became a case study and was published under the name *Case Study: on Painting a House Purple*. The document contains the following statement by the Chicana author:

> The issue is bigger than my house. The issue is about historical inclusion. I want to paint my house a traditional color, but please give me a broader palette than Surrey beige, Sevres blue, Hawthorn green, frontier days brown, and Plymouth Rock grey… I thought I had painted my house a historic color. Purple is historic to us. It only goes back a thousand years or so to the pyramids. It is present in the Nahua codices, book of the Aztecs, as is turquoise, the color I used for my house trim; the former color signifying royalty, the latter, water and rain. (not paged)

Curiously, San Antonio is considered one of the most Latin cities in the United States, with a large part of the population made up of Mexican Americans. The Hispanic culture can be seen on the streets, buildings, cafes, museums, and parks, even as a way to call the tourists' attention. However, back in the 1990s, when Sandra Cisneros had to officially justify painting her house purple, she realized how little the city historians and other San Antonio authorities knew about the traditions of *los Tejanos*. In an article entitled *Purple Politics: Our Tejano History Has Become Invisible*, published in 1997, the Chicana author expresses her disappointment:

> We don’t exist. My history is made up of a community whose homes were so poor and unimportant as to be considered unworthy of historic preservation. No famous architect designed the houses of the Tejanos, and there are no books in the San Antonio Conservation Society library about the houses of the working-class community, no photos romanticizing their poverty, no ladies auxiliary working toward preserving their presence. Their homes are gone, their history is invisible. (not paged)

She ends the document making a request to the readers, especially to the Texan residents, asking them to tell the stories related to their old houses and to investigate the layers that lie underneath those old walls. She even makes herself available to publish these stories and to offer them to the San Antonio Conservation Society, the San Antonio Public Library, the King William Association, the Historic Review Office, and the city of San Antonio. It is important to mention here that the theme of the house is a key concept for this author, who relates it to the building of an identity and to the feeling of belonging represented in her most acclaimed work, *The House on Mango Street*.

The House on Mango Street, published in 1984, is the first work that calls the critics’ attention and puts Sandra Cisneros in the spotlight. In vignettes which are profoundly significant, Esperanza Cordero, the narrator, describes the problems and difficulties faced on a poor street of a Mexican American community in Chicago.

Seen as a semi-autobiography, this work and other Cisneros’ publications bring up issues related to social prejudice and racial discrimination suffered by Latino immigrants as well as the sexism faced by Chicanas within their own families and communities. It's interesting to point out that Cisneros writes about the experience of

Latinos from a female perspective. The idea of using the house as a metaphor in this work came up when the author attended a literary workshop at the University of Iowa during a discussion on *The Poetics of Space*, by Gaston Bachelard. The researcher Sonia Torres, in an article published in 1997 about Cisneros' *The House on Mango Street*, observes that this was the moment when Cisneros became aware of her alterity in relation to the other colleagues, and that it was about this quality of being the Other that she should write (34). In a text celebrating *The House on Mango Street*'s tenth birthday, included in Cisneros' book of memories, *A House of My Own*, she says that Bachelard's book really impacted her:

> The conversation, I remember, was about the house of memory, the attic, the stairwells, the cellar. Attic? Were we talking about the same house? My family lived upstairs for the most part, because noise traveled down. Stairwells reeked of Pine-Sol from the Saturday scrubbing. We shared them with the tenants downstairs: public zones no one thought to clean except us. We mopped them, all right, but not without resentment for cleaning other people's filth. And as for cellars, we had a basement, but who'd want to hide in there? Basements were filled with rats. Everyone was scared to go in there, including the meter reader *and* the landlord. What was this guy Bachelard talking about when he mentioned the familiar and comforting house of memory? (127)

Besides *The House on Mango Street,* which is a narrative consisting of a series of vignettes (1984) and the novel *Caramelo* (2002), among Sandra Cisneros' publications there are poetry books, *Bad Boys* (1980*), My Wicked Wicked Ways* (1987) and *Loose Woman* (1994); a collection of stories, *Woman Hollering Creek and*

Other Stories (1991), short story books and books for children like *Hairs/Pelitos* (1994). After the publication of *Caramelo* (2002), Sandra Cisneros published *Vintage Cisneros* (2004), *Bravo Bruno* (2011), for readers "age 6 to 106", according to Cisneros' website, *Have You Seen Marie?* (2012), *A House of My Own: Stories from My Life* (2015), a collection of true stories, *Puro Amor* (2018), a story inspired by Frida and Diego's love story and *Martita, I Remember You/Martita, te recuerdo*, a story in English and Spanish, published in 2021. Her latest publication is *Woman Without Shame/Mujer sin vergüenza,* a collection of poems in English and Spanish, published in 2022, after twenty-eight years without publishing poems.

Her poetry and fiction have been translated into more than twenty-five languages, including Spanish, French, Dutch, German, Italian, Norwegian, Turkish, Serbo-Croatian, Chinese and Thai, among others. *The House on Mango Street* has been recently translated into Portuguese and it was published on May 2020 in Brazil as *A casa na rua Mango.*

Sandra Cisneros also writes essays whose theme is the construction of Chicano identity and the constant crossing of dividing lines, both real and metaphorical. In her work, the author uses the metaphor of the border to explore Chicano identity as an amalgamation, a fusion of Mexican and Anglo-American cultures, "a border culture", to use Gloria Anzaldúa's words:

> A border is a dividing line, a narrow strip along a steep edge. A borderland is a vague and undetermined place created by the emotional residue of an unnatural boundary. It is in a constant state of transition. The prohibited and forbidden are its inhabitants. *Los atravesados* live here: the squint-eyed, the perverse, the queer, the troublesome, the mongrel, the mulato, the half-breed,

> the half dead; in short, those who cross over, pass over, or go through the confines of the “normal”. Gringos in the U.S. Southwest consider the inhabitants of the borderlands transgressors, aliens – whether they possess documents or not, whether they are Chicanos, Indians or Blacks. (3)

Sandra Cisneros’ work has extensively been the theme of research papers in the Ethnic Studies and Mexican American Studies departments of the major universities in the United States and also overseas. Thesis such as Annalisa Wiggin’s *Rethinking the Historical Lens: A Case for Relational Identity in Sandra Cisneros’s The House on Mango Street* (2008) offers a rejection of the traditional borderland notion of the tragic and romanticized Chicana and proposes the creation of a relational identity model. Maria D. Ramirez’s *An Exploration of Dual Identity in Sandra Cisneros’s The House on Mango Street* (2015) looks into gender expectations and the complexity of having both Mexican and American identities. Guadalupe V. Linares’s *Unravelling the Rebozo: the Effects of Power on the Body in Sandra Cisneros’s Caramelo* (2010) explores the Western perceptions of the body and relates it to living in different times and spaces.

Adopting a historical perspective, Mariana Calazans’ *Sandra Cisneros’ Autobiographical Practices: the Simple Yet Intricate Art of Weaving Verdad with Puro Cuento* (2016) investigates the emergence and use of the literary genre autobiography, associated with modernity and its notion of subjectivity. Furthermore, among the articles that problematize the theme of migration and its developments in Sandra Cisneros’ work, we can cite Robin Ganz’s *Border Crossings and Beyond* (1994), Ellen McCracken’s *Postmodern Ethnicity in Sandra Cisneros’ Caramelo: Hybridity, Spectacle, and Memory in the Nomadic text* (2004), and Heather

Alumbaugh's *Narrative Coyotes: Migration and Narrative Voice in Sandra Cisneros' Caramelo* (2010).

Ethnicity, identity, memory, culture, gender, and Chicana feminism are also among the themes in several other articles which, besides offering reflections upon Sandra Cisneros' literary texts, celebrate and give visibility to Chicano/a Literature as a prolific field of study.

The crossing of borders, with the transit of so many different elements and the presence of dualities and oppositions, is constant in Sandra Cisneros' literature, which carries the mark of postmodernism by questioning and reconfiguring the historical discourse via literary text. Her work, clearly composed of cultural issues, problematizes, in various ways, the frailties of the social and economic forces involved in the construction of her characters' hybrid identities. In this sense, a broad view, and a general comprehension of conceptions of culture enhances the understanding of the notion of identity which is needed in the analysis of the literary texts selected for this thesis.

3 Culture(s) and Identity(ies)

3.1 Discussing Culture(s)

As we propose a cultural analysis of an artistic manifestation such as a literary text, many questions arise and lead us to reflect upon what that specific work wants to reveal to its public about the culture in which it was produced. We begin this section by putting into dialogue some conceptions of culture and their transformations throughout history, starting from the assumption that there is no unique and established conception of the term, that is, a definition that answers all the inquiries of the ones who are dedicated to dealing with the topic. As literary critics and as people interested in analyzing literature from movements of crossing cultures, we take on the challenge of seeking what the research in social sciences and humanities has postulated about such a plural concept.

In the first chapter of *The Idea of Culture*, the British intellectual Terry Eagleton mentions that "culture" is considered one of the two or three most complex words in the English language, and the term which is sometimes considered to be its opposite - nature – “is commonly awarded the accolade of being the most complex of all” (7). The complexity of both terms occurs because, although nature is currently considered as a derivative of culture, the concept of culture, says the author, is a concept derived from that of nature.

The author makes us reflect on some other words, such as the English word *coulter*, which is a cognate of culture and which means “the blade of a ploughshare”,

calling attention to the fact that “our word for “the finest of human activities” thus, is derived from labor and agriculture, crops and cultivation (7). In addition, the theorist points out an existing redundancy in two expressions that have “culture” as a component. One of them is "cultural materialism", because the word "culture" denoted a completely material process before it was related to affairs of the spirit. The other is when we talk about “culture and colonialism” since the Latin root of the word “culture” is *colere*, which can mean either cultivating and inhabiting to worshipping and protecting. The meaning of “inhabit” evolved from the Latin *colonus* to the contemporary “colonialism”, so there is a certain overlap when the terms “culture and colonialism” are put together.

> If culture means the active tending of natural growth, then it suggests a dialectic between the artificial and the natural, what we do to the world and what the world does to us. It is an epistemologically ‘realist’ notion, since it implies that there is a nature or raw material beyond ourselves; but it also has a ‘constructivist’ dimension, since this raw material must be worked up into humanly significant shape. So it is less a matter of deconstructing the opposition between culture and nature than of recognizing that the term ‘culture’ is already such a deconstruction. (Eagleton 8)

The word “culture”, thus, in addition to bringing marks of the history of humanity with regards to what is produced for its own survival, raises philosophical questions when reflecting on the interferences that humanity does in nature, in the environment in which it lives.

Bringing an analysis which is more focused on the transformations that modern culture goes through due to the penetration of the mass media in a world permeated by symbolic signs, the English theorist John B. Thompson in *Ideology and modern culture*, postulates that the concept of culture has a long history of its own, and the meaning it has today is, to a certain extent, a product of that history. Derived from the Latin word culture, the term has as its first meaning “the act, effect or way of cultivating” and was used in the Middle Ages to designate the activity dedicated to the raising, development and breeding of plants or animals.

Terry Eagleton adds that one of its original meanings is “husbandry” or the tending of natural growth (7). From the beginning of the sixteenth century onwards, “this original sense was gradually extended from the sphere of husbandry to the process of human development, from the cultivation of crops to the cultivation of the mind” (Thompson pos. 2656). In this way, the new meaning that the word acquires in the modern and Renaissance era is linked to the refinement of the human being and the search for an intellectual and artistic development - the so-called “high culture”, which refers to the Fine Arts and other manifestations relating to human and spiritual skills, such as music, architecture and literature. Later, with the improvement of anthropological studies and the development of Social Sciences in general, the word “culture” reaches a broader connotation and starts to include the creation and use of symbols that are part of the life of a certain group, that is, the actions, customs and habits of man as a member of a social group. Also, considering the moment in human history when these events happen and their influence on subsequent events, it can be said that culture involves a whole process of historical and social transformation.

Raymond Williams, one of the founding fathers of Cultural Studies, in *Culture and Society:1780-1950*, traces a history of the semantic changes suffered by certain

words, which are basic points for understanding the capitalist society today. Among these words is the word culture. About this term, the author states:

> (…) it had meant, primarily, 'the tending of natural growth' and then, by analogy, a process of human training. But this latter use, which had usually been a culture of something, was changed, in the nineteenth century, to *culture* as such, a thing in itself. It came to mean, first 'a general state or habit of the mind', having close relations with the idea of human perfection. Second, it came to mean the 'general state of intellectual development in a society as a whole'. Third, it came to mean the 'general body of the arts'. Fourth, later in the century, it came to mean 'a whole way of life, material, intellectual and spiritual'. It came also, as we know, to be a word which often provoked either hostility or embarrassment. (xiv)

In the quote by Williams, who is a theorist known for his political vision of art, it can be seen that the change in the concept of culture goes hand in hand with the change of paradigms of our western society. From these more recent conceptions, it can be said that in the middle of the twentieth century the meanings of the word culture had already acquired new significance. In addition to the meaning referring to agriculture, the word culture already referred to human intellectual development, the set of works and artistic practices as well as the ways of living of a certain group, that is, culture as a way of life. According to Williams' thoughts, these changes in the meaning of culture accompany social transformations throughout history.

> Raymond Williams has traced something of the complex history of the word ‘culture’ distinguishing three main modern senses of the word. From its etymological roots in rural labour, the word comes first to mean something like ‘civility’ and then in the eighteenth century becomes more or less synonymous with ‘civilization’ in the sense of a general process of intellectual, spiritual and material progress… It could also mean the intellectual refinement of a group or individual, rather than of society as a whole. (Eagleton 14)

Having this in mind, one can say that the concept has to do with good manners and morals. When people are civilized, they behave according to certain standards and ethics. As a synonym of ‘civilization’, ‘culture’ is a term that belonged to the general spirit of the Enlightenment and had the influence of the French and the Germans in its conception. The French ‘civilization’ typically included political, economic and technical life while the German ‘culture’ had a more religious, artistic and intellectual reference.

The French Professor of Ethnology Denys Cuche states that the human being is essentially a being of culture and that, in the evolution, which resulted in *Homo sapiens sapiens*, the first man, there was a regression of instincts, which have been progressively replaced by culture (10). Culture allows the man not only to adapt to his environment, but also to adapt that environment to the man himself, his needs and his projects. In short, culture makes the transformation of nature possible. The author also adds that the notion of culture applies only to what is human, offering the possibility of conceiving the unity of man in the diversity of his ways of life and beliefs, emphasizing unity or diversity (13). The studies of ethnologists have greatly contributed to the understanding of this relationship (unity/diversity) and also to the development of other

concepts related to culture, such as, for example, that of society and that of civilization. The “invention” of the scientific concept of culture, according to Cuche arises from inquiries made by sociology and ethnology about human specificity in the diversity of peoples and customs (33-34).

John B. Thompson, in *Ideology and modern culture*, distinguishes two basic uses of the concept of culture (pos. 2722). The first is the descriptive concept of the word, which originates in the writings of the nineteenth century cultural historians who were interested in the ethnographic description of non-European societies. These historians examined elements such as customs, skills, tools, arts, weapons, religious practices and the like of a tribe or people and offered a systematic description of how the gradual development of that group would take place. The descriptive conception, which is based on studies related to culture and civilization, has a scientific and systematic character.

Thompson summarizes the descriptive conception of culture as follows: “the culture of a group or society is the array of beliefs, customs, ideas and values, as well as the material artefacts, objects and instruments, which are acquired by individuals as members of the group or society” (pos. 2776). The author reiterates that the study of culture involves, at least in part, the comparison, classification and scientific analysis of these diverse phenomena. However, the problem with this conception lies in its method of analysis, in how its study should be carried out. Without a clear definition of this point, the concept of culture can become very broad and, consequently, very vague, thus losing the precision needed by the sciences.

The other basic use of the concept of culture pointed out by the author is its symbolic conception. Unlike the character of observation and, as the name says, description of the concept commented on earlier, the symbolic conception is more

concerned with making sense of the actions and expressions of social actors. One of the premises of this approach is that “human beings not only produce and receive meaningful linguistic expressions, but also bestow meaning on non-linguistic constructions - on actions, works of art, material objects of various kinds” (Thompson pos. 2794). Taking the anthropological debates proposed by Clifford Geertz as the basis for his discussion, the author further emphasizes that:

> Culture is a ‘stratified’ hierarchy of meaningful structures’; it consists of actions, symbols and signs, of ‘twitches, winks, fake-winks, parodies’, as well as utterances, conversations and soliloquies. In analyzing culture, we are engaged in unravelling layers of meaning, describing and re-describing actions and expressions which are *already meaningful* for the very individuals who are producing, perceiving and interpreting these actions and expressions in the course of their everyday lives. (pos. 2813)

In this sense, it is interesting to notice that in the symbolic conception of culture, there is a concern to seek what the actions and expressions practiced by certain individuals mean and, thus, make some considerations about the social group in question. The symbolic conception sees culture as the pattern of meanings embodied in symbolic forms, which includes “actions, utterances and meaningful objects of various kinds, by virtue of which individuals communicate with one another and share their experiences, conceptions and beliefs” (Thompson pos. 2827).

It can be said then that, while the descriptive conception works with a more comparative approach, seeking the classification and scientific analysis of the cultural phenomenon, the symbolic conception is more focused on the interpretation of the

meanings of everything that is part of the life of a determined group of social actors. From the definition of these two conceptions, Thompson proposes a structural conception of culture, that is, a conception that emphasizes *both* the symbolic character of cultural phenomena *and* the fact that such phenomena are always embedded in structured social contexts (pos. 2912).

He defines this cultural analysis as the study of symbolic forms - that is, actions, objects and meaningful expressions of various kinds - in relation to historically specific and socially structured contexts and processes within which, and through which, these symbolic forms are produced, transmitted and received. The cultural phenomena, then, becomes significant not only for those who live it, but also for those who analyze it. When considering socio-historical contexts and processes in the analysis of the cultural phenomena, analysts have the possibility to better understand and interpret the significant characteristics of social life.

The French theorist Michel de Certeau, when dealing with the cultural phenomenon, in his renowned publication *The invention of the quotidian*, refers to “mass culture” and “popular culture”. In this work specifically, he examines how people see culture, and he presents an analysis of how people individualize, transform or give a new significance to what they receive, whether utilitarian objects, books, language, rituals and even the planning of a city. These are everyday practices put into action. There is a focus on what the receiver - or the “user” - assimilates from what he receives and which, in a way, “subverts” when using it. These “ways of doing” constitute the thousand practices by which users reappropriate the space organized by the techniques of socio-cultural production (De Certeau 41). Rituals and representations imposed by institutions, for example, take another form when the so-called “ordinary” people take them and attribute a meaning to them. De Certeau points out that it is in

the activity of consumption and in the general use of things that people find opportunities to subvert the rituals and the representations imposed to them by the institutions. So, instead of “consumers”, he proposes the term “users”, since people more or less reshape what they receive.

The Jamaican intellectual Stuart Hall, in *Essential Essays*, mentions two different ways of conceptualizing culture, based on Raymond Williams' formulations. The first relates culture to the sum of the available descriptions through which societies make sense of and reflect their common experiences (49-50). In this sense, the concept of culture is no longer the sum of the best that was thought and said, it no longer corresponds to that ideal of perfection for which everyone aspired. In the second way of conceptualizing culture, according to Stuart Hall, the emphasis is on social practices. Therefore, culture

> is threaded through *all* social practices and is the sum of their interrelationship. The question of what, then, is studied, and how, resolves itself. The “culture” is those patterns of organization, those characteristic forms of human energy which can be discovered as revealing themselves - "in unexpected identities and correspondences", as well as in "discontinuities of an unexpected kind - within or underlying *all* social practices. (51)

So, for Stuart Hall, social practices are the key for the understanding of culture since culture permeates all social practices and constitutes the totality of their complex interrelationships.

Despite the differences in the concepts developed and proposed by authors such as Eagleton, Thompson, Cuche, Williams, De Certeau and Hall about what

culture is, they have a common basis: the difficulty of defining precisely what “culture” is and answer questions about the term. Thus, this conceptual imprecision accompanies the articulations around the problem of Cultural Studies as an expression of significant ruptures in postmodern thought.

Mainly after the nineteen eighties there was a considerable increase in the number of works that have culture as an object of study and that, in addition to reflecting on the media consumption and popular culture, cast their gaze on issues related to power, gender, sexuality, ethnicity and identity.

From that same decade on, Cultural Studies became institutionalized in the United States and started relying not only on a considerable number of scholars studying the subject, but also on departments dedicated to the discipline in prestigious universities in the country. Renowned intellectuals such as Fredric Jameson, Edward Said and Homi Bhabha deal with topics related to post-colonial studies, such as late capitalism, postmodernism, exile and imperialism. Their scholarly production is useful to those researchers who dedicate themselves to studying such themes, because, in addition to having a close connection with the studies of culture, they support the comprehension on the way identities are formed in the contemporary world. In the field of cultural criticism, Maria Elisa Cevasco, a scholar from the University of São Paulo points to the importance of seeing culture as the formalization of a complex of social relationships. It is a *locus* where it is possible to apprehend characteristics of the contemporary society and map ways to go beyond its limits (150).

For approaching the cultural phenomenon in a way that not only considers the social practices of the individual, but also their social displacements, their multiple subjectivities and for taking into account the relationships between dominant and dominated cultures, precepts of the Cultural Studies are used in this study about

Sandra Cisneros' work. As a methodology of analysis of the literary work, the studies of culture seek to go beyond the consideration of aesthetic standards and, at the same time, look for a social role of subversion of the traditional and the canonized within a historical context. As it happens in the political sphere, those who subvert are almost always part of the dominated group.

In the Western literary world, literatures which are classified as belonging to ethnic groups are still placed on the sidelines and their value as historical, political and social documents of a society are marked by oppositions. In this sense, in order to understand the relationships between these oppositions – center and margin – it is necessary to understand the role of culture within the literary work. In the study of cultural phenomena, many texts can be seen as the registration of customs, ideas and values which are shared by members of a community within a given historical period. Furthermore, using the cultural approach in the study of the literary work suggests an analysis of social, political, and economic forces in the fictional world which are closely related to the real world and that, in turn, may serve to reflections in the Social Sciences and the Humanities field as a whole. The examination of the relations between different cultures within the literary text reveals what is often hidden under the veil of the hegemonic discourse and collaborates so that ideas negatively preconceived about a culture are undone and receive a new configuration.

Culture is a fundamental element in the organization of society and must be seen as having a great social role in the construction of a fairer society. For the distinguished literary theorist and cultural critic Edward Said, "culture" primarily designates all those practices, such as the arts of description, communication, and representation, which have relative autonomy vis-à-vis the economic, social and political fields, and that often exist under aesthetic forms, with pleasure being one of

their main objectives (12). This intellectual, in *Culture and Imperialism*, states that cultural forms such as the novel, for instance, are of great importance in the formation of attitudes, references and imperial experiences. In this way and based on the assumption that nations are linked to narratives, it can be said that the several voices which are present in a novelistic plot carry (or, at least, carried) the function of shaping the idea that a nation has about itself and about the others. In many traditional Western narratives, for instance, heroes and heroines have a Caucasian physique while less distinguished characters have darker skin or indigenous physical traits, which can generate conflicts about the formation of the identity of these Others in white-dominated consumer societies.

Claire Kramsch, a professor of Foreign Language Acquisition at the University of California at Berkeley, in *Language and Culture*, when reflecting upon the sociocultural context of language study, states that culture, as a process that both includes and excludes, always entails the exercise of power and control. It resonates with the voices of the powerful and are filled with the silences of the powerless (8-9). The American nation, the great empire of our days, with the argument of providing service to minority communities in terms of social assistance, classifies them into ethnic groups and, quite subtly, places these citizens in an inferior social position. Citizens belonging to minorities are still excluded and segregated in urban ghettos, without proper access to public services and often times having to submit to precarious working conditions. When mentioning specifically the situation of mid-twentieth century Mexican Americans and Puerto Ricans, the Hispanic groups who carry with them the legacy of American postcolonialism more clearly, Oboler comments:

> Castigated for their differences in race and color, language and customs, their respective cultural legacies and sense of self were denigrated and consistently undermined in every area of their lives. Marginalized in segregated and neglected urban and rural ghettos, many had no access to adequate schooling, housing, plumbing, or electricity. Locked for the most part into low-paying menial jobs in canneries, factories, and fields, they were often limited to seasonal employment. (48)

Many of these issues are, in a way, represented in the literary works that are the object of this study, because, by problematizing the collisions between different cultures, they denounce the varied conflicts existing both in the individual sphere and in the social sphere. In Sandra Cisneros' literature, the strategies of social displacements between two worlds are imbued with the cultural phenomenon through practices that involve elements of duplicity in this difficult transit between two different cultural contexts. We can mention as one of these elements the very identification of the ethnic group represented in Cisneros' work, the Mexican Americans. Being a Mexican American is to be in this "in-between" place and, at the same time, to be aware that it does not exactly represent the place where you ought to be. The composite term is like a brand that identifies them as the Others.

It can also be said that the presence of duplicity appears in the fact that this group communicates in two languages, English and Spanish. This code switching became so constant that the hybridization of the language, a phenomenon that often happens across borders, in the United States takes place thousands of distances from it. The use of this hybrid language, *Spanglish* - in Texas it is called *Tex Mex* - is a

reality not only among Mexican Americans but also among the other groups of Hispanic origin.

The confrontation between cultural traditions of Mexicans and American customs may also generate conflicting feelings. On the one hand, there is a necessity to preserve customs and artifacts which are significant to the culture of origin; on the other hand, there is also the need to integrate into this new culture and become part of it, even if this represents the negation of the first. Living in the United States, a nation of considerable political and economic power, but not being able to appreciate many of its benefits and being placed at the margins reveals that even in the world's largest economy there are problems and difficulties faced by residents of emerging countries.

The idealization of their places of origin is another element of duplicity in the life of Mexican Americans as the homeland is always seen as the place where everyone wants to return one day. However, many, upon returning, realize they no longer belong to that place either, for their ways of life have already mixed with elements of the culture of the country where they live, causing the feeling of belonging and not belonging.

Sandra Cisneros' literary work brings all these elements. It also brings characters who question the ideology of domination of one culture over another, pointing, through the fictional text, to social issues which are present in a real-world environment. Besides this, even though Sandra Cisneros' established position of prestige in American contemporary literature, the classification of her work in the group of Chicano/a literature indicates the character of exclusion which is still present in the hegemonic discourse. It is seen, through the reading of her literature, that there is a search, on the part of the author, to rescue History, currently still committed to the

ideology of the mainstream, and an attempt to reframe the notion of culture in (and of) the United States. When examining contemporary texts written by Mexican Americans, we can reach the understanding that the production and export of the American image to other countries have been at the service of an ideological thought still linked to the maintenance of an imperialist culture. Thus, the literary production of these Others has contributed to create a critical discourse and make a historiographical as well as ethnographic review of the American culture.

Having presented these considerations, I may now proceed offering conceptions and reflections upon the notion of identity, another important issue being discussed in the cultural scene nowadays. The emergence of new identities, an issue widely discussed in Humanities and Social Sciences, comes to light especially in texts written by authors who belong to ethnic groups, and corroborates for a certain destabilization related to preconceived ideas, like, for example, the idea of an official literary canon.

3.2 Identities in Dialogue

To live in the borderlands means you
are neither *hispana india negra española*
ni gabacha, eres mestiza, *mulata*, half-breed
caught in the crossfire between camps
while carrying all five races on your back
not knowing which side to turn to, run from;

To live in the Borderlands means knowing
that the *india* in you, betrayed for 500 years,
is no longer speaking to you,
the *mexicanas* call you *rajetas*,
that denying the Anglo inside you

is as bad as having denied the Indian or Black;

Cuando vives en la frontera

people walk through you, the wind steals your voice,
you're a *burra, buey*, scapegoat,
forerunner of a new race,
half and half-both woman and man, neither-
a new gender;

To live in the Borderlands means to

put *chile* in the borscht,
eat whole wheat *tortillas*,
speak Tex-Mex with a Brooklyn accent;
be stopped by *la migra* at the border checkpoints;

Living in the Borderlands means you fight hard to

resist the gold elixer beckoning from the bottle,
the pull of the gun barrel,
the rope crushing the hollow of your throat;

In the Borderlands

you are the battleground
where enemies are kin to each other;
you are at home, a stranger,
the border disputes have been settled
the volley of shots have shattered the truce
you are wounded, lost in action
dead, fighting back;

To live in the Borderlands means

the mill with the razor white teeth wants to shred off
your olive-red skin, crush out the kernel, your heart
pound you pinch you roll you out
smelling like white bread but dead;

To survive the Borderlands

you must live *sin fronteras*
be a crossroads.

_____

gabacha – a Chicano term for a white woman
rajetas – literally, "split", that is, having betrayed your word
burra – donkey
buey – oxen
sin fronteras – without borders

Gloria Anzaldúa
Borderlands/La Frontera

The metaphor of the border has a relevant role in the literature written by the author considered in this study, the Mexican American writer Sandra Cisneros. Taking Gloria Anzaldúa's ideas in her study entitled *Borderlands/La frontera: the new mestiza* into account, we consider that the border is not only something physical in this author's work, but it is also imaginary and sentimental. The characters represented in Sandra Cisneros' work live on the border for we can say that they live "between": between two countries, between two cultures, between two languages. In this constant crossing from a universe to the other, the search for identification goes through the differences between what is to be Mexican or American and live in this gap that separates both nationalities.

Today, the cultural approach in literary works produced in the Americas, especially the ones which carry the theme of migration, have called the attention to the construction of these migrant communities' identity within a context that is still marked by discrimination. These minority groups have become more visible on the social sphere, and they search for the recognition of their identity while they question and, in certain extent, protest against the subaltern position imposed to them.

Late modernity societies are marked by the difference and therefore by different identities, by diverse positions of their subjects. Hispanic identity in the United States, historically subjugated to the Anglo identity, today goes through changes and searches for self-affirmation through different cultural manifestations and among them we can cite the literary narratives. Many of these texts can be seen as contestations, bringing a strong appeal to an identification of the Hispanics, and in the case of this study, the Mexican Americans, with their culture of origin. However, insofar as they contest, they try to find their room in the American society, inserting themselves in a context of more political and economic power.

When commenting this stage which the humanity is facing, when everything is "post", like postmodernism, postcolonialism, postfeminism, the remarkable scholar Homi Bhabha, a distinguished name in the cultural scene, argues that we find ourselves in the moment of transit where space and time cross to produce complex figures of difference and identity, past and present, inside and outside, inclusion and exclusion.

> The move away from the singularities of 'class' or 'gender' as primary conceptual and organizational categories, has resulted in an awareness of the subject positions – of race, gender, generation, institutional location, geopolitical locale, sexual orientation – that inhabit any claim to identity in the modern world. What is theoretically innovative and politically crucial is the need to think beyond narratives of originary and initial subjectivities and to focus on those moments or processes that are produced in the articulation of cultural differences. These 'in-between' spaces provide the terrain for elaborating strategies of selfhood – singular or communal – that initiate new signs of

> identity, and innovative sites of collaboration, and contestation, in the act of defining the idea of society itself. (2)

The literary texts studied here expose what is to live in these 'in-between' spaces through the experiences of the characters in them. Their intersubjective and collective experiences of *nationness*, community interest, or cultural value – and here we are using Bhabha's terms – are negotiated in the emergence of the interstices in these displacements.

These ideas dialogue with Stuart Hall's precepts around the notion of identity. His initial argument – and one that has been discussed a lot in the latest decades – is that old identities, which for a long time made the social world so stable, are now in decline and, because of that, new identities are emerging and fragmenting the modern person, who was once seen as a unified subject. As Stuart Hall hypothesizes in *Who Needs Identity? Questions of Cultural Identity,* published in 1996, if in the past the subjects had more fixed roles in the social world, with defined identities, this is not the case in the late modernity.

> The deconstruction has been conducted within a variety of disciplinary areas, all of them, in one way or another critical of the notion of an integral, originary and unified identity. The critique of the self-sustaining subject at the centre of post-Cartesian western metaphysics has been comprehensively advanced in philosophy. The question of subjectivity and its unconscious processes of formation has been developed within the discourse of a psychoanalytically influenced feminism and cultural criticism. The endlessly performative self has been advanced in celebratory variants of postmodernism. Within the anti-

> essentialist critique of ethnic, racial and national conceptions of cultural identity and the 'politics of location' some adventurous theoretical conceptions have been sketched in their most grounded forms. What, then, is the need for a further debate about 'identity'? Who needs it? (10)

For the acclaimed author, the answer to this question lies in the observation of two important aspects. The first one is the observation of something distinctive in relation to the deconstructive critique under which these concepts have been subjected so far. Once these concepts have not been substituted for more adequate ones, we still have to think about them, but now in a different perspective. The second aspect demands us to observe where the irreducibility of the concept of identity emerges. Here, the author calls the attention to the question of "agency and politics" (10). He declares that there is the necessity of a reconceptualization of the subject. It is important to think of the subject in a new position within the paradigm.

In a previous text, entitled *The Question of Cultural Identity,* published in 1992, Stuart Hall had already mentioned that a different type of structural change was transforming modern societies at the end of the twentieth century - and it still is. This change has been altering the notions that we once had in relation to class, gender, sexuality, ethnicity, race and nationality. "The argument is that the old identities which stabilized the social world for so long are in decline, giving rise to new identities and fragmenting the modern individual as a unified subject" (274). This means that our personal identities are being modified, affecting the idea that we have of ourselves as integrated subjects. This 'dislocation' or 'de-centring' of the subject, to use Hall's terms, is what brings about the so-called 'crisis of identity'.

But why is this happening? Why do individuals have this “crisis of identity”? Why are the notions and concepts that humanity once had as solid and certain acquiring a new configuration?

Several academic works in the area of the Social Sciences have been approaching the theme of identity under the perspective of postmodernism. In order to look for answers to the questions posed here, we consider relevant for this study to expose the ideas of a sociologist who is a psychologist as well, and intensely studied cultural changes and their relation to identity issues.

Bringing identity as a central theme and exposing the complexity which is involved in the attempt to answer to the “*Who am I?*” question, the Italian intellectual Alberto Melucci, one of the relevant social thinkers of the end of the twentieth century, offers important reflections on how we can understand the human being who inhabits the contemporary world.

Every time we question ourselves about who we are, we are dealing with our identity. According to Melucci, the term includes several meanings but there are three elements which are always present: first, the existence of a subject that preserves him/herself in time, free of environmental influences until a certain threshold; second, the notion of unity, which establishes the limits for the distinction between one subject and another; and, finally, the relation between two elements, which allows their recognition as identical (44). The author states that if we talk about identity, either if it’s of an individual or of a group, we refer to these three characteristics: continuity of the subject, regardless of the variations in time and of the environmental adaptations; delimitation of this subject in relation to others; and ability to recognize him/herself and to be recognized.

The interesting thing is that the individual can identify him/herself when he/she realizes he/she is distinct from the environment. Our notion of identity defines our ability to speak and to act, differing us from the others and remaining ourselves. However, Melucci argues that self-identification must possess an intersubjective recognition to be able to ground our identity. The possibility to differ ourselves from the others must be recognized by these "others" (45). The author adds that our personal unity, which is produced and maintained by self-identification, finds support in the group to which we belong, in the possibility of placing ourselves inside a system of relations. The construction of identity depends on the feedback coming from the others. Each one must believe that one's distinction will be, in every opportunity, recognized by the others and that there will be reciprocity in the intersubjective recognition: "I am to you the You that you are to me".

Critical situations are the moments when our identity and its frailties are revealed: when we are submitted to contradictory expectations, when we lose our traditional identifications, when we enter a new system of rules. For the scholar, these conflicts are difficult tests for our identity and can compromise it.

Our identity is, at first, an autonomous ability to produce and recognize our "self", as Melucci notes. We all see ourselves similar to the others, so we all recognize ourselves and can be recognized. At the same time, we can affirm our own difference as an individual. The paradox of identity is that the difference, in order to be affirmed and lived as such, presupposes a certain reciprocity (47).

We can say that identity is related to the way we see ourselves as individuals, but it is also related to the way we see ourselves within the family, the social group, the community, and the like. When we say that we recognize determined traits in us, we are pointing out characteristics that we carry and that place ourselves in the system

of relations we are part of. There are, of course, identity traits that we have been carrying since the day we were born. However, our identity is also related to what is constructed throughout life. Our identity then has to do with what one day, in the past, was established for us and has to do with what was constructed, with our own participation, throughout our existence. The professor at Open University, Kathryn Woodward, converses with this idea by stating that “in a certain sense, we are positioned – and we also position ourselves – according to the social fields in which we are acting” (30). The researcher mentions that there is, in modern life, a diversity of positions which are available to us – positions that we can occupy or not.

Considering identity within a group, Melucci postulates that identity is what assures the group or the society to which we belong its continuity and conservation (47). Identity establishes in time the limits of a group in relation to its natural and social environment. It also regulates the inclusion of the individual in a certain group, defining the requirements, the criteria for him to recognize himself and to be recognized as a member, the author declares. It is interesting to mention that, throughout history, the different tribes, the different social groups, with their characteristics and their culture, constructed their identities, building a sense of community that marks their shared identity and therefore makes them more connected and cohesive.

Identity is then, according to Melucci, the ability to recognize the effects of our action as ours and therefore, attribute them to ourselves. Identity presupposes, at first, that we have the ability to carefully think about ourselves (48). Our action is not a simple reflex of environmental and biological ties, but it produces symbolic orientations and meaning, which we are in conditions to recognize. It also indicates that we have a perception of causality and positioning as a group, that is, we are capable of

recognizing the effects of our action. This recognition allows us to appropriate what we produce with our action, exchange it with the others and decide its destination.

If it is true that our identity has its fundamentals uniquely in a social relation and that it depends on interaction and on reciprocal recognition between us and the others, therefore identity contains a tension between the definition that we have about ourselves and the recognition given by the others. Identity bears a divergence between self-identification and the identification given by the external environment.

When we are in a situation of exchange this distancing and tension are partly controlled because there is a certain reciprocity in the recognition. The exchange has its fundamentals in the principle that each one of us recognizes in oneself what is recognized in the other and vice-versa, within certain limits (Melucci 49). However, there are situations when this is not possible because the individual differences, the diversity of social positions, and the speed of changes upon us increases the distance which exists between us and the others. Reciprocity then becomes impossible, competition arises, and we enter in a situation of conflict.

The conflict breaks the reciprocity of interaction, it is a collision for something which is common to both opponents, but which they refuse to recognize to the other (Melucci 49). We start a conflict to affirm our identity, denied by our opponent, in order to reappropriate what belongs to us because we are able to recognize it as ours.

Every time that, in a situation of conflict, we find other people's solidarity and we feel part of a group, our identity is reinforced and guaranteed. We do not feel connected to the others only for having interests in common but also because this is the condition to endorse the meaning of what we do. Thanks to the solidarity that connects us to the others, we can stand as subjects of our own action and withstand the break that the conflict inserts in social relations.

Under the perspective of Sociology as well but focusing more on postmodernism and its implications, the sociologist and philosopher Zygmunt Bauman points out that the problem of identity is quite recent and came up to our days due to the crisis of belonging.

> … if you recall that only a few decades ago ‘identity’ was nowhere near the center of our thoughts, remaining but an object of philosophical meditation. Today, though, ‘identity’ is ‘the loudest talk in town’, the burning issue on everybody’s mind and tongue. (pos. 275)

He also postulates that identity is revealed to us only as something to be invented rather than discovered. It is an effort, an objective, a construction. As stated by him, identity is also revealed

> as something one still needs to build from scratch or to choose from alternative offers and then to struggle for and then to protect through yet more struggle – though for the struggle to be victorious, the truth of the precarious and forever incomplete status of identity needs to be, and tends to be, suppressed and laboriously covered up. (pos. 259)

This truth about identity is increasingly clear as the mechanisms that once hid it, do not hide it anymore; nowadays, the interest is more focused on building individual identities rather than public ones, according to Bauman’s postulates. The awareness about having an identity does not happen while one believes in belonging but when one thinks about an activity to be continuously done.

According to Bauman's ideas, there are so many identities to be chosen and many others to be invented in this liquid modernity. So, when we talk about the construction of identities, we are referring to an infinite number of possibilities. 'Belonging' and 'identity' are not guaranteed for the whole life; instead, they are negotiable and revocable. The decisions taken by the individuals, the ways they go through and the manners that they act are fundamental for the feeling of 'belonging' as well as for the 'identity'. The thought of having an identity will not occur to people as long as belonging remains their fate, a condition with no alternative (Bauman pos.198).

As the author reflects upon his own condition because of the peculiarities of his biography, he declares that he not only shares this fate with millions of refugees and migrants that are produced by our world every day. He also shares this problem that he investigates with practically every one of our liquid modernity, just to use an expression coined by Bauman himself. In these modern times, Bauman argues that "the world around us is sliced into poorly coordinated fragments while our individual lives are cut into a succession of ill connected episodes" (pos. 214). The intellectual then emphasizes that there are few of us - if there is anyone – who can avoid the passage through more than one community of ideas and principles and who are exposed to just one community of ideas and principles at a time.

We may gather, then, that dealing with all the identities we have is a complex task. We are sometimes totally and sometimes partially dislocated, and there are times we can feel we are nowhere – and the fact of having aspects that may be seen by the others as something different or strange may be an uncomfortable and disturbing experience. There are always things to be explained or there are things we have to apologize for; there are things to be hidden or the opposite, to be boldly displayed.

“There are differences to be smoothed or glossed over, or to be on the contrary made more salient and legible” (Bauman pos 227). The author then draws attention to the idea that some of our identities are of our own choice, but others are thrown to us by the people of our surroundings, and we have to pay attention not to disregard those identities that have been chosen by us.

> ‘Identities’ float in the air, some of one’s own choice but others inflated and launched by those around, and one needs to be constantly on the alert to defend the first against the second; there is a heightened likelihood of misunderstanding, and the outcome of the negotiation forever hangs in the balance. The more one practices and masters the difficult skills needed to get by in such an admittedly ambivalent condition, the less sharp and hurting the rough edges feel, the less overwhelming the challenges and the less irksome the effects. (pos. 230)

In this sense, one can even feel at home anywhere but, at the same time, one must accept the idea that it is impossible to feel totally and fully at home. One can complain of all this discomfort and hope to have some redemption or at least some peace, longing for what is called belonging. But one can also make of this fact of not having a choice a mission, a destiny which is consciously chosen and then get some benefit from that.

The discussions on the idea of belonging is something relatively recent to the sociological studies and comes along with the discussions on identity. We can say that the feeling of belonging is the subjective belief in an origin that unifies different people to a community or a place. This feeling of belonging can be recognized in the way a

group of people develop their activities and give meaning to them taking their social interactions into consideration. The interaction with the place is also very important once this idea is what makes people feel that they belong to a place and that the place belongs to them. Moreover, the feeling of belonging makes people believe that they can interfere and that it is worth interfering in the directions of their place.

This sense of belonging leads us to reflect upon national identities. Every time a person says, “I am from *this* or *that* country” or “I am *this* or *that* nationality”, the person is signaling the awareness of belonging to a group and the understanding of what a nation means. According to Hall in *The Question of Cultural Identity*, “these identities are not literally imprinted in our genes. However, we do think of them as if they are part of our essential natures” (291).

It was the organization of our modern societies that brought about the necessity of building a common feeling around a place and a community and therefore, construct what is known by a national identity.

Stuart Hall, in this same publication, tells us that the particular cultural identity that is of his concern is the national identity. He then posits two questions to be reflected upon: “what is happening to cultural identity in late modernity? Specifically, how are national cultural identities being affected or displaced by the process of globalization?” (291).

His argument is that national identities are formed and transformed within the representation. We know what it means to be a certain nationality because a nation is something that produces meaning. “It follows that a nation is not only a political entity but something which produces meanings – *a system of cultural representation* (Hall 292). The fact of being born in a place and thus, being a legal citizen of that place is not the only reason that makes this person participate in the idea of nation as it is

represented in its national culture. “A nation is a symbolic community, and it is this which accounts for its power to generate a sense of identity and allegiance”, according to Schwarz (qtd. in Hall 292).

Considering Schwarz’ ideas in *The Question of Cultural Identity*, Hall argues that this loyalty which was directed towards the tribes long ago was gradually transferred to western societies. “The allegiance and identification which, in a pre-modern age or in more traditional societies, were given to tribe, people, religion and region, came gradually in Western societies to be transferred to the *national* culture” (292). Regional and ethnic differences were gradually put under the nation state which became, says Hall, a powerful source of significance to modern cultural identities.

These identity issues, which are present in Sandra Cisneros’ literary texts, point out to the idea of the fragmented and mobile identity of the postmodern subject. The structural and institutional changes of contemporary society cause identities to collapse. A totally unified identity in all respects is something that does not exist. Instead, as the systems of meaning and cultural representation multiply, we are confronted by a bewildering, fleeting multiplicity of possible identities, any one of which we could identify with – at least temporarily (Hall 277). Considering this thought, we can say that within Cisneros’ characters, there are contradictory identities, pointing in different directions, in such a way that these identifications are being continuously displaced.

Concerning the group of Mexican Americans, the Chicanos, their experiences related to living between two symbolic communities must be considered as we endeavor to understand the construction of their identities. Caught between Mexican and Anglo cultures, this duality may bring discomfort and anguish, especially because, in this case, it is a relationship that has the stain of an internal colonialism.

The internal colonization of Chicanos means that they are culturally, politically, and economically oppressed as a group, according to Mirandé and Enríquez (118). In this respect, due to a historical heritage of subjugation, Mexican Americans still struggle to fight against problems like poverty and lack of opportunities. Facing obstacles like prejudice and racism because of their ethnicity, this disadvantage in relation to the other Americans gives them an inferior status in society.

Furthermore, dealing with two different sets of identities means that this community has to use two languages to communicate. Spanish is usually learned in the domestic environment while English, the country's official language, is generally learned when children go to school and need to interact with the external world. Often times, especially among younger generations, there is the feeling that speaking English well is a way to escape from the association with the Chicano's negative stereotypes. On the other hand, in their own Mexican American communities, not speaking Spanish can be seen negatively, as it indicates a rejection of part of one's identity. When commenting this duality, Anzaldúa states:

> *Nosostros los* Chicanos straddle the borderlands. On one side of us, we are constantly exposed to the Spanish of the Mexicans, on the other side we hear the Anglos' incessant clamoring so that we forget our language. Among ourselves we don't say *nosotros los americanos*, *o nosostros los españoles, o nosotros los hispanos*. We say *nosostros los mexicanos* (by *mexicanos* we do not mean citizens of Mexico; we do not mean a national identity, but a racial one). We distinguish between *mexicanos del otro lado* and *mexicanos de este lado*. Deep in our hearts we believe that being Mexican has nothing to do with which country one lives in. Being Mexican is a state of soul – not one of mind,

> not one of citizenship. Neither eagle nor serpent, but both. And like the ocean, neither animal respects borders. (62)

Being Mexican, then, is not only related to their place of birth. It has to do with what they feel about their origins and their sentiments towards what the Mexican nation represents to them as a whole.

For Chicanas, the construction of their identities involves even more elements. Due to the folkloric tradition of Mexico, there is the comparison of Mexican women either with the image of the saint, that is, the Virgin of Guadalupe, or with the figure of the traitor, i.e., Doña Marina, La Malinche, two archetypes that haunt the identity of Chicanas. However, it is important to mention here that, although the popular folkloric view labels her as a whore, an unnatural mother, and a betrayer, historical accounts indicate that she was an Aztec princess of noble lineage who became a Mayan slave and ended up being presented to Cortés when she was barely fourteen years old, according to Rodriguez (qtd. in Mirandé and Enríquez 25). Historical data revealing La Malinche's positive traits like generosity and benevolence have been used by some researchers in a move to stop her condemnation and to give new significance to this important figure for Mexicans.

Furthermore, for scholars Mirandé and Enríquez, the Chicanas suffer more than the double oppression of women who are part of colonized groups; in their case, it is a triple oppression (12). First, they are victims of an economic and political exploitation because the dominant group has subordinated Chicano culture. A second form of abuse is the universal oppression that comes from being female, something shared with women of other cultures. The third oppression happens because of a cultural heritage that tends to be male dominant. Even being important figures in decisions

related to domestic affairs, women usually have to subject to male authority due to the *machismo*, a characteristic still strong in Mexican and Chicano cultures and that still resonates in their identities.

As we reach the end of this chapter, we believe that the implications of the conceptions brought here as well as the insights and discussions presented in terms of theoretical presuppositions can go beyond the issues analyzed in the literary texts. Considering that literature expands our minds and our sensitivity insofar as it helps us deal better with the world's complexity, the themes approached, posited in dialogical relationship, lead us to a new signification of these physical and metaphorical borders involving Mexican and Mexican American universes within the United States of America.

4 The Crossing of Borders in Sandra Cisneros' Work

In Sandra Cisneros' memoirs, *A House of My Own*, she tells that when she was in the fifth grade, her teacher, Sister Mary Regina Immaculata of the Holy Ghost Most High, asked to see her mother. As Mrs. Elvira Cisneros got to the school as requested, disgusted because of all the domestic chaos caused at home due to her absence, the complaint from the Sister was this: "Your daughter is a daydreamer" (267). During that time, remembering that very word "daydreamer", for the girl Sandra Cisneros, was a painful thing. "A word worse than a stick or stone", she says. "It broke more than bones". Then, the author continues, in the following winter they had to move to another neighborhood, another school, "one with kind, compassionate lay teachers and nuns who discovered I was an artist and writer" (268).

I start the present chapter with this anecdote about Sandra Cisneros' life in order to highlight that the discovery of her artistic personality did not come without some suffering and pain, features that accompany the characters of the literary pieces analyzed here, in different doses, of course. However, the hostile forces of poverty, racism, and discrimination faced in the society contrast with the characters' nurturing families and affectional bonds at home.

In the texts analyzed here, namely the novel *Caramelo*, the short story *Woman Hollering Creek*, and the poem *Jarcería Shop*, Sandra Cisneros presents truth, *puro cuento*, sorrows, and dreams, as well as voices who find a way to be heard. Interestingly, the author never loses track of the movements which lead these texts' characters to assume an empowered awareness of themselves, going in for the transformation of the course of their lives.

Moreover, Sandra Cisneros cultivates a sense of warmth and naive humor for her protagonists, qualities that are evident in *Caramelo*'s Celaya, *Woman Hollering Creek*'s Cleófilas and in the speaker of *Jarcería Shop*. As migrant souls, their crossing of borders is vital for their awareness towards their cultural traits, for the construction of their hybrid identities and, most importantly, for the encounter with peace in their hearts.

4.1 The Novel *Caramelo*

The main objective of this section is the analysis of Sandra Cisneros' *Caramelo*, a novel in the form of a saga, containing the story of different generations of a Mexican American family. Like *The House on Mango Street* and other texts by Sandra Cisneros, this work marks the author's career by celebrating ethnicity while it brings issues concerning migration, belonging, social displacement, as well as the construction of hybrid identities, themes that are portrayed in several postmodernist narratives.

However, unlike Esperanza in *The House on Mango Street,* whose fictional universe is a defined space, that is, a poor street in a Hispanic community in Chicago, *Caramelo* brings the narrator and several other characters as real nomads, as people who are in this constant come and go between two worlds, Mexico and the United States, crossing borders which are not only physical but also spiritual. Always in the search for a dignifying way of surviving and continue their lives with decency and with a sense of identification, several of the novel's characters, including the protagonist, struggle in this in-between place which is the Mexican American world.

Caramelo is a book that exceeds four hundred pages, divided into three parts, which are also divided into chapters. Part One, *Recuerdo de Acapulco,* has an opening chapter, which is not numbered and then goes from Chapter 1 to Chapter 20; Part Two, *When I was dirt,* also has an opening section and goes from Chapter 21 to Chapter 51. Finally, Part Three, *The Eagle and the Serpent or My Mother and My Father,* has an introduction as well and it goes from Chapter 52 to Chapter 86. After the end of Part Three, there is a final section called *Fin* (The end) with only one story, offered to the readers as a *pilón*, "something extra tossed into your bag as a thank-you for your patronage just as you are leaving" (433). Then, the author includes a chronology with important facts for Mexicans and Mexican Americans as well as the acknowledgments, where the writer Sandra Cisneros even cites names of other Chicano authors as she thanks them.

In the first part of *Caramelo*, Celaya Reyes, the narrator, tells the readers about a family trip from Chicago to Mexico City and, along with that, she introduces her family members with a keen sense of humor, some bits of irony, and with the innocence of a child who believes (or is forced to believe) everything adults do is for the children's own good. As she describes a family picture which is on display on her parents' bedroom wall, she captures particulars that would not be perceived by most of her family members:

> The little kids, Lolo and Memo, making devil horns behind each other's heads; the Awful Grandmother holding them even though she never held them in real life. Mother seated as far from her as politely possible; Toto slouched beside her. The big boys, Rafa, Ito, and Tikis, stand under the roof of Father's skinny arms. Aunty Light-Skin hugging Antonieta Araceli to her belly. Aunty shutting

> her eyes when the shutter clicks, as if she chooses not to remember the future, the house on Destiny Street sold, the move north to Monterrey. (3)

The narrative begins with the yearly trip by the Reyes brothers and their respective families - all Chicago residents - to visit their parents Soledad and Narciso in Mexico City. These trips and all the events that take place during them operate as a source of inspiration for the girl Celaya, who seeks, through the stories she tells, to finish the caramel-colored *rebozo* that was halved when Guillermina, her great-grandmother, a talented *rebozera* (a shawl maker), died, taking with her the secrets about the most complex knots in the piece. This *rebozo*, which has not been finished yet and is the only object that links Soledad to her childhood days, is a key element in this narrative once it represents several of the qualities and attributes of the narrator's family.

The opening chapter in Part One is very meaningful as it comes with the image of a family picture taken in Acapulco during one of Celaya's family trips to Mexico. The portrait with the photograph is placed above Celaya's parents' bed, something which indicates that it is a special item in the Reyes' memories. Celaya describes the family members in the photograph and, after giving details of the landscape and telling what each person is doing in the picture, she reveals that she is missing in it: "No one notices I'm off by myself building sand houses" (4). Then, as she continues telling the story of this very photograph, she says: "It's as if I didn't exist. It's as if I'm the photographer walking along the beach with the tripod camera on my shoulder asking, - *¿Un recuerdo?* A souvenir? A memory?" (4). When comparing herself to the photographer who captured this image, the narrator seems to be placing herself in the position of the one who is destined to register the stories of her family, an idea that is shared by Ellen McCracken, as she states that "what is to follow, the chapter suggests,

is the untold story that the Acapulco photograph fails to tell, in which the author herself becomes a key character" (7). Additionally, the researchers Leila Harris and Bruno Ferrari, in *¿Verdad o Puro Cuento? Interweaving Memories in Caramelo, by Sandra Cisneros,* affirm that "it is up to Lala to inscribe herself in the narrative and forge, through her memories and those of her family members - as well as the present experiences - her own identity, always changeable and unfinished like the *rebozo* she inherited"[9](143).

It is interesting to point out that this same photograph will be mentioned again in the narrative at its end. As small talk is going on at Inocencio and Zoila's - Celaya's parents - anniversary party, and Celaya is telling someone that she does not appear in that picture because her relatives did not bother to call her, her brother interrupts her conversation with the following reprimand:

> What are you talking about? You weren't making sand castles, Lala. You want the truth? You were mad, and that's why when we called you over, you wouldn't come. That's the *real* reason why you're not in the picture. And I ought to know, I'm the oldest. (422)

Her brother's discordance with her version of the story behind the Acapulco photograph, reinforces an idea that appears in the beginning of the novel, just before the first Part - *Tell me a story, even if it's a lie* - and runs through the whole narrative: "The same story becomes a different story depending on who is telling it" (156). According to Guadalupe Linares, by challenging Celaya's interpretation of the photograph, her brother writes his own version of history. He defers to his ethos as the

[9] Originally written in Portuguese and translated by me.

oldest child to convince the audience, suggesting that memory becomes more permanent with age (3). The fact that he is the oldest son and then has a natural position of ascendancy over his youngest sister gives him authority to contest her.

In Part One of the novel, *Recuerdos de Acapulco,* the girl Celaya, or Lala, as her father addresses her, introduces her family members including not only her nuclear family, which consists of her parents, Zoila and Inocencio, and six brothers, but also her extended relatives, consisting of uncles, aunts, cousins, and her paternal grandparents, Soledad and Narciso. As she describes them, in her still infant language, she discloses many of the traits that her family has and places importance on this trip specially because it is when Soledad reveals Inocencio's secret to Zoila, something that is later mentioned in Part Three of the novel. The significance of family connections, *la familia*, and the preservation of familial ties among its members, although the existing drawbacks, is very clear in this first part of *Caramelo*. The fact that these sons, Soledad's and Narciso's children, immigrants in the United States, travel each year to spend the Summer visiting their parents in Mexico City indicate their consideration towards the elder family members – *the abuelos* - as well as their concern to be exemplary to the younger ones.

> Uncle Fat-Face's brand new used white Cadillac, Uncle Baby's green Impala, Father's red Chevrolet station wagon bought that summer on credit are racing to the Little Grandfather's and Awful Grandmother's house in Mexico City. Chicago, Route 66 – Odgen Avenue past the giant Turtle Wax turtle – all the way to Saint Louis, Missouri, which Father calls by its Spanish name, San Luis. San Luis to Tulsa, Oklahoma. Tulsa, Oklahoma, to Dallas. Dallas to San

> Antonio to Laredo on 81 till we are on the other side. Monterrey. Saltillo. Matehuala. San Luis Potosí. Querétaro. Mexico City. (5)

As the narrator is naming the cities in the itinerary of their yearly trip, we can infer that this might not be an easy journey since they are all traveling miles and miles in cars loaded with luggage and full of naturally energetic children. However distant, the sacrifice of traveling so far, facing the troubles and hardships of a long trip is worthwhile, since the grandparents' house in Mexico City represents their linkage to their Mexican roots. Many of the characteristics of the Reyes' relationships and the events in this part of the novel lead us to agree with scholars Mirandé and Enríquez, who point out that Chicano culture places more emphasis on *la familia*, which includes the immediate family and extended relatives, than does Anglo culture (107). Later in the novel, this idea is made clearer when, in a moment of deep anguish after having broken up with her boyfriend Ernesto, Lala sees La Virgen de Guadalupe in a dream and wakes up remembering her dad's advice:

> *Always remember, Lala, the family comes first* – la familia*. Your friends aren't going to be there when you're in trouble. Your friends don't think of you first. Only your family is going to love you when you're in trouble, mija. Who are you going to call?...* La familia*, Lala, Remember.* (390)

In the second Part of *Caramelo,* entitled *When I was Dirt*, we observe that the narrator's infant voice is not there anymore, and it has given place to the voice of an older Celaya recounting her grandmother's life story. Soledad, the Awful Grandmother, now as a ghost, helps the young lady in her narrative by interfering in what she tells

as Lala goes back to “the time of before”, to “the land of *los nopales*” (91), when Soledad was still a girl. In this section, we understand how an abandoned and suffering young girl turned into a grumpy old woman, feared by her granddaughter with the same intensity that she is hated by her daughter-in-law. Different from the first part, when we see Soledad as a mean and prejudiced person, the second part of the novel “serves to humanize the grandmother and explain the circumstances that have led her to this place” (Linares 5). After the death of Guillermina, Soledad’s mother, her father remarries and decides to send her away to live with his cousin Fina in the capital:

> Poor Soledad. Her childhood without a childhood. She would never know what it was to have a father hold her again. There was no one to advise her, caress her, call her sweet names, soothe her, or save her. No one would touch her again with a mother’s love. (95)

So, however young, fulfilling her obligations as a daughter, Soledad obeys her father and stepmother and does what is expected from her, even though this is not what she desires. This view, which somewhat converses with Octavio Paz’ ideas, present in the very well-known and debated *The Labyrinth of Solitude*, published in 1961, clashes with postmodernist precepts, which give a new configuration to the historical discourse. While Paz brings an essentialist representation of Mexican women, saying that because of their Pre-Columbian religious heritage and because of their anatomy, “the Mexican woman has no will of her own” and “is always vulnerable”, being “submissive and open by nature” (37-38), we can interpret young Soledad’s subalternity as a form of resistance and an act of transgression in favor of her own continuity, in favor of her own survival. Still a teenager, she meets young Narciso, her

future husband, and is taken to his house to work as a servant. She gets pregnant and when she has her first child, Inocencio, she realizes that she can love again and receive pure love in turn from her own child, since her husband Narciso is not loyal to their marriage and does not treat Soledad with the dignity and attention that a wife deserves.

> - Isn't he beautiful? *Mi rey*, my king, she cooed, smacking one fat foot with a loud kiss. – Someday you'll grow up to be a person of category, my fatty. Yes, my life, you were born under a star. You won't go barefoot like I did when I was little. No, not you. You're a Reyes, right? Aren't you, aren't you, my heaven. You're destined to be a king. (196)

Inocencio, more than any other of Soledad's son, represents her empowerment as a woman. Once her husband greatly disappointed her with his behavior, especially in relation to his adultery and unfaithfulness, Soledad decided to follow the advice given by the *tamal* vendor she had met the day she was desperate with jealousy: "Fall in love again. Like they say, one nail drives out another" (186). So, instead of grumbling and lamenting over her unrequited love, she directed all her sentiment and dedication to this new love, a bond that will remain strong until her last days. In Mexican as well as in Mexican American families, mothers are significant and influential figures and, according to Mirandé and Enríquez, "for children, their importance to the family takes precedence over that of the father" (113).

In Part Three, the final part which is entitled *The Eagle and the Serpent or My Mother and My Father,* Celaya describes the years Soledad lived with her family in the United States, following Little Grandfather's death. It is in this part that Celaya narrates

events that not only illustrate the difficulties of being a Mexican immigrant in the United States but also the conflicts that arise with the condition of being a Mexican descendant who is physically so far away from Mexico but who struggles to remain in touch, at least spiritually, with her ancestors' homeland.

> And this is how they talk to me:
>
> - Hey, hippie girl, you Mexican? On both sides?
> - Front and back, I say.
> - You sure don't look Mexican.
>
> A part of me wants to kick their ass. A part of me feels sorry for their stupid ignorant selves. But if you've never been farther south than Nuevo Laredo, how the hell would you know what Mexicans are supposed to look like, right? (352-353)
>
> …
>
> Look, I don't know what you're talking about when you say I don't look Mexican. I *am* Mexican. Even though I was born on the U.S. side of the border. (353)

The tension between Celaya and her group of classmates, proud Chicanas who claim their brown power, "making fists and chanting, - *¡Viva la raza!*" (354), is intensified after she tells the story of her great-grandfather who was from Seville. By doing so, she ignited a historical resentment in those girls, who see in the figure of Celaya, a girl who does not look Mexican and has roots in Spain, remnants of colonial supremacy. Mirandé and Enríquez affirm that "an overriding characteristic shared by Chicanas, in addition to their Mexican heritage, is a sense of marginality in an Anglo-dominated society" (12). Yet, because of their different backgrounds and because of Celaya's

classmates' ignorance, the girls do not recognize the similarities that they share with Celaya for being all Mexican descendants.

After Soledad, the Awful Grandmother, passes away, her spirit haunts Celaya as she grows into a woman. Threatening to take Inocencio with her to the afterlife when he has a heart attack, Soledad forces her granddaughter to tell her story so that she can be forgiven and be able to cross to the other side. Celaya, then, in exchange for some more years with the presence of her father, agrees to tell Soledad's life story and then becomes the Reyes family historian and storyteller, the one who is going to finish, at least symbolically, the uncompleted caramel *rebozo*. For Linares, this object represents Celaya's connection to her grandmother. "Though a physical and cultural border may separate the two, their stories remain tightly woven together" (6). From Part One of the novel until its third part, every time the caramel *rebozo* is mentioned, this connection is iconically enhanced. The *rebozo* then, becomes a cultural symbol because of its rich connotative meanings. The researcher Claire Kramsch observes that some signifiers like 'the French Revolution', 'May 68', 'the Holocaust' have simplified an originally confusing amalgam of historical events into conventionalized symbols. "The recurrence of these symbols over time creates an accumulation of meaning that not only shapes the memory of sign users but confers to these symbols mythical weight and validity" (22). Following this logical reasoning, the reappearance of this very symbol, the *rebozo inacabado*, from time to time in the narrative, and also in some of its crucial moments, establish, among the main characters and narrators, Celaya and Soledad, relations that give general meaning to their own experiences and the world they live in.

4.1.1 Just Like a Good *Telenovela*

In the first part of *Caramelo*, Soledad throws a birthday party for her oldest son, Inocencio (who turns out to be her favorite) and prepares a traditional Mexican dish to be served for all the guests. The sons compliment the mother for the *mole* she's prepared for them, using different adjectives - *delicious, rich, exquisite, excellent* - to describe it, and by doing so, they reinforce the idea that in Mexican families, mothers are not only to be obeyed; they have to be pleased and their efforts have to be valued even though the children have grown to adulthood: "This *mole* is excellent. I always say, there's no food like the one made by Mamá" (54). As the novel progresses, this attitude is reflected in other characters, who see in the mother a figure of authority, in spite of the fact that, this same woman, as a wife, is usually in a subaltern position. Many of the characteristics of Mexican and, therefore, Mexican American families in relation to family life and to the feminine roles within it find roots in Aztec society. According to Mirandé and Enríquez, "in both pre-Columbian Mexico and contemporary Chicano culture the woman is to be the hearth of the home; to be chaste, modest, honorable, clean, and, most importantly, to minister to the needs of her husband and children" (98). In the same segment, when Inocencio asks Soledad the reason why she didn't use the blender he had given her as a gift in the previous summer, she demonstrates this idea of servitude by reinforcing the cultural view that places women and men in separated roles.

> - The blender! Forget it! Not even God willed it! It never tastes the same. The ingredients have to be ground *by hand*, or it never comes out tasting authentic.

> These modern kitchen gadgets, really! What do you men know? Why, your own father's never entered in my kitchen. Isn't that so, Narciso?
>
> - I don't even know what colors the walls are, the Grandfather says, chuckling. (54)

From this quotation, the reader sees that Soledad understands that her role as a wife and mother involves physical labor and sacrifice. She rejects modernity because she thinks it devalues her work. Her husband Narciso, in turn, feels comfortable with being served and accepts his wife's attitude by being playful with his condition of not having to offer any sacrifice to serve his own wife and children.

The family, as a fundamental constituent of different societies, is an important element to understand cultures and to identify traits that contribute to the construction of one's identity. When *Caramelo*'s narrator brings the intricate relationships and the experiences portrayed in the Reyes family and relates them to traditional practices and historical events which are part of the Mexican American world, she not only refers to biased ideas about Mexicans and Mexican Americans, but she also questions them and tries to give them a new construct. In passages when characters demonstrate the complexity of their familial connections, we are asked to reflect upon how Western societies see families and understand the role of family members in this social group. The developments, in terms of culture, that arise from this reflection can be analyzed via ideas presented in John B. Thompson's *Ideology and Modern Culture.*

In the section entitled *The Concept of Culture*, Thompson postulates that several analysts agree that the study of cultural phenomena is a preoccupation of central importance for the social sciences. He adds that social life is not simply a matter of objects and facts that occur naturally. Thompson postulates that

> it is also a matter of meaningful actions and expressions, of utterances, symbols, texts and artefacts of various kinds, and of subjects who express themselves through these artefacts and who seek to understand themselves and others by interpreting the expressions they produce and receive. (pos. 2615)

Thompson explains that the study of cultural phenomena might be thought as the study of the social-historical world, which is constituted as a field of significant items. In his view, the study of cultural phenomena can be seen as the study of the ways of how meaningful expressions of several kinds can be produced, constructed, and received by individuals who are situated in a social-historical world. Though the author distinguishes four basic classifications for the concept of culture (the classical conception, the descriptive conception, the symbolic conception, and a structural conception), his point is that the four classifications are ultimately linked. The classical conception came up among the German philosophers and historians of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries and it refers to the process of intellectual and spiritual development. Anthropological studies gave place to the descriptive and symbolic conceptions: the descriptive conception refers to a varied set of values, beliefs, mores, conventions, habits, and practices which are characteristic of a given society or of a certain time in history; and the symbolic conception changes the focus occupying itself with symbolism. In the structural conception, which was formulated by Thompson, the emphasis is in both the symbolic character of the cultural phenomena and the fact that these cultural phenomena are inserted in structured social historical contexts.

In *Caramelo*, we observe that the family relationships which are present in the narrative indicate that, in spite of the existing affection among family members, the effects of power on family life are the result of prejudiced, sexist, and oppressive societies. Mexican and Mexican American societies, heirs of a colonial system which historically repressed them are every so often pictured in the interpersonal relations that permeate the novel. Soledad, the Awful Grandmother, represents the adult figure of dominance over the lives of her children and the younger members of her family. Though her sons are already adults and have their own offspring, the matriarch rules and imposes her will concerning the affairs around the sons' visit to her house. Inocencio, her first born and favorite child, is the one whose life she mostly interferes, perhaps because of the strong bond that they maintain. "Father always does whatever the Grandmother orders" (22), says the narrator, and this is something that annoys not only Celaya, but also Zoila, Inocencio's wife, who does not miss the opportunity to manifest what she feels towards Soledad: "- And stop calling me *vieja*, Mother shouts back. I hate that word! I'm not old, your mother's old" (8). Zoila's reaction to her husband's subservience to his mother reflects her disagreement with the treatment she receives from her husband when compared to the attention Inocencio offers to Soledad. In Mexican American families, mothers and grandmothers, according to Mirandé and Enríquez, play a critical part in the lives of children: "they perform many domestic tasks and are also responsible for setting parameters on the children's behavior. They determine when one gets up or goes to bed and when one comes in from playing" (113). Thus, while the woman may not have the prestige or status of the man in the society, it is in the home that she has power and can control other peoples' lives. Inocencio, having been raised in Mexico and having received the influence of this family system for a longer time, appears to be more receptive to the severity of his

mother's figure; Zoila, on the other hand, having been born in the United States, is naturally quite farther from these very rigid principles governing families, especially the ones related to feminine roles, and expresses a lot of difficulty to get along with her mother-in-law. Soledad, emotionally imprisoned by her childhood and youth traumas, does not see other women with sympathy and understanding. In one of the excursions during the family trip to Acapulco, with the intention of provoking her daughter-in-law, Soledad tells Zoila that the girl Candelaria, the washerwoman's daughter, is Inocencio's illegitimate daughter. In the face of Zoila's angry reaction, instead of dealing with the situation with empathy, Soledad despises her.

> - *¡Atrevida!* You climbed up in life marrying my son, a Reyes, and don't think I don't know it. Now you have the nerve to talk to me like that. My son could've done a lot better than marrying a woman who can't even speak a proper Spanish. You sound like you escaped from the ranch. And to make matters even more sad, you're as dark as a slave. (p. 85)

In this segment, Soledad expresses her feelings towards her daughter-in-law, and overcome with emotion from the heat of that moment, she humiliates Zoila because she thinks she's not good enough to be married to her son Inocencio, not only because of Zoila's humble origin, but also because of her skin complexion, showing reminiscences of a time when *mestizos* were excluded from climbing up the social ladder. Also, Soledad's permissiveness towards Inocencio's behavior years before, that is, when he had this illegal daughter, shows that mothers are more indulgent with their sons, and their reprehensible behavior is more tolerated than the behavior of daughters. Her view reverberates Mirandé and Enríquez' descriptions of Mexican

American families, to whom “the boy is a fledging macho who must be allowed to venture out of the home so he may test his wings and establish a masculine identity (114). The way Soledad treats her other sons and also her only daughter, who is a single mother and lives with Soledad and Narciso, is different from the consideration she gives to her favorite, Inocencio. This is certainly perceived by the narrator and is the reason why Norma (or Aunty Light-Skin, as the narrator addresses her), Soledad’s daughter, after being beaten by a raging Soledad in a moment of emotional outburst, ends up breaking up with her own mother. Soledad, as someone who is very proud of her position of authority in the home, someone who does not accept making mistakes and a person who is always pointing out the flaws of others, does not admit being criticized by her daughter. As Soledad hears Aunty Light-Skin’s question “- How do you know what’s happened to me?” (262), in a tone of disapproval, she loses control and beats her daughter. “- You’re selfish, you’ve always been selfish, the Grandmother says, banging both fists on her daughter’s body. *Thunk, thunk, thunk*. – You’ve always done what you wanted with your life, always, always, always. I hate you!” (263). From this passage, we can remark Soledad’s resentment in relation to how her own life was conducted compared to what happened to her daughter, who has had more freedom of choice. It seems that Soledad is reluctant to accept that her family has changed over time and that relationships and familial organization change as a consequence of age and maturation. When she realizes that she has not looked at her daughter as an adult and as someone in need of love and attention, just like herself, she collapses.

Thompson’s structural conception of culture provides insight to understand what happens in the Reyes family. This conception approaches the study of symbolic forms in relation to the historical and social contexts where these symbolic forms are produced, transmitted, and received.

> Cultural phenomena, on this account, are to be seen on *symbolic forms in structured contexts* and cultural analysis may be regarded as the study of the *meaningful constitution and social contextualization of symbolic forms*. As symbolic forms, cultural phenomena are meaningful for actors as well as for analysts. They are phenomena which are routinely interpreted by actors in the course of their everyday lives, and which call for interpretation by analysts seeking to grasp the meaningful characteristics of social life. (Thompson pos. 2913)

So, according to Thompson's precepts, the analysis of cultural phenomena implies the clarification of socially structured contexts and processes as well as the interpretation of symbolic forms. All these movements form a "complex whole" which is characteristic of a given society, differentiating this society from others that exist at different places and times. Soledad has ingrained ideas about family structures and especially about feminine roles that were learned out of her sacrifice, her servitude, and her obedience. Having become a maternal orphan at an early age, being abandoned by her father and practically given to another family to become their maid during arduous times, not only in her life but also in Mexican history, Soledad learned how to survive in a hostile environment where there was no love for her. Later, after moving to Narciso's family to work as a servant and feeling some comfort which, in a way, she considered love, once more she is emotionally abandoned, this time by her husband. Inserted in her own world and living within fixed and inflexible ideas about her duties as a wife, a mother, and as a daughter-in-law, she struggles to live up to the demands of her family system. In Soledad's set of beliefs, customs, ideas, and values, there are solid role

expectations that men and women have to fulfill, although this may lead to negative consequences. Sociologist Maria Bermúdez argues that “Mexicans are locked into rigid conceptions of masculinity and femininity which make it difficult for men to be “candid and humane” and for women to be “dignified and independent” (qtd. in Mirandé and Enríquez 109). In this sense, because of Soledad’s spiritual nature, although her suffering as a young woman, she does not behave the way it is expected for regular Mexican women. On the contrary, it is very difficult for her to feel sympathy for the other women in her family, that is, her daughter, daughters-in-law, and granddaughters, mainly Celaya, the one who spends more time with her. Moreover, she does not feel any compassion for the women who work as servants in her household, treating them as inferior and neglecting the fact that Inocencio, her beloved son, had an illegitimate daughter with one of them. Soledad uses skin complexion, class status, and family position to humiliate the other women who surround her and uses Inocencio’s filial love and care to compete for his attention with Zoila, her daughter-in-law. In her mind, she is the one who must have the control over her son’s life and the one who must protect him from any problems and disappointments.

Interestingly, we can understand Soledad’s attitudes and manners during her adult life as reactions to the hard times she had been through. Belonging to a generation who saw a typhoid epidemic take many lives, including her mother’s, a generation who watched firsthand the horrors of an armed revolution and had to overcome its consequences without lamenting, Soledad expresses negative feelings as she sees that the following one, that is, her daughter’s and her daughters-in-law’s, has an easier life. While Soledad, already as an orphan, suffered the abandonment of her father and was sent to her aunt’s home to work as a maid, her daughter and daughters-in-law grew up supposedly with more protection and affection from their

families and did not have to do manual labor the way Soledad had to. Soledad only experienced real protection and consideration when Señor Eleuterio, Narciso's father, told Narciso to marry her, even against his will. Eleuterio's attitude is related to a culturally male perspective that morally condemns unmarried girls who get pregnant. Feeling responsible for this girl who was living under his roof and had no one else to claim for her life, he had a serious conversation with his son and, sending a message between the lines to marry her, he followed his religious and moral principles: "We are not dogs. We are not dogs…We are Reyes and must behave like Reyes. Promise me you will always remember this, son. Promise?" (159).

Norma, Soledad's only daughter, on the other hand, had a different fate. She fell in love with a married man and like Soledad, also got pregnant without being married. However, Norma decided to run away from home because of her parents' strictness, and her awareness that Soledad and Narciso would not accept her boyfriend:

> This was because he'd already been married, and *lo más triste*, in a church. Plus he was a lot older, almost twenty years older than me, and to make matters worse he was a bit chubby and much-too-much-too Indian for my Mother to approve. She was always concerned with *el que dirán*, the what-will-they-say. (271)

Norma "let herself be stolen" and for some time, shared the same house with her daughter's father, who in fact, was seldom there. After being abandoned by him, she had to go back home to live with her parents, despite their "terrible I-told-you-so's" (273). Since her behavior was a reproachable one in the eyes of the society and a

reason for shame in the family due to her parents' concerns, Soledad does not treat this daughter with affection or understanding, even having been through a similar situation when she was younger. Norma – or Aunty Light-Skin - seems to have found some comfort in another older man's arms, though this relationship is not explicit in the narrative. Señor Vidaurri, her boss, "drives our pretty Aunty Light-Skin to his construction company every day and delivers her home each evening" (32), fills her with expensive fancy clothes and a Sunday allowance for her daughter, Antonieta Araceli. Soledad's attitudes towards Norma suggest that she tolerates her presence in her household even though she is resentful in relation to her daughter's past and also her present life. Similarly, the other women in the novel who belong to Norma's generation, that is, Soledad's daughters-in-law, are also criticized by the old woman, who find it difficult to accept modern times and changes in people's mentalities. As she tells her sons how she prepared the *mole* for Inocencio's birthday party, she comments:

> - Ay, it's no trouble at all, even though I made it from scratch! I'm not like these new modern women. Oh, no! I don't believe in cooking shortcuts! the Grandmother says, not looking at her daughters-in-law. – To make food taste really well, you've got to labor a little, use the *molcajete* and grind till your arm hurts, that's the secret. (54)

Taken as lazy and often times as troublemakers by Soledad, the daughters-in-law have a more modern view of their lives and relationships. However, in spite of belonging to the following generation, that is, one that benefits women with more

freedom of choice, like their mother-in-law Soledad, they are still restricted to the home and its confines.

Later in the narrative, when Soledad is already a ghost and has an encounter with her granddaughter Celaya by Inocencio's bed at the hospital, she reprimands the young girl and calls her attention so that Celaya can act in a different way and break the cycle of women's submissiveness which preceded her.

> - Grandmother, why do you keep haunting me?
> - Me? Haunting you? It's *you*, Celaya, who's haunting *me*. I can't bear it. Why do you insist on repeating my life? Is that what you want? To live as I did? There's no sin in falling in love with your heart and with your body, but wait till you are old enough to love yourself first. How do you know what love is? You are still just a child. (406)

On the surface, it seems that Soledad is criticizing Celaya because of her feelings towards her frustrated love relationship with Ernesto, who had left her alone in Mexico, arguing that they were both committing a sin in the eyes of God. However, deep inside, Soledad not only wants Celaya to realize the mistakes she is making in relation to her own life, but also to develop her self-esteem and direct her energy towards growing into a self-assured person before finding "someone who's brave enough" (407) to love her. By observing the direction Celaya is taking in regard to her life and relationships, the Grandmother wishes a different destiny for her granddaughter. She wants Celaya to break with the values and beliefs imposed to women of their origin, to fracture the cultural tyranny described by Anzaldúa in *Borderlands/La Frontera*:

> The culture expects women to show greater acceptance of, and commitment to, the value system than men. The culture and the Church insist that women are subservient to males. If a woman rebels she is a *mujer mala*. If a woman doesn't renounce herself in favor of the male, she is selfish. If a woman remains a *virgen* until she marries, she is a good woman. For a woman of my culture there used to be only three directions she could turn: to the Church as a nun, to the streets as a prostitute, or to the home as a mother. (17)

As we compare the three generations mentioned here – Soledad's, her daughter's along with her daughters-in-law's, and Celaya's, we see that all of them act – or try to act - according to the cultural expectations about the roles of parents and children in their social contexts, expectations which are also gendered. As mothers, they have to cherish for the welfare of their families, putting their husbands and children in the first place; as daughters and daughters-in-law, they have to obey the elder members in the family and pay respect to them, even if their decisions are contrary to the younger generation's wishes. Celaya is the one who, without weakening the strong bonds of affection and love with her family, is going to emancipate herself from this pattern of subservience and is not going to repeat Soledad's life. Moreover, by telling her Grandmother's story life, Celaya goes back in time and crosses psychological and spiritual borderlands so that, through herself, Soledad can be understood and forgiven.

4.1.2 The Language of The *Rebozo*

It has long been argued that the use of symbols is a distinctive feature of human life (Thompson pos. 2790) and the *caramelo rebozo,* which acts as a key element in this narrative is part of the symbolic forms present in the cultural traits of Mexicans and Mexican Americans. For the character Soledad, it is the item that connects her to her past and her future: her past as it is what reminds her that one day she received true love from her mother and father; and it connects her to her future because it is the emblematic object that is going to be finished, at least, metaphorically, when she receives love again from her family, along with forgiveness, as Celaya tells Soledad's life story.

In the narrative, we understand that when Guilhermina, Soledad's mother, a gifted *rebocera*, died at a young age, besides leaving a daughter who "was still too little to braid her own hair" (94), she took with her "the language of knots and rosettes, of silk and artisela, of cotton and ikat-dyed secrets" (94), which is used to weave the most beautiful *rebozos*. She left a caramel-colored *rebozo* unfinished, an item that, due to its complexity, ended up not being completed and was given to Soledad, first as a plaything. As time went by and Soledad felt more and more abandoned, this piece of clothing became the only remembrance Soledad had of good times, appearing in the narrative in many of its crucial moments.

We can observe that the narrator mentions the language of the *rebozo* and, in this sense, we can refer to Thompson's remark that "human beings not only produce and receive meaningful linguistic expressions, but also bestow meaning on nonlinguistic constructions – on actions, works of art, material objects of various kinds" (pos. 2790). Based on the conceptions delineated by L.A. White in the 1940s, he

exposes the argument that the use of symbols or “symbolling” refer to those events or things that depend on the exercise of a mental capacity which is peculiar to humans.

In that regard, as we interpret and search for the significance of cultural expressions in Caramelo, the *rebozo* is the object that manifests actions and articulations that go beyond what is present in the social discourse. A *rebozo* is a kind of shawl worn by Mexican women that has a great cultural heritage. According to the scholar Gabriella Gutiérrez y Muhs, “*rebozos* are memory and ritual at the same time. *Rebozos* represent womanhood served in a bowl of folklore and struggle, motherhood and fashion: a myriad of uses, activities and memories for Mexicana/Chicana women to digest continuously” (134). Of indigenous roots, the *rebozo* has been worn by Mexican women of all ages and social classes since the colonial period. From the Spanish conquest on, it acquired some other characteristics concerning the design and the material which is made. The way it is woven, its color, size and material indicate a woman’s social class and the colors, and its patterns make them identifiable by region. It is an item of clothing worn by women from the day they are born, as it can be used to wrap the baby’s fragile body, until the day they go to the grave, since it can be used as a shroud for the deceased. Mirandé and Enríquez state that just after the Anglo takeover “the rebozo was viewed as the most fashionable item in female wearing apparel, but there was objection to its use because one could easily conceal pistols, knives, and other weapons” (75-76).

It is interesting to mention that, traditionally, a *rebozo* was used by a midwife as an accessory to help pregnant women in their labor and delivery. Mexican women also use it to carry their babies, allowing them to stay close to their breast, making breastfeeding easier and improving the connection between mother and child through the proximity of their bodies and the feeling of affection which is provided by that. In

the beginning of the second part of the narrative, when Celaya, the narrator, starts her conversation with the Awful Grandmother's spirit, there is a description of the use of the *rebozo* that can be understood as a remark of its importance for the Mexican culture:

> Women across the republic, rich or poor, plain or beautiful, ancient or young, in the times of my grandmother all owned *rebozos* – the ones of real Chinese silk sold for prices so precious one asked for them as dowry and took them to the grave as one's burial shroud, as well as the cheap everyday variety made of cotton and bought at the market. Silk *rebozos* worn with the best dress – de gala, as they say. Cotton *rebozos* to carry a child, or to shoo away the flies. Devout *rebozos* to cover one's head with when entering a church. Showy *rebozos* twisted and knotted in the hair with flowers and silver hair ornaments. The oldest, softest rebozo worn to bed. A *rebozo* as cradle, as umbrella or parasol, as basket when going to market, or modestly covering the blue-veined breast giving suck.
>
> That world with its customs my grandmother witnessed. (93-94)

The unfinished *rebozo* which was left to Soledad and constantly appears in *Caramelo* may be seen as a metaphor for Celaya's family, since it carries some of the Reyes' characteristics. Besides the fact that it is a piece with indigenous and Spanish influences, it carries the caramel color, a feature that can be associated to Candelaria, the washerwoman's daughter, "a girl with skin like *a caramelo*" (34), who turns out to be Celaya's bastard sister. Moreover, the knots in the *rebozo* are intricate and complex, just like many of the relationships in the Reyes family. The secrets to finish

the *rebozo* still have to be unveiled, just as some secrets and the stories in the Reyes family, which need to be revealed so that some of the liaisons and connections disentangle and find some peace at last.

> - And what's this? I say, tugging an embroidered pillowcase.
> - This? the Grandfather says, pulling out of the pillowcase a cloth of caramel, licorice, and vanilla stripes. – This was your grandmother's *rebozo* when she was a girl. That's the only *recuerdo* she has from those times, from when she was little. It's a *caramelo rebozo*. That's what they call them.
> - Why?
> - Well, I don't know. I suppose because it looks like candy, don't you think?
> I nod. And in that instant I can't think of anything I want more than this cloth the golden color of burnt-milk candy.
> - Can I have it, Grandfather?
> - No, *mi cielo*. I'm afraid it's not mine to give, but you can touch it. It's very soft, like corn silk.
> But when I touch the *caramelo rebozo* a shriek rises from the courtyard, and I jump back as if the *rebozo* is made of fire.
> - *¡¡¡ Celayaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaa!!!* (58)

We can see from this Celaya's first contact with the family *rebozo* that this is something kept with a lot of care and esteem by Soledad. The way Little Grandfather presents the *rebozo* to Celaya indicates the appreciation Soledad has for this item as this is the only *recuerdo* that she has from her mother and from the time that she was loved by her father. It is interesting to mention that, traditionally, wearing a *caramelo rebozo* is

an indication of the finesse and sophistication of the user. In a paradoxical way, Soledad was the opposite of this: she ended up growing up humble and poor. Even after she became an adult and went up the social ladder, sophistication was a characteristic that she does not seem to have acquired.

Soledad is also resentful because people, especially modern women, do not give the same value to *rebozos* that they used to give in the past. She carries a feeling of bitterness when she talks about this traditional item of clothing and does not accept the new uses modern women give to them. In a conversation with her son Inocencio and Narciso, her husband, she outbursts as Inocencio tells her that he wants to buy a *rebozo* for his Lalita.

> - I was saying you can't find them anymore, Narciso. You tell him. Better he buy Celaya one of the cotton ones in the market, am I right? No use spending on something she can't even wear till she grows up. And what if she grows up and doesn't even *want* to wear it. Then what, eh? So that she can save it for her funeral? Over there on the other side do they even wear them? I don't think so. They're too modern. Why, my own daughter doesn't even want to be seen wearing a *rebozo*. In another generation they'll look on them as rags, barbarities, something to spread on a table or, God forbid, a bed. If you find a real silk one, better buy it for your mother. I'm the only one who knows the true worth of a *rebozo* around here. (39)

Soledad speaks as if she is the last woman who gives this kind of shawl the value it has and, from her speech, we can see that she does not accept other uses for it. This resentment and bitterness shown again by Soledad reveals how she deals with the

changes in women over the years not only in Mexico but also in her family. Her daughter already sees a *rebozo* in a different way, showing some shame for wearing it, according to Soledad. Then, if her own daughter has these feelings towards such a significant item for Mexican culture, she imagines that her granddaughter, the one who was born in the United States and has more modern and different influences, is not going to give the *rebozo* the value it deserves. However, as the plot develops, the *rebozo* becomes an important element for Celaya as well because it creates communion with her grandmother and her Mexican ancestry. The fact that it is unfinished relates it to the stories which still need to be told about this family and the historical context underlying it.

In analyzing culture, "we are engaged in unravelling layers of meaning, describing and re-describing actions and expressions which are already meaningful for the very individuals who are producing, perceiving and interpreting these actions and expressions in the course of their everyday lives" (Thompson pos. 2813). Both Soledad and Celaya view the rebozo as a sign of love and protection. It is the object that strongly connects them to their past and their future, reminding both grandmother and granddaughter of who they are as they live meaningful experiences and build powerful interrelations not only among each other but also concerning the other family members and their cultural heritage as well.

Soledad's (and also Celaya's) attempt to finish the *rebozo* can be seen in the differentiated strategy regarding *Caramelo*'s narrative focus. As Celaya narrates the Reyes' story using her own storytelling style, her grandmother's voice, which in Part Two of the novel is in bold type, appears. Soledad, the Awful Grandmother, interferes in Celaya's narrative by weaving comments, completing the narrator's sentences, agreeing with what she says and sometimes even contradicting her.

In rosy pastels it seemed to rise like a dream of a more charming time…

It was never rosy, and it certainly wasn't charming. It was smelly, dank, noisy, hot, and filled with vermin.

Who's telling this story, you or me?

You.

Well, then.

Go on, go on. (97)

Other stylistic resources used in this novel seem to be converging to this greater enterprise which is to finish the *caramelo rebozo*. Besides the change of narrative focus through the use of different voices in the novel and the interaction between these voices, we can observe other movements towards this endeavor. The use of repetitions, the Spanish language in evidence and the references to music and poetry are among these devices.

Additionally, something that greatly calls the reader's attention is the use of footnotes (and notes of the footnotes), as if they were the fringes of this rebozo that is yet to be finished. At the end of many of *Caramelo*'s chapters, there is extra information, ranging from historical facts about Mexico and the United States to more mundane information such as an explanation of the role of the soap operas (*telenovelas*) for the Mexican community and TV audience, all pertinent to the narrative. Moreover, at the end of the novel, there is a chronology of important events in the history of Mexico, starting in 1519 and ending in the year 2002, the year *Caramelo* was published.

Like the members of the Reyes family, the *caramelo rebozo* not only has a cultural Mexican identity but it also has a migrant soul; it represents a conscience that persists and travels crossing these borderlands that go beyond the physical, the spiritual, and the imaginable. As it crosses time and generations, this fine object is there to remind Soledad and Celaya of their roots and their connections with the ones who preceded them. Its incompleteness is part of its nature, as if it were preparing the ground for the family members and the histories yet to come.

4.2 The short story *Woman Hollering Creek*

The object of this section is the short story *Woman Hollering Creek*, which is included in Sandra Cisneros' collection *Woman Hollering Creek and Other Stories*. Published in 1991, like her acclaimed *The House on Mango Street*, which portrays the lives of an immigrant community in a Chicago neighborhood, this book illustrates the lives of immigrants and their experiences – some of them notably traumatic and violent - in a different and peculiar space, which is the border between Mexico and the United States.

In Cisneros' title story, the character Cleófilas Enriqueta DeLéon Hernández has to cross borders that are not only geographical but also emotional. By crossing them, she goes from being a romantic young woman who believes her life will be like the ones in the *telenovelas* to a woman who dares to feel she has the right to search for her own independence. As she chooses to get married to Juan Pedro Martínez Sánchez and is then taken "over several miles of dirt road and several miles of paved, over one border and beyond to a town *en el otro lado* (43), Don Serafín, her father,

predicting that one day this matrimony would not work out well, reminds her of his paternal feelings: “I am your father, I will never abandon you” (43).

Cleófilas, involved by her excitement and desire for romantic love and passion, does not consider very much her father’s words. However, the narrator anticipates her fate, calling the attention to Cleófila’s own reflection upon the nature of a parent’s love as she compares it to the love of a couple: “How when a man and a woman love each other, sometimes that love sours. But a parent’s love for a child, a child’s for its parents, is another thing entirely” (43). The beginning of the story leads us to the observation that in many Western societies, due to the socio-historical context that views men and women differently, it is still natural to see women in a subaltern position. Mexican and Mexican American communities, which strongly bring the heritage of colonialism and its outcomes, although the developments in feminine consciousness and the breaking of many barriers, still relate women to frailty, seeing them as the ones who need protection. Reminiscences of the Spanish rule and the religious influence left a common belief that women need to be protected by masculine figures, that is, by fathers, brothers, and the like, including the protection from being sexually harassed by other males; as women grow up and reach the age to get married, the protection must come from their husbands, who, not rarely may act as their proprietors. As it has been mentioned in this study, the culture of the patriarchate and the religious precepts followed by Mexicans and Mexican Americans demand that women obey and subject to the men in their families. Women who accept this tradition of obedience are considered good while the ones who rebel and question this way of life are considered selfish and are severely criticized. Anzaldúa tells us that for a woman of her culture there used to be only three directions she could turn: to the Church as a nun, to the streets as a prostitute, or to the home as a mother. However, a fourth choice is to enter

the world by way of education and career so that women can become self-autonomous persons, a condition not shared by many: “a very few of us”, she adds (17).

In *Woman Hollering Creek*, we observe that the young woman Cleófilas is led by this cultural tyranny. Trapped in a slow life of a small town in Mexico, she sees in marriage the possibility of living her own love story, a romanticized life, full of passion and “happily ever after” (47), like the ones in the books, songs, and in the *telenovelas* she watches with her friends. By getting married, not only she is given the possibility of having her own house and leave the never-ending chores at her father’s home, but she is also given the chance of crossing the border to live her American Dream in Texas with her husband. In moments when the narrator privileges observations about the crossings in Cleófilas’ life, crossings that can be entirely figurative, the text asks its readers to question where they originate. The complications that arise from this questioning can be analyzed via ideas presented in Alberto Melucci’s work, *Il gioco dell’io*[10]*.*

In the section entitled *Metamorphosis of the multiple self*”, as Melucci explains the complexity of the modern world, in which the threat of a catastrophe looms over the future, he affirms that modernity’s most exultant and dramatic legacy is our necessity and responsibility of existing as individuals (59). In other words, of being subjects of action with sense of direction and of also being poles of networking and communication. The author states that new dilemmas besiege the daily experience of the children of disenchantment. In the society of information, he argues, our consciousness becomes more and more reflective: it is not about learning anymore, but learning to learn, that is, controlling the cognitive and motivational processes and adapt them to new problems. According to Melucci, there is an unlimited expansion of

[10] *The Game of the Self,* in free translation.

the symbolic possibilities, of self-reflexive activity, and of the capacity of representing reality through multiple languages (60). It seems that this capacity leads us to live in a world produced by the images that we ourselves create to the point of losing the ability to distinguish between reality and the reality of images.

Melucci explains that we then find ourselves belonging to a plurality of groups generated by the multiplicity of social roles, of associative networks, and reference groups (60). By entering and leaving these systems, we become migrant animals in the city mazes, travelers of the planet, nomads of the present. We participate, in reality and in imagination, in an infinity of worlds. Each one of them is characterized by a culture, a language, a set of roles and rules, to which we must adapt in each migration. This entails constant pressure to mutate, to transfer, and to translate what we were a second ago into new codes and new forms of relationships. In his analysis, Melucci states that the multiplication of our social participations and the excessive amount of possibilities and messages enlarge the field of our experience (61). The traditional references which once gave us the possibility to our identification (family, church, party, race, class) weaken and it becomes difficult to assure who we are. We look at our past and our future through different lenses as far as we transfer ourselves to the regions of experience.

In *Woman Hollering Creek*, we observe that the several crossings Cleófilas has to confront illustrate the variability and the complications of her process of identification. As an adolescent in a small town in Mexico, Cleófilas, captivated by the romantic content in songs, books, magazines, and especially in *telenovelas*, produced the images of a rapturous love for herself, a relationship with conflicting feelings but mended by love: “always loving no matter what, because *that* is the most important thing” (44). Then, through the questions she asks just after mentioning her idea of a

passionate love life, we quickly learn that hers is a superficial and naturally immature view: “and did you see Lucía Méndez on the Bayer aspirin commercials – wasn’t she lovely? Does she dye her hair do you think?” (44). From this segment, we can notice that Cleófilas acts not out of a motivation to live a regular love life with her husband Juan Pedro, whom she barely knows, but out of a naive desire to be swept away by passion, “in its purest crystalline essence” (44), and live the life she projected based on a simulacrum created by herself. From the position of a daughter and sister who knows the safety of familial love, Cleófilas crosses this metaphorical border and ends up seeing herself as a wife suffering the disappointment of a toxic marriage that only objectifies her.

Melucci’s reflection about the paradox of choice provides insight into the complexities of making choices nowadays. Wherever we live, he says, we inhabit real or imaginary cities which are the terminals of an interdependent and highly complex planetary system (62). When the field of our experience is different, we cannot transfer any longer the same models of action from an environment to another. In that regard, we can mention that the physical border Cleófilas had to cross removed her from a system of relations where she had feelings of affection and safety to a context where she realized she could not transport the acquisitions she had made in the different areas of her experience so far.

> “What do you want to know for?” Trini the laundromat attendant asked in the same gruff Spanish she always used whenever she gave Cleófilas change or yelled at her for something. First for putting too much soap in the machines. Later, for sitting on a washer. And still later, after Juan Pedrito was born, for not

> understanding that in this country you cannot let your baby walk around with no diaper and his pee-pee hanging out, it wasn't nice, *¿entiendes? Pues.* (46)

This segment exemplifies how Cleófilas must confront the languages and the rules of this new system. Besides suffering the alienation from her family home, she has to face the rudeness of someone who sees her with inferiority, possibly because of her condition of being an immigrant in unfavorable financial conditions. As the laundromat attendant criticizes Cleófilas' behavior and censors her mothering techniques, we can observe the prejudice and lack of empathy that people in Cleófilas' situation face. This illustrates Melucci's argument related to the difficulty to transfer, from a time to another, from a context to another, the same model of action that has been conquered elsewhere (62). Because of all her dislocations along with the maternal and educational references that lack for her, Cleófilas ends up forcibly learning that real life is not like what is portrayed in the *telenovelas* she is accustomed to watch. However, as she is confronted with her new reality as a young wife and mother, away from her humble but safe familial environment, she gradually realizes she fell into a trap of physical violence and emotional neglect, living a growing number of uncertainties, which, very frequently, suffocate her. It is also interesting to point out that although there has been this city move when Cleófilas got married, this geographical border crossing in her life did not fulfill the expectations she had created: "*Seguín, Tejas*. A nice sterling ring to it. The tinkle of money. She would get to wear outfits like the women on the tele, like Lucía Mendez. And have a lovely house" (45). Instead, as she compares her hometown in Mexico with her new place, despite the similarities in relation to some negative traits they both share, this new town provokes

in her feelings of melancholy and solitude, as it can be noticed in the following passage:

> The town of gossips. The town of dust and despair. Which she has traded for this town of gossips. This town of dust, despair. Houses farther apart, perhaps, though no more privacy because of it. No leafy *zócalo* in the center of the town, though the murmur of talk is clear enough all the same. No huddled whispering on the church steps each Sunday. Because here the whispering begins at sunset at the ice house instead. (50)

Cleófilas misses what she has left behind, describing, as she juxtaposes the characteristics of both towns, how she sees them in terms of personal relations. The houses being further apart makes neighbors' contacts rarer and the absence of a *zócalo*, a place of encounters in the center of town, does not encourage the community to join for unpretentious gatherings. Moreover, the whispering on the church steps, an activity she probably used to participate in her hometown, does not happen in Seguín. Instead, the whispering is at the ice house, a place mostly frequented by the city men, where she only went as a newlywed and sat mute beside her husband, listening to the conversation between him and his companions. Cleófilas continues her comparison and by analyzing her criticism, we can see in her description that not only she feels lonely in that place, but she also feels excluded.

> This town with its silly pride for a bronze pecan the size of a baby carriage in front of the city hall. TV repair shop, drugstore, hardware, dry cleaner's, chiropractor's, liquor store, bail bonds, empty storefront, and nothing, nothing,

> nothing of interest. Nothing one could walk to, at any rate. Because the towns here are built so that you have to depend on husbands. Or you stay home. Or you drive. If you're rich enough to own, allowed to drive, your own car. There is no place to go. Unless one counts the neighbor ladies. Soledad on one side, Dolores on the other. Or the creek. (50-51)

In the beginning of this passage, we feel that Cleófilas finds a way to disdain of something she sees no value compared to what she was used to seeing in her country home. On the other hand, as she cites the other spaces in Seguín, we can observe that they are all business that require the use of money to benefit from. Being a person of few financial resources, Cleófilas is resentful because these are places she cannot take advantage of. Besides this, she complains about the city planning that does not allow people to move around on foot. This characteristic obliges citizens to go around by cars and, in Cleófilas' mind, only rich women are allowed this independence, while women like her, depend on husbands to move around town. "Cleófilas' map of the city, imbued as it is with her sense of the structure of her relationship with her husband, provides few models for resistance" (Brady 141). For Cleófilas, the way the city is planned reinforces the patriarchal system she is used to living in.

Interestingly, among the few places she mentions being possible for her to go are the neighbors' houses. One of the ladies is named Soledad, a Spanish word for solitude; the other neighbor's name is Dolores, a word in Spanish that means pain. We learn in the story that both women were once dedicated to men who are not with them anymore. Although Soledad said she was a widow, the stories around her husband's disappearance vary, leading Cleófilas to think that Soledad's husband had probably run away. Regarding the lady Dolores, both her sons and husband are dead,

and she spends her days worshipping their memory and taking care of her garden, “famous for its sunflowers” (47).

The creek is another place Cleófilas says she can go, the Woman Hollering Creek, *el arroyo de La Gritona*, in a clear reference to the Mexican legend of *La Llorona*, the Weeping Woman, “a mythological figure whose existence in Mexican-Chicano culture dates back to pre-Columbian times and persists through modern times” (Mirandé and Enríquez 31).

Curiously, there are different versions for the legend of *La Llorona* and their interpretations reflect varying attitudes towards women. Based on Sahagún’s research, Mirandé and Enríquez elucidate that in pre-Hispanic Mexico, sounds of a woman’s cries heard at night foretold poverty or death for the ones who heard them, being considered bad signs (31). Another researcher, Alfonso Caso, relates *La Llorona* to the Aztec goddess Cihuacoatl, the patron of the *ciuateteo*, sanctified women who died in childbirth (qtd. in Mirandé and Enríquez 31). In the Aztec calendar, on days dedicated to them, they descended to the earth wailing and moaning in the night air. Another reference linking *La Llorona* to Cihuacoatl is mentioned by Bacon et al, as they explain that the sacred codes of the Aztecs predicted that Cihuacoatl would announce the defeat of the empire at the hands of foreigners from the east. It is said that a little before Hernán Cortés and his soldiers’ arrival in Mexico, a ghostly white lady appeared at night wandering the streets of Tenochtitlán, screaming omens of destruction. The emperor Moctezuma and his priests believed that this apparition was the same goddess Cihuacoatl and they fearfully awaited the end of their world (82).

Later, in the colonial period, when the Aztec capital Tenochtitlán had already been taken by the Spanish rule and had become the capital of New Spain, the nebulous white figure of a weeping woman appeared again. She was seen walking

through the lonely streets, emitting penetrating and prolonged moans, and then she moved towards the waters of a nearby lake, where she entered, submerged, and finally disappeared. During this period, *La Llorona* was not only seen as a mother, but she came to be seen also as a widow who cried for her orphaned children. Other forms included a virginal bride who died on her wedding's eve, a wife who died in her husband's absence and a woman who was murdered by her jealous husband, according to Mirandé and Enríquez (32). In addition, this haunted spirit was believed to be the ghost of Doña Marina, La Malinche, the indigenous woman who served as a slave and a translator to Cortés during the conquest of Mexico. La Malinche, this archetype in Mexican culture, is considered a traitor of her people as well as the mother of modern Mexico once she had a son with Cortés and became the mother of one of the first mestizos in the land. When *La Llorona* is associated with La Malinche[11], according to Bacon et al, it is said that she consumes herself of pity and cries in anguish because she had betrayed her own people (82).

The legend of *La Llorona* is also greatly present in the Chicano culture and there are modern versions for the myth in the United States. In one of them, as reported by Bacon et al, she is a wife who, in a desperate act aroused by her husband's abandonment after the birth of their three children, drowned them in the turbulent waters of the Río Grande. Feeling miserable and regretful because her husband did not return and she terribly missed her children, she started going to the margins of the river to look for them. After some days, hopeless and devastated, she drowned herself in the murky waters of the Río Grande and then became a spirit

[11] As it is mentioned in the end of Chapter 3 of this study, there is a movement to give La Malinche a new configuration. According to different accounts, she was originally an Aztec princess, with knowledge of different dialects, and possessing a benevolent personality. She was sold into slavery at a very young age and was given as a present to Hernán Cortés. Considering what happened in her time, she acted according to the resources she had and "she became a mediating force between adversaries" (Mirandé and Enríquez 30).

wandering and crying for her deceased children (94-96). It is interesting to say that the presence of the water is a common symbol in these modern Mexican American versions. When Hispanic people want their children to be away from the riverbanks, for instance, they use the figure of *La Llorona* as a warning, saying that she will carry them off.

According to Mirandé and Enríquez, “whatever maybe the cultural origins of the myth of La Llorona, all versions consistently present her as a female who strayed from her proper role as mother, wife, mistress, lover, or patriot” (33). In all versions and interpretations of the legend, *La Llorona* is regretful for what she has done and feels guilty for not having fulfilled her role. “Wailing is the Indian, Mexican and Chicana woman’s feeble protest when she has no other recourse” (Anzaldúa 33) and *La Llorona*’s wailing in the night for her lost children represents her lament over her fate because she failed to perform her female roles satisfactorily.

Returning to Cleófilas, it is relevant to point out that the first time she crossed the border between Mexico and the United States with her husband, as they drove over the bridge, Juan Pedro told her the name of that creek: *La Gritona*, and she laughed. “Such a funny name for a creek so pretty and full of happily ever after” (47). This name intrigued her, and from the beginning she became curious about it:

> Though no one could say whether the woman had hollered from anger or pain. The natives only knew the arroyo one crossed on the way to San Antonio, and then once again on the way back, was called Woman Hollering, a name no one from these parts questioned, little less understood. *Pues, allá de los indios, quién sabe* – who knows, the townspeople shrugged, because it was of no concern to their lives how this trickle of water received its curious name. (46)

In this segment, it is observed that there are uncertainties among the local people concerning the reason why the woman's holler happened, if it was out of pain or anger. We can say that a holler out of pain relates to suffering and despair and may be associated to *La Llorona*'s regrets towards her deeds and her laments over her sad destiny. However, if the holler is out of anger, it may acquire another meaning and relate to discontent and dissatisfaction, sentiments that may lead to a struggle for change and, eventually, to a more hopeful fate. Furthermore, the lack of information about the history of the creek's name among the locals demonstrate how uninformed these people are about their own cultural heritage, which includes native Mexican myths and legends. "The townspeople flippant response suggests their inability to comprehend the significance of *La Gritona*'s indigenous roots" (Carbonell 8), showing alienation from their own sociohistorical and cultural background.

Even though Cleófilas remains ignorant about the reason why the creek received this intriguing and, in her opinion, humorous name, despite all the inquiries she has made to townspeople, there is something about this place that attracts her. She turns to it when she feels lonely and, as she listens to "its high, silver voice" (51), she realizes that the name could be related to *La Llorona*, the weeping woman who drowned her own children and whose stories she learned as a child. We can observe that this combination of personal experience, curiosity, and memory of old times brought about this epiphanic moment in Cleófilas' life and, as she recognizes *La Llorona*'s calling, she not only identifies herself with this female figure, but she also feels that the Woman Hollering creek wishes to tell her something. Instead of driving her "to the darkness under the trees" (51), Cleófilas senses that *La Gritona* wishes to

conduct her into brightness so that she can protect herself, her children, as well as find strength to abandon her violent and abusive husband.

As the story develops and Cleófilas becomes more aware of her unfavorable condition, she gathers her forces to be able to cross one more border and leave behind what she once thought would be her dream life. Cleófilas sees that “this man, this father, this rival, this keeper, this lord, this master, this husband till kingdom come” (49) finds it difficult to communicate healthily and to express his emotions in a respectful way. Instead, his “fists try to speak” (p. 48), he resorts to alcohol and does not avoid any violent reactions at his wife’s requests, being unable to share any romantic moment with her. Additionally, Cleófilas’ knowledge of frequent accounts of violence against women and of femicide cases printed in the newspapers lights on her a warning that she could be the next one to have her story “in the pages of the dailies” (52). As she listens to *La Gritona*’s voice, she crosses the barrier of shame and prejudice, and decides to go back to her father’s house, even predicting the gossip and surprise: “What would the neighbors say? Coming home like that with one baby on her hip and one in the oven. Where’s your husband?” (50). Cleófilas understands that this is a complication she must face if she wants to save herself and protect her life and her children’s from this destructive relationship.

Melucci states that when we put ourselves before the possibility of a change, it is because something from the present is not enough for us, does not satisfy us, limits us (63). The change is, therefore, a goal we wish, on which we project ourselves in search for the new and the diverse. At the same time, changing is also a threat to our certainties, to habitual and consolidated rules, according to the author. In the face of changes, we are always torn between desire and fear, between expectation and uncertainty.

Cleófilas' necessity to change and leave behind her life in Seguín surpasses her fear. Under the pressure produced by her own desire to end up with the suffering caused by her deleterious matrimony with Juan Pedro, she becomes sure about the decision she must take. Helped by the health clinic workers Felice and Graciela, whose names mean Happiness and Grace, respectively, Cleófilas is able to cross the border again, back to her family home in Mexico.

Interestingly, the people who rescue Cleófilas and guide her back to the border so that she can return to her father's home are two women, and not a masculine figure. These two women who decide to help Cleófilas portray completely diverse traits from the references that she has. Different from the ladies Soledad and Dolores, who had practically revoked their own lives because the men in their homes are gone or dead, Felice and Graciela do not live their lives at men's service or because of them. Instead, their lives are oriented by their own will and autonomy. Graciela, by recognizing the reason why Cleófilas has "black-and-blue marks all over" (54), does not turn a blind eye to the violence and calls on her *comadre* Felice for support. The fact that Felice, the one who drives Cleófilas and Juan Pedrito to the bus station, owns a car and, moreover, a pickup truck, greatly surprises the young wife, who believes this is something reserved for men or for the wealthy: "The pickup was hers. She herself had chosen it. She herself was paying for it" (55). According to Carbonell's ideas, Felice's truck "becomes an index of female self-sufficiency in a town where little is accessible on foot and public transportation appears to be insufficient or nonexistent" (9). In addition, this vehicle owned by a woman is crucial not only to help Cleófilas escape from her reality of violence but also to move her from a state of dependency and inaction to an awakening to autonomy and self-fulfillment. Proceeding this reflection upon Felice's role in the story and what it represents, we can include her holler as they

drive over the bridge crossing Woman Hollering Creek: “I scared you two, right? Sorry. Should’ve warned you. Every time I cross that bridge I do that. Because of the name, you know. Woman Hollering. *Pues*, I holler” (55). Felice’s yell “as loud as any mariachi” (55), in that moment, and on those circumstances announces Cleófilas’ recapture of her free power of choice and demonstrates that the holler must not be of anger or pain, like the townspeople thought it was. Felice’s yell is an exclamation incorporating contentment and self-confidence, attributes that serve to inspire young Cleófilas as she faces this new crossing experience in her life. When she listens to Felice hollering “like Tarzan” (55), she understands that it is *La Gritona* calling her again, this time materialized in her new friend’s voice.

At first, Cleófilas’ return to her father’s home might be seen as the simple homecoming of a daughter who failed in marriage and turns to the paternal protection again. However, Cleófilas is going back home a different woman due to the hardships she had to face and the lessons she learned out of her suffering not only as a woman but also as an immigrant in a town *en el otro lado* (43).

Melucci refers to the borders as recognition of limits and as an opening and closing regulation of these limits (66). For Cleófilas to cross the physical borders she wished, she needed the support of someone else, even though she understood that her choice was defining that. However, her psychological, emotional, and spiritual transformation was undoubtedly the most difficult border she had to cross, something that depended entirely on her inner mobilization.

4.3 The poem *Jarcería Shop*

Jarcería Shop*

A breakfast tray please. For my terrace.
In the morning I invite the bees
To raising bread with lavender honey.
Don't worry, there's always
Enough for everybody.

I'll take a few of those *carrizo*
Baskets, strong enough for a woman
To haul a kilo of fresh oranges
From the Ignacio Ramírez market.
As if. I usually send Calixto,
The handyman.

Add a palm fan.
And an *ocote* stick or two.
For the fire I'll never ignite.
Solo de adorno, of course.
To amuse spirit ancestors!

Can you bring down
That papier-mâché doll?
Dressed in her best underwear.
I had one just like it as a girl.

No, I don't have kids.

A *comal* would be nice
To reheat my evening *tamal*.
Only a *comal* gives it
That smoky flavor.
I don't know how
To make *tamales*.
Why bother when
You can buy them
From the nuns.

A *molcajete*? Maybe.
Would make a cool bird
Bath for my yard.

Ay, and *ixtle* –
Maguey fibers
Hairy and white as
The grandfather's chest –
To strop the skin raw in the shower.

My outdoor sink,
With ribs like a hungry dog's,
Could use a step-stool stone

That dances *un danzón*,
And an *escobeta* scrub brush
Cinched tight at the waist
Like a ballerina.

Please deliver a fresh *petate*
With its palm tree scent
For my bedroom floor.
In the old days they were
My ancestors' coffins.

And that ball of *mecate* string.
Might as well.

Plus a lidded straw basket
To store plastic market bags
The color of the Mexican
Tianguis –

Sky turquoise,
Geranium coral,
Jacaranda, amethyst,
Tender green of
Fresh *nopal* paddles.

A cotton hammock

Wide as a market woman,

So while I sleep

The pepper tree can bless me.

Six *carrizo* poles

To hang the new curtains

Made from *coyuchi* cotton.

I came for a cage

For my onyx parrot –

A goodbye gift from my agent

Attached with a warning.

Don't move south.

Los abuelos,

Who couldn't read, fled

North during the revolution,

With only what

They could carry in *un rebozo*.

And here I am at fifty-eight

Migrating in the opposite direction

With a truck hauling my library.

I live *al revés*, upside down.

Always have.

Who called me here? Spirits maybe.

A century later. To die at home for them

Since they couldn't.

And for my cobbled courtyard,

Your best branch broom

With a fine *shh-shh*,

Like the workers who sweep up

Saturday night on Sunday

Morning in el Jardín.

And, a bucket.

To fill with suds.

For the simple glory of scrubbing

Mexican porch tiles

In my bare brown feet.

When I feel like it.

On the housekeeper's day off.

To set the grandmothers

Grinding their gravestone teeth.

* This from the *Diccionario de la Real Academia Española (The Dictionary of the Royal Spanish Academy):*

jarcería

f. Méx. Shop where objects made from vegetable fibers are sold. An archaic word, hardly in use anymore.

Sandra Cisneros's *Jarcería Shop* is a poem included in her latest poetry book, *Woman Without Shame*, published in 2022. Written in free verse, it is the third poem of the section entitled *Cielo Sin Sombrero,* which brings poems that mostly deal with identity and belonging, but which also have cultural and political comments about Mexico and the United States. *Jarcería Shop* had already been published in Sergio Troncoso's *Nepantla Familias: An Anthology of Mexican American Literature on Families in Between Worlds*, a 2021 book, characterized by being a sociological study and an ethnographic model of lives for Mexican Americans in the United States.

Through the analysis of the poem *Jarcería shop*, we can say that this particular piece has a dialogical tone that resembles a conversational monologue. The poetic-I, throughout this poem, has many of her traits as well as her background life revealed to the reader as she orders products to this silent listener who can be identified as the shop assistant at this commercial place.

In *Jarcería Shop*, Cisneros uses the viewpoint of a migrant mature woman who has found peace with her Mexican cultural heritage and her Mexican, American, and Chicana identities. As readers of this poem with knowledge about Sandra Cisneros' personal life, it is difficult to avoid thinking about the author as the poetic-I in these verses. As in other Cisneros's texts, the theme of the house is present in *Jarcería*

Shop. However, different from Esperanza's family house in *The House on Mango Street*, where the pipes did not work properly and she had to share a room with her six brothers, this is a comfortable house, and, most importantly, it is a house of her own. Concerning this point, here we can make a reference to Cisneros's book of memories, entitled *A House of My Own*, published in 2015. In *Jarcería Shop,* the repetition of the possessive adjective "my" in several of its verses reinforces the idea that this place she is furnishing, and decorating is of her property: "For *my* terrace" (l.1); "Would make a cool bird / Bath for *my* yard." (l. 32-33); "*My* outdoor sink," (l. 39); For *my* bedroom floor." (l. 48); "*my* library" (l. 81); "And for *my* cobbled courtyard," (l. 87)[12]. We should call attention here not only to the word itself but to the power it brings to the poem, indicating that the speaker has the command over the things in her house and that she is the one who makes the decisions over its rooms, not allowing someone else to do that for her.

It is interesting to point out that while she orders traditional Mexican items for her place, she mentions the purpose each one of them has, adding comments which not only tell the reader about her everyday habits but also expose some details of her personal life and her historical background. Her desire to have a Mexican home with elements of Aztec and colonial Mexico references is her desire to be at peace with her ancestry and to feel at home in her heart at last.

We can observe that the speaker is a woman who lives alone, who lives by herself. However, she does not feel loneliness. She starts the poem ordering a tray, which is an object that brings the idea of offering things to someone else under a certain ritual. She tells the sales assistant that every morning she receives the bees as guests and shares breakfast with them, not worrying about the number of bees

[12] The word "my" was highlighted by me.

which show up for that meal. Bees are symbolic here once they can represent good luck and prosperity. The speaker's offering bread and honey to her guests, i. e., the bees, demonstrate her generosity and friendship. Honey and bread are considered holy food and are present in many passages of the Scriptures - bread representing a gift from God and honey being associated with prosperity and abundance. Raisin is another element which is present in the Scriptures, as raisin cakes were eaten on special occasions, in times of joy and celebrations. Lavender represents purity, devotion, and grace and is also mentioned several times in the Bible for its diverse characteristics and properties.

For every item the speaker orders at the *jarcería shop* she says what she is going to use it for, mentioning what she plans for each object in her house. Her motivations sometimes involve practicality, like the use she wants to give to the *comal* and the *carrizo* poles: "A *comal* would be nice / To reheat my evening *tamal*" (l. 22-23). It is important to mention here that a *tamal* is a small cake of dough made from corn, with its origin in indigenous cultures of Mesoamerica. Part of traditional Mexican cuisine, the *tamal* is also part of the speaker's diet. Another practical use she mentions is related to the *carrizo* poles: "Six *carrizo* poles / To hang the new curtains / Made from *coyuchi* cotton" (l. 66-68). Here the speaker indicates that a type of cotton grown in Mexico was used in the new curtains of her house, another evidence of her appreciation for local vegetable fibers. She orders the *carrizo* poles with a practical objective in mind.

However, other times, it seems that the poetic-I simply wishes that these new objects in her house serve as reminders of old Aztec and Mexican traditions. An example of this is when she orders the fresh *petate*, which is a bedroll woven from natural palm fibers: "In the old days they were / My ancestors' coffins" (l. 40-50). So,

besides decorating her bedroom floor, the *petate* will be there to make her think of times past. It could be argued here that some of these pieces serve as a means to connect her to her Mexican identity. Interestingly, most of the objects she buys are made from vegetable fibers taken from native plants which grow in the region of Mexico. On the surface, they are a clear reference to the natural resources of that region, abundant in plants which are considered sacred for the native people of Mexico due to their uses and significance. Deep inside, however, these fibers obtained from these plants represent the strength and endurance of Mexican people before difficulties and hardships.

The items she chooses for her house have an appeal for Mexicans' cultural Aztec background and are associated to Mexican identity traits. Examples are abundant in the poem: an "*ocote* stick" (l. 13), for instance, is a natural fire starter; "*carrizo*" (l. 6 and l. 66) is a fiber, as well as *ixtle* (l. 34), obtained from succulent plants like *agave* and *yucca*. The same happens to the *maguey*, which is an important plant in Mexico and appears in another poem in this book, entitled *I want to be a Maguey in my next life*, the last of the section *Cielo sin sombrero*. As she orders items that are associated to Mexicans' indigenous ancestry, and to Aztec and Mexican traditions, the poetic-I is celebrating her historical background. It seems that the speaker wants to recover the appreciation of things that represent her culture, a love that remained asleep in the past with the people who preceded her.

The presence of nature in *Jarcería Shop* can be linked to the speaker's connection with the geographical region portrayed in the poem. In spite of being a recent relationship, the speaker and that land are already bounded, and we can observe this affinity throughout the poem. Besides her offering breakfast to the bees in the beginning of the poem, she considers buying a *molcajete* for the birds to bathe

in her yard. It is interesting to point out here that this is a typical Mexican cooking object, which is being given another purpose by the speaker – instead of using it for labor, she intends to use it for the birds' pleasure and for her contemplation of their delight. Moreover, the natural fibers of the objects she orders show the telluric force she wants to enhance. Another example of the presence of natural power in this poem comes from lines 64 and 65, when the speaker says that her sleep can be watched by the pepper tree blessing her. Peppers are enormously significant in Mexican culture, being part of Mexican people's lives since childhood, not only for their use in culinary, but also for medicinal benefits, as well as for their spiritual and magical properties. The pepper symbolizes protection and often times is used to chase away bad spirits.

The poetic-I makes use of evocative imagery in the sense that the items she orders produce different responses in her. Every time she mentions one object, a reaction is formed in her being. She sometimes reflects upon the utility of each item, either mentioning the use it had in the past or the use she intends to give now that the object is going to be part of her house. Other articles arise in her memories of times past, like the papier-mâché doll, making her remember the toy she used to have long before, as a child. Feelings of comfort are also generated. As she orders the hammock, for example, she sees herself resting and receiving the benediction of good spirits through the branches of the pepper tree. Distinct ideas arise as she sees the objects in the shop.

This evocative imagery used by the poetic-I captures the intense Mexican colors, which are in the poem to send a message. The poetic-I mentions "The colors of the Mexican / *Tianguis*" (l. 55-56) and then cites the tones which are present in them. *Tianguis* are part of Mexican culture and are open markets traditionally held on certain special and commercial days. They can evoke in the reader who has

knowledge of Mexican culture the image of the colored *papel picado,* usually used in this kind of celebration and with different designs.

The colors that are cited have different meanings. As it was previously mentioned in this study, in the Nahua codices, book of the Aztecs, the turquoise color signifies water and rain. Turquoise is also considered the color of calmness and clarity, and in the poem, it is associated to the sky. It is important to say that the sky is a significant element in this section of poems, being the theme of two other pieces, namely *Sky wearing a hat* and *Sky without a hat*, a reference to the sky of San Miguel. The sky symbolizes infinity and eternity and in poetry it is often said that the sky represents the poet's emotions. The "Sky turquoise" of *Jarcería Shop* can be related to the speaker's joy and happiness for this special time she is having at this moment in her life.

Coral is the following color mentioned by the poetic-I. It is considered a lucky color and in different cultures it is thought to promote longevity and prosperity. In the poem it is associated to the geranium, a flower that symbolizes happiness, good health, and friendship. The speaker then cites Jacaranda, which refers to the bluish-purple color of its petals covering the streets and roofs of many Mexican towns during certain times of the year. Especially in the region of Mexico City, Spring brings the ravishing violet petals of the Jacaranda trees into full bloom, something that amazes viewers and passers-by. Following that, amethyst is also mentioned, a gemstone associated with royalty due to its purple coloring. It is interesting to point out here that amethyst stones are believed to proportionate protection and to have healing properties. The poetic-I closes the stanza citing the green color, giving it the quality of being tender and associating it to "Fresh *nopal* paddles" (l. 61). Green is very important for Mexicans as it is part of the Mexican flag, representing independence and hope.

The *nopal,* commonly referred to as prickly pear cactus in English, is also symbolic in Mexican culture as it refers to the image in its national emblem. In this image, there is an eagle standing on a *nopal*. The eagle is holding a snake in its beak, a reference to the time of the Aztecs going to the region of Mexico, and it is based on the legend of the founding of the Aztec capital, Tenochtitlan[13]. Of citrus and tart flavor characteristics, the *nopal* is a staple in Mexican cuisine. But, most importantly, for Mexicans, the *nopal* is considered a life-giving plant, *la planta de la vida*, as it seems to live forever.

Besides the speaker's house and the *jarcería* shop itself, we can notice the presence of other places that are relevant in San Miguel de Allende, the city where the poet has chosen to live in Mexico. The Ignacio Ramírez market, with aisles of traditional products and full of flowers, and a variety of Mexican articles, is part of the life of that place and it is where the poetic-I sends her helper to buy fresh oranges. It is interesting to say that Ignacio Ramírez was an important writer and a libertarian politician from San Miguel and here we can imagine that the poet wants to pay homage to this celebrated *Sanmiguelense* by mentioning the name of this traditional local market. We can observe that in the same stanza the speaker mentions her handyman's name, Calixto, honoring someone who is not famous, but who is important in her life in San Miguel. Putting his name in such a meaningful poem is valuing his assistance and engraving his presence in the speaker's history.

Another local place mentioned in the poem is *El Jardín*, the central *plaza* in San Miguel. Fundamental in Mexican culture, these places of encounters, which are part

[13] The legend says that the people of Aztlan, north of what today is Mexico, had to leave by orders of their gods in search of the promised land. Ingersoll recounts how the Aztecs moved into the valley of Mexico and settled upon certain islets in a marshy lake – the site of the subsequent City of Mexico; and this safe site is said to have been pointed out to them by a sign from their gods – an eagle perched upon a prickly-pear cactus, *the nopal*, in the act of strangling a serpent. Cortés engraved it upon his Great Seal, and Mexico has kept it to this day (qtd. in Guthrie 88).

of the heritage left by colonial times, bring life to the city. The central square in Mexican cities is where friends meet to have informal conversations, where families take their children to play and to enjoy themselves. A social space that reinforces the idea of community, *El Jardín* is the Mexican heart of San Miguel. In the poem, the workers clean what is left from "Saturday night on Sunday / Morning" (l. 91-92), in a reference to the rebirth the place goes through every weekend. In literature, the times of day are cyclical symbols, and the idea here is that what was left imperfect, gains a new chance to continue its purpose. It might also be noted that the following poem in this section is called "El Jardín, End of Day", and in it, the speaker describes typical scenes she observes in the place while she walks around it as she exercises to lose weight.

There are some interesting comparisons in *Jarcería Shop*. The poetic-I makes use of simile as she compares some of the objects she requests to things that remind her of her family, her childhood days, or bring to her mind images which arise good feelings in her. The sight of her grandfather's torso appears in "Maguey fibers / Hairy and white as / The grandfather's chest" (l. 35-37). *Abuelos* are very significant in Mexican culture, being loved and respected by their descendants beyond their last days. For the poetic-I, this is a memory that carries affection and fondness. In the following stanza, beginning "My outdoor sink, / With ribs like a hungry dog's" (l. 39-40), the comparison is a reference to a common sight in many Mexican cities, where you can find a number of homeless dogs wandering on the streets. Additionally, when we have knowledge about the poet's life, we learn that she is very fond of dogs and devoted to the ones she owns.

Another simile that can be seen in the poem is the comparison between the scrub and a ballerina: "Cinched tight at the waist / Like a ballerina" (l. 44-45). The comparison between a scrub and a ballet dancer comes to the speaker's mind

because of the format the object gets as the fibers are fastened and receive a strap tightly tied. Besides, the speaker had just mentioned the act of dancing after ordering a step-stool stone for her outdoor sink, imagining herself, we can conclude, in a moment of joy while washing what is necessary in that basin. One more analogy done by the poetic-I appears a little later in the poem, when she orders "A cotton hammock / Wide as a market woman" (l. 63-64). This overstatement refers to the often large women working in markets, selling typical products to maintain their families. It might also be a reference to the humane and compassionate description portrayed in Langston Hughes' *Mexican Market Woman*, a short poem published in 1922[14]. It is the idea here that she can feel the comfort and the coziness of an experienced and large Mexican woman's lap while she rests on this hammock. It is interesting to point out that we can observe a contrast in relation to the previous comparison in the poem: the ballerina and the market woman. Despite their differences in size, both are remembered by the speaker in moments of delight and rejoicing.

Besides the sense of sight, the speaker provokes in the reader the sharpening of the other sensory faculties. The sense of smell is activated as she orders a "fresh *petate*", calling the attention to the "palm tree scent", thus emphasizing an important characteristic the object needs to have. As the speaker orders a *comal* and enhances the smoky flavor it gives to her *tamal*, she evokes the sense of taste in the poem's reader. The sense of hearing is provoked by the use of onomatopoeia, when the poetic-I orders a branch broom "With a fine *shh-shh*"(l. 89), recreating the sound of homemade broomsticks, with their twigs and natural grass dusting and sweeping the floor. Towards the end of the poem, the sense of touch is sharpened as the speaker

[14] This ancient hag / Who sits upon the ground / Selling her scanting wares / Day in, day round / Has known high wind-swept mountains / And the sun has made / Her skin so brown. [*]
[*] This poem is in public domain in poets.org website.

describes the feeling of scrubbing “Mexican porch tiles / In my bare brown feet” (l. 96-97), making a connection between her ethnicity to the heart of a traditional Mexican house.

In *Jarcería Shop*, the poetic-I shows her empowerment as a mature woman who is in control of her life. It can be observed in some of the poem’s verses that her life does not follow the Mexican and the *Chicano* cultural standards. As she orders “That papier-mâché doll” (l. 18), we can infer, by the last line in the stanza, that the salesperson may have asked her if the doll was a gift for her daughter, which she replied with “No, I don’t have kids” (l. 21). Moreover, we can notice that she is a financially independent woman as she orders so many objects without asking about or making any comment on their price. It is the idea that once those objects fulfill her desires, she is going to acquire them without bothering about the money needed for that deal.

Another point is the fact that she has the means to pay other people to do the housework and run errands for her, as it can be seen when she orders the *carrizo* “Baskets, strong enough for a woman / To haul a kilo of fresh oranges / From the Ignacio Ramírez market. (l. 7-9). Following these verses, the speaker immediately brings an ironic and humorous tone to the poem and adds the following comment: “As if. I usually send Calixto, / The handyman. (l. 10-11). On the occasion of ordering the *comal*, she offers the information that she does not know how to make *tamales* and that she buys them “From the nuns” (l. 30). Cooking skills for women are very important in Mexican culture and the speaker indicates, in her verses, that this is an ability she lacks. Interestingly, we can infer that the salesperson suggests that she buys a *molcajete*, which is a cooking object used in the traditional preparation of *tamales* so that she can learn how to cook them. However, the speaker considers buying it, but

with a different purpose: “Would make a cool bird / Bath for my yard” (l. 32-33). The salesperson’s hidden voice can be understood as the voice of the Mexican and Chicano societies, which still see mothering and domestic activities like cooking, for instance, as a woman’s prerogative. Yet, it is clear in the poem that the speaker does household chores, but not as an obligation, as it can be read in the following verses: “When I feel like it. / On the housekeeper’s day off” (l. 98-99). Using the sink and dancing, scrubbing the porch tiles while seeing her brown feet in the middle of the white suds are pleasant and amusing moments for her.

As she orders the cage for her onyx parrot, the speaker remembers that her agent did not want her to move south. Perhaps it was a warning telling she would be away from the opportunities as an artist. Nevertheless, the gift – the onyx parrot – is like a talisman, since it is said that onyx stimulates strength, willpower, and discipline.

Then, after ordering the cage, we learn about the speaker’s history of migration through her stream of consciousness. In this moment of brief digression, she reveals that her grandparents, who were illiterate, migrated to the United States because of the difficult times they had to face due to the Mexican Revolution, “With only what / They could carry in *un rebozo*” (l. 77-78). By the speaker’s account, we can also learn that her relatives were people of few resources once they used only a *rebozo* to pack their personal belongings. Differently from them, she is now migrating back in a privileged condition. As an educated woman, “With a truck hauling my library” (l. 81), her purpose is different. At a mature age and with the sensitiveness of an artist, she sees her migration as a homage she is paying to her ancestors. As she reflects upon her journey “in the opposite direction” (l. 80), she refers to the female expectations she has not met: I live *al revés*, upside down. Always have” (l. 82-83).

The presence of Spanish words in the poem is a mark of the poetic-I's identity, since the language she speaks is a hybrid one. In connection with this is the fact that some of the poems in Cisneros's *Woman Without Shame*, the book which includes the poem being studied here, *Jarcería Shop*, were originally written in Spanish by the author. Moreover, many of the words that refer to the objects portrayed in *Jarcería Shop* are in the Nahuatl language, the language of the Aztecs.

A bucket is the last object ordered by the poetic-I at the *jarcería*: "And, a bucket. / To fill with suds" (l. 93-94). As it is an item that has to do with cleaning, we can relate it to activities expected from women. The speaker's last comment in relation to the grandmothers makes a reference to their reactions before the habits of modern Mexican women, their granddaughters, who do not follow the cultural expectations for them anymore. The poetic-I knows that scrubbing the floor just when she fancies doing it would cause an effect of extreme irritation in her grandmother to the point that she would grind her teeth.

However, we can imagine that the presence of the bucket as the last item the speaker orders may have another reason. The speaker might want the readers to relate it to her bucket list, in the sense that she had a wish list concerning her new house after migrating to Mexico.

Sandra Cisneros's *Jarcería Shop* is not only captivating because of the poet's perfect scene-setting and the presence of an informal conversational style. Resources like the rhythm of the poem, the imagery and the peculiar lexical choice, with the presence of the three languages that are part of the poet's cultural heritage and identity, takes readers to an intimate tour inside a house which is, in fact, representative of this migrant woman's heart and soul.

As we reach the end of this section and thus, the end of this chapter, we would like to point out that the analyses carried out here demonstrated that Sandra Cisneros' literature carries a discourse that not only thrills and unsettles its readership. It also takes readers to a journey through the Mexican and the Mexican American world, crossing real and metaphorical borders, and giving a new configuration to preconceived ideas about the presence of the Mexican Americans in the United States. In this crossing of borders, it is important to mention that the female voices in these texts offer resistance to a model of oppressive society and show that they can break barriers and become active agents in determining their own destiny.

5 Final Considerations

The political, economic and social transformations through which the world has been through, mainly after World War II, raised themes such as (im)migration, exile, and the formation of new cultural identities on the agenda of discussions in the fields of Humanities and Social Sciences. The result of these transformations and of this new notion of the subject has created a new geography and has designed a map which is more guided by the logic of social and cultural relations than by the territorial logic.

According to Edward Said, the invocation of the past is one of the most common strategies in interpreting the present (33). In order to understand many of the cultural phenomena that occur because of the formation of new identities, it is necessary to analyze some pages of History and seek for new interpretations. In the case of the United States, a country traditionally associated with the WASP (white, Anglo-Saxon, protestant) culture, one of the facts that draw people's attention today is the growing number of the Hispanic population, which has brought to the country not only a new demographic configuration, but also different symbolic artifacts.

Examples can be seen all over the country. Even being in the land of "Uncle Sam", people can eat *tacos* or *burritos* for breakfast at the most popular fast-food restaurants and the flour *tortillas*, which are considered the staples of Mexican meals, are more sold than bread in supermarkets. Some dates of the Mexican calendar, such as *Cinco de Mayo* and *Diez y seis de Septiembre* (written that way on banners and posters instead of "dieciséis") are celebrated in festivals and with parades of floats on the streets of American cities, decorated with *papel picado* in red, white, and green, the colors of the Mexican flag. In some US states, Hispanic surnames like "García"

are more common than some very popular Anglo family names like “Smith”, for example. *Spanglish* or *Tex-Mex*, as it is called in the state of Texas, is a dialect spoken in the daily life of the Hispanic community. Even though it is not official, Spanish is considered the second language of the country, being present in public and commercial departments, with the purpose of reaching an audience that consumes more and more and, consequently, pays taxes. The American entertainment industry has radio stations and TV channels totally spoken in Spanish, with TV shows, news programs and *telenovelas* aimed at Hispanic audiences.

It is interesting to note that, in order that we understand this phenomenon, which in some respects is considered current by many people, there is a necessity to seek data from the nineteenth century and examine the historical process, markedly the time when the United States began its policy of expansion and, after a turbulent war against Mexico, annexed a large part of Mexican lands to its territory. From that time onwards, Mexicans who lived in that land, as well as other groups of Hispanics who arrived later (including Mexicans), became part of the development of the American capitalism. Different historical events, personal experiences, traditions, and customs resulted in an intertwining of distinct cultures sharing the same space, something that has not always been peaceful in view of the fact that many of these relations involved power and dominance. It is also important to mention that severe economic and political crises in Latin America after World War II have contributed to the increase in the number of Hispanic populations in the United States. Additionally, the idea of the American dream still inhabits the minds of Latin Americans who would face the hardships of becoming an immigrant, even in an illegal condition, to have the chance to prosper and obtain financial success in the nation that holds the title of the world’s greatest economy.

Despite the social victimization suffered due to their ethnicity and unprivileged social condition, this large and growing community, with its customs, beliefs and values, has reflected on the experience of living between two worlds through various artistic manifestations, which began to be recognized and valued mainly from the 1960s onwards. In the wake of the Civil Rights movement on that occasion, the group of Mexican Americans, the Chicanos, mobilized to have a voice in American society. From then on, other groups, such as Cuban Americans, Puerto Rican immigrants in New York, the Nuyoricans, and immigrants from other Latin American countries, also started to show, through their art, the traces of their blended existence.

Our interest in addressing issues related to the experiences of Hispanics, and more specifically, of Mexican Americans in the United States arises from the analysis of a literature that still searches for its place in the American literary canon. In these literary texts we can see different ways of living, of feeling, of thinking and of placing oneself in the world, which is proper to a group that lives on the borderlands, being them geographical or imaginary. Under an ethnic minority label and in a situation of dominated class, this group's crossing of borders includes, in addition to the struggle for survival, the struggle for recognition, social inclusion and acceptance by the ones who belong to the ruling class. Mainly after the Chicano Movement, there was the emergence of a generation of poets and novelists who, because they knew the immigrant experience closely and because they lived on the threshold of two worlds – the Mexican and the American – dramatized this feeling of living in an "in-between" place. In this sense, resorting to History and Cultural Studies is necessary as a way of illuminating the contexts that the texts studied here refer to as a way of more effectively understanding their construction.

This study emerges from the reading of literary texts which are responses to cultural matters and identity issues reflected in a society that needs to deal with oppositions and conflicts due to a constant come and go between two worlds, the United States and Mexico. The reading of Chicano literature allows us to reflect, among other ideas, upon the marks of the border culture that the represented Mexican American communities carry, as well as upon the contradictory forces that the members of these communities need to face. The texts selected for this thesis, written by the Chicana author Sandra Cisneros illustrate the challenging crossing from one culture to another while they offer reflections upon being a woman and finding peace with her Chicana heritage within her American existence.

Considering this, it is noticeable that the encounter of different cultures in contemporary times has produced intense debates, even because the meanings of culture have been developed in different ways since the emergence of the term in medieval times. From grain cultivation in the Middle Ages to the cultivation of the mind in the Renaissance and Modern Ages, the word “culture” became strongly linked to the refinement of the human being and the search for intellectual and artistic improvement. When Edward Said uses the term, it means two things in particular. Firstly, culture designates all those practices, such as the arts of description, communication and representation, which have relative autonomy before the economic, social and political fields and that exist in aesthetic forms, including both popular knowledge and specialized knowledge. Secondly, the author states that culture is a concept that includes an element of elevation and refinement, the reservoir of the best of each society, and in that sense, it is a source of identity that can generate religious and nationalist fundamentalisms (12-13).

As it can be observed, culture is in a continuous process of transformation and presupposes power relations and shared meanings; it is a phenomenon where the conflicting relations among the different segments that compose the society are always in evidence. Because of its all-encompassing characteristic, many different issues are seen to be part of culture, which is something that cannot be understood without the attention to these developments.

In the analysis carried out here, we sought to raise questions related to the cultural phenomenon within three of Sandra Cisneros's fictional works, namely the novel *Caramelo*, the short story *Woman Hollering Creek*, and the poem *Jarcería Shop*. We worked towards showing how experiences of migration and the construction of hybrid identities are represented in these literary texts, establishing a relation with theoretical works which, besides dealing with the cultural phenomenon, bring conceptions of identities that help us understand the complexity of the diasporic processes present in postmodern literary publications.

The investigation demonstrated that the characters' experiences of migration and relatedness to it are crucial to the understanding of their internal conflicts which result from the presence of rather opposed cultural values. Additionally, not only cultural aspects matter in these characters' construction of hybrid identities but also, and most importantly, the strong bond that connects them with their ancestors.

Through a historical overview of migration and its main causes, our attention was directed to the impacts of this phenomenon in the academic production of intellectuals as well as in artistic manifestations such as literature. Then, as we referred to the situation of the United States in relation to the presence of Mexicans and Mexican Americans in the country, an attempt was made to demonstrate how the literature produced by these hybrid authors is committed to reviewing the

historiography and ethnography of this community within this geographic space. If critics currently suggest that nations are narratives, one might say that the literature presented here not only seeks to contribute for the Mexican American nation to consolidate its place in history and in the American empire, but also for them to assert their identity and the existence of their own trajectory.

Upon accessing the first pages of each text, it is possible to identify elements that lead us to the discussion of the themes proposed here. In *Caramelo*, for instance, on the introductory page, the subtitle used by the narrator simulating the cursing spoken in *telenovelas* contrasting with the adulation phrases in embroideries used in Mexican homes, anticipates a feature that is identified during the whole novel, which is the presence of Spanish inserted in a narrative written in English. However, most importantly, is the anticipation of the conflictual relationships encountered in the stories told throughout the following pages, permeated by contends and incompatibilities, but mended by familial love.

Additionally, the observations made by the narrator Celaya related to the differences between the two countries, just after they cross the border on their annual trip to Mexico, gives us the idea that in spite of not having been born in that land, there is a strong connection with it, something which is noted as she details the scenery upon the family's arrival. Her description creates this atmosphere of affinity and attachment revealing that her bond transposes her memory and is felt through her senses as well.

> As soon as we cross the bridge everything switches to another language. *Toc*, says the light switch in this country, at home it says *click*. *Honk*, say the cars at home, here they say *tán-tán-tán*. The *scrip-scrape-scrip* of high heels across

> *saltillo* floor tiles. The angry lion growl of the corrugated curtains when the shopkeepers roll them open each morning and the lazy lion roar at night when they pull them shut. The *pic, pic, pic* of somebody's faraway hammer. Church bells over and over, all day, even when it's not o'clock. Roosters. The hollow echo of a dog barking. Bells from skinny horses pulling tourists in a carriage, *clip-clop* on cobblestones and big chunks of horse *caquita* tumbling out of them like shredded wheat. (17)

By the end of this chapter, as Celaya finishes the detailed description and says "Every year I cross the border, it's the same – my mind forgets. But my body always remembers" (18), we have a demonstration of how she responds to Mexican cultural references. Her living "in-between" can be observed by the sharpening of her senses as that Mexican vivid imagery is portrayed in this American girl.

Caramelo's main narrator Celaya Reyes - the other narrator is Soledad, the Awful Grandmother - by acting as a kind of family historian and storyteller, besides bringing information and anecdotes related to her family members, includes reflections upon growing up in a Mexican American home. Being the only girl - and the youngest kid - in a family of seven siblings, through her narrative, we sense her empathy towards the other female characters while we learn about Mexican and Mexican American elements that make part of both cultures and how they relate to her family life both in Mexico and in the United States.

The presence of the caramel-colored *rebozo* which was left uncompleted by Guilhermina, Celaya's great-grandmother, and has already been crossing generations is crucial to understand the relations in Celaya's family. Carrying many similarities with the Reyes family, the *rebozo* serves as its metaphor while it strongly connects the girl

Celaya to her Awful Grandmother. Like the Reyes, the *rebozo* is an item of clothing with Spanish and indigenous influence, dating back to Mexican colonial times. The sophistication of its caramel color contrasts with the modesty of the girl Candelaria, Celaya's bastard sister, whose skin complexion is also caramel. The intricacy of the knots in the rebozo represent many of the family's complex relationships, which arise before the social parameters determining the characters' lives.

Bringing one of the hallmarks of postmodern literary productions, *Caramelo* can be considered a narrative that is fictional, historical, and discursive. Reflecting on past values from the understanding of what happens in the present and the presentation of a truth that can be discussed and questioned represent more flexibility in interpreting historical facts. In this sense, *Caramelo* allows readers to look at the historical discourse from the perspective of the ones who had been put to the margins.

The other literary piece that has been analyzed here, the short story *Woman Hollering Creek*, depicts the several borderlands that the protagonist has to cross and that illustrate the complications of her process of identification. While the young woman Cleófilas, the main character in the story, is dreaming about a perfect love life which is only seen in *telenovelas*, she does not realize that the marriage she committed to has actually imprisoned her, not only because of her husband's violence, but also because she subjugates herself to that cultural model of relationship.

From a different perspective, *Woman Hollering Creek* is related to the Mexican Legend of *La Llorona*, the ghost of a woman who cries for her lost children, the children that she killed herself. This haunted spirit, *La Lorona*, is also believed to be the ghost of Doña Marina, La Malinche, the indigenous woman who served as a slave and a translator to Cortés during the conquest of Mexico. La Malinche, this archetype in Mexican culture, is considered a traitor of her people as well as the mother of modern

Mexico once she had a son with Cortés and became the mother of one of the first mestizos in that land. When *La Llorona* is associated with La Malinche, it is said that she consumes herself of pity and cries in anguish because she had betrayed her own people.

However, instead of lamenting over her deeds, in *Woman Hollering Creek*, *La Llorona* gains a new meaning and becomes *La Gritona*, in a demonstration that fear, suffering, and dissatisfaction may lead to a struggle for a change and, eventually, to a more promising destiny. Believing that she would have a better life in a town *en el otro lado*, Cleófilas departs for her American Dream which, in reality, turns out to be a nightmare. Such a story of contradictory feelings reverberates what happens with adolescent girls in many poor immigrant communities where marriage seems to be the only direction they should turn to.

The themes proposed in this thesis are also revealed in *Jarcería Shop*, the third literary piece analyzed in this study. However, different from what we observe in relation to the main characters in *Caramelo* and *Woman Hollering Creek*, this poem brings the viewpoint of a poetic-I who has acquired maturity and wisdom, and because of that, can be seen as a migrant soul who has found peace with her Mexican cultural heritage and her Mexican, American, and Chicana identities.

In *Jarcería Shop*, the reader is offered the perspective of someone whose purpose of migration was different from what happened with characters in *Caramelo* or *Woman Hollering Creek*. The speaker in *Jarcería Shop*, as a mature woman, has migrated “in the opposite direction” (l. 80) with the intention of paying homage to ancestors who had to go “North during the revolution” (l. 76). In this poem, which can be considered a conversational monologue, we observed a strong need on the part of the speaker to reconnect with her Mexican cultural heritage and her Indian ancestry

through the objects she buys for her house in Mexico. Each object that she orders to furnish and decorate this “house of her own” - and here we make a reference to the title of Sandra Cisneros’ 2015 publication - in the Mexican city of San Miguel de Allende, celebrates her ethnicity and helps her to be at peace with her ancestry and to feel at home in her heart at last.

Additionally, it is important to consider here that the reading of Mirandé and Enríquez’ *La Chicana: The Mexican-American Woman* and Gloria Anzaldúa’s *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza* were vital to this thesis because they provided insights to examine the themes studied here within the Mexican American world impacting the lives of Mexican American women. *La Chicana: The Mexican-American Woman* explores the sociological and historical influences that have formed the mentalities of today’s Chicanas. The antecedents and roots of contemporary cultural traits of Mexican Americans offered valuable information to understand, for instance, the role of the family, *la familia*, one of this community’s greatest assets. In the other publication, *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza,* Anzaldúa impeccably puts into words the sentiments that merge out of the border culture. This author, from an autobiographical point of view, speaks of her existence while she verbalizes – in English, but with the presence of the other codes that are part of this border language – what is to live between two cultures and position oneself with consciousness and pride for one’s *mestiza* identity.

The interpretation of Sandra Cisneros’ literary texts in this thesis raises the understanding that the protagonists’ movement towards finding peace with their multiple identities does not start until they recognize that they are free and autonomous to lead their lives and write their own histories. The awareness in relation to their

cultural heritage and the richness of the symbolic forms shared by them make them strong and empowered to find their place in the world.

In order to close the reflection proposed here, we state that the analysis of Sandra Cisneros' *Caramelo*, *Woman Hollering Creek*, and *Jarcería Shop* enabled us to recognize and verify that the discourse articulated in these literary pieces is a committed discourse, since it socially and ideologically defines those who use it, thereby revealing ways of thinking and acting that are deeply linked to the history of their Mexican American communities. Literature as a social practice and as a cultural and ideological manifestation, through its discursive mechanisms and through the interlocution with History, Geography, Sociology, and other sciences, constitutes a way of illuminating our understanding of the human condition and promote public discussion of issues that concern the societies of contemporary times.

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Pontifícia Universidade Católica do Rio Grande do Sul
Pró-Reitoria de Pesquisa e Pós-Graduação
Av. Ipiranga, 6681 – Prédio 1 – Térreo
Porto Alegre – RS – Brasil
Fone: (51) 3320-3513
E-mail: propesq@pucrs.br
Site: www.pucrs.br