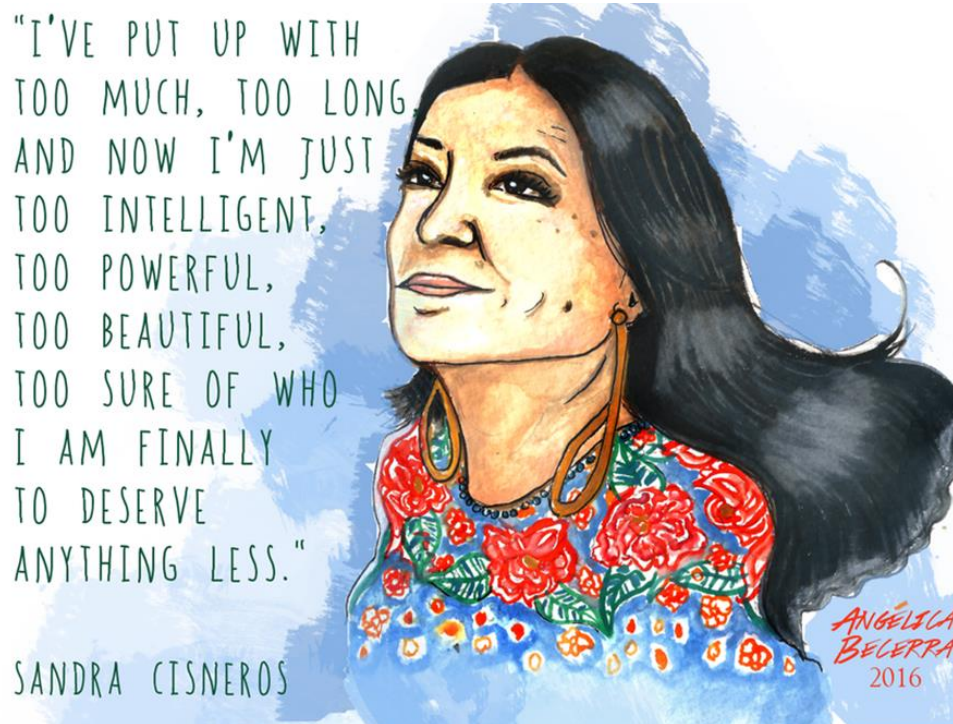


*Caramelo, o Puro Cuento: Sandra Cisneros and her feminist twist to telenovela*



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## Introduction

“We are ‘third world’ consciousness within the first world. We are women under capitalist patriarchy. We can impact United States foreign and domestic policy” (xix), with these words sixty-two years old Cherría Moraga (1952-) introduces the fourth edition of the project she and Gloria Anzaldúa (1942-2004) started in *This Bridge Called My Back* (1981) at twenty-seven years old. Written in November 2014, Moraga re-introduces this *dated* collection of “writings by radical women of color” for us, “the next generation, *and the next one*” (xxiv); signaling the relevance that today has the pending promise of revolution that women of color believed in when they laid political and theoretical framework for a feminism of color in the late 1970s. Being gender not as central in the political agenda of Chicano Movement and feeling excluded from mainstream feminism, Chicana feminists found this absence and exclusion and started to discuss their struggles as working-class women of color from that standpoint. Central to the theorization of gender subordination and liberation were not only Chicana feminist scholars but also artists and writers. In fact, this feminist awakening developed a distinctive expression of a feminine racial voice through the renaissance of ethnic women’s writings as part of feminist discourses (Hurtado 1998; Madsen 2000; Salvídar-Hull 2000).

Binding the personal with the cultural, Chicana writers create a distinct voice where Chicanas are subjects as well as agents of a literary discourse. As noted by Madsen, conventional forms were subverted to express the experiences of these colored women: “the subject of Chicana writing *is* the Chicana subject: feminine subjectivity in a Mexican American context” (5) and thus being “the quest for self-definition” and voice the primary subject matter of Chicana literature. Through her first novel *The House on Mango Street* (1983), the Chicana author Sandra Cisneros (1954-) forged her style by introducing personal experiences, feelings, and thoughts while suggesting how these attributes have been influenced and prescribed by political, racial, economic and cultural forces (Madsen 133). Relating her narratives to male-

oriented, misogynistic Chicano culture, Cisneros's main focus is to voice urgent issues of Chicana feminism by highlighting the potential of feminine subjectivity and sexuality.

With a focus on female gender and telenovela genre, in this thesis I will examine the Chicana feminist twist to the telenovela done by Sandra Cisneros in her piece of work *Caramelo, o Puro Cuento* (2002). Combining “tele” [television] and “novela” [novel], telenovela is a serial drama, commonly equated to soap operas, produced in and/or televised in Latin American countries (Merriam Webster). The connection between telenovela and Chicana/o writing has been studied by several literary scholars (e.g. Eva Fernández de Pinedo Echevarría (2007), Amara Graf (2008, 2014), Marina Malli (2013), Sonia Saldívar-Hull (1999, 2000) and Belkys Torres (2011, 2013)), whose studies highlight the key role of Sandra Cisneros and other Chicana writers (e.g. Ana Castillo, María Amparo Escandón) in experimenting with the telenovela's structure and content in their writing. These scholars agree on signaling the collection of short stories *Woman Hollering Creek* (1991) as Cisneros's initial engagement with the telenovela. In their analysis of the relation between Cisneros's fiction and the telenovela, these studies have mainly focused on the short stories of two women, Cleófilas and Lupe, and their connection to the plotting of women's destinies by dominant, patriarchal discourse and to their feminist awakening. In the story “Woman Hollering Creek”, the protagonist, Cleófilas, is a Mexican woman who tolerates her husband's violence because of the unrealistic love narratives of telenovelas, songs and romance novels. Contrary to this passive viewer, the female protagonist of “Bien Pretty”, Lupe, consumes telenovelas but she is aware of the impossibilities conveyed by its narratives, questioning its ideology and portrayal of female anti-role models. For Saldívar-Hull (1999), the stories of these two women are meant to disarticulate the “hegemonic immigrant narrative that is restaged and rescripted for Mexican women in the domestic sphere through popular televisual culture” (253), which directs our attention to telenovela as a powerful tool to revise sexuality and gender constructions among its viewers.

Fascinated by Ana Castillo's *So Far from God* (1993), which Cisneros reviewed as follows: "Ana Castillo has gone and done what I always wanted to do—written a Chicana *telenovela*", the novel *Caramelo* is regarded by some of the aforementioned literary scholars as Cisneros's attempt to create her own Chicana telenovela. Due to the focus and scope of this thesis, telenovela will be used as a reference framework throughout the chapters to analyze how the narrative conventions of this genre gives interpretative frameworks regarding womanhood and sexuality to the main character. Whereas in *Woman Hollering Creek* Cisneros presented two adult women to experiment with telenovela's informative and affective aspects, *Caramelo* is starred by a teenager girl learning how to be a woman while receiving input from family and popular culture at both sides of the U.S.-Mexico border. Thus, the main protagonist's journey to find her voice and identity allows for a deeper analysis of her mediation of telenovela's fictional worlds within her Chicana feminist awakening. In doing so, telenovela is regarded as more significant than a television genre due to its capacity to empower the viewers through an engagement with socio-cultural aspects as gender consciousness.

In this dissertation, I will focus on the protagonist, Celaya (Lala) Reyes, to analyze her criticism about gender identity constructions within her Chicano/Mexican community. In her family, gender politics is effectively transmitted through socialization and cultural objects such as telenovela, thus reinforcing fixed gender roles and stressing the importance of traditional marriage and family life. I would like to explore the mental shift she narrates by portraying a critical approach to feminine ideals in order to find her singularity. Relying on telenovela-like tropes in her dialogue with the past allows her to comprehend the life choices of the female members of her family. Commenting on these fairy-tale-like narratives grants her a space in the family narrative where she can voice and build her own identity as a woman. Therefore, I aim to answer the following research question: which reassessment of sexist power structures does Celaya advocate with her critical view on gender cultural ideals and on telenovela as

informative framework? This reassessment will be analyzed as a phenomenon occurring through voice, heritage, and rejection.

In Chapter One I will use Mikhail Bakhtin's Dialogism theory, Arnold van Gennep's Liminality concept, and Victor Turner's work on Liminality to delineate the voice of Celaya as an adolescent questioning the established order. In Chapter Two, I will focus on gender socialization and sexism by bringing to the discussion the theory of Ambivalent Sexism developed by Peter Glick and Susan Fiske. This theory will allow for a deeper analysis of benevolent sexist attitudes in *Caramelo* and the widespread of sexist ideas through telenovela conventions. In Chapter Three, I will center on Sandra Cisneros, Cherríe Moraga, and Gloria Anzaldúa's essays on sexuality and self-definition to contextualize the social relevance of the process of feminist awakening narrated in *Caramelo*. These essays will allow for a more complex understanding of the need for societal sexism to disappear from mainstream telenovela narratives and the need for a critical voice as Celaya's to advocate having alternate stories outside of the sexist tradition. This thesis thus tackles in three chapters the novel *Caramelo*, each of which is intent on discussing a specific aspect related to the research question, respectively: Celaya as female agent of social change, the transmission and reception of gender cultural ideals in the novel, and Celaya's feminist standpoint of opposition to societal norms. At the same time, the theme of gender politics and the telenovela framework run as the guiding thread throughout this thesis, at times problematizing Celaya's search for a future outside of sexism, at times supporting it.

## Literature Review

The novel *Caramelo, o Puro Cuento*, written by Sandra Cisneros in 2002, has been an object of study for several authors. Due to Cisneros's citizenship and family roots, the research lines differ slightly in terms of contextualization. These authors mainly frame the novel within the

Chicana Fiction and the Mexican/American cultural borderland. Only few scholars have studied the novel exclusively within its historical framework (e.g. Gabriella Gutiérrez y Muhs, Randy Ontiveros); whereas the vast majority of authors have centered their studies in connection with theoretical frameworks: hybrid identity (e.g. Shuo Chen, An Van Hecke), identity and mobility (e.g. Helane Androne, Marci Carrasquillo, Maya Scolovsky, Adam Spires), identity and language (e.g. Helen Androne, Adam Spires, Bill Johnson González), gothic fiction (Paul Wickelson), collective memory (Cortney Thomas), and historical discourse (Sally Giles).

In terms of Chicana Movement, an author who has decided to concentrate on the place of Sandra Cisneros's novel within the American literary tradition is Randy Ontiveros (2014), who specifically focuses on the relevance this novel has within the Chicana movement and Chicana fiction. According to his study, the works of Sandra Cisneros are characterized by a mix of preserving cultural tradition (*Chicanismo's* pride in cultural practices) with encouraging personal freedom for women (feminism). By showing "how the raw life of Mexican American women could serve as a source for literature" (174), Cisneros plays a key role within the evolution of Chicano cultural politics towards a more feminist perspective. This view of Cisneros as a great renovator of Chicana literature is shared by Gabriella Gutiérrez y Muhs (2016), who highlights Cisneros's contribution in presenting "borderless cultural [Chicana] characters" (153). For her, *Caramelo* is infused with fighters instead of victims who encapsulate the Chicana spiritual quest in a transnational space. Following the context that frames this feminist line of thought, it is not surprising to see that Celaya, the protagonist of the novel, has been examined throughout these studies as an embodiment of the sociohistorical changes that affect second—and even third-and-higher—generation immigrants living in U.S. soil. A special emphasis is given to the challenges these changes inflect on her as a woman owing to the nationalistic sentiment encouraged by Chicano movement and feminist ideologies endorsed by Chicana movement.

Within this Chicana frame, most of the authors have decided to focus on the life of Celaya and her family as members of Mexican, Mexican-American and American communities. Identity theories have been mainly drawn on to approach their life experiences. In her research, Maya Scolovsky (2013) focuses on the challenge made by Cisneros in *Caramelo* to the rhetoric of unbelonging imposed to Mexican-Americans. Referring to Gilberto Rosas and his “thickening borderlands” (61), Scolovsky describes first how the physical and cultural borderland between Mexico and U.S. needs to be recognized as a bigger transnational space. From the depiction of a larger Mexican-American community, she moves to study how *Caramelo* challenges the national identity through practices of mestizaje, creating thus “a newly imagined site of political empowerment” (62). To do this in-depth study of this new geopolitical identity represented in the novel, she refers to Gloria Anzaldúa’s *Borderlands: La Frontera* (1987), in which she proposes to transform geographical and linguistic borderlands into political weapons.

Anzaldúa describes the marginal and oppressive history of the American frontier, which serves to analyze the complexity of liminal subjects. Furthermore, once the complex reality of borderland inhabitants is displayed, Anzaldúa advocates for a transformation of this liminal state into a spark for societal change. From this contestation of the hierarchical order characterized by patriarchy and heteronormativity, the mestiza consciousness arises with a discourse that celebrates the multiple identities and languages of female liminal subjects. This new consciousness had a great impact within Chicana movement and Chicana fiction because it broke with the prevailing binary categories that defined the reality of Chicanas. As a result, Mexican-American women started to consider their liminality and in-between state as a valid place to be identified with and Chicana writers started to write from this liminal perspective. Because Anzaldúa is a theorist whose philosophy served as a source for Chicana writers, it is common to find how scholars use her theories to decipher and sustain Chicana writers’



meanings. For instance, in Scolovsky's study of *Caramelo*, Anzaldúa's mestiza consciousness theory is used to support the conception of the Southwest and the Midwest as porous spaces where an indigenous and mestizo nation has its legitimate home. As it has been seen exemplified by Scolovsky's study, Gloria Anzaldúa is the most referred theorist by scholars when they interpret this novel. Thus, a dialogue between Anzaldúa's mestiza theory and other identity and culture theories has been created by these scholars to better comprehend the hybrid identity of the protagonist of the novel. This hybridity has been analyzed thematically and linguistically.

Thematically, there is an emphasis in elements from the chain of events that leads the reader to discover Celaya's process of identification. In connection to mobility theories and the road trip genre, Marci Carrasquillo (2006) examines Celaya's mobility within her community. According to Carrasquillo's analysis, the family trips convey a stagnation of male and female roles within the community to which Celaya finally rebels in her final trip from Mexico City to Chicago. In the novel, this final trip upwards stands for facilitating instead of limiting women's mobility. Thus, this trip is a discovery journey that results in Celaya asserting a combination of selfhood and community in her Chicana womanhood. This interrogation of established ethnic formulation finds its source in Anzaldúa's philosophy. A similar interpretation is given by Shuo Chen, who states that the novel narrates a search for both cultural identity and feminine identity. Celaya wants to find a place within American society without having to renounce to her identity as a Chicana. By framing her analysis in the borderland, feminist subject, she suggests that Celaya embodies the *Mujer Nueva* chicana who finds herself in-between tradition, represented by Mexican lifestyle, and modernity, represented by American lifestyle. Nevertheless, there are also cultural differences between Mexicans and Mexican-Americans, which entangles the clear-cut ethnic identity strategies promoted by society and complicates Celaya's own discovery journey. This clash in the search for Celaya's identity can also be found in An Van Hecke

(2010)'s discussion about how food acts as a bridge between Mexican and Chicano spheres. In Chicano households, Van Hecke states that children grow up differentiating the Mexican food cooked at home from the American food that can be eaten out. She points out that Mexican food has a characteristic smell and taste that feeds the nostalgia of the migrants for their traditions. Nevertheless, these representations of "the other side" work as Mexican clichés for second and third generation migrants. The three authors agree on stating that Celaya is in contact with clashing identity classifications. Whereas Carrasquillo and Chen focus on space; Van Hecke focuses on a tangible object—food—to describe the source for being exposed to the Mexican, Mexican-American and American strategies through which the community and "the other" are established. Although Celaya has traveled to Mexico to visit her grandparents, it seems that her understanding of her Mexican roots are an obstacle rather than a bridge to comprehend her place within the community. Thus, Celaya's process of identification needs to be approached considering the national messages and ideals in which she is embedded as a Chicana.

Linguistically, authors have considered code-switching as the most representative sign of characters' hybridity. Helane Androne (2016) studies *Caramelo's* code-switching in connection to mobility. By referring to Anzaldúa's acknowledgement of the border as an intersection of place, language and space, she suggests that the narrative voice is tightly linked with the experience of border crossing. Celaya's experience as a child of crossing the U.S.-Mexico border is marked by linguistic and behavior changes that she perceives on the road. She also suggests that the continuous mobility experienced by Celaya influences her speech when recalling her memories. Thus, memories are narrated through code-switching because she tries to reflect as accurate as possible the reality she is recalling. In his study, Adam Spires (2008) also links the characters' code-switching with the Reyes family's mobility. According to him, the novel revolves around how characters interiorize their dual environment (i.e. Mexican and

American). Through analyzing the frontier speech, he concludes that the migrant Mexican subconsciousness and the assimilated Chicano subconsciousness lie both at the heart of the constant negotiation between Spanish and English. Characters are doomed to modify their speech to enter in the social hierarchy of language prevailing in the U.S., which provoked an identity crisis during their process of finding an ethnical identity. A different approach to code-switching is carried out by Bill Johnson González (2010), who focuses on the political activity that underlies this linguistic phenomenon instead of on the effect mobility has in producing it. Johnson González suggests that code-switching in the novel exposes the language conflicts within Mexican/Chicano community rather than the conflict between identifying as Mexican or American. He sustains his analysis on the fact that “culture is mediated by language” (209); thus, Celaya’s continuous translations to English are seen as a critique towards the discrepancies within Mexican-American families. Nevertheless, Johnson González agrees with Androne and Spires’s in acknowledging the liminal position of Celaya between two fierce nationalistic cultures regarding to their national languages. The difference is that Johnson González explicitly states that this liminality “provides Celaya with a certain epistemological privilege” (210). This idea can be understood as signaling the need for a new identity to emerge in order to reconsider fixed classifications in the same way Anzaldúa advocated in her theories. Therefore, implicitly or explicitly, hybrid identity is still visible in the linguistic studies of the novel. And, it can be said that the novel has been studied because of the usage of code-switching either to faithfully transmit memories (Androne), to mark the inner-reality migrants live when embedded in two languages (Spires), or to assert a new language that corresponds to the new consciousness caused my migration (Johnson González).

Another approach to *Caramelo* can be found on works of scholars who decided to focus on Celaya and her storytelling. Although not as fully explored as the quest for an identity, several dissertations have studied how Celaya recalls her memories and transmits them through

the role of storyteller. In Section II, past family stories are narrated through a conversation between Celaya and her ghostly Awful Grandmother Soledad. Paul Wickelson (2014) connects this lengthy conversation to the gothic quest for place. Although Wickelson states that this haunting is caused by Celaya's fears of repeating the failed past of her grandmother; he also affirms that this dialogue provides "the possibility for a healing renewal" (111). This reconsideration of past times works as a reflection for Celaya to confront the subjugation of the female members of her family and the constraints of cultural nationalisms. The connection between storytelling and healing can also be found in Cortney Thomas (2011)' discussion of the novel. Instead of focusing on the gothic elements of Celaya's storytelling, Thomas centers on storytelling as an inherently human act to maintain a collective memory of a community. By recollecting memories and recalling specific details and people, Celaya tells these stories in her own voice. Through this subjective approach, Thomas concludes that storytelling allows Celaya, firstly, to recognize the anger and pain of the individual members of her family and, secondly, to give voice to the family's mistakes and regrets. Thanks to remembering the past, Celaya and her family can move on and start the healing process. A completely different approach to storytelling is done by Sally Giles (2005), who connects Celaya's fictional family stories with historical claims. Giles centers her discussion on the disenfranchised reality of Chicanas to argue that Cisneros is using storytelling as an empowerment act for Chicana movement. She first states that Celaya's family stories belong to the private sphere, a place where female voices are not suppressed and, then, she moves to examine how the discussion of historical issues within those fictional stories represent the entrance of Celaya's female voice in the historical discourse. All these authors affirm that storytelling has a specific function (i.e. to face past traumas (Wickelson), to move forward (Thomas) and to reconstruct national history (Giles)). It can also be argued that these authors agree on highlighting the relevance of memory within storytelling. Whereas Wickelson and Thomas are creating a dialogue with notions of

individual and collective memory to examine Celaya's relationship with the stories she narrates; Giles prefers to highlight the suppression of female perspectives in national histories and to challenge the prevailing history of Mexican American families' reality.

Considering all the studies and arguments already written about hybrid identity and storytelling in *Caramelo*, I take as the starting point the stress on identity that several authors have considered for their studies. Thus, in Chapter One, I will examine the complexity of Celaya as liminal subject through Arnold Van Gennep's theory of liminality instead of following Gloria Anzaldúa's philosophy. I will argue that the feminist turn of the telenovela takes place through a reassessment of sexist power structures that goes parallel with the reshaping of the identity of the protagonist through the liminality of coming of age between a set of female role models.

## Chicana Writing and Telenovela Narratives

At the end of the twentieth century, Chicano/a literature experienced a new period of cultural production, starred by Chicana writings, and characterized by its political content and disarticulation of discursive domains. The scholar Rosaura Sánchez (1996), specialized in Chicano Studies, describes this phenomenon as a "renarrativization" of older narratives to question identity politics (54). Notably, she focuses on studying the deconstruction of a specific social space –the patriarchal family– in Chicana literature due to its subordination of women in marginal spheres. The construction of not only individual subjectivity but also new collective identities is seen as a direct consequence of the repositioning of women within the family in these Chicana writings. For Sánchez, Sandra Cisneros is part of this new Chicana trend because the author constructs female characters "acutely interested in subverting the politics of gender through a reversal of roles [...] attempting to negotiate and assume a position of power in the process of reshaping the heterosexual norm" (54).

Aligned with the experimental trends in Chicana writing, Sandra Cisneros purposefully uses the telenovela genre with its centrality of the theme of love to inspire the storyline of *Caramelo, o Puro Cuento*. Being Lala and Awful Grandmother the main protagonists, the novel makes readers witness the generational gap between a second-generation immigrant and her Mexican grandma in terms of gender ideals and romantic love. In this novel, Cisneros uses an older narrative form such as telenovela to “renarrativize” a story about gender politics in this novel, highlighting the latent counternarrative underlying mainstream telenovela narratives. This “renarrativization” goes in parallel with Lala’s reshaping of her identity, thus alluding to the prospect of remodeling women’s space in society and popular culture.

Telenovela is an established genre that allows for further experimentation and reinvention by altering its motifs and themes and maintaining some of its essential landmarks. However, to tackle the “renarrativization” of the telenovela genre, we first need to delineate the landmarks and conventions of its narratives. In the search to define the telenovela genre, Gustavo Aprea and Rolando Martínez Mendoza (1996) agreed on condensing the metadiscourse of telenovelas in the following discursive characteristics: “narración de tipo seriada, retórica ligada a la exageración, centralidad de los temas amorosos” [serialized storytelling, rhetoric connected with exaggeration, centrality of the theme of love] (17). In other attempts to define the telenovela genre, it can be seen that authors tend to highlight the love story as the most distinct feature to categorize narratives as telenovela. For instance, Janneke Verheijen (2006) describes telenovelas as “classical love stories, set within a modern, luxurious, urban world” (25) and Layla Suleiman Gonzalez (2006) states that “traditionally, the telenovela retells the classic Cinderella story” (86). Due to the prominence of love, Aprea and Martínez Mendoza state that the telenovela genre is characterized by a specific theme –the happiness of a monogamous, heterosexual couple (24)– and by specific motifs related to this theme – unrequited love, love misunderstandings, forbidden love affairs, romantic rendezvous, and a

wedding (25)–. Whereas other narratives such as melodrama and soap operas might include love stories, the love tale is considered central for the existence of a telenovela because it marks its beginning and its end. In the first episode, a telenovela usually starts by introducing the two lovers: a sweet, attractive, poor (darker) heroine and a handsome, rich (white) hero. Throughout the episodes, the lovers must fight and overcome struggles and obstacles to finally be reunited in the last episode. Although there is no a protagonist couple in *Caramelo*, the love life of relatives and Lala’s search for true love are core elements to the narrative. Being central for Lala’s process of becoming, these love stories are constantly compared with the black-and-white worldview of telenovelas and with the themes and motifs of telenovela-like love.

Owing to the fixed nature of the argumentative line of telenovela, viewers expect a telenovela to finish with a happy ending where the main protagonists marry in a religious ceremony and start a family together. Hence, the moral equilibrium is reestablished at the end by the union of two moral, good persons. Since the happy ending is taken for granted, viewers are interested in the in-betweenness that complicates the love tale and finally leads to the expected resolution. Thus, telenovelas center on exaggerating situations and plot twists to display as many scenarios as possible to hinder the happy ending of the couple(s). A telenovela usually englobes many related stories that interconnect the characters of “a restricted group of interrelated people and families” (Verheijen 32), allowing for an extension of the plot and a greater display of these scenarios. This way, the interpersonal relationships of the characters in domestic settings are also part of the serialized narrative and its immoral-moral worldview. To achieve a portrayal of this black-and-white worldview, all characters tend to be one-dimensional, constructed based on specific archetypes such as heroine-hero-villain. Thus, telenovelas maintain a morally rigid worldview where some characters are evil and punished at the end while other characters are morally good and thus rewarded. Throughout the vignettes that configure *Caramelo* in a serialized narrative, grandma’s ideas about what means to be a

proper *señorita* (lady) and critiques about women who do not act as *señoritas* fill the pages and the coming-of-age stages of Celaya. These images about womanhood are based on these moral views spread by telenovelas, focused on transmitting that if your behavior is morally good, you will succeed in life with a family.

Sometimes equated with soap operas, telenovela genre differs with soap opera in its target audience due to the popularity of its serialized storytelling. As noted by Amara Graf (2008), soap operas started as a marketing strategy aimed at promoting cleaning products such as soap or food brands for housewives (16). With no complicated plots, housewives could be able to continue their daily chores while listening or viewing these episodes. In contrast, telenovelas' narratives are built to attract the attention of whole family units, who reunite in silence around the television to faithfully watch episodes. If an episode is missed, crucial information might be lost from the plot line such a subplot or a secret leading to a plot twist. Since this manner of viewing a telenovela produces a faithful audience rate, major telenovelas are broadcasted in prime time allowing for every member of the family to stop his/her routine and watch the telenovela.

Translating this audience popularity to the communication economy of the United States, broadcasting telenovelas in prime time also allows for a marketability that attracts major television corporations in the US Hispanic market. A large number of Spanish speakers are targeted to Mexican media and Latin media by the dominant *hispano-hablante* TV networks, Univision and Telemundo, and the new TV networks directed at Latinos/as living in the US, Azteca America, LATV, UniMás, Vme, Estrella TV, and MundoFox (Rodrigo Gómez, et al. 45-6; Juan Piñón 26). Due to the incredible export success of telenovelas in the American continent and the Arab world, several authors (Hugo Benavides 2016; Gómez, et al. 2014;) have focus on the impact of telenovelas in the United States centering on this genre as an “incredible powerful medium of Latin American popular cultural representation” (Benavides



303). Comprising the 18,3% of the US population in 2018, there are an estimated 59,763,631 Hispanic or Latino residents in the US territory, among which 34,952,474 were born in US, merely 15,516,005 speak only English at home and 38,860,22 speak Spanish at home (“United States Census Bureau”). As happens with the transmission of language, media and literature have the social function of assimilation and cultural maintenance within the Latino community. In the case of telenovela consumption, the growing *hispano-hablante* TV networks signal the huge engagement Latinos have with these cultural products.

Acknowledging the potentiality of telenovela narratives, the scholar Layla Suleiman Gonzalez (2002) claims that telenovelas are powerful mass communication tools to foster social change. With a special emphasis on “kitchen table” talk, she affirms that telenovela narratives encourage its viewers to engage in transformative discourses about taboo topics that would be impossible to be held otherwise (e.g. family planning, divorce, abortion). Besides, being a cultural product watched by intergenerational audiences, these “kitchen table” talks include old and newer ways of understanding what it means to be a Latina. “Expand[ing] public discourse about gender roles and radically shift[ing] Latina identities” (Suleiman Gonzalez 95), the fact that Sandra Cisneros decides to “renarrativize” the telenovela genre entails an encouragement for a debate about gender politics and sexism in Latino society similar to the “kitchen table” debates described above. This tandem between sexism and telenovela narratives will constitute the main guiding thread for this thesis. Divided into three chapters, namely voice, heritage and rejection, this guiding thread will be used to describe the voice that leads the “renarrativization”, then to unlock the heritage from which the need for a “renarrativization” emerges and, finally, to discuss the rejection to the heritage implicit in the act of “renarrativizing”.

## Chapter One. Voice:

### Lala Reyes, The Liminal Voice that Initiates the Dialogue



“Borderlands”, María Fernanda Molins and Paloma Contreras Lomas

On this chapter I examine the female voice that narrates the events of the novel *Caramelo* to comprehend her standpoint as a female adolescent agent for social change. The stress on describing her voice is based on the Russian theorist Mikhail Bakhtin (1895-1975), whose theory on dialogism offers the possibility of connecting the internal microstructure of a literary work with the social, political and cultural environment of a text. Julia Kristeva (1941-), translator of Bakhtin's works into English, states that Bakhtin conceptualized

the 'literary word' as an *intersection of textual surfaces* rather than *a point* (a fixed meaning), as a dialogue among several writings: that of the writer, the addressee (or the character) and the contemporary or earlier cultural context

(1986, 36)

Thus, by examining the textual surface of the narrator and main character of *Caramelo* Celaya, it can be unlocked a possible dialogue with the textual surfaces of the writer Sandra Cisneros and of the guiding threads of this thesis, namely sexism and telenovela. This way, we can address, on the one hand, the horizontal relation between author and text, for a better understanding of the social controversy of romantic love, that is represented through the novel's dialogism; and, on the other hand, the vertical relation between literary corpus and text, for a better understanding of the modifications made to the telenovela genre. Besides, through its narrator(s) and characters, a novel as the one examined in this thesis displays an array of worldviews confronting ideas and perspectives, which creates dialogism within. Therefore, by first describing the point of view of the narrator, we can then focus on the connection between her worldview and the other characters' ideologies about love and womanhood.

The novel is divided in three parts: *Recuerdo de Acapulco* [Souvenir from Acapulco] (pp. 3-86), *When I Was Dirt* (pp. 89-232) and *The Eagle and the Serpent or My Mother and My Father* (pp. 235-430); and all of them are written from the perspective of a first-person narrator. The identity of the narrator is revealed in page 19 as "Lala" and in page 27 as "me, Celaya–

Lala”. At this stage, the narration of the events is done in retrospective by an older Lala, whose age is unknown. This is suggested by the usage of the word *recuerdo* (remembrance) in the title of the first part and reinforced by the narrator’s description of the specific souvenir from Acapulco: a family photograph. For instance, her father “isn’t acabado yet. He isn’t finished, worn from working, from worrying, from smoking too many packs of cigarettes” (3), meaning that he looks younger in the photograph than he looks in the moment of the narration. Hence, this description implies that certain events (namely the decline of her father’s health) have taken place since that picture was taken. Therefore, Lala is a narrator in retrospective who highlights her subjective interconnections between past family memories and her present, enhancing the agency of her voice. An estimate of the age of Lala is not revealed until page 250, where Lala narrates how she will “be promoted to the eight grade” at the end of the school year. Thus, in part three, Lala as a character and as a narrator must be a teenager who is 13 or 14 years old. Thanks to a hint in page 409 – where the dialogue between Lala and her ghostly grandma in a hospital is revealed to be the part two of the novel –, we decipher that Lala is narrating from the standpoint of a teenager in part two and part three; and, although not explicitly stated, in part one too.

Since the intertwining between the past of the stories and the present time is explicitly used by Lala as a narrative strategy to comment on in retrospective, it is interesting to analyze the layer of textual surface that having a female adolescent as a narrator adds to the novel. To better analyze Lala’s consciousness as an adolescent when mediating the world around her, we focus on the social and cultural transition from childhood to puberty that she is experiencing. A pioneer in the analysis of the dynamics of individual and group life is the German-French folklorist Arnold van Gennep (1873-1957), who published his model of transitions in life through rituals in his book *Les Rites de Passage* (1909, first translated into English in 1960). The stages articulated and defined in van Gennep’s book and the development of his model of

the rites of passage in *The Ritual Process* (1969), by the anthropologist Victor Turner (1920-1983), serve as a lens to consider the process of Lala's transition into an adolescent in part three and her perspective as narrator in part one, two and three.

With special interest in initiation rites, van Gennep focuses in his book on demonstrating that puberty can be separated into physiological puberty and "social puberty". Through this distinction, van Gennep claims that puberty ceremonies are rites of separation from an asexual world with no specific correlation with physical changes of sexual maturity (66). Thus, society dictates that there are two stages in life, and, at some point determined by each specific social group, persons leave the world of childhood to enter the world of adolescence. Based on his model of rites of entrance, of waiting, and of departure (25), van Gennep suggests that initiation rites can be described as follows: the separation from a previous asexual world (*preliminal rite*), the rites executed during the transitional state between the asexual and sexual world (*liminal or threshold rite*), and the ceremonies of incorporation into the new sexual world (*post-liminal rite*) (67). Besides, van Gennep claims that the purpose of a girl's initiation is marriage as a social institution, being the next age group that of married woman (86-7). Therefore, if we consider what is stated in his theory about a girl's life transitions, in part one Lala as a character is a child in the preliminal stage and in part two and three Lala is a teenager in the liminal or threshold stage. Thus, Lala as narrator is a liminal subject remembering her asexual world in part one and mediating her introduction into the sexual world in part two and three, without being fully part yet of the new sexual world of the post-liminal stage.

Considering the ritual framework advocated by van Gennep's theory, the fact that Lala is narrating at the time of adolescence gains in relevance because of the widespread tradition of celebrating girls' fifteenth birthday in a ritual called *Quinceañera* that marks the transition from childhood to puberty in Mexican society. Due to her estimated age, the protagonist is immersed in a major life and social transition from the innocent realm of childhood to the self-discovery

journey of puberty. In their articles about the Quinceañera ritual, Karen Dávalos (1997) focuses on its cultural significance for Chicanas claiming that this ceremony “makes a girl into a woman, but more importantly makes her into a Mexican” (59), whereas Valentina Napolitano (1997) describes its mechanism affirming that this ritual involves a “learning about gender identity and the construction of the female body” (282). Lala is a second-generation immigrant whose father is a Mexican-born immigrant and whose mother is an American with Indian blood. As part of an ethnic minority group labelled Chicanos/as, teenagers of Mexican descent living in the US find themselves in choice dilemmas around adopting the identity of dominant (Anglo-oriented) or nondominant (Mexican-oriented) cultural lifestyle tendencies.

To examine the relationship between social identity and ethnic identity, identity formation in ethnic minority youth has been a field of research with a focus on acculturation as a continuum. As noted in Pizarro and Vera (2001) and Spencer et al. (1991), the cognitive development of adolescents allows them to begin to understand ethnic identity. Consequently, Chicana/o adolescents’ identity construction and development are influenced by

cultural variables of the client (e.g. age, gender, race), family variables (e.g. parental ethnic socialization), contextual variables (e.g. academic environment, community factors), and the dynamics of enculturation and acculturation

(2001, 111)

Considering acculturation to the dominant Anglo culture as a continuum, Chicana adolescents such as Lala are not urged to construct their identity in rigid categories based on their acceptance or rejection of Mexican cultural traditions. Instead, the continuous intersection of cultural, family and contextual variables is taken into account to understand their degree of immersion into the alternate culture (Anglo-oriented). This position towards minority identity formation rejects the ideal bicultural identity intended for Chicanas/os to fit in both Mexican and

American contexts. Although her father wished to celebrate the ritual (“Ay, Lala, it’s like the party I always dreamed for your *quince* [fifteenth birthday] that I was never able to give you”(415)), due to their financial situation Lala has not had this passage ceremony into Mexican womanhood as described by Dávalos. Adding an extra layer in the female voice of Lala as our narrator, celebrating or not a Quinceañera party is a crucial choice tightly connected to the acculturation challenges faced by Chicana teenagers in their process of identity formation. The fact that Lala has not “been made into a Mexican” signifies that she is exploring the identity possibilities offered by the view of ethnic identity as part of an acculturation continuum.

By being a ritual only for girls, Napolitano claims that the Quinceañera ceremony constructs a girl’s own self-perception in connection with social control over the female body and its sexuality. If we consider this ritual as a ceremony of incorporation into the new sexual world (*post-liminal rite*), the fact that the narrator does not have a *quince* may signal that Lala remains in the transitional state between the asexual and sexual world. Lala has detached herself from her childhood worldview described in part one and her consciousness as narrator is in the ‘liminal’ stage. In his development of liminality, Turner (1969) affirms that a liminal subject is ambiguous with regard to state and position within a cultural space, presenting a time “in and out of secular social structure” (82). Without being part yet of a structured, differentiated and hierarchical society, Turner argues that liminal subjects are invited to explore, experiment and reflect during liminality (in Howard-Greenville et al., 2011: 523). In their article about liminal experiences in contemporary literature, Sara van den Bossche and Sophie Wennerscheid (2018) highlight the empowerment of a character being in the experience of transformation and transition. This allows for a focus on identities “as being negotiated instead of constructed”, that is, on a dynamic sense of self instead of a fixed outcome (1-2). Therefore, by not having celebrated a Quinceañera ritual, our main character has not adopted the gender identity based on *marianismo* ideas of purity and soon-to-be mother represented by this ceremony but instead

she is in the process of negotiating her own identity and her control over her female body and sexuality. For Napolitano, the Quinceañera fiesta starts a time of illusion in female life, which is a period when girls can enjoy themselves until the engagement and the later responsibility for their own families (286). However, without a *quince*, Lala has not accepted to enter this time of illusion that expires with a marriage and a family. Hence, her subjectivity as narrator needs to be interpreted considering her negotiation of an identity where her personal freedom and control over her body characteristic of a time of illusion has no ending.

Thus, the emphasis given to the puberty stage by Cisneros can be argued to set the narration of past events in a framework of constructing identity. Several scholars (Christina Dubb, Eliane Rubinstein-Avila) and teachers (Leslie Averbach, Mary Stewart) have researched the representation of young female protagonists in the context of literature and education. Although differing in terms of scope and goal, these researches agree on the need for more female authority and voice in adolescent protagonists. Despite of the lack of non-white female protagonists in young adult literature, they all point to Latina literature as a source to develop girls' adult voices through reading. In *Caramelo*, the narration starts with Lala's absence in the family portrait "No one notices I'm off by myself" (4), leaving her on a secondary level. Although "the portrait is incomplete, It's as if [she] didn't exist", Lala accepts this absence as an opportunity to do a complete portrait through her storytelling: "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). Lala decides to become a photographer, a transmitter of family memories, attempting to trace the origin of sexist gender ideals. Through her agency, Lala transmits adolescent girl themes as described by Stewart (2012): boys, friendship, and finding one's voice or identity (20). These adolescent girls' themes are being examined here, with special emphasis in the protagonist's search for identity, love, and sexuality within a sexist society.



Following Rubinstein-Avila's investigation (2007), Lala can be considered one of the few protagonists that challenge "mainstream gender boundaries and traditional societal expectations" (367). Clashing with the construction of female protagonists through the lens of sexism, racism, cultural imperialism and heterosexuality in conventional literature (364, 371), Cisneros created a Latina female protagonist with a powerful voice for *Caramelo* along the same lines of the female protagonist of her book *The House on Mango Street* (1984), Esperanza, and of other Latina female protagonists such as the García sisters in *How the García Girls Lost Their Accents* (1991), novel written by the Dominican-American author Julia Álvarez (1950-). Averbach (1998) remarks the role of Latina fiction to counter the silence of females in media and literature by voicing female adolescents' struggles, sense of identity and discovered individuality. Thus, considering the lack of not only racialized female referent points but also voiced female referent points, the female voice of Lala counters the silenced world of womanhood and the male-dominated society by expressing her own subjectivity throughout the narration.

In this novel, having a strong female voice in a framework of constructing identity is enhanced by the focus on telenovela as informative framework. As remarked by the scholars Flavio Marsiglia and Lori Holleran (1999) in their research on Chicana adolescents' identity formation, growing up female and male differs within Mexican American culture. This polarity shapes the femininity ideals conveyed by mainstream telenovela stories. Due to the centrality of married life, the dialectic that governs the female/male difference in adolescence is based on the core values of *marianismo* ("the centrality of the strong, virtuous mother in the family") and *machismo* ("qualities of bravery, courage, generosity, respect for others, protection of and provision for loved ones" (Holleran and Waller, 2003: 336)). During this liminal stage, Lala as a narrator is using telenovela-style ideas and references to transmit her reflections upon constructing a female social identity within her Mexican American family.

Added to the context of identity negotiation, telenovela allows Celaya to focus on adolescent girl themes regarding sexuality, (romantic) love, and self-discovery in her mediation of female characters' love stories. This way, idealized conceptions of monogamous, heterosexual love are introduced, commented, and criticized by the voice of Lala as narrator during her journey of exploring her sexuality and romantic love. Hence, by opening a dialogue with the hegemonic discourse that maintains sexist, power relations, the voice of this teenager proposes a transformation and subversion of the status quo portrayed by black-and-white morality of telenovela narratives. Thus, merging a contestation of telenovela romantic ideals with a strong female voice drives the subversion forward. The agency of Lala as an adolescent narrator is crucial to examine the dialogism that connects the other characters' ideas and experiences of love throughout the formation of her mindset on sexuality and womanhood.

## Chapter Two.

### Heritage



*Las Pachucas razor blade 'do*, Carmen Lomas Garza

## Section One. Women in the Reyes Family: The Role of Wife and Mother

As narrator in a reflective, experimental stage, Celaya is settled to narrate the stories of women in her family and their key role in shaping expectations and limits during gender socialization. Specifically, on this section I will examine Reyes family's perception about what means to be a reputable woman in society through their interactions. I will first focus on the representation of women throughout the narration and, on section two, I will further discuss the effect and reception of these gender cultural ideals in Lala's journey to explore love and sexuality. As guiding threads, telenovela narrative conventions and societal sexism will be tools to decipher the sexism behind the comments and acts of the female characters described.

Considering the framework of constructing identity, the significance of the family in Lala's socialization process as an agent of socialization gains in relevance. Socialization is broadly defined as a learning process through which a human being acquires and internalizes the normative knowledge, skills, norms, values, traditions, behaviors, etc. to be prepared for the tasks of social life (Anastasiu 1; Blunt Bugental and Grusec 366; Kelly and Donohew 1035). Traditionally, it has been considered that there are three agents of socialization that directly or indirectly contribute to the socialization process: family, peers and school; but, recently, a fourth agent has been added to the socialization process: media (Kelly and Donohew 1034). Being a primary agent, the family is considered the most influential agent of socialization affecting gender socialization and a person's involvement with secondary agents such as media and peers (Anastasiu 3). Thus, although the role of media as a source of socialization is tightly connected to adolescence, media effects and choices need to be considered in the context of the family. Due to the role of families as primary agents of socialization, the following descriptions of Lala's family members is meant to analyze their transmission of gender ideals. Being media

and telenovela narratives secondary agents of socialization, the modelling and guidance offered by these female characters will be regarded as a reinforcement of telenovela-like love conventions.

In addition to the description of female members of Reyes family, we need to consider the position from which Lala is mediating these descriptions as narrator. As detailed explained in chapter one of this thesis, Lala is in the process of negotiating her own identity and her control over her female body and sexuality. Since she is not yet fully part of the new sexual world of the post-liminal stage, she is narrating her introduction into the sexual world in a context of identity construction. This translates into Lala receiving ideas about gender roles, sexuality and romance from her family while critically thinking and giving her opinion and view over these ideals. In part one, Lala the character is a child who does not attend school yet (56) and, thus, the only agent of socialization that shapes her formation process is her family. However, owing to the use of retrospective narration, Lala the narrator might be meditating these womanhood ideas ironically, thus emphasizing her naivety as a child and her acceptance of gender socialization without questioning. In part two and three, Lala as adolescent might appear to engage more critically with the socialization she receives, and her opinion might influence deeper her immediate choices regarding boys, friendship and finding her own voice. Therefore, apart from focusing on the descriptions, we can consider how Lala as mediator judges and comments the beliefs, norms and behaviors of the female members of her family, which can be understood as the foundation of her developing post-liminal identity as a woman in the sexual world.

Part One, *Recuerdo de Acapulco*, revolves around a memorable family trip when the three Reyes brothers drive south to their parents' house in Mexico together for the first time. This trip ends up abruptly after a big family fight among the brothers at the birthday party of Lala's father. Thus, this is the first and last family trip where all female members of Lala's

family are reunited in the same place: the house on Destiny Street. This family trip starts in chapter 1 “Verde, Blanco, y Colorado” [Green, white and red] with the three Reyes brothers’ cars “racing to the Little Grandfather’s and Awful Grandmother’s house in Mexico City” (5). Since each car is taking a nuclear family from Chicago to the final destination, Lala introduces her extended family by focusing on the microcosms of each car.

Packed in the first car, a brand-new used white Cadillac, travel Uncle Fat-Face, his sons: Elvis, Aristotle and Byron; and his wife, Aunt Licha. To pay for their vacation, the family brings along with them items to sell in Aunt Licha’s hometown: Toluca. Through this detail, we know that Aunt Licha is a Mexican woman who is living in the US. For Lala, her Aunt Licha “is as beautiful as a Mexican Elizabeth Taylor” (11), highlighting her beauty. Nevertheless, this beauty seems not enough to remain confident in her marriage because “even though [...] aunty is jealous of every woman” (11). From this description, it appears that Lala is linking love and beauty to jealousy, signaling that she is receiving the message that a beautiful woman as her Aunt Licha needs to be jealous to express her love and commitment. In fact, Lala’s mother, Zoila, seems to reinforce this idea by equating Licha’s jealousy to her Mexican upbringing:

–If a woman’s crazy jealous like Licha you can bet it’s because someone’s giving her reason to be, know what I mean? It’s that she’s from over there, Mother continues, meaning from the Mexican side, and not this side. –Mexican women are just like the Mexican songs, *locas* for love.

(11)

Although at first Zoila suggests that the source of Licha’s jealousy is Uncle Fat-Face’s behavior, she also claims that this reaction is not surprising because of her being a Mexican woman. Hence, Lala learns that Mexican women behave as a *loca* [madwoman] when in a relationship because of her mother’s comments about her Aunt Licha. Within a novelized telenovela framework, Licha can represent the wife and mother character, which endures the suffering and

the sacrifices of a marriage. Nevertheless, Licha does not have the understanding, submissive attitude with her husband that is expected for this character (Acosta 182). Therefore, for Lala, Aunty Licha might embody the behavior of a Mexican woman who emigrated to the US with her partner but still asserts her opinion in a Mexican normative relationship.

The second car, a green Impala, is filled with Uncle Baby, his daughters, Amor and Paz; and his wife, Aunty Ninfa. The love story of Uncle Baby and Aunty Ninfa is based on the idea of the forbidden love. Lala tells how Uncle Baby met Aunty Ninfa in a Laundromat on Taylor Street, which is known as the Little Italy of Chicago. Although Lala believes that her aunt is a truly Italian, she is in fact American from Italian descent. Due to the different ethnic background of her husband, Ninfa claims that “–My family didn’t want me to marry Baby because he ain’t Italian, but I married him anyways ... maybe because they said don’t” (13). By marrying her husband without the permission of her family, Ninfa shows an agency that is needed to overcome the obstacle to true love. Therefore, Ninfa might represent more faithfully the wife and mother character of telenovelas in *Caramelo*. Even though no more information is shared about Ninfa and her love relationship with Baby, Lala affirms that Uncle Baby and Aunty Ninfa “live like movie stars” (12). Thus, owing to Lala’s perception of this marriage as idyllic because it resembles a Hollywood movie, the character of Ninfa might embody the perfect outcome that arrives from a successful forbidden love story as the ones described in mainstream telenovelas.

Once the three families arrive in Mexico City, Lala introduces the characters of La Güera, her Aunty Light-Skin (Norma), and Antonieta Araceli, her cousin (28). Both the Spanish nickname la Güera and her English nickname Aunty Light-Skin makes reference to the physical attributes of Norma, whose significance gains in relevance due to the beauty standards attached to the women as erotic object characters (the girlfriend/fiancée and the lover) in telenovelas. This type of character is generally described as a white, European-like, blonde woman (Acosta 180). No information is given about Norma’s hair but her white skin is an attribute highlighted

both in English and Spanish. Therefore, Norma can represent the “lover” side of this character type because of her status as divorced and as lover of a man without being married.

Lala dedicates chapter nine “Aunty Light-Skin” to her aunt Norma, where information about her is given through the comments and remarks of her other two aunties and her mother. Lala starts this chapter by describing her aunt as a Sleeping Beauty who needs help every morning to prepare for her day at the office. For Lala, “Aunty always looks so elegant” (31) with her cocktail dresses, tight skirts, matching *bolero* jackets, silk blouses, crocodile-skin stilettos, crocodile handbag, and hats. This glamorous view of her aunt is tarnished by the gossip of her aunts and mother, who blab about the relationship between Aunty Light-Skin and her boss, Señor Vidaurri:

–Ay, so much for just a little office job! Aunty Licha sniffs when the Grandmother and Aunty Light-Skin have left the room.

–How the hell does she afford such fancy duds? Aunty Ninfa adds. –I mean, Jesus Christ, with just a secretary’s salary? Nice work if you can get it.

Mother says, –Well, if you ask me she must be very, very good at what she does.

The daughters-in-law burst out laughing.

(31-32)

The clothes that makes Lala reflect about her auntie being a glamorous woman are used by the older female members of the family to gossip about the possibility of Norma being Señor Vidaurri’s lover. This way, a symbol of elegance is regarded as a source for mockery depending on the eyes of the character. This might reflect, on the one hand, the naivety of Lala because of not considering it odd that her aunt can afford expensive clothing and, on the other hand, the pureness of Lala because of not minding the source of those clothes. The gossip goes a bit further to describe the past romantic life of this aunt and her actual state. Lala remarks that her mother and her aunts like to gossip not only about Aunty Light-Skin, Señor Vidaurri and Awful



Grandmother, but also about Aunty's husband "whose name no one is supposed to mention" (32):

–Yeah, well, if you want my two cents there wasn't a divorce, because there wasn't a marriage, Mother says. –Know what I mean?

–How could there be a marriage? He was still legally married to two others, Aunty Ninfa whispers too loudly.

(32)

Therefore, apart from mocking her for having a relationship with an older, rich man, they amuse themselves by sharing details about a past failed relationship with the father of Antonieta Araceli. Thus, Aunty Light-Skin seems a woman to which you are entitled to laugh about because of her romantic life. Through this example, Lala learns about the importance of love because of its connection to a woman's status, being a source of gossip and mockery for others if a relationship fails. Furthermore, Lala also learns that it is acceptable to talk about a woman's life with others if she is a mother but not a wife, highlighting as well the relevance of marital status to be considered a proper woman.

Norma's daughter, Antonieta Araceli, is first introduced in part one as a thirteen years old girl who "has decided she's a grown-up this summer and spends all day in front of the mirror plucking her eyebrows and mustache, but she's no grown-up" (28). Due to the age difference between her and Lala, there is not much interaction between them in the novel. But, as a teenager narrator, Lala's comments about her cousin not being a grown-up yet might be conveying how Antonieta Araceli is pretending to be a grown-up in the post-liminal stage, when she is just exiting the preliminal stage and entering the liminal stage of puberty. However, it seems remarkable that the first introduction to this preliminal/liminal character is linked to beauty rituals, signaling that beauty is regarded as a key part in the process of becoming a woman. The next information we have from her Mexican cousin is at the beginning of part

three, in page 239, through the Awful Grandmother. Antonieta Araceli is now 20 years old, she is married and has a child. According to Awful Grandmother, she moved to Nuevo León where she “studied at the Tech and earned her degree in matrimony” (239), an ironical remark about the promising future she earned at this private university: not an education but a husband. Awful Grandma remarks that “–Too young, perhaps, but at least married [..] –And better to find her married respectably than getting into trouble” (239), to which Lala replies by thinking “I know she means Aunt Light-Skin” (239). Therefore, Lala is aware that her Awful Grandma rejects the life her daughter Norma has led and, thus, she is relieved to see that her granddaughter Antonieta Araceli has not followed in her mother’s footsteps. This indicates that Lala is a thirteen- or fourteen-years old girl who already knows what kind of life she is expected to emulate to please her grandma: a respectable married life as her cousin Antonieta Araceli. The characters of Aunt Light-Skin and Antonieta Araceli have not migrated to the US but remain in Mexico City at Awful Grandma’s house. Therefore, as female characters in this telenovela-like novel, they might embody the two types of Mexican women distinguished by Mexican society: a (failed) not-married mother and a (respectable) married mother and wife, respectively.

Apart from these minor female characters and their key role in constructing Lala’s myriad ideas about womanhood, the two most prominent women in Lala’s narrative are her mother, Zoila, and her Awful Grandmother, Soledad. Due to the correlation of events in the novel, the character of Awful Grandmother appears with great weight in each part. In part one, Awful Grandmother is an old woman happy to have her sons back in Mexico but unable to understand the manners of her American-born grandchildren, claiming that “–My daughters-in-law have given birth to a generation of monkeys” (28) when they speak in English and “Don’t pretend you’re not Mexican!” (55) when Lala cannot eat spicy *mole* sauce. Lala’s grandmother is a housewife proud of not following “cooking shortcuts” like the “new modern women” (54),

meaning her daughters-in-law. Compared to the characters previously described, Awful Grandmother might embody an older generation with old values based on racism (“–Get me out of this inferno of Indians, it smells worse than a pigsty” (79)) and classism (“–You all behave like Ranch people” (48)). Obsessed with the idea that her daughters-in-law have socially moved upward by marrying her sons.

In part two, the character of Awful Grandmother is approached through her love story as Soledad, an orphan maid that marries the son of her Spanish masters after an unwanted pregnancy. Through this love story, Lala learns how her grandmother became that awful. Her role as wife was rewarded with an unfaithful husband while her role as a nurturing mother of four children was rewarded with her three sons migrating up north and her only daughter having a failed marriage. Thus, this character might embody how women suffer from being constrained in the character of wife and mother without further aspirations. Therefore, within the narrative of part one and part two, Soledad seems to represent the most accurate telenovela character, who insists on blaming the agency and progressive attitude of newer generations of the mother and wife characters represented by her daughters-in-law and her daughter. Besides, telenovelas’ female characters are also distinguished in terms of age, classifying them into the grandmother, the mother-in-law and the working woman (Acosta 182). Although Soledad is a grandmother, her attitude with respect to her daughters-in-law makes her fit better in the character of mother-in-law, which sows seeds of division among these marriages. At the same time, her role as both safeguard of matrimony and origin of marital conflicts makes her the perfect representation of the outcome from the role of passive wife and self-scarifying mother in a telenovela-style marriage.

Reversing these roles, in part three Awful Grandmother is a widow who needs to be taken care for. Having moved with Lala’s family to Chicago, and later to San Antonio, the connection between Lala and her Awful Grandmother at this stage is highly influenced by the

relationship between her mother, her father and her grandmother. Being the first son of Soledad, Lala's father (Inocencio) is the first-true love of Awful Grandmother and her favorite child. Thus, Soledad's feelings for her daughter-in-law Zoila are based on jealousy, fighting for every inch of Inocencio's love ("The Awful Grandmother sitting where Mother usually sits, because her feelings get hurt if she isn't given this seat of honor" (69)). Having triggered an immense fight between Zoila and Inocencio at the end of part one, this fight is used by Lala to transmit her view of her mother as a child. In an effort to break this marriage, Awful Grandmother tells Zoila about Inocencio's illegitimate daughter with the washerwoman. At first, Zoila is angry with her husband: "What do you take me for? A fool? An imbecile? A complete *alcahueta* [gossiper]? Do you enjoy making me look stupid in front of your family?" (82). However, later she aims her anger to her mother-in-law: "I'm Inocencio's wife and the mother of his kids, you hear. I'm his legal wife. I'm a Reyes! And there's not a damn thing you can do about it" (86). This turn in the events is better understood through Lala's point of view, through which she unlocks the ultimate role of Zoila in society as a mother:

Mother springs out like a *loca*, darting across busy traffic and disappearing into a scruffy neighborhood plaza. But where can Mother go? She doesn't have any money. All she's got is her husband and kids, and now she doesn't even want us.

(83)

For Lala, Zoila is first of all a mother since "all she's got is her husband and kids", a message reinforced by her father who claims: "You want to break up our family, go right ahead. Lalita, who do you want to go with, your mother or me?" (85). Therefore, because at the end of this fight Zoila remains with Inocencio to demonstrate to her mother-in-law her status as wife, Lala learns that marriage is an important aspect in a woman's life and, thus, a woman should forgive a husband to maintain the family united.

Zoila is a Mexican American *from the other side*, being the offspring of the Mexicans whose land was invaded by the US during “The Mexican War. Or, the American War of Intervention, depending on your point of view” (435). Due to her position as the only Chicana adult in the novel, we could interpret her behavior and ideas as those of a woman aligned with the ideas of Chicana feminism. Nevertheless, her willingness to become financially independent is countered by his husband Inocencio, who claims: “–What! A wife of mine work? Don’t offend me!” (289). Thus, for Lala, Zoila might be a character who obeys her husband’s commands reluctantly, showing a spark of feminist thought regarding her subordinate role as a mother and wife. Yet, tradition as embodied by her mother-in-law Soledad is on the watch for blaming her non-normative action. Thus, although Zoila is finally refrained from embodying those feminist ideals, Lala is witnessing her mother’s discomfort with married life. Therefore, she can also represent a twist from the subordinate character of wife and mother, without being as outspoken and independent as Lala will choose to be.

Therefore, in this framework of constructing identity, there is a great variety of attitudes and behaviors embodied by minor and main female characters through which Lala starts to question her own ideas about womanhood. Having Mexican, American Mexican and Italian women interacting and gossiping with, and about, each other, Lala learns certain lessons that will be contested later on in the narrative. On the one hand, Lala learns about the relevance of marriage in a woman’s life through the mean comments of her aunts, her grandmother and her mother about her Aunt Light-Skin. The relationship between Lala and Aunt Light-Skin will develop further in part three, being the only female character with whom Lala talks in-depth about being in love and lovesick in chapter 55 (pp. 264-275). Therefore, despite of the advices about not emulating the love life of her aunt Norma, she is the only female character who wants to speak with Lala about heartbreaks because “Your turn will come” (274), humanizing her failed relationship and encouraging Lala to fall in love despite of *el-qué-dirán*

[what-people-say]. Therefore, Lala seems to be learning from the “lover” character instead that from the wife and mother characters. This turn of events will have further implications in terms of her identity as a woman that will be analyzed in section two.

On the other hand, Lala learns through her mother Zoila that there are two sides and, thus, two ways of being a woman. Through this simplified comment about Licha being from the other side, Zoila introduces the cultural differences between being a Mexican woman or a Mexican American woman. Nevertheless, although Zoila is the only Mexican American woman in the Reyes family, her sacrifice to unite her family despite of her husband’s lies can be equated with Soledad’s suffering and pain as head of the family. Thus, although these female characters do not faithfully follow the wife and mother character’s script due to their agency and activeness, they are labelled by their sacrifices to have a normative family (Zoila) or by their failure to be part of the norm (Aunt Light-Skin). Therefore, although it is acknowledged a possible transgression of the status quo by voicing your opinion and desires as women, for Lala they all still embody the characters of wife and mother in a patriarchal society as conveyed in mainstream telenovelas, signaling the need for a further revisionist approach to society and telenovela conventions.

## Section Two. Benevolent Sexism: Lala’s (Re-)Interpretation of Sexist Archetypes

Throughout the first pages of Lala’s journey to shape her own voice and identity as a soon-to-be adult woman, all the female characters of the Reyes family are introduced to us. Although some minor characters have been briefly presented, all characters have helped us to discuss the archetypes through which women are classified in Lala’s society in section one. Standing out for their role as wife and mother characters in telenovela-style classifications, these female

relatives exemplify and support a classification based on sexist archetypes. On this section, I will focus widely on sexism to discuss its influence on determining women's behavior and status and to study its transmission in telenovela narratives. These sexist cultural ideals are received with skepticism by a teenager Lala who prefers not to codify her reality with archetypes that clearly define, and stigmatize, women's freedom of choice.

As noted in Fowers and Fowers (2010), the gender hierarchy is maintained in society by subtyping women into conforming and non-conforming groups, an idea endorsed by the psychologists Peter Glick and Susan Fiske through their theory of ambivalent sexism. Viewing sexism as "a multidimensional construct that encompasses two sets of sexist attitudes" (491), Glick and Fiske (1996) categorized societies' sexist attitudes as a response of either hostile sexism or benevolent sexism. Following this line of thought, women are target of hostile sexist attitudes when belonging to a non-conforming group and of benevolent sexist attitudes when belonging to a conforming group. Fowers and Fowers (2010) claim that society focuses mainly on female sexuality to divide women into subtypes due to the classic Madonna/Whore dichotomy. Consequently, women's sexuality is central in the rites of passage of adolescent girls such as the protagonist of *Caramelo* because of the relevance of their sexual practices in order to be considered as part of the conforming group and, thus, women deserving of respect and worth.

Focusing on the possible classification of female characters in the novel through subtypes or archetypes, it is relevant to note that, apart from Aunty Ninfa, all members of Lala's extended family are of Mexican descent. Thus, having mainly female characters embedded in Mexican societal values, on both sides of U.S.-Mexico border, it seems logical to compare them with the two female archetypes of Mexican culture that continue to be transmitted and perpetuated nowadays by mass media and telenovela: la Virgen de Guadalupe and La Malinche. The use of these two Mexican archetypes to define women is highly connected to the

Madonna/Whore dichotomy mentioned in Fowers and Fowers due to the influence of the Spanish Christian culture. In fact, the Chicana scholar Irene Lara (2008) traces “the prevalent postcolonial dichotomy between virtuous *virgen* [virgin] and pagan *puta* [whore]” to the “classed, patriarchal, and binary colonial projections of both Spanish missionaries and Mexican imperialists” (103). Borrowing Lara’s terminology, cultural constructions regarding male/female and their sexuality have combined both European and indigenous beliefs, myths, and practices resulting in the virtuous *virgen* subtype being embodied by la Virgen de Guadalupe and the pagan *puta* subtype being embodied by La Malinche (Espinosa Spínola 79; Lara 99).

Within Mexican folklore, in words of the author Sandra Cisneros (in Rodríguez-Aranda 65), Latinas are raised “with a Mexican culture that has two role models: La Malinche y la Virgen de Guadalupe. And you know that’s a hard route to go, one or the other, there’s no in-betweens.” On the one hand, la Virgen de Guadalupe archetype represents the pure, devoted, self-sacrificing woman, nurturing and protecting others. Being a Christian transformation of the Aztec fertility goddess Tonantzín, la Virgen de Guadalupe started to represent the pure maternal image for Mexicans (Lara 2008; Petty 2000; Suleiman Gonzalez 2002). Thus, to be considered a woman according to Mexican society, this woman must follow the role model of la Virgen de Guadalupe in order to be rewarded with marriage and motherhood thanks to her pureness, decency and affection. Because of the stress on pureness and virginity, these role models are based on women’s physical sexuality. Hence, benevolent sexist attitudes are received through the role of wife and mother because of choosing to conform with the established order. In telenovela narratives, the protagonist tends to end married with a husband and starting a family, which seems the ideal outcome for a woman in society. In *Caramelo*, almost every adult character has achieved this fantasy: Licha, Ninfa, Zoila, Soledad and Antonieta Araceli;



whereas Norma is blamed for not being able to choose a nice husband with whom to start this fantasy.

Opposite to this, there are women who use their sexuality for non-reproductive purposes and, thus, they will receive hostile sexist attitudes for their impurity, which in telenovelas is represented by “the lover”, “the working woman” and “the man-eater” (Acosta 180-183). In Mexican folklore, these non-conforming women are represented by the figure of La Malinche-Malintzin-Marina, an Aztec woman who was a Spanish-Nahuatl interpreter for Hernán Cortés during the Spanish conquering of Mexico. Considered as the mother of Mexican mestizos, she is equated to betrayal due to her pivotal role as translator during the invasion of her own homeland. Apart from her role as traitor, it is more significant for this thesis the view of Malinche as *la chingada* [the raped] due to her sexual intercourses with the Spanish colonizers, namely Hernán Cortés and Juan Jaramillo (Petty 2000; Sánchez 1998; Tate 2017). This idea of violated woman is explained by the Mexican author Octavio Paz (1914-1998) in his book *The Labyrinth of Solitude* (1950) as follows: “Doña Marina becomes a figure representing the Indian women who were fascinated, violated, or seduced by the Spaniards.” (77, in Petty 122). Therefore, La Malinche figure embodies the female sexuality of non-conforming women and, thus, these women received hostile sexist attitudes because of their sexual agency. Hence, following Fowers and Fowers (2010), Mexican society also chooses the focus on female sexuality to divide women into two subtypes, la Virgen de Guadalupe and La Malinche, mirroring the classic Madonna/Whore dichotomy. Therefore, women are labeled as either “good” and “virgins”, or “bad” and “malinches” depending on their virginity and sexuality.

On her first day at a catholic high school in San Antonio, Lala faces the first intromission on her sexuality through Sister Odilia’s question during mass: “–Should one be a virgin when one marries? (324). Lala confesses readers her point in this debate: “If she calls on me I haven’t a clue what I’ll say. Pretend like I’m a *puta* [whore] or pretend I’m la Virgen de Guadalupe.

Which is worse? Either way, everybody's sure to laugh" (325). Through this chain of thoughts, we can suggest that Lala is aware of the sexist categorization of women depending on their sexual activity but, at the same time, she does not perceive the benevolent sexism received from being good and virgin as positive. It can be argued that her negative view of both Mexican archetypes is triggered by the attitudes and values supported by the female members of her family explained in section one.

Being the closest character to La Malinche archetype, Aunty Light-Skin is the only female adult that has a lengthy conversation with Lala about the positive and negative sides of falling in love and getting married. Mentioning that "those times were different" (265), she explains how, when she was young, being married was the only way to cohabite with a man: "We weren't like the young people now, do you follow me? In those days a woman wouldn't think of being with a man just like that" (265). Since Aunty Light-Skin was civil married to a divorced man, Awful Grandmother confronted her daughter's decision claiming:

What, are you stupid or just pretending to be stupid? As long as his first wife is still alive, your marriage is just paper. You may think you are married, but in the eyes of God you're nothing but a prostitute

(271)

Having struggled with "those words, they hurt me even now, Lalita" (271), Aunty Light-Skin acknowledges her subtype as "bad" and "malinche" for not having a catholic marriage with the man she loved in the eyes of her family. However, Lala's reaction to the story that labels her aunt as a *puta* is to signal her aunt as a possible telenovela protagonist: "–Stolen! Like kidnapped? All for love, that's too cool, Aunty. Your life would make a terrific *telenovela*. Did you ever think about that?" (271). By suggesting the possibility of having a story like her aunt's as a telenovela, Lala highlights the potential of this forbidden story if the focus on categorizing

the protagonist as either bad or good is erased. In fact, a telenovela story is based on a pure, forbidden love between a man and a woman in the same line as Aunty Light-Skin's love story with this man. There were obstacles they needed to overcome to be together by plotting a rapture. Echoing the mean comments about her aunt that she heard as a child, Lala the teenager is an active listener of her aunt's love story showing more humanity and openness than her other aunts and her mother had ever had. Instead of having a hostile sexist attitude in this conversation, Lala is willing to listen and learn from the lessons her Aunty Light-Skin is teaching her. Opening a relation with La Malinche stereotype in her process of becoming a woman while advocating for the inclusion of these non-conforming characters as telenovela protagonists, Lala is seeking for a wider acceptance of the childless and/or unmarried character in mainstream media as a means for young female audiences to be exposed to new female archetypes.

Despite of Lala's transgressive idea of doing a telenovela with a malinche-like narrative as the main love story, several authors (Sifuentes 2014; Duncan 1995) have signaled the traditional role of telenovelas as secondary socialization agents in reproducing women roles as wife, mother and housewife. Lala receives messages about conforming to the traditional role of women mainly through her grandmother and her father, the two characters that consume fotonovelas and telenovelas in the narration. In chapter 74 "Everything a Niña [Girl] Could Want", Lala opens up with his father about her dream of living by herself and faces her father's objection: "–But that's not for girls like you. Good girls don't leave their father's house until they marry, and not before. Why would you ever want to live by yourself?" (359). Willing for her daughter to perpetuate la Virgen de Guadalupe archetype, Inocencio counters Lala's dream with the threat of receiving hostile sexist attitudes:

–If you leave your father's house without a husband you are worse than a dog. You aren't my daughter. You aren't a Reyes. [...] If you leave alone you leave like, and

forgive me for saying this but it's true, *como una prostituta* [like a prostitute]. Is that what you want the world to think? *Como una perra*, like a dog. *Una Perdida* [a fallen woman]. How will you live without your father and brothers to protect you?

(360)

Emulating the words of his mother towards his sister Aunty Light-skin, Inocencio resorts to the prostitute archetype linked with non-conforming women. Both Norma and Lala's attitudes are different in nature, Norma civil married a divorced man while Lala simply wants to live alone and "try stuff. Like teach people how to read, or rescue animals, or study Egyptian history at a university" (359). Nevertheless, they both face the shame on them for wanting to have a non-conforming lifestyle instead of following the paved way for women: to marry in the church through a Catholic rite and to form a family.

At the core of the genre, a telenovela portrays how a woman follows this marked trajectory to achieve success in life: the protagonist is a pure woman with good morals who falls in love with a man and, after some plot twists and obstacles, they get married and start a Catholic family. For this reason, it seems noticeable that the only two characters who consume telenovelas and fotonovelas in the narration are the ones who voice the *prostituta* archetype towards the non-conforming attitudes of their daughters. As noted by Mariclaire Acosta (2008), Mexican fotonovelas and telenovelas are a reflection in narrative form of the constructs, values, and attitudes of the ideological superstructure of Mexico. Thus, as Cisneros suggests in the title of Chapter 83 "A Scene in a Hospital That Resembles a Telenovela When in Actuality It's the Telenovelas That Resemble This Scene", we have stereotypes about women in mass media because of their existence in society. This can result in the consumers of telenovela mirroring its black-and-white worldview and its fixed moral equilibrium when codifying their immediate reality. Because telenovelas maintain a morally rigid worldview where some characters are evil and punished at the end while other characters are morally good and thus rewarded, it seems

that Inocencio fears that her daughter Lala will be labelled as evil and, thus, punished for her actions. However, the characters in *Caramelo* are multidimensional contrasting with the one-dimensional characters that populate telenovelas (e.g. the wife and mother, the mother-in-law, the lover). Therefore, although the female characters could be easily grouped as “guadalupes” or “malinches” because of their status as married or unmarried woman, they do not totally conform to these archetypes, showing contradictory attitudes such as Awful Grandmother’s definition as loving grandmother for her sons and as meddling mother-in-law for her daughters-in-law and Lala.

Throughout the vignettes, the moral and ideological frameworks of women, romantic love, and marriage are aligned with the moral views spread by telenovelas, which focus on transmitting that if your behavior is morally good, you will succeed in life with a family. Aiming for Lala to be a proper *señorita* [lady] in order for her to receive benevolent sexist attitudes, Awful Grandmother and Inocencio are showing what Fowers and Fowers suggested as “a defensive strategy for women in highly sexist environments” (470) by promoting benevolent sexism as the only survival of the sexism of the nation. However, Lala does not seem to appreciate the role of la Virgen de Guadalupe as a defensive strategy but rather a constrain to her freedom and dreams, which might indicate a mental shift regarding women and society. The negative effects produced by the virtuous *virgen*/pagan *puta* dichotomy in the development of female subjectivity are, according to Irene Lara, a foundational theme in Chicana feminist thought. For this reason, Lala’s refusal to be part of the sexist archetypes defined by the society she belongs to can be understood as a direct reflection of Chicana’s struggles in finding a voice and an identity that represents them as autonomous human beings outside of patriarchal societal norms.

The coming to consciousness of a Chicana identity can be traced to the need to hold conferences within the Chicano Movement specific to issues and struggles that Chicana women

face due to their intersectionality of gender, class, and race. At the end of the 1960s, Mexican American women started to rise their voice against the social injustices they encountered because of being (working-class) women of color embedded in a patriarchal society that was defended by the Chicano Movement. Considering the background of this feminist movement, Sandra Cisneros uses the female archetypes that categorize Mexican American women in *Caramelo* by showing an increasing de-colonial feminist understanding of this categorization as “guadalupes” or “malinches”. From a Chicana feminist perspective, the deconstruction of La Virgen de Guadalupe and La Malinche serves to redefine their spirituality and sexuality in socially empowering ways. Being the blur of the boundaries between Guadalupe and Malinche the main focus in the redefinition carried out by Lala, a new range of female possibilities open up in terms of sexual and maternal identity. Refusing to stay at her father’s house until she marries, Lala would embody the traditional “malinche” idea as traitor and “sold” to the Anglo nation because she openly challenges the authority of her father by declining his protection. However, through a Chicana feminist lens, the fact that Lala puts the dichotomy into question with her position to women’s independence can be linked to the transformation of cultural discourses “that silence and/or distort Chicana decolonial imaginings of sexuality and spirituality” (Lara 122).

In previous pieces of work, Cisneros also created female characters wrestling with the internalized, limited and even negative definitions of women imposed by the Mexican icons of sexuality and motherhood, La Malinche and La Virgen de Guadalupe respectively (Wyatt 1995). As the female protagonists of the short stories within *Woman Hollering Creek* (1991), Lala cannot run away from these archetypes but must negotiate them by shifting meaning of signifiers. Using allusions to telenovela throughout her narration, Lala signals the modifications made to the conventions of the genre as a feasible challenge, which can be interpreted as an analogy to the modifications to the conventions of society she is advocating. Therefore, if, as

Acosta and Cisneros claim, a telenovela mirrors the genre constructs of society, it can also mirror the new feminist redefinitions that start to populate in Chicana feminist writings.

Within media studies, several authors (Duncan 1995; Suleiman Gonzalez 2002) have denounced the detrimental bias against the telenovela genre signaling the key role of telenovela narratives in sparking societal changes worldwide. Apart from the love story, Duncan affirms that there is an increasing number of telenovelas showing women's struggles in its storylines. Being a genre that depends on female protagonists, telenovelas tend to reflect values and issues relevant to women and, thus, the genre started to be studied as "a vehicle for cultural reproduction as well as for social change" (Suleiman Gonzalez 84). In *Caramelo*, most of the characters' commentaries are used to reproduce benevolent and hostile sexist attitudes through rigid societal values about womanhood and sexuality, being especially relevant the attitude against the most Malinche-like character Norma. Within this emphasis to maintain traditional gender roles, Lala can be interpreted as the character that embodies telenovela's power to produce social change.

Aided by her liminal stage in the sexual world, Lala has agency to propose a new type of storyline that counters the hostile sexism and benevolent sexism narrative where mothers and wives need to conform to their role to be respected by their families and society. According to Duncan, telenovela genre can be used to this purpose because this type of narratives "do not necessarily promote mindless conformity to a system which oppresses women; instead, they reveal areas where a change in the system is called for, and invite the spectator to imagine ways in which the change might take place" (91). Therefore, it could be argued that Lala is using the direct references to telenovela to guide the readers' attention to the relevance of the telenovela genre for fostering the revision of her identity as a feminist Chicana. In line with Suleiman Gonzalez's approach to the telenovela, "the emancipatory potential for reconstructing and transforming Latina identities" (85) of telenovelas can be find in Lala's intention to reinterpret

the role of Chicana women in society outside of the benevolent and hostile sexism dichotomy. In fact, by suggesting that every woman can be a telenovela protagonist, Lala is including “malinches” to the eyes of patriarchal society like Norma and even herself. It can be said that telenovela is a well-established genre among Latin American communities, including those living in the US. Due to the popularity of its storylines, Lala uses this medium to twist its conventions and, thus, make room for new types of women outside of the conforming ethos. By including these women in popular telenovela narratives, new discussions around women’s struggles will be generated in kitchen-table conversations, resulting in a wider acceptance of the decolonial female image as well as a source of inspiration for women not to conform with a life within the benevolent sexism/hostile sexism dichotomy.



Chapter Three. Rejection:  
Love Stories and Sexuality



“Mija You are Worthy”, Iliana Galvez

Choice, sexuality, and status have been key elements in Lala's path to understand societal sexism and to voice her position against the status quo. Having witnessed the attitudes of her female relatives as a product of hostile and benevolent sexism, Lala is determined to look for a space to grow outside of patriarchal society and its sexist archetypes. In this chapter, I will focus on the key role that self-definition and control has in imagining an alternative story outside of the sexist tradition prescribed by society and popular culture.

Expressing her decision to find her own place within Reyes family, telenovela and sexism are finally combined to counterargue prescriptive sexist gender-role norms and to expound a feminist awakening: "You're the author of the *telenovela* of your life all right. Comedy or tragedy? Choose." (399). This reflection happens at a point in the narration when Lala has just experienced her first sexual relationship and the consequent breakup with her first boyfriend: Ernie Calderón. Her best friend Viva Ozuna scolds her because of her lack of knowledge about birth control, which makes readers realize that comedy and tragedy in this context symbolize the two possible outcomes of a telenovela starring a sexually active teenager girl embedded in a sexist society ("if you can't control your own body, how can you control your own life?" (399)). Therefore, Lala desires a place outside of the tragic love stories of her family members (e.g. unfaithful husbands and suppressed economic independence). Aided by the storytelling of her Awful Grandma's past as a ghost, Lala starts to learn about the importance of knowing your body to gain control in life and of not rushing to have a telenovela-like love story at an early age.

In 1996, Sandra Cisneros opened up in her essay "Guadalupe the Sex Goddess" about her youthful discomfort with her body and towards discussions about sexuality and birth control. Marveled at how white women were comfortable in their skin, Cisneros explains how her culture "locked [her] in a double chastity belt of ignorance and vergüenza, shame" (1). This Chicana author claims that the reason behind writing this essay is her being "overwhelmed by

the silence regarding Latinas and our bodies” (2). The guilt, silence and misinformation led her teenager self to believe sex equals love, which later on she countered by discovering sex while realizing that “motherhood and/or marriage were anathema to [her] career” (3). In Chicano communities, choosing childlessness was regarded as a betrayal in the same lines as lesbianism because of the challenges imposed on the status quo. For this reason, openly lesbian Chicana feminist such as aforementioned Cherríe Moraga and Gloria Anzaldúa, through their essays and the publication of their book *This Bridge Called My Back* (1981), made sexuality a central element in Chicana feminist theorizing (Hurtado 1998). The exposure of Latina/Chicana teenage girls’ misinformation on sexual issues can be found in their essays, where Chicana sexuality is described as tightly connected to society’s expectations. The Chicana activist Cherríe Moraga claims that men impose social and legal control of women’s reproductive function, which translates into “the social institutionalization of our roles as sexual and domestic servants to men” (111). Likewise, in her acclaimed essay *Borderlands/La Frontera* (1987), the Chicana theorist Gloria Anzaldúa affirms that “the ability to serve, claim males, is our highest virtue. [...] I will not glorify those aspects of my culture which have injures me and which have injured me in the name of protecting me” (21-22). Both theorists highlight the servitude behind defending protective attitudes and reverencing women who comply to the ascribed role of wife and mother. This false sense of protection resonates with the benevolent sexist behavior identified within sexism by Glick and Fiske, since the rationalization of women’s roles as mothers and wives serve as a justification to exert control and dominion.

Juggling sexism and protectionism, Lala’s negotiation of silences, restrictions and desires regarding female autonomy starts when she faces her father’s accusations for wanting to live alone already described in Chapter Two (Chapter 74 pp. 359-360). Due to the impossibility of becoming independent without a husband, Lala sets a short-term goal: to find a lover and marry him. Through this simple chain of thoughts, *Caramelo* finally displays the

love story that will be the backbone of Lala's journey to find her voice. Encouraged by the "conspiracy of silence" embroidering the idealization of unrealistic sexual relations (Madsen 115), Lala shows us her position in the spectrum of assimilating romanticized fairy-tale-like conceptions of marriage with her decision to marry any suitable candidate to obtain certain independence. The first step to achieve her plan is to find a male partner with whom to overcome all obstacles with patience, sacrifice and suffering for the sake of their true love (Aprea and Martínez Mendoza 1996), being this scenario fundamental to engage in a dialogue with telenovela's mechanisms.

Since the narrative discourse mirrors telenovela's articulation around the main macro-theme of love, multiple love stories have been described throughout the narration from which Lala extracts (mis)information and ideals to telenovelize her relationship with Ernie. As examined in Chapter Two, the female members of Reyes family are described in relation with the success of their marital status. The marriages of the Mexican and Mexican-American couples consist of the ideal lovers described in Aprea and Martínez Mendoza (1994): on the one hand, the attractive darker heroines Soledad ("Soledad was a Reyes too, although of the backward, Indian variety" (113)) and Zoila ("Not the red-river-clay color of Mother" (34)) and, on the other hand, the handsome white heroes Narciso ("Delighted his mama was to see he was born lighter than herself [...] he would be *güero*, fair" (157)) and Inocencio (Not shark-belly pale like Father" 34)). Connecting race with class and status, the mother-in-laws disowned all these romances because of the darker skin of the brides ("You're as dark as a slave! [...] Trash! Indian!" (85-86), "*¡Qué!* What! *Una negra* [a black woman] to be his daughter-in-law! *Una negra* to become a Reyes!" (141)), which creates the forbidden and impossible love required for the happy ending of the couple to match fairytale-like marital expectations.

Due to the continuous referentiality to the telenovela genre within the storyline to connect life with telenovela's love conventions, it can be argued that Lala is using telenovela

as an interpretative and affective framework to telenovelize her life. Thus, there are certain expectancies regarding oneself, the other person and the relationship from where Lala builds on her ideal romantic story with *Ernesto*:

Ernie! I let go a sigh. It lacks dignity, respect, mystery, poetry, all the ingredients necessary to fall in love. Only how can I tell you that?

–I’ll call you Ernesto.

And that’s what I call you [...] Ernesto, then and since.

(367)

Despite of Lala’s efforts to add the spark necessary for her own telenovela love, the modern Cinderella story, as described in Suleiman Gonzalez (2006), does not occur as she has dreamed: “Just like that picture on the Mexican calendar, *El rapto* [abduction], Ernesto arrives in my life to rescue me” (368).

Firstly, the obstacle of a societal barrier due to race and class is not found in the union of these lovers: “with Ernesto, well, I guess [Father]’s just satisfied he’s Mexican” (368). Thus, the partner’s choice does not provoke the family’s opposition that leads to the lovers’ promise of marriage for love despite of the disapproval. Secondly, the lack of agency in the male lover and subsequent active role of the female lover clashes with the passivity characteristic of “the lover” character described in Acosta (2008). Because of the short-term goal of Lala, she is eager to formalize her relationship with Ernesto and, thus, rushes him to ask permission to marry her: “–Listen up, Ernesto. You’ve *got* to ask my parents for their permission. –For what? –To marry me, silly, what else?” (372). Nevertheless, Lala finds a non-enthusiastic response when Ernesto claims “–You didn’t ask me!” (373), followed by “I’m going to get into trouble” (373). Although Ernesto finally agrees to (“–Okay, I guess” (373)), her initial plan goes wrong because Lala’s parents are too busy trying to find los *papeles* [papers] for *la Migra* [Immigration]. Due to the immigration inspection, Inocencio resorts to moving back his family to Chicago and Lala

resorts to a master plan: *el rapto*. Thirdly, Lala's master plan consists of her running away with Ernesto to Mexico City and getting pregnant out of wedlock to force a marriage:

–Once I'm pregnant, then they'll *have* to give us their blessing, your ma and my father, I mean. Then they won't be able to say anything, and we can get married.

(382)

Although the abduction worked for her Awful Grandmother (“[Narciso] arranged to have me stolen, and, well, we married, and there” (122)), the fate of Lala mimics her Aunty Light-Skin's story. After their sexual debut, Ernesto concludes that Lala is not Catholic enough for them to marry:

–So we're a sin, Lala. You and me. [...] Sex is for procreation only. The Church says so. And we're not even married yet. And the fact is, I can't marry you; you're not even Catholic.

(386)

Therefore, the sum of the (mis)information that Lala gathered from her family's love stories, the romantic stories spread by mass media and telenovelas, and the sexist behavior norms and standards that dictate a girl teenager's life leads our protagonist to make the mistake that Sandra Cisneros always feared: “I was ready to sacrifice everything in the name of love [...] but thankfully there were no takers” (2).

Legitimizing women's sexual desire within a committed, formalized relationship but demonizing it outside such relationships is at the core of Ernesto's final reaction to break up with Lala. Naming their sexual debut “a sin” and affirming that sex cannot be desired for pleasure, Ernesto embeds his speech within the sexist archetypes defined for women to remain virgin until marriage. Because of the prevailing rationalization and control of women's bodies, Chicana activists (re)defined the conceptions around feminine subjectivity and sexuality to pursue women's autonomous decisions regarding their sexual activity with/without a formalized partner. The issue of social control over the female body can be found in Cisneros's

essay, where she claims that she found herself voiceless to assert her willingness to use contraceptives: “I said nothing, and I let him take me like that with nothing protecting me from motherhood but luck” (2). Therefore, Cisneros is voicing this issue in this novel with a character who find herself wanting to become a mother because society dictates it is the only way for a woman to become adult and (in)dependent. Besides, with Ernesto’s speech, Cisneros brings to the fore the feared La Malinche’s stereotype and the connection between betrayal and controlling one’s sexuality. This is countered with the focus on a teenager girl’s formation process in terms of identity and sexuality after facing the harsh reality of having a failed relationship. As noted by Madsen (2000), for Cisneros the enjoyment of one’s own sexuality is a source of power for women, appropriating her sexuality to break the limits placed upon feminine sexuality. Therefore, as relevant as the breakup for the novel is the consequent gender consciousness that results from discovering the “conspiracy of silence” regarding love, sex and relationships outside of plotted telenovela storylines.

Haunting Lala “everywhere” (363) since she was bullied by her new schoolmates (in Chapter 72. Mexican on Both Sides), the spirit of Awful Grandma Soledad finally explains to Lala why she has been appearing as a ghost:

–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’re old enough to love yourself first.

(406)

As if she was Lala’s conscience, Awful Grandma reprimands Lala for aiming to replicate the *tragic* love story she held with her husband, Little Grandfather. By signaling that Lala must mature and learn to love herself before falling in love and marrying a partner, Awful Grandma’s scolding is quite significant because Lala was just trying to emulate the traditional life that her family seems to value in her cousin Antonieta Araceli. In fact, this discussion leads to the

lengthy conversation between Lala and Awful Grandma that builds Part 2 “When I was Dirt”, where Lala re-tells the love story of her paternal grandparents and her parents. Nevertheless, because this storytelling takes place for Lala to learn about what she should not repeat (“Ay, Celaya, don’t wind up like me, settling with the first man who paid me a compliment” (407)), the role of Lala as storyteller can be analyzed as an unmasking of the “conspiracy of silence” through the aid of her grandmother’s wisdom.

The core of this silence surrounding the female body and its mechanisms is displayed in Chapter 33. “Cuidate” [Take care of yourself]. “–Now that you’re a *señorita, cuidate*” (153): this order camouflaged in advice could not be completely understood by Soledad due to the misinformation spread by society (“they meant take care of yourself *down there* [..] They demanded you not to become... but they didn’t tell you how not to” (153)). Lala captures this reality in her retelling: “Then as now, the philosophy of sexual education for women was –the less said the better” (156). For this reason, the lack of information about contraceptives drives youngsters as Soledad and Narciso to have unprotected sex and unwanted pregnancies. Although Narciso “fulfilled [his] obligation as a gentleman” (159) and “took for his wife his cousin Soledad Reyes, she of the kingdom of kitchen” (167), he continued getting involved with other women while Soledad soon realized that the great love of her life will not be her husband but her first-son Inocencio.

Exposing all the Little Grandfather’s sexual adventures and Awful Grandma’s misfortunes as orphan, wife and mother, it can be said that Lala is re-writing the idealized telenovela-like love story of her grandmother. Instead of noting down Soledad’s love story as she remembers it, Lala embellishes it focusing the tragic ups and downs that make the storyline a more realistic telenovela. In the process of learning to gain control over her life, the choice between tragedy and comedy is connected to knowledge and agency on sexual matters. Taking control of her subjectivity as a storyteller, Lala has moved from willing a conventional role as



mother and wife with her first boyfriend to opening room for a young life as an individual “growing into who [she is]” (407). Despite of not following the marked path for telenovela protagonists because of the failed romance, Lala still insists on comparing her reality to a telenovela series, advocating for a further view on women as protagonists without a companion. Aided by the speech of her ghostly Awful Grandma, Lala realized that the decision of not rushing to become a mother and wife as a teenager is supported by her family. Thus, her telenovela will be starred by herself in a protagonist role without a formalized partner with whom to have a romantic happy ending but without renouncing to experience joy and cheerfulness in her own comedy.

## Conclusion

This thesis sought to interpret what the main protagonist of *Caramelo, or Puro Cuento* critically interrogates, and to what extent her act breaks with dominant power structures, examining her view on womanhood and sexuality compared to sexist archetypes. Notably, the tandem Celaya-Awful Grandmother forges a bond to deeply revisit societal sexism, showing that inside benevolent sexist ideals there is a subjacent willingness for a redefinition of womanhood and sexuality outside sexism. As a ghost, her Awful Grandmother Soledad embodies for Celaya the needed support to act upon and become her desired self: an independent, educated young woman. By choosing not to reproduce the hegemonic discourse around fairy-tale-like love stories, Celaya explicitly refers to telenovela narratives and her opportunity to choose which narrative –comedy or tragedy– she wants to be the protagonist of. This final reflection poses a firm suggestion on how telenovela narratives can mirror these redefinitions on womanhood and sexuality that populate Chicana feminist writings.

Thus, in this thesis I aimed to demonstrate that Sandra Cisneros uses her voice and her fiction to motivate a critical thinking around Chicana women's struggles in terms of independence and sexual freedom. Following Cherrie Moraga's words about the impact women can inflict in their immediate surroundings, I was interested in examining the ability of a female author such as Cisneros to spark a feminist thought through her writing. To study this phenomenon, I decided to center on the Latin American genre of telenovela and on the Chicana subversion carried out by Cisneros in *Caramelo* to narrate the experience of a Chicana subject. Due to telenovela being an established genre, the reworking of its recognizable patterns was my main focus to explore the capacity of making use of the genre as a tool to revise gender constructions. Thus, the changes made to this established genre were analyzed as a result of the power relations of sexist, racist and hierarchical societies experienced by the feminine subjectivity of the novel: Celaya Reyes.

Our understanding of Lala's inner process of developing post-liminal identity as a Chicana woman in the sexual world was deepened thanks to the centrality of Lala as narrator. By focusing on the female voice of *Caramelo*, this thesis has shown how her stance of rejecting both benevolent and hostile sexism is an attack on, on the one hand, telenovela's informative framework about femininity and sexuality and, on the other hand, the societies that perpetrate these sexist attitudes towards women. Adding this rejection to the framework of constructing identity, Lala's mental shift to not accept benevolent sexism as something positive despite of her father's insistence was considered the main signal of her feminist awakening within her process of becoming a woman.

Throughout the thesis, the novel has been studied as a narration of Celaya's observations, comments and judgements about her family's transmission of gender cultural ideals. For that reason, female members of her family have been analyzed to unlock their role in the process of gender socialization that Lala is experiencing. To better understand her mental shift and feminist awakening during this formation process, Arnold van Gennep's liminality theory was used to stimulate a critical reading of Lala's narration as a questioning of the established order that she is expected to be part of when she becomes an adult woman. From this liminal stage, Lala has been introducing adult women in her family for us to perceive her subjectivity as observer and maker of meaning of these women's realities. Using telenovela conventions as an informative framework, we examined how these female characters could be classified as examples of the mother and wife characters that populate telenovelas if they had a greater passive role in their love relationships. That is, the agency of these women clashes with the normative passivity of morally accepted characters in telenovelas. The introduction of this minor modification to the telenovela genre was considered as the first step towards Celaya's final decision to envision her own telenovela with multidimensional characters outside of the black-and-white moral framework characteristic of the telenovela genre.

Centering on the female characters from whom Lala learns and to whom she imitates, Lala's awareness of sexist categorization of women depending on their sexuality and marital status came to the fore. These sexist archetypes, viewed from a telenovela lens, allowed Lala to unlock for us the attitudes and habits her family and the media maintain as products of hierarchical societies to perpetuate gender roles, which difficult her challenging of hostile and benevolent sexism. Nevertheless, Lala not only acknowledged the centrality of sexuality in the construction of female identities but also contested this narrative to blur in her mindset the sexist categorization of women into virgin –La Virgen de Guadalupe– and whore –La Malinche–. This blurring of boundaries was read as an opportunity to explore a new range of female possibilities within her narration.

Being the agent of change in the narration by opening new narratives with women outside the norm, it can be concluded that Lala embodies the power of telenovela to produce societal change as affirmed by Suleiman Gonzalez. Lala advocates for a transgressive telenovela, where she is the protagonist without the need of a lover to complement her and where she has agency to decide her own actions. Therefore, Lala's willingness to stop the constraints to her freedom and dreams imposed by the expectations of a sexist society underlies the Chicana feminist revindications for self-definition. Because of the widespread of telenovela narratives around the world and the emergence of subversive telenovela stories to portray emerging realities (e.g. Netflix series *La casa de las flores*), it would be interesting to explore research lines on this topic examining these subversive narratives in literature and cinematography, focusing on pieces of work from Chicana, Latino US, and Latin American authors.

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