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the power of identity forged through border crossing

Mallory Lynn Dickson

For the characters in Sandra Cisneros' novel *Caramelo*, physical and mental border crossings affect their understanding of self-identity. Celaya Reyes, the book's narrator, and her family cross physical and cultural borders between Mexico and the United States, where they misunderstand and are misunderstood by those native to the United States. Their journey also takes the Reyes across mental borders, where they attempt to reconcile the past, the future, and a strange in-between space called "Nepantla." Nepantla refers to coming to terms with the reality of living between two cultures and countries or "a way for marginalized populations to be rewired and gain a deeper understanding of self" (Ramirez 304). Through Nepantla, Lala finds herself stuck between various physical locations, feels disconnected from both Mexican and American culture, and tells stories and witnesses experiences of people who are stuck halfway between life and death. Mental, physical, and in-between border crossings define Lala as a girl who is not only connected to a Mexican family, but to her American home as well; she is able to bridge the gap between the two cultures of Mexico and the United States, remembering her family's past as she moves into her future. In the

following analysis, I will explore Lala's encounters with physical, cultural, and mental border crossings. After analyzing how these border crossings force Lala to question her identity, I will discuss Nepantla and how this in-between experience helps Lala discover her Mexican roots and American future, serving as a blueprint to help other Mexican-Americans cross borders successfully by sharing their stories.

Lala does not comment on how crossing the border between the United States and Mexico affects her family for either good or bad, although she states that while "crossing the border, nobody feels like singing" (Cisneros 16). In fact, having a physical border between the two countries creates a "third country" or "border culture"; borders generally "define the places that are safe and unsafe," create a "dividing line," and are often "a vague and undetermined place created by the emotional residue of an unnatural boundary" (Anzaldua 3). Lala crosses the border a handful of times throughout the novel, and these crossings make her question her heritage and identity. She notices this dividing line, stating that "as soon as we cross the bridge everything switches to another language . . . sweets sweeter, colors brighter, the bitter more bitter" (Cisneros 17). Having family in both Mexico and the United States and knowing both Spanish and English, Lala is literally living in this third country. Her family crosses the border every year, and Lala points out that "every year I cross the border, it's the same—my mind forgets. But my body always remembers" (18). Lala is both American and Mexican, although not wholly either. Having grown up in the United States, Lala and her siblings are more comfortable speaking English and living in the U.S. In fact, when Lala's brother Rafa is left in Mexico for a year, he says that he felt as though he had been "abandoned by [his] parents and left in a country" where he didn't "have enough words to speak the things inside of [him]" (23). Rafa and his family not only cross into a different country every year, but they cross cultural borders as well.

These cultural border crossings create prejudices between United States citizens and Mexicans. Lala's family that live in Mexico label United States citizens as reckless and barbaric. Soledad, Lala's grandmother, tells Lala not to pretend she is not Mexican and to remember that "in this country we don't throw food away" (55). Even during Lala's infancy, her grandmother sees Lala as more American than Mexican. A family friend, Señor Juchi, thinks that taking advantage of girls is just what happens "to girls over there on the other [American] side" (392). Lala's father adds to this negative image,

claiming that Americans are “ignorant” people who “can’t bother to learn” about the family’s Mexican culture (308). Even though the family lives in Chicago and Texas, they raise their children with Mexican culture and values. This difference is highlighted when a man gives Lala a handshake and calls her by her first name. She claims that his behavior is “rude, like barbarians, but they don’t know any better” (320). Although Lala’s family has crossed the border and now lives in the United States, they retain “ties with their country of origin” and struggle to write their own story (Baron 99). Although Lala lives in the United States and holds United States citizenship, she values her Mexican culture and heritage over her American status.

Similar to the misunderstanding of Americans from a Mexican perspective, those living in the United States judge Lala and her family as Mexicans who all look alike, have no worries, and have fewer values. Lala encounters people at school that ignorantly believe all Mexicans look the same. Because Lala does not look like the stereotypical Mexican, she is mocked. Lala points out that, contrary to these opinions, “there are green-eyed Mexicans. The rich blond Mexicans . . . The curly-haired, freckle-faced, red-headed Mexicans” (Cisneros 353). A man Inocencio meets claims that Mexicans people only “live for the now. The past and the future mean nothing to them. They are people who live in the clouds and are better off for it” (211). Even after crossing the physical border between the U.S. and Mexico, Lala’s family faces multiple “borders” within a U.S. society that “tolerates them but does not embrace their culture” and knows little about their Mexican upbringing (Montes 131). Instead of treating the Reyes with respect, U.S. society treats Lala’s family like thieves or low class citizens. Soledad notices that when they cross the border into the United States that “instead of being treated like the royalty they were, they were after all Mexicans, they were treated like Mexicans” (Cisneros 289). When she says “treated like Mexicans,” she refers to the incorrect belief that Mexicans are criminals or lower beings. Lala and her friend also experience this prejudice when they leave a store and face accusations of stealing. This angers Lala, who asks herself if they have been accused because they are “brown,” or Mexican (338). These cultural borders challenge Lala’s identity on all fronts, defining her as an outcast to both Mexicans and Americans.

The family’s border crossing challenges Lala, who must choose to accept the United States as either her home or as a type of prison. This prison, where Latinos find themselves “unwittingly stranded . . . has less to do with the

violation of the line created by some other hand and more to do with the future once the crossing has occurred" (Muñoz 72). While Lala's parents make the decision to cross the border into the United States and make it their new home, they cannot make the choice for Lala, who is the "future" result of the family's crossing. Because the border has been crossed, Lala enters a "no man's land, the place in which you cannot go back but never fully belong, a place of extreme anxiety about the joy of belonging, the escape from restriction and pain, and the . . . threat of being . . . found wanting" (Walkerline 12). Due to the cultural judgment of her American peers and Mexican family, Lala is constantly "found wanting." People at school ask her if she is Mexican "on both sides," and that she "sure doesn't look Mexican" (Cisneros 352). Her own mother describes her as "a girl born on the other side who speaks Spanish with an accent" (208).

Lala's "no man's land" is understood in terms of the family's past, present, and future. On top of the physical and cultural borders she constantly crosses, Lala crosses the mental border of trying to reconcile the past with the future. She mentions several times that both she and her family live in the past. Lala's grandmother, Soledad, suffered in her marriage, "haunted by [her husband's] future and terrorized by [his] past" (184). Inocencio, Lala's father, faces accusations of living in the past as well (292). Lala obsesses over the past, describing the family's trip to San Antonio as "dragging the past" with them (304). She directly compares the past with the border between Mexico and the U.S. when she says, "In less than three hours we could be at the border, but where's the border to the past, I ask you, where?" (380). This border between the past and the future is a type of physical entity in *Caramelo*. Lala laments her current circumstances and turns to less complicated and hypothetically "happier" times in search of respite. However, she recognizes quickly that she is unable to cross the border into the past and is constantly being pushed towards her own future.

Even more than the physical and mental border crossings of the book, the moments stuck between borders impact the lives of Lala's family. These moments of Nepantla effect both the Reyes' physical location, their mentality, and their movement between life and death. Nepantla, caused by physical location, occurs when the Reyes move to San Antonio. Soledad decides to move to the United States after her husband dies. However, after the move she realizes "she missed her old house too much and was too proud to admit she'd made a mistake. She couldn't go backward, could she? She

was stuck, in the middle of nowhere it seemed, halfway between here and where?" (287). Soledad straddles two worlds: the world of Mexico and the world of the United States. She experiences *Nepantla*, which represents "the liminal space in between zones, where a process of transformation begins," and where Latinos realize "they exist in two worlds" (Ramirez 305). Soledad begins to transform after the move, realizing how much she took for granted in Mexico. She misses her independence and dislikes feeling like a burden to others. After she moves in with Lala's family, she crosses borders once more, becoming "aware of that familiar feeling of shedding her body once again. It both delighted and frightened her" (Cisneros 347). By speaking to her granddaughter after she passed on, Soledad attempts to move beyond the borders of life and death but finds herself stuck in *Nepantla* once more. Soledad speaks to Lala and asks Lala to tell her story, but Soledad cannot cross the border into the afterlife or the border into earth life. It is only after Lala tells Soledad's story that Soledad crosses the border into the next life.

The move from Chicago to San Antonio causes Lala to question where she belongs. She asks her father, "Home? Where's that? North? South? Mexico? San Antonio? Chicago? Where, Father?" (380). She realizes that she identifies with both her Latino and American home. Lala asks her father these questions because she believes that at some point each of these places was home. She and her family cross the border between Mexico and the U.S. every year; this border crossing feeds Lala's strong desire to understand her identity. This new identity connects to each identifying aspect of her person: race, gender, and class. Through crossing "symbolic borders and border crossing along institutional, racial, gender, class, and sexual orientation lines," questions of identity arise (Gallo 182). Lala and her family move to Texas, a state connected to the border. Living on the border of two cultures, languages, and worlds, Lala attempts to keep "intact [her] shifting and multiple identity and integrity" (Anzaldúa preface). Although she has grown up in the United States, Lala seems to relate more to her Mexican roots. At school, she defends her Mexican heritage, identifying herself as Mexican even when other kids at school call her "a white girl" (Cisneros 354).

Lala notices in San Antonio that many of the street names and signs are in Spanish, and she describes living in Texas as "almost like being on the other side, but not exactly" (304). Similar to Soledad's reaction to moving to the U.S., Lala suggests that her father regretted that "he moved [the family] to San Antonio, a town halfway between here and there, in the middle of

nowhere" (380). Moving to Texas leads not only traps the family between physical borders, but it leaves them trapped in mental borders as well.

This feeling of living in the middle of nowhere causes Lala to question where she belongs. She complains, "I never belonged here. I don't know where I belong anymore" (356). The Reyes struggle between their expectations of how Mexico and the United States should be and how they are in reality. Lala feels ties to Mexico, a place connected to her childhood. However, when she revisits her grandmother's town she realizes that her memories of Mexico may be incorrect. She describes her grandmother's street as "smaller than I remembered it. Noisier. Could it have gotten noisier, or could it be I forgot the noise . . . How come I never remembered being scared?" (261). These thoughts about her grandmother's street reveal how Lala also crosses the borders of memory, unable to retrieve a perfectly clear image of her past.

Cisneros encounters the same problem as Lala as she attempts to mentally cross over the border between her present and past memories of Mexico. She says, "I don't know how it is with anyone else, but for me these things, that song, that time, that place, are all bound together in a country I am homesick for, that doesn't exist anymore. That never existed. A county I invented. Like all emigrants caught between here and there" (434). Cisneros realizes that, similar to physical borders, she cannot cross the borders of her past memories without creating a place that "never existed." Lala is unable to discover her true identity until she visits Mexico again, older and without her family. Only when she returns does she realize that her childhood summers spent in Mexico were in a place she had mentally created. Lala's self-discovery begins by realizing the power and duplicity of these mental borders. She spends the first half of the book believing that Mexico is some kind of sanctuary where she will find the happiness and a sense of belonging that eludes her in the United States. However, Lala's later visit to Mexico is anything but ideal. Realizing that Mexico is not the perfect safe haven she thought it was, she returns to the U.S. and makes new memories and a new home there.

Although Lala has crossed the physical border between Mexico and the United States multiple times, faced judgment from family and persecution from classmates due to cultural borders, struggled to reconcile the past with the present, and experienced *Nepantla*, she pieces together her identity only after understanding the shifting borders between life and death. Before her encounter with Soledad, Lala attempts to come to terms with her identity in a vacuum, using only herself as reference. However, after unearthing and

recreating the story of her family Lala begins to understand just how thin the border is between life and death. Even though her grandmother died, Lala continues to communicate with her. The two become co-creators of Lala's identity, weaving together fact and fiction, Lala's life and Soledad's life. Cisneros refers to death as crossing a border on the acknowledgments page of *Caramelo*, where she states that those who have died "slipped across the border from this life into the next" (444). Lala also writes about death in terms of border crossing and decides to write the story of her family. This decision makes her a speaker for those who have passed on.

Lala, the one telling the story and using artistic license to capture the emotional truth of the Reyes (rather than the strict historical facts), emphasizes the prison between life and death for a reason. She recognizes during the course of the novel that she is inseparably connected to her ancestors, especially Soledad. Lala even says, "the Grandmother's face in mine. Hers. Mine . . . Amazing the way I look different now, like my grandmother is starting to peer out at me from my skin" (394). Lala's path to discovering her true identity and learning how to voice her border crossing experience is found through Soledad, especially after Soledad dies but her spirit lingers on, a spirit only Lala can see. Soledad emphasizes the border that prevents her from moving from this world to the next. She feels "so lonely being like this, neither dead nor alive, but somewhere halfway, like an elevator between two floors" (408). Lala also feels caught in Nepantla, trapped between her Mexican and American heritage, her family and friends, and the past and future. Soledad specifically asks Lala to help her cross over this border, even though the two were never close in life. She and Lala have a conversation, where Soledad begs Lala to "help [her] cross over," and Lala asks if Soledad can "get somebody else to carry [her] across" (408). After Soledad explains that only Lala can see her, Lala serves as a bridge from life to death. However, instead of only helping Soledad cross borders, Lala herself crosses her own borders of self-discovery.

At the end of the book, Lala attends a party where she thinks she sees a crowded dance floor full of "everyone, but everyone, moving in a lazy counterclockwise circle. The living and the dead" (424). Her family connections, regardless of physical borders keeping them apart, lead Lala to discover her identity. By crossing the physical border between Mexico and the United States, Lala realizes that she is both Mexican and American and that her family has roots in both countries. At first this is challenging because Americans

challenge her American status and Mexicans challenge her Mexican roots. This leads to mental border crossing, where Lala tries to cross into her past in an attempt to hide from her future. Lala is clearly stuck between these several borders in the last third of the book. However, it is also during this difficult time that she realizes her deep connection to both dead and living relatives.

Instead of deciding to be only Mexican or only American, Lala understands that inhabiting the middle ground gives her power. Lala's power comes through the art of writing her family's story, allowing her to reconcile her inward clash of identities: old, new, and still forming. Lala effects powerful change through her sentences, using words that tell her family's story (and therefore her story) of crossing physical and mental borders boldly and unapologetically.

Lala not only represents a member of the Reyes family who learns how to successfully live between borders, but she also serves as an example for all Mexican-American people. Her ability to connect with both American and Mexican culture, while remaining firmly tied to her family, gives her stability. Instead of simply repeating the past and living the same life as Soledad, Lala chooses to live a different life. She listens to the mistakes made by her ancestors, and instead of remaining confined to her supposed "destiny," she trecks her own course. Lala, as well as all Mexicans who come to live in the United States, realize that "borders cross people, often without their choosing" (Valdivia 303). Lala represents the border crossing experience, demonstrating that the change from Mexican to Mexican-American is challenging but not impossible.

Rather than casting off her Mexican culture and family, Lala discovers her identity by embracing them and their stories. By serving as the narrator to these family stories, Lala demonstrates what Mexicans can and should do: hold tightly to their Mexican heritage and values while embracing their new American home. By telling her story through art (in this case a book), Lala challenges current American literature. Her story, and the real stories of immigrants moving to the United States from Mexico, change the canon so that "American literature and culture... are no longer considered to be limited by the borders, or even powers, of the United States" (Nas 127).

Caramelo is a feat of American literature, a book that cannot be contained or restrained by its white readers. Cisneros, the voice behind Lala, wrote *Caramelo* for a mostly white audience. Instead of writing the book in such

a way that American readers can completely understand and relate to Lala, Cisneros leaves these readers in the middle of two borders. White readers have to reconcile a mix of Spanish words sprinkled throughout the text and read through various struggles of Latino peoples. She invites her readers into Lala's family, only to hold them at arm's length. Like most Latino texts, the story catches white readers in the middle of Latino and American culture, refusing to completely reconcile the two countries. Readers are kept in a state of Nèpantla, with the hope that they will be just as transformed as the characters they read about. Cisneros empowers her character Lala by making Lala the narrator and "author" of these family stories.

Lala's experience with border crossing teaches Mexican immigrants to challenge their past memories and future lives in their artwork and literature. This allows all Americans to become part of the Latino past and American future; these new Latino stories and depictions will become an integral part of American society, one where identity is formed—not stolen—from the borders Mexican-Americans crossed and continue to cross. Lala represents a blueprint of the Mexican-American experience. Her story is not neat and perfect, but this blueprint shows what is possible and what must be overcome in order to find happiness while living between borders. Success is not achieved by simply getting over the border, but by remaining rooted in Mexican culture while growing American branches. Successful border crossing involves having the power and words to tell the many stories of Mexicans on their journey to become Mexican-Americans.

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