Sandra Cisneros as Chicana Storyteller: Fictional Family (Hi)Stories in Caramelo

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SANDRA CISNEROS AS CHICANA STORYTELLER: FICTIONAL FAMILY

(HI)STORIES IN CARAMÉLO

by

Sally M. Giles

A thesis submitted to the faculty of

Brigham Young University

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GRADUATE COMMITTEE APPROVAL

of a thesis submitted by

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As chair of the candidate’s graduate committee, I have read the dissertation of Sally M. Giles in its final form and have found that (1) its format, citations, and bibliographical style are consistent and acceptable and fulfill university and department style requirements; (2) its illustrative materials including figures, tables, and charts are in place; and (3) the final manuscript is satisfactory to the graduate committee and is ready for submission to the university library.

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ABSTRACT

SANDRA CISNEROS AS CHICANA STORYTELLER: FICTIONAL FAMILY
(HI)STORIES IN CARAMELO

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Master of Arts

My thesis discusses the ways in which Sandra Cisneros makes historical claims from a Chicana perspective by telling fictional family stories in Caramelo. Not only have Chicanas traditionally been marginalized ethnically by the Anglo mainstream, they have also suffered disenfranchisement as women in their own male-dominated cultural community. Both elements have contributed to the cultural silencing of Chicanas outside of domestic spaces, and particularly in historical discourse. Cisneros introduces storytelling as a means of empowering Chicanas through language that allows them to speak historically and still signify culturally. By telling stories from the site of the family, she ingeniously utilizes a culturally allotted authority over the domestic sphere to branch out and discuss historical issues as they inform the lives of her Chicana narrator’s family members. Thus, she succeeds in breaking the traditions of her culture that would silence Chicanas while allowing them to maintain their cultural identities.
Presenting her historical assertions through fiction allows Cisneros to avoid the pitfalls of post-Enlightenment epistemological modes in historical discourse, introduce new perspectives on historical events, and invite historical discussion rather than shutting it off. Because all historical accounts are narratives that have been constructed by biased individuals, history and story are essentially the same. Cisneros calls attention to this concept as she conflates history and story in her novel. Empirically minded historians of the past insisted on one true version of history and thus ignored “other” viewpoints. Fiction creates a new space for discussion that does not disregard alternative viewpoints because it does not pretend to be fact.

In addition, Cisneros employs an abundance of Chicano pop cultural references in *Caramelo* to create a cultural mythology for the Chicano community. Chicanos are alienated by the mainstream cultures on both sides of the border, and thus they generally feel culturally invalidated. By invoking pop cultural forms, primarily the *telenovela*, Cisneros fosters collectivity among Chicanos who can all relate to the signs of pop culture, which makes itself available to everyone regardless of class, race, gender, or geographic position. She asserts new views of history through the lens of pop culture, and strengthens the ability of Chicanos to enter historical discourse by strengthening cultural cohesiveness. Cisneros is helping to redefine American literature by calling attention to at least one of the marginal voices that are rapidly becoming the center in the United States.
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Sandra Cisneros as Chicana Storyteller: Fictional Family (Hi)Stories in *Caramelo*  
Sally M. Giles

Introduction

*Articulating the past historically does not mean recognizing it ‘the way it really was.’*

-Walter Benjamin, *On the Concept of History, VI*

In 1993, Sandra Cisneros began research for a short story tribute to her dying father that snowballed into a nine-year project, resulting in the 2002 publication of *Caramelo*, a lengthy novel through which Cisneros uses fiction to enter historical discourse for the first time. As she stated in an interview about the book, “in telling my father’s story, I had to place him in time and history, and then I had to go back and look at how he became who he was. So I had to invent my grandmother’s story and how she became who she was” (qtd. in Suarez 1). In her past literary successes such as *The House on Mango Street* and *Woman Hollering Creek*, which the general public has consumed and literary critics have thoroughly discussed, Cisneros has written primarily about the domestic sphere. Although current published scholarly work on *Caramelo* scarcely exceeds more than the initial book reviews, this text in which Cisneros ambitiously ventures to speak about the roots of Chicana/o identity and culture deserves attention. She elaborately weaves together cultural fragments and family memories into stories, much like the weaving of the Mexican *rebozo* [shawl] that gets passed down through the generations to the young narrator, Celaya Reyes. With *Caramelo* structured around family (hi)stories, Cisneros still speaks from the site of home and family in which Chicanas hold a culturally allotted authority. Traditionally, gender roles have been rigidly polarized in Chicano culture with a woman’s duty being always and exclusively to home and family. Chicanas—even educated and talented feminists like Cisneros—live within
the constructs of a border culture in which they are more bordered than Chicanos by their femaleness in a male-dominated society. Thus, Chicanas have traditionally been culturally silenced and denied a voice in the predominantly Anglo and patriarchal construction of history and culture. In *Caramelo* the young Chicana narrator, Celaya, traces back the family (hi)stories of her ancestors in order to mediate and come to terms with her own border culture and identity, thereby venturing out of typical female roles to talk about history as it informs her family’s past. While Cisneros continues to write about domestic spaces in *Caramelo* by centering the novel on family (hi)stories as told by Celaya, in this study I am interested in how Cisneros uses these fictional stories to rehistoricize the past from a Chicana perspective. Cisneros proposes storytelling as a way for Chicanas to use language to get outside the confines of the domestic sphere and break the traditional silence imposed upon them. She draws upon the fictional nature of stories to refute the supposedly factual, post-Enlightenment epistemological modes that are primarily responsible for the widely accepted grand historical narratives that exclude alternative claims to truth and ignore the voices of marginalized peoples like Chicanas/os. In addition to retelling history from her “other” perspective, Cisneros enriches her stories with references to Chicano popular culture by which she creates a mythology of Chicano culture that can heal the fragmentation of border culture and foster collectivity among the geographically scattered Chicano diaspora in the United States. Reinforcing Chicana/o solidarity allows Chicanas/os to contribute to U.S. mainstream historical discourse without reticence about their in-between-ness, thus helping to create a more inclusive United States.
In his essay “The Storyteller,” Walter Benjamin laments the decline of storytelling in modern industrialized society, in light of which he claims that “experience has fallen in value. And it looks as if it is continuing to fall into bottomlessness” (83-84). Telling stories allows for the creation and expression of communal experiences, uniting rather than alienating members of a community. In spite of accelerated industrialization and modernity in the United States, Cisneros succeeds as a storyteller in restoring the value of communal experience, first for the Chicano diaspora—a culturally unified group that resides in a multiplicity of spaces in the U.S. without a geographical homeland—and second for today’s heterogeneous United States as a whole. Although *Caramelo* may be classified as a novel, it functions more as a collection of family-centered stories that represent the Chicano experience and add variety and depth to what it means to be an American. In *Caramelo*, Cisneros speaks communally, rather than individualistically as traditional novels do. Through fictional family stories, she also avoids merely writing what Benjamin calls “information,” by utilizing the fictional realm to explore history. By telling stories, Cisneros creates a more personal, tangible revision of historical truth that stems from the site of the family and avoids falling into the empirical modes of past historical discourse—ones that have often blocked alternate interpretations of history. By opening up the possibility for multiple historical voices, Cisneros fosters collectivity—a sense of cultural cohesion and inclusiveness—among Chicanos specifically and then among Americans as a whole, regardless of ethnicity or gender.

Until sometime mid-twentieth century, when the women’s rights movement began to make some headway, history was almost exclusively a patriarchal discourse. Until that
point in time, women were generally active only in the domestic sphere\(^1\)—the realm of home and family. The public sphere of politics, industry, business, academia, and therefore, history, were male-dominated areas of life. Thus, the lens through which we traditionally view the past is inevitably masculinist. Lamentably, the accounts we have represent, at best, half of the human experience. Most historical “fact” is really a biased, single-sexed interpretation of events and peoples since even men with the best intentions cannot accurately document a woman’s history as she would. Because of this bias, history differs little from fictional works, tales told by authors who are inevitably influenced by their own prejudices and life experiences. At least one significant difference remains—fiction openly admits to its own subjectivity, while history makes more claims to be fact, leaning upon scientific methods in the search for indisputable truths. Because empiricism claims ownership to truth and discards other viewpoints, the doubly-marginalized voices of Chicanas have been omitted from mainstream, empirically-driven historical accounts.\(^2\)

This omission of female voices occurs to a heightened degree in Latino cultural communities both inside and outside the borders of the United States. Traditional gender dynamics on both sides of the U.S.-Mexico border are such that men are expected to assert authority, while women should remain passive and submissive. Despite obvious individual variation, these gender roles traditionally divide men and women into separate spheres, respectively the public and the domestic, also often referred to as exterior and

\(^1\) Domestic space, in this project, constitutes primarily the interior spaces and concerns of the home and family, but can also branch out to include concerns of other relatively small social groups like neighborhoods, church groups, or social clubs. Hence, women do function in public spaces at times, but do not signify like men do in the public sphere as I define it here.

\(^2\) This paper will not address other disenfranchised groups and the exclusion of their voices in the historical canon, although I recognize that Chicanas are by no means the only group to be omitted from the master narrative of Western Civilization. Moreover, other groups such as African-American women have been doubly marginalized in many of the same ways that Chicanas have.
interior spaces. Contemporary gender studies increasingly question the boundaries that define these two categories; however, because I am focusing on the retelling of Latina/o history in this study, I am mainly interested in the function of the public and domestic spheres historically. The domestic sphere I refer to, specifically in consideration of traditional Latino cultures, mainly consists of the concerns of home and family (both extended and immediate), at times branching into neighborhood communities. The public sphere, as I examine it here, constitutes all that exists outside of the domestic circle, including but not limited to politics, business, economics, academia, art, literature, and philosophy. This split has added to the historical privileging of the male voice in Latino societies. However, this gender separation does not bar men from the domestic space. Although men dominate the public sphere, they retain more freedom to move into the domestic sphere and even assert their authority in issues of the home and family if they so choose while women are not afforded the same privileges. Consequently, the exclusion of women in the public sphere results in a markedly authoritative female role in the domestic sphere. While she typically submits to the ultimate will of the men in her life, even the most traditional Latina retains a culturally carved-out space of power in the domestic realm. Due to both machismo and marianismo, Latinas have been restricted to speaking and signifying only from the site of the home and family.

Although the silencing of women’s voices in historical discourse has been the norm for the entire Western world, this dynamic is particularly evident and potent in Latina/o cultures in which machismo and marianismo—the traditional gender expectations for women—are informing influences. Because of the voluminous treatment of machismo and its relationship to Latina/o cultures and societies as of late, I need to
clarify how I understand and deploy this term in relation to my current study. My interest lies in *machismo* as it has been generally and traditionally—the clearly dominant position of men over women in Latina/o communities. More than emphasizing the inequalities of the past, I am concerned in this study with the cultural inheritance *machismo* has left to Latino communities today, particularly as it comes to bear on the social position of Chicanas and their empowerment. Even though opportunities for women in the United States offer Chicanas more freedom than ever before in history, deeply entrenched cultural traditions connected to *machismo* inhibit them from defying gender expectations of the past. I am interested in what Latina/o cultures have inherited from the longstanding history of a *machista* worldview. Conceding that most Latinos are not tyrannical and that some aspects of *machismo* have resulted in the increased caring and cherishing of women, I would still argue that the historical predominance of men has caused more oppression than freedom for Latinas because of the cultural silencing that it has helped create. Furthermore, I would attribute the perpetuation of *machismo* as directly to women as men, since both sexes continue to inscribe strict gender roles in successive generations. *The Maria Paradox*, a book written by Rosa Maria Gil and Carmen Inoa Vasquez—both Latina psychotherapists and professors who specialize in the treatment of Latinas in the U.S.—offers a thorough discussion of traditional Latina/o gender expectations and delineates some of the important ways that *machismo* signifies in Latina/o cultures. Gil and Vasquez’s explanation of how “. . . *machismo* mandates that men have options, and women have duties” (6) reflects the overall tone of *machismo* as discussed in this paper. They continue, “It means that a man’s place is *en el mundo*, in the world, and a woman’s place is *en la casa*, in the home” (6). The confinement of Chicanas—the largest
population of Latinas in the United States— to the home, amplified directly by *machismo*,
has disallowed a feminine voice in the public sphere.

Gender characteristics and expectations in contemporary Chicano culture,
including both *machismo* and *marianismo*, draw heavily upon the influence of Catholicism established in colonial Mexico by the Spanish.\(^3\) Catholic doctrine essentially splits deity into masculine and feminine forms: God, a three-part entity most often depicted as Christ, and his mother the Virgin Mary (who is often referred to as Guadalupe in Mexico because of her apparition ther). God, the male counterpart, has final and omniscient authority; he is often perceived as the lawgiver, the disciplinarian, the Judge. Representing the feminine side, the Virgin lovingly accepts and comforts her followers. Speaking specifically of the Mexican apparition of the Virgin, theologian Jeanette Rodriguez writes, “Our Lady of Guadalupe identifies herself as Our Loving Mother and people see her as a mother, a maternal presence, consoling, nurturing, offering unconditional love, comforting” (28). The dynamics of this gender duality are reflected secularly in the actual cultural expectations of both men and women, resulting in *machismo* and *marianismo* as gender ideals for Chicanos and Chicanas, respectively.

Celebrated Chicana writer, Ana Castillo, relates the connection of God and the Virgin with the women and men in her own formative years, as follows:

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\(^{3}\) One can hardly overestimate the extent to which Catholicism has defined cultural norms in Latin America. The mixing of native peoples and cultures with the Spanish, often referred to as *mestizaje*, catalyzed the overall conversion of native peoples to Christianity by hybridizing indigenous religions into Christian forms. Catholicism dominated due in large part to the virtual genocide of indigenous populations throughout the Americas. As the Spanish decimated indigenous populations, cultural mores were lost and those that remained were clearly diluted. For a more thorough treatise of Spanish colonialism see award-winning journalist Juan Gonzalez’s *Harvest of Empire*, Chapter 1. Spain compelled the people of Mexico to adopt Catholicism and its cultural economy. I find Catholicism’s effects on gender roles and family life to be particularly interesting because of the definite split between the genders patterned directly after the Mexican Catholic perceptions of gendered deity.
God the Father was absent, though like the men in my family, who were often shadowy and silent, He nevertheless was the ultimate authority. He watched us with a close and critical omnipotent eye and mostly wielded his power by instilling fear. Our Mother, on the other hand, watched over her children without condemning their acts. Our mother simply loved us.

(74)

Male and female roles, even in completely secular terms, fall into the same categories outlined by Castillo. In her account as in others, *machismo* facilitates an overarching male-dominance that has been treated heavily in recent cultural studies.

*Marianismo*, the ideal in femininity constructed by and for Latinas, has been discussed to a far lesser degree. It has been most recently and thoroughly discussed by Gil and Vasquez in *The Maria Paradox*, in which they deploy the term as “the ideal role of woman . . . taking as its model of perfection the Virgin Mary herself” (7). Catholic adulation of the Virgin Mary directly informs gender ideals in all Latino cultures in the United States as discussed by Gil and Vasquez, thus including Chicano culture. Of course, individual faith and devotion to the Virgin are private and vary greatly among Latinas/os. However, the overlying cultural significance lies in the Virgin’s position within Latino cultures as the paragon of womanhood, resulting in *marianismo*—the expectation that Latinas should look to the Virgin as the feminine ideal. As the mother of God, the Virgin plays an ambivalent role, which in turn complicates the act of trying to emulate her. As deity, she does hold a powerful position, yet she also embodies submissiveness. Even her power stems from her passivity. Her strength lies in her suffering, her patient silence in spite of her pain. She is almost always depicted with a
meek, downward glance. Her supreme maternal nature prescribes motherhood as the ultimate in womanhood. From her motherhood she gains her authority as well as her docility. She exists solely for her children, to comfort and nurture them, and millions adore and worship her for it, seeking her guidance and aid.

Because of marianismo, the pattern repeats itself in the actual lives of women in Chicano culture and results in a unique social role as ambivalent as the Virgin’s. Chicanas are taught to be completely devoted to family, which both oppresses and empowers them simultaneously. Striving to be the perfect woman keeps Chicanas who adhere to traditional cultural norms in a silent role. They are expected to bear all suffering, especially that imposed upon them by the men in their lives. As Gil and Vasquez note, “Marianismo is about sacred duty, self-sacrifice, and chastity….About living in the shadows, literally and figuratively, of your men” (7). Sandra Cisneros, who refers to Guadalupe as “my culture’s role model for brown women like me,” calls this “an ideal so lofty and unrealistic it [is] laughable” (“Guadalupe” 48). It destroys women’s freedom to make their own life choices and create their own identities. To truly signify as women, marianista women must become mothers. Marriage and motherhood afford Chicanas a degree of authority, but always within the bounds of the domestic realm.

In Latino cultures, a stay-at-home wife and mother is not called merely a “housewife”; she is the ama de casa, literally the boss or proprietor of the home. Because this position is the highest point of development in a traditional woman’s life, it “gives her certain power and much respeto” (Gil and Vasquez 7). While the marianista Latina gives her entire life over to her family, she also gains some control over it. As a mother, she makes decisions for the household, as long as they solely concern the home.
environment. The mother is arguably the most revered individual in Latina/o cultures, as far as personal relationships go. This idea is evidenced by the 2000 publication of an entire anthology of Latina/o writings called *Las Mamis*, a collection of personal essays written by renowned Latina/o authors about their mothers. The cultural justification for this work dedicated to motherhood can be seen in the Foreword to the book. One of the editors, Joie Davidow, claims that “Latina mothers have a particular role in the lives of their children” (*vii*). After expressing her surprise at the variety of responses all full of some anxiety or other that so many Latina/o authors expressed when invited to contribute to the anthology, she writes, “No matter what we call them—Mom, Mommy, Mamá, Mami, or Mamacita—our mothers have enormous power over us all” (*viii*). Despite *machista* authority over the exterior aspects of family life, Chicana mothers determine the day-to-day and often more personal interactions and decisions in the interior. Being in the home, they instill cultural norms and traditions into their children and by extension to the Chicano community as a whole. In this way *marianismo* is passed on from one generation to the next. Mothers train their daughters and sons in proper gender behaviors. Speaking directly to Latinas struggling with the consequences of *marianismo*, Gil and Vasquez write, “Of course, it was unthinkable for you to openly disagree with her [mother’s] wishes” (56). In the home, Latinas can command respect because it is the one domain in which they can and are expected to speak. For this reason, Cisneros ingeniously utilizes that given space within the family realm to branch from the domestic sphere into the public discourse of history in *Caramelo*.

Even Chicanas like Cisneros who have defied *machista* and *marianista* gender expectations have had to struggle with powerful cultural forces since childhood to
achieve autonomy. Chicana feminist theorist Sonia Saldívar-Hull recounts her experiences with her own confinement to the domain of home and family while growing up in Texas in her book *Feminism on the Border*:

The brothers could play, read and study as much as they wanted—indeed the status of the family somehow hinged on their success—but as a mujercita [young woman], I was needed to perform crucial household duties and child-care tasks. My attempts to read and study were signs of laziness and nothing more. My longing to ride a bike or play baseball with the boys could signify only dangerous propensities to wander, improper desires for a girl. At that time, Mother could not conceive of a different possibility for a daughter. (9)

Her experience of double standards for boys and girls reflects a much larger social trend. *The Maria Paradox* documents the issues associated with the traditional separation between the public and domestic spheres that affects Chicanas today. Because *marianismo* has been the only available model of femininity for past generations of Mexican and Chicana women, they have not had a voice in the construction of their own historical narratives. However, Cisneros shows one way to use language, through stories about the family, to venture into the public discourse of historical narrative. The fictional nature of her historical assertions diverges from the Anglo masculinist power that constructed the “factual” grand historical narratives.

As a part of its legacy, the Enlightenment bequeathed to Western civilization the unquestioned privileging of fact over fiction in the pursuit of truth. The rise of science predominated so heavily that its empirical methods diffused even into previously
nonscientific areas of study. Philosophers such as Bacon, Hume, Locke, and Comte, among others, drew the focus away from any knowledge sought through other than empirical means, such as intuition, faith, or *a priori* induction. In one of the foundational documents of empirical thought, “An Essay Concerning Human Understanding,” John Locke attempts to identify the source from which all knowledge comes. He writes, “To this I answer, in one word, from EXPERIENCE; in that all our knowledge is founded, and from that it ultimately derives itself” (186). While the Enlightenment recognized literature as valuable in some respects, since an abundance of great fiction grew out of this period, only knowledge gained through sensory evidence and concrete observation could be considered usable truth upon which to build. In his book about Francis Bacon—one of the key founders of empirical thought—Perez Zagorin wrote, “Toward imagination itself, it is true, [Bacon’s] attitude was somewhat ambiguous on account of its ability as a creative faculty to oppose and elude reason” (185). Although Bacon wrote poetry himself and praised some of its features, he categorized the truth-value of the imaginary (including fiction) as less important than the empiricism of the sciences.

During this time the division between the sciences and the arts arose; before the Enlightenment, these categories that may seem intrinsically at odds in the modern world, were nonexistent, and the schism between the two is a new development, relatively speaking. As they did with all dualisms in the Western paradigm, the sociopolitically empowered patriarchs of the Enlightenment formed a binary in which science triumphed over the arts as the higher power. In other words, alleged objectivity conquered subjectivity. Thus, the empirical mindset became ingrained into the cultural blueprints of Western societies. “Fact” became synonymous with “truth,” and “fiction” was therefore
polarized into the realm of “falsity.” What was fiction but fanciful lies, something imaginary and empirically unverifiable, and therefore untrue? How, then, could fiction make any valid claims to truth?

History, as a discourse, was saturated with empiricism as much as any other field of study and generally began to be thought of as a science as opposed to an art. David Hume, in his essay “History as a Guide,” reigns history in with the hard sciences:

> These records or wars, intrigues, factions, and revolutions, are so many collections of experiments, by which the politician or moral philosopher fixes the principles of his science, in the same manner as the physician or natural philosopher becomes acquainted with the nature of plants, minerals, and other external objects, by the experiments which he forms concerning them. (359)

Today, we still refer to history as a social science, just a small manifestation of the empirical methods upon which it is purportedly founded. However, because it relies on accounts of past events, history necessarily deals in narrative and only exists if someone is there to tell it or write it down. The Enlightenment’s penchant for verifiable fact in some ways attempted to force the narrative qualities of history into exile. Empiricists would christen as “fact” the historical narratives that were constructed and approved by the dominant power structures that were indubitably male and predominantly white, thus closing themselves off to the full spectrum of possibility in historical discourse.

History’s ontological foundations, however, disallow the removal of narrative because without narrative, history ceases to exist. Even a cursory look at the shared root of the words “history” and “story” demonstrates a connection between the two. When those in
power chose a few selected narratives to represent the facts about “the way things really happened,” story was actually converted into history, at least nominally. While Enlightenment thinkers would insist on maintaining separate categories, and this imagined split would continue as part of their legacy in western culture, in actuality history and story became conflated into one accepted narrative.

Empiricism developed into positivism, which only accepts as valid those claims to truth that are based upon previously empirically established truths. By excluding modes of thinking that do not adhere to empiricist thought, the scope of possible truths only narrows. It builds exclusively upon its own system and can therefore never truly expand or progress. In his book *One-Dimensional Man*, Herbert Marcuse, who was affiliated with the Frankfurt School, defines and discusses positivism: “Since its first usage . . . the term ‘positivism’ has encompassed (1) the validation of cognitive thought by experience of facts; (2) the orientation of cognitive thought to the physical sciences as a model of certainty and exactness; (3) the belief that progress in knowledge depends on this orientation” (172). Members of the Frankfurt School in the early twentieth century, including Benjamin, argued against positivism because it legitimizes only the dominant, pre-established power structure, dismissing all alternative voices, particularly those that subscribe to non-empirical epistemological modes such as metaphysics or spirituality. Marcuse writes that “positivism is a struggle against all metaphysics, transcendentalisms, and idealisms as obscurantist and regressive modes of thought” (172). Because such knowledge cannot be proved materially, with hard evidence, it is shunned by empiricist and positivist thinkers. Positivism rules out much of non-Western modes of thought because they exist outside of the empirical realm of ascertaining truth.
Anglos in the United States, who have inherited positivist thought processes, tend to rely only on “factual” information. Conversely, Chicanos along with all other Latino communities often give more credibility to spiritual, non-provable phenomena such as miraculous apparitions of deity or the deceased, folk cures, witchcraft, and dreams. Their traditions, many of which are based in *mestizaje*—the cultural mixing or hybridization of Spanish and indigenous cultural paradigms—depend less on material evidence and more on faith. It is an open, rather than a closed system because rather than accepting only claims that originate within its own narrow scope of ideas, it allows for a variety of sources of truth. Latino culture subscribes more easily to the metaphysical and spiritual dimensions of acquiring knowledge. Fiction, although not to be equated exactly with metaphysics, also lies in the realm of the fantastical rather than the scientifically provable. In her use of fiction to make historical claims in *Caramelo*, Cisneros draws upon her Chicana worldview; she does not depend merely on “fact” to arrive at truth.

Cisneros also gravitates toward her Chicana/o cultural heritage in *Caramelo* by centering her text in communal, particularly familial, growth and development rather than focusing only on the journey of one individual. Latina/o cultures in general emphasize the community and the family more than the individual, in comparison with the typical mainstream American worldview which does deal with familial contexts but tends to focus more heavily on the infinite potential of the individual. The American Dream is based on solitary figures such as Benjamin Franklin who represent the ideal that *one* person can rise above the others, no matter how downtrodden his background. Latina/o cultures, on the other hand, focus more on benefiting a unified group of people. Women perhaps demonstrate a communal focus more obviously than men because of their
culturally learned dedication to their husbands and their children, which illustrates to a heightened degree the values of *familismo* and *personalismo*. In their 2002 study entitled *Latino Children and Families in the United States*, Ana Mari Cauce and Melanie Domenech-Rodríguez define *familismo* as “the importance of family closeness and getting along with and contributing to the well-being of the family, often viewed as an extended one” (12). The strict mandate of obedience to authorities, particularly males and elders, prescribed by *marianismo* results from, and in part causes, this familial closeness and dependence. Drawing some general conclusions from several other studies done on Latino families, Cauce and Domenech-Rodríguez claim that Latinos tend to have bigger families, tend to live closer together geographically, and “place greater importance on regular face-to-face contact, physical touch, and sharing of ‘minor joys and sorrows’ with nuclear as well as extended family members” (13) than Anglo Americans do. Cauce and Domenech-Rodríguez also introduce the concept of *personalismo*, which they describe as “. . .the importance that Latinos place on personal goodness and getting along with others, values considered more important than individual ability and material success” (12). Both *familismo* and *personalismo* tend toward a communal rather than an individualistic cultural mindset. The Chicano values of *familismo* and *personalismo* are at least partially a result of the traditional gender roles impacted by Spanish Catholicism and the resulting *marianista* and *machista* tendencies it causes. Because of this, many Latinas struggle to become independent because they feel they run the risk of losing the familial support that is so integral in their culture. They see the traditional gender roles as inseparable from *familismo* and *personalismo*. While their fears of rejection by other Latinas/os can inhibit their individual development and their ability to achieve their
personal life goals, their concerns about fitting into their community can also be personally beneficial if used properly because even when Chicanas claim authority, they tend do so communally, seeking the benefit of the family rather than the self.

Chicana authority, stemming from the marianista emulation of the maternal qualities embodied by the Virgin, tends to be less self-interested than other kinds of authority because it centers on the same values from which the Virgin gains her power. As Jeanette Rodriguez explains in her essay “Guadalupe: The Feminine Face of God,” devotees of the Holy Mother that seek her aid find “. . . solidarity with the oppressed, belonging, unconditional love, the power of expressed feelings and sharing (women come to her and share their immediate needs and they feel heard). The power of commitment, the power to endure suffering, the power of caring, . . . and with her help they are encouraged and given hope” (30). Precisely because Latinas, through the pressures of marianismo, have been taught to sacrifice their own individual wants and identities to something larger—the family—the authority they assume is distinct. It is inclusive, not exclusive. Chicana authority seeks to benefit the community and not just the self, uniting rather than dividing.

Because Chicanos in the United States are spread over a large geographical space and because Chicano culture encompasses a vast spectrum of “Mexicanness” and “Americanness,” there is often disunion among the Chicano diaspora; they may not feel the strength of a united community. As members of a border culture they reside somewhere “in between,” as neither Mexicans nor Americans, not identifying completely with either Mexico or the United States. In Mexico, they are seen as foreigners who speak pocho, or anglicized and therefore less authentic Spanish, if they in fact speak any
Spanish at all. At the same time, Chicanos are often regarded as immigrants in the U.S.
even when their families have been in the country for several generations. Because
Chicano culture varies so widely and changes so rapidly, even some Chicanos deny the
legitimacy of their own culture. It is difficult to take root in a culture that remains in
constant flux and abounds in contradictions because two opposing cultures are merging
into one. As Gloria Anzaldúa writes in her seminal text Borderlands/La Frontera: The
New Mestiza, “It’s not a comfortable territory to live in, this place of contradictions” (19).
In contemporary society in which even members of the mainstream in the U.S. struggle to
define their culture and can feel alienated by the vastness and divergence of cultural
norms, Chicanos suffer even greater cultural confusion. Both Mexico and the U.S. have
historically refused to recognize Chicano border culture as legitimate. Thus, like other
disenfranchised or bordered groups, Chicanos need binding agents that help foster a sense
of community in the diaspora.

Because in Caramelo Cisneros focuses on family stories that also exemplify the
larger community of the Chicano diaspora, she thereby restores some of the value of
communal experience that Benjamin claims was declining among the predominantly
white male authors at the forefront of literature during his time. Although some of the
prominent modernist writers are concerned with issues of community, in “The
Storyteller,” Benjamin’s concerns about the alienating nature of the novel persist.
According to him, traditional novels center around the perceptions and events
surrounding one individual (87), which are often interpreted by the same individual (first
person), or a singular narrator (third person). By joining the ranks of others who have,
especially in contemporary literature, gone against traditional modes by drawing upon
non-Western modes of thought and writing toward the communal, Cisneros defies the characteristics that Benjamin lays out as novelistic. The family (hi)stories shared in *Caramelo* explore alternative modes of expression, such as multiple narrators, various plotlines and protagonists, and numerous perspectives of the same event. Identity is seen as communal, rather than solitary. There is a connectedness in sharing family narratives characteristic of the storytelling that Benjamin upholds as a feasible means of sharing communal experiences and defying alienation.

Cisneros also goes against tradition in *Caramelo* in that the fictional nature of her historical claims contests the empirical privileging of what Benjamin calls “information,” or news. Benjamin targets the rise of the information age in modern times as another reason for the loss of storytelling. He says, “If the art of storytelling has become rare, the dissemination of information has had a decisive share in this state of affairs” (89). The rise of the novel during the Enlightenment as well as the flourishing of literature ever since proves that the desire for fiction has not decreased. However, the cultural value placed upon stories has shifted because of the general privileging of fact over fiction as a valid means to truth. Because fiction openly decries its nonfactual nature while empirical modes to ascertaining truth rely upon observable fact, society in the wake of Enlightenment rationality has tended to downplay the validity of fiction in the gaining of knowledge. Stories, or fiction in general, remain open to interpretation in a way that extreme rationality despises because it demands a resolute and singular answer to every question. Fiction decidedly rebels against such simplistic modes of thought. It explores truth through the medium of lies.
Harnessing the power of language through stories allows Chicanas who struggle against the culturally silencing burden of *machismo* and *marianismo* the opportunity to signify in the public sphere and not remain confined to domesticity. Cisneros models this with *Caramelo* by taking hold of an authority over family matters already culturally granted to her and using stories about family to speak historically. The female characters in *Caramelo* demonstrate the limitations of traditional gender expectations and a feasible way out of silence through storytelling.

As a nonfactual way of asserting truth, the fictional nature of Cisneros’s stories allows her to circumvent empirical and positivist dead-ends and still make useful historical claims. Anglo dominance over historical accounts of the past eschewed non-Western paradigms as false—an idea that Cisneros refutes by drawing upon her cultural heritage of nonfactual traditions, particularly storytelling. An admittedly fictional view of history directly insults history’s claims to factual correctness. By conflating history and story, showing that in actuality history is story and story history, Cisneros opens up a liberating space for further discussion on historical subjects.

As she tells stories about Mexican and Mexican-American families and communities, Cisneros begins to unite the bordered Chicano diaspora, thus dispelling some of the alienation that many Chicanos feel as residents of the borderlands. She emphasizes the values of *familismo* and *personalismo* by creating a mythology of Chicano popular culture, which calls to mind Roland Barthes’s pop cultural study, *Mythologies*. While telling stories about various family members, Cisneros highlights the pop cultural markers in their lives to which members of the Chicano diaspora can relate, creating a communal sign system. As Chicanos feel more solidarity and unity among
their own community, they can more feel more confident about their position in relation to mainstream discourse, feeling that they belong to a legitimate culture. As the United States becomes increasingly transnational, our national paradigms must readjust to recognize and include marginal voices. As a representative of one of the many previously disenfranchised groups that are slowly becoming empowered, Cisneros’s voice will help us realign our mainstream cultural boundaries to reflect actual cultural demographics in the U.S. Perhaps today the margins are closer to the center than we believe. By entering historical discourse and retelling history from a Chicana vantage point, Cisneros enriches not only her own Chicano community, but American historical and literary studies as a whole.
Chapter 1

Breaking the Tradition of Silence

In the early pages of Caramelo when Sandra Cisneros alternately titles her disclaimer, “I DON’T WANT HER, YOU CAN HAVE HER, SHE’S TOO HOCICONA [loudmouth] FOR ME,” she cleverly signals the cultural context in which she, as a Chicana, writes this book. Old world Mexican cultural tenets, which indisputably saturate Chicano cultural norms, traditionally silence women’s voices and viewpoints, particularly in public discourse. A traditional marianista woman always defers to the men in her life, who are correspondingly imbued with machista models of manhood. Along the broad spectrum of possible real behavioral projections that these two general categories of gender prescription allow, the common thread is a collective cultural privileging of the male over the female. Centuries of this dynamic have placed a common yoke of silence on Chicanas, stereotyping them as “hociconas” [loudmouths] should they step outside of traditional lines and venture to speak. The generational transference of these polarized gender norms makes them particularly difficult to eschew in a culture that centers on family connectedness. The female role models offered to Celaya Reyes (Lala), the young Chicana narrator and protagonist in Caramelo, by her mother, aunt, and grandmother all overtly or subconsciously advocate various tenets of marianismo; it seems that she is destined to repeat the stories of her Chicana predecessors. However, Cisneros presents through Celaya an ingenious way out of the culturally imposed female silence that manipulates the customary family-centered position of Chicanas. Because women are allotted authority within the realm of home and family, speaking in that vein allows Chicanas a space in which to signify; this space can then provide a bridge by which they
can move from the space of domesticity into public discourse. By assuming the role of family storyteller and thereby exposing family secrets and hidden histories, Celaya uses language to break free from the cultural silence imposed on previous generations of Chicanas by *machista* and *marianista* traditions; language becomes the means to cultural and historical empowerment. Because her stories seek out the lives of her ancestors and search the family roots, they enable her to actually strengthen family ties and still gain her autonomy.

In *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza*, Gloria Anzaldúa identifies the longstanding location of the Chicana woman as merely a part of the family unit, rather than an autonomous being. Due in part to the non-Western influence on Chicano culture that causes it to focus on the communal more than the individual well-being—a cultural trait shared by other Latino communities—duty to family surpasses the wants or aims of individuals in Chicano culture, regardless of gender. However, Anzaldúa emphasizes the intensely heightened expectations of self-sacrifice that are placed upon women. She writes, “In my culture, selfishness is condemned, especially in women; humility and selflessness, the absence of selfishness, is considered a virtue” (40). Frankly, most societies would benefit from more of these qualities, since humility, self-sacrifice, and so on seem in remarkably short supply in some corners of contemporary society. The societal danger, which is Anzaldúa’s primary concern as a very nontraditional woman (lesbian Chicana feminist), begins when these characteristics are imposed upon women specifically as the only acceptable manifestations of femininity. When women must bow to the needs of the family in all instances, especially when men are not expected to do the
same, they cannot grow into individual persons. They are not culturally validated. They are silenced.

The pervasive duty to family before self underscores the various tenets of *marianismo*—a conglomeration of traditional feminine ideals in Latino cultures—laid out in *The Maria Paradox* by Gil and Vasquez. They argue that in trying to imitate the Virgin Mary, Latinas have been and continue to be oppressed, especially Latinas living in the U.S. who are trying to negotiate between conflicting cultural messages. On the one hand they see the possibility of entering the public sphere modeled by women in the U.S., yet because they desire to stay close to their Latino roots they often feel unable to step outside *marianista* boundaries. In their self-help styled book, Gil and Vasquez list what they call, the “The Ten Commandments of Marianismo,” each of which details a real life manifestation of the way *marianismo* translates into the real lives of Latinas, denying them autonomy and culturally silencing them. While the authors are candidly displaying only the negative aspects of traditional Latino gender expectations for women and omitting any benefits afforded to women by these cultural norms, their point is well taken. *Marianismo* restricts female identity to becoming a wife and a mother. Most cultures view marriage and motherhood as positive life situations. This may be especially true in Latino (including Chicano) cultures because of the respect and admiration attributed to mothers in particular, which borders on sanctity. The force behind the negativity of Gil and Vasquez’s list does not come from any kind of disdain for marriage

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1. Do not forget a woman’s place. 2. Do not forsake tradition. 3. Do not be single, self-supporting, or independent-minded. 4. Do not put your own needs first. 5. Do not wish for more in life than being a housewife. 6. Do not forget that sex is for making babies—not for pleasure. 7. Do not be unhappy with your man or criticize him for infidelity, gambling, verbal and physical abuse, alcohol or drug abuse. 8. Do not ask for help. 9. Do not discuss personal problems outside the home. 10. Do not change those things which make you unhappy that you can realistically change. (Gil and Vasquez 8)
and motherhood in themselves, but from the fact that Latinas are denied the freedom to
become anything else without being culturally ostracized. This list emphasizes the lack of
self-realization allowed to women when the cultural superstructure confines them to the
private sphere and prohibits them from speaking out against the system. It is difficult for
Chicanas to defy these tenets because they seem to be a fundamental piece of their
cultural identity as Chicanas. Under this set of rules, Chicanas are kept submissive and
quiet.

Under the weight of these long established traditions, Chicanas today still struggle
for autonomy in ways that contemporary Anglo women do not—living alone, for
example. When the editors of *Latina Self-Portraits*, a collection of interviews with
contemporary Latina writers, asked Cisneros to explain the development of her “feminist
consciousness,” she recounted a personal experience when fellow Chicana scholar Norma
Alarcón arrived at Cisneros’s apartment and asked how Cisneros managed to live on her
own. Cisneros pinpoints that moment as the beginning of her feminism. “Because I did
not realize how hard it had been to arrive at that apartment of my own and no one had
understood how hard it was for me until Norma asked, ‘How did you do it?’” (qtd. in
Kevane and Heredia 50). A “good” *marianista* Mexican or Chicana daughter does not
leave home until she marries because she sees her duty to her family as foremost,
attending to her parents and siblings before marriage and to her husband and children
after marriage. To become independent and live alone is seen as offensive to the family,
culturally deviant, and at the very least, unfeminine. In this respect, then, to live on one’s
own is to have defeated great odds.
In *Caramelo*, Celaya faces the same culturally cemented attitudes toward a woman’s self-determination outside these *marianista* strictures when she asks her father about moving out to try living alone someday. He replies:

> 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. You hurt me just talking like this. If you leave alone you leave like, and forgive me for saying this but it’s true, *como una prostituta* [like a prostitute]…. How will you live without your father and brothers to protect you? One must strive to be honorable. (360)

Although the care and protection of women at least partially motivates these *machista* attitudes in someone like Celaya’s father, who wants to protect her from the disdainful opinions of those Chicanas/os who would question her moral standing and femininity, this *machista* mindset also inhibits the absolute acceptance of women as complete and wholly formed human beings. Understandably, Chicanas often feel an inability to signify independently and outside of the family atmosphere. Deeply entrenched gender expectations deny these Chicanas the full identity formation that they crave. How is she to ever become her own person without the constant “protection” of the men in her life?

Despite the many diatribes against *machismo* and the quintessential male oppressors found in the texts of past feminist discussions on the marginalized position of Latinas, the startling fact is that women are the most dominant force in continuing these biased traditions. True, run-ins with overriding male authority similar to the aforementioned conversation between Celaya and her father about her moving out are common enough in the real lives of Chicanas. Still, cultural formation primarily occurs
during childhood and in the home, and in the overwhelming majority of Latino homes, women (usually mothers) contribute a more influential presence than men do. Because they are physically at home with the children more of the time, mothers inculcate more cultural patterns and norms into their children than fathers do. While they most likely teach some lessons purposely, mothers also mold their children by the mere action of daily living, teaching by example. Thus, Chicana mothers tend to both actively and passively reinforce the marianista traditions that were drilled into them at an early age.

Cisneros demonstrates the generational continuity of gender expectations in Caramelo in regard to the sexual freedom allotted to young men and the silencing of young women concerning their own bodies. When Soledad, Celaya’s grandmother, becomes a live-in maid at the Reyes household, the mother of the house turns a blind eye to her “. . . son coming and going into the kitchen at night” (157). Cisneros expresses this tradition of males controlling sex, writing, “Was she not ‘la muchacha’ after all, and was it not part of her job to serve the young man of the house?” (156). Later, Soledad repeats this practice, since her son, Inocencio, fathers an illegitimate child by the washer woman in his home. Marianista women cannot pass on traditions—like female autonomy—that are completely foreign concepts to them. Because both boys and girls are indoctrinated with traditional gender roles from a very early age, they continue to revitalize these traditions in their adult lives, and the cycle continues.

Not only do Chicanas reaffirm marianista tendencies through their own actions and teachings in the home because they are unfamiliar with the alternatives, they also find a culturally validated space as mothers which grants them a degree of authority otherwise denied them. Much like the Virgin who serves as their supreme role model,
women in Mexican and Chicano cultures attain a degree of respect akin to sanctity, as long they play by the rules and become wives and mothers. Because traditional Latinas must act submissively toward the men in their lives, they often become overly authoritative within the domestic sphere, in which they are culturally allowed, and even expected, to take control. Exerting authority in the home serves as a sort of release valve. Gil and Vazquez discuss the tendency for Latina mothers to overly exert their power in the home. They write, “Have you forgotten el poder, the power, of your mother? . . .

Despite her passivity and obedience where men were concerned, Mamá was probably un terror, a holy terror with you, demanding strict compliance with what she felt was correct and expecting you to accept it without talking back” (56). Both of the major mother figures in Caramelo, Soledad (the Awful Grandmother) and Zoila (Celaya’s mother) reflect this overcompensation in the home. Zoila, for example, “shouts good and loud” (364) at Celaya when she accuses her mother of favoring her sons, threatening “two good conks on your head with my chancla [sandal]” (364). Yet, when Zoila’s husband decides to move the family to San Antonio and buys a house there without consulting her, she “. . . is as wild as if she’d won the lottery” (299). She seems surprisingly unbothered by being excluded from a major life decision. These mothers demand complete obedience to their orders in the domestic sphere, yet they paradoxically relegate all of the decision-making power outside of their domain to the men in their lives, mainly their husbands.

In these seemingly incoherent situations, Chicanas embody the complications of trying to emulate the Virgin Mary, an already ambiguous figure. While the Virgin is the silent sufferer, she also exerts great power over the lives of her devotees. It is a complex, perhaps even impossible, role for a real human being to fulfill. Gloria Anzaldúa addresses
the ambivalence of female roles in Chicano culture when she writes, “Through our mothers, the culture gave us mixed messages. . . . Which was it to be—strong, or submissive, rebellious or conforming?” (40). While they want their daughters to succeed, Chicanas feel uncomfortable endorsing behaviors that would belie longstanding gender norms. Sonia Saldívar-Hull, another renowned Chicana feminist, draws upon experiences with her own mother, writing, “As a woman of her own time, a product of unresolved conflicts and ambivalence about her preordained role as a mother and as a woman, she tried to prohibit me to read because to her the physical inactivity of reading signified laziness in a girl” (8). In Saldívar-Hull’s home, as in so many Chicano homes like hers, formal education for females was seen as superfluous; girls needed only to perfect the vocational skills of a housewife. Thus, Chicanas lose the opportunity to develop their capacities in asserting their voices in public discourse. When one is bred to be a wife and mother exclusively in the private sphere of the home and family, it becomes close to impossible to be informed on issues of the public sphere and therefore to contribute to its discourse, should the male-dominated power structures even accept a woman’s view as valid.

One might ask why, in contemporary society in the United States where women arguably have more opportunity than any group of women past or present, it is still a struggle for Chicanas to be revolutionary and branch out from the private sphere to enter public discourse. Have Chicanas not observed the gender revolutions happening around them? Because Latino cultures are so embedded in familismo, stepping out of accepted gender role expectations can be perceived as a rejection of one’s Latina identity and cultural heritage. Younger generations are expected to give respect to their elders and do
as they say. Closeness within not only the nuclear but the extended family as well stands out as one of the most admirable and foundational traits of Latino cultures. Still, these strong bonds can paradoxically subjugate women, imposing limitations that inhibit their personal progression. Chicanas often feel they are faced with the decision to become good *marianistas* and be accepted in their families and communities, or become independent and be rejected by them. As exemplified in the previously cited passage from *Caramelo* when Celaya’s father challenges her desire to move away from home by herself, independent women risk hurting their family members, being seen as pretentious, or having their moral uprightness questioned (like being called a prostitute). Gender patterns are passed on as a major part of the cultural economy, and as such they are extremely hard to escape if one wishes to preserve her Latina identity.

Celaya appears to fit the category of a young Chicana presented with *marianista* role models, both subconsciously and openly forced upon her since birth. Escaping these trends seems nearly impossible, yet somehow Celaya has managed to write this historical family narrative, thus stepping out of traditional female gender roles and entering the public sphere in historical discourse. The most prominent female figures in her life—her mother, Aunty Light-Skin, and the Awful Grandmother—exhibit various *marianista* tenets, matching “The Ten Commandments” referenced above from *The Maria Paradox*.

Cisneros delights in creating non-stereotypical Latina characters and in some respects accomplishes her task with Zoila, Lala’s mother. After all, Celaya’s mother is non-religious, is interested in politics, speaks better English than her husband, and therefore attends to some of the more practical communications in the public sphere. However, even Zoila, as a Chicana of the older generation, fits into the *marianista* mold.
in certain aspects that are not traits inherent in her personality, but manifestations of the times and circumstances in which she lives. I have already discussed her tendency to relegate authority outside of the domestic sphere. In addition, she dedicates herself completely to the role of housewife. Even when the family needs more income, her husband scoffs at the idea of her entering the outside work force, saying, “What! A wife of mine work? Don’t offend me!” (289). Most of the time when she appears in the book, she is cleaning, cooking, or waiting on her husband. In one instance, Celaya comments, “Mother has steak sizzling on one burner, tortillas on another, and on another she’s reheating frijoles for Father’s dinner” (400). She accepts this role as her normal station in life, even though her innate personality seems more independent-minded or even rebellious. Cultural silencing in her identity formation has weighed heavily on her ability to express her true emotions to her loved ones.

Language is a barrier for Zoila because of the marianista values she has been taught, so she often “speaks” through food, a culturally acceptable medium. As one of the main female duties in the home, cooking is an acceptable behavior for a woman in Chicana culture. In some parts of Caramelo, putting feelings into food preparation mediates the articulation of feelings, a connection that recalls Laura Esquivel’s Like Water for Chocolate. Though many Chicanas may be comfortable expressing themselves through language, for some it is problematic, whereas food as a discourse is culturally validated. It allows a woman to express herself without the use of spoken language, which can be perceived as too openly assertive. Zoila’s case may be extreme as she even has difficulty using language to show love or praise. Rather than communicating her feelings to her husband directly, Zoila mumbles to the side, “He works hard” (401), as
she “slices an avocado and chops some cilantro,…tucking the tortillas into a clean dishcloth” (401). The earlier incident of Inocencio’s birthday party proves that Zoila’s behavior is not an isolated incident; Soledad also expresses her love for her son through food preparation for him. “It’s Father’s birthday. All week the Grandmother has been marketing for everything herself…to buy the freshest ingredients for Father’s favorite meal—turkey in the Grandmother’s mole sauce” (47). A lifetime of being culturally validated for domesticity rather than words makes food a comfortable discourse for Mexican and Chicana women. It is not that either of these women are literally silent; on the contrary, they both scold and shout constantly, but when they need to communicate deep personal feelings, they often employ the tools available to them—cooking being one. Cisneros’s use of food as a form of language mirrors her tactic in Caramelo as a whole—asserting a voice through the culturally safe site of the home.

Because Latino families are prone to include close interaction with extended as well as immediate family members, Celaya’s aunts serve as models of femininity for her, especially her Aunty Light-Skin in Mexico. This aunt’s situation illustrates the binding nature of following in the Virgin’s footsteps as a silent sufferer. In the end, her attempts to imitate the Virgin land her paradoxically in the position of a kept woman, basically the whore of the Virgin/whore dichotomy. Aunty Light-Skin tells Celaya that after she discovered that her husband had been cheating on her, she looked to the Virgin for answers. She says, “I even went to la basílica to ask la Virgencita for this strength…. I lit

5 This phenomenon is also referred to as the Ave/Eva duality, based upon the legacies of the two most prominent women in Christianity: the Virgin Mary and Eve. “Ave” refers to the Virgin, who (despite being married to Joseph and bearing children by him) Catholics praise for her eternal virginity, which they equate with purity. “Eva” recalls the first woman Eve, who—in the Catholic paradigm—tempted Adam with her inherent sexual immorality and caused the human race to fall from God’s graces, introducing evil and suffering into the world. This dualistic view of woman translates secularly into contemporary Chicano culture in that women are seen as naturally more pure than men, but with an underlying potential for lasciviousness, so that if a woman transgresses societal rules she immediately becomes a “bad” woman.
a candle and prayed with all my soul, like this, ‘Virgencita, I know he’s my husband, pero me da asco, he disgusts me. Help me to forgive him’” (272). She embodies the marianista admonition against questioning her man about his behavior and asserting her rights to complete fidelity and respect. Even when she forgives him, he leaves anyway, resulting in a constant buzz of gossip among the other women about whether or not they ever were married and about her current relationship with her boss. When she first appears in the novel, Aunty Light-Skin works for Señor Vidaurri, purportedly as a secretary, but she also questionably receives fancy clothes, a weekly allowance for her child, and rides to work with her boss. Her futile attempt to be humble and submissive like the Virgin leads straight to her demise into the realm of a kept woman. There is no feasible way out of the bind. The cultural silence placed upon her obstructs her development into an autonomous person. Instead of being her own person, Aunty Light-Skin passively receives the treatment of the men around her, letting them mold her persona and life circumstances.

The Awful Grandmother assumes the most powerful female presence in Celaya’s consciousness as she writes down the family (hi)stories. The grandmother’s voice becomes close to a second narrator as they have meta-textual conversations—interruptions in the actual storyline in which Celaya and the grandmother pointedly refer to and negotiate about the construction of the text itself. Through this character, Cisneros explores some of the most entrenched cultural gender norms of both machismo and marianismo. For one, Celaya’s grandmother has been relegated to a life of housework and sacrifice for her children, in which she takes great pride. In addition, her story illustrates the sexual quandary that Latinas face. Their overemphasized biological
function as mothers conflicts with expectations that females should forever maintain a virginal state of purity and innocence. Somehow Chicano culture overlooks the same discrepancy in the life of the Virgin Mary, who traditional women are supposed to imitate. Men, on the contrary, are allowed sexual freedom; in fact, machista society often condones male infidelity as a healthy sign of masculinity. Men are allowed, even expected, to be sexual beings while women should merely brook sexual intercourse for the sole purpose of having children.

The Virgin Mary gains much of her authority because she suffers for her children, who are also her followers. In trying to emulate her, Chicanas feel they can only signify by sacrificing all of their own personal needs and fulfilling the needs of their husbands and children. As mentioned earlier, a great part of these marianistas’s toil comes in the form of housework, dedicating oneself to the daily chores necessary in running a household. The Awful Grandmother demonstrates these qualities perfectly. The more she suffers, the more self-worth she feels—an obviously problematic schema. Speaking of the week-long food preparations for her grown son’s birthday party, the grandmother says, “To make food taste really well, you’ve got to labor a little, use the molcajete and grind till your arm hurts, that’s the secret” (54). She feels she will be admired for her suffering, just like the Virgin. Showing how deeply ingrained these traditions are in Celaya’s grandparents, Cisneros creates the following conversation between them:

What do you men know [about cooking]? Why, your own father’s never even entered my kitchen. Isn’t that so, Narciso?

—I don’t even know what colors the walls are, the Grandfather says, chuckling (54).
Because she has been denied a societal role outside of her home, she thrives on the authority that she gains as the *ama de casa* [boss of the house]. The kitchen is her designated space. She takes possession of it willingly as one of the few areas in which she can exist independently, and her husband willingly relegates it to her because strict *machismo* classifies an interest in domesticity as effeminate. Both Narciso’s *machista* attitudes and Soledad’s personal formation as a *marianista* took root in her life at an early age. As the servant girl in Regina’s household, Soledad learned her place in Narciso’s life. Although her actual servant status may be an extreme case, she represents the traditional primary duties of Mexican women in domestic chores. As a wife and mother these duties govern her life, and therefore she clings to them in order to gain the respect her culture affords her in that role. Being a mother is being somebody. Indeed, Cisneros writes, “Men no longer looked at her, society no longer gave her much importance after her role of mothering was over” (347). For this reason, she obsessively continues to sacrifice for her sons, especially Lala’s father who is the eldest, even into her old age. She is grasping at the last straws of what has been her identity.

Cisneros subtly plants the seeds of gender insurrection in Celaya’s character by making her inept at all but the simplest household tasks, thereby constructing her as a misfit in her culturally designated role. When Celaya gets a job at her Catholic school, she has to quit because she cannot satisfactorily perform the domestic services for the priests which she is assigned. She has to go and explain to them, “How my mother says I’m no good for anything in the kitchen unless it’s burning rice. How I can’t even iron my own clothes without scorching them. How I need strict supervision anytime I sew anything. . . . I’m not meant for the kitchen even though I’m an only daughter” (322).
Even though she has been trained by her female relatives to see that housework is an inherent part of womanhood, Lala feels inadequate in that aspect. By refusing to perform these duties as a formal job, she begins to reject the marianista patterns that would limit her possibilities to be more than a housewife.

Not only are Chicanas entrapped by the external duties of domesticity, they are often biologically enslaved as mothers at an early age because of the conflicting sexual messages given to women in Latino cultures. Again, this point is exemplified perfectly in the life of the Awful Grandmother. As she reaches pubescence, she notices people begin to tell her to take care of herself, but she does not understand that they are tacitly advising her to abstain sexually. “But they meant to take care of yourself down there. Wasn’t society strange? They demanded you not to become . . . but they didn’t tell you how not to” (153). Because it is a cultural taboo, no one speaks to girls about their sexual function. Talking to them about sex might ignite their underlying libidinous natures, turning them into whores who actually enjoy sex rather than only tolerating it. Sadly, because of the sexual double standard between men and women, a woman’s sexual education often comes too late. Sandra Cisneros discusses this problem in her essay, “Guadalupe the Sex Goddess,” in which she calls her culture, “a culture of denial” (48). She describes the unfair sexual roles in the following excerpt:

This is why I was angry for so many years every time I saw la Virgen de Guadalupe, my culture’s role model for brown women like me. She was damn dangerous, an ideal so lofty and unrealistic is was laughable…. [The boys] were fornicating like rabbits while the Church ignored them and
pointed us women toward our destiny—marriage and motherhood. The other alternative was *puta*hood [whore-hood]. (48)

The cultural silence imposed upon women regarding their sexuality encourages the virgin/whore dichotomy. There are only black and white options for Chicanas: remain pure by being asexual beings until marriage and maintain even after marriage that sex is only to be used for procreation, or be considered a whore. In *Caramelo*, Soledad becomes pregnant before she ever realizes she has done anything forbidden. Because she is the servant girl, Narciso’s parents turn a blind eye, and in a sense condone his sexual interactions with Soledad. As noted earlier, she is there to serve him in all capacities. He is expected to act upon his sexual desires to fulfill a *machista* stereotype, while she is expected to remain sexually pure despite the complete lack of education given her on the subject or any semblance of protection from Narciso’s sexual advances. Soledad becomes pregnant as an adolescent, leading her directly to the role of motherhood without the chance to complete her own identity formation. Before she can reflect upon her own upbringing in a mature way, she is forced into raising children and teaching them cultural norms.

Celaya nearly falls into the same sexual pattern as her grandmother late in the book, but a few minor societal changes redirect her path, mostly the sexual openness of some of the characters who influence Celaya’s adolescent life. Sex becomes a topic that the nuns discuss at school, although expectedly in an erroneous and reticent manner. Celaya’s real sexual education comes from her older, sexually active friend, Viva. Although she perhaps falls into the category of “whore,” in the end Viva manages to avoid early marriage and pregnancy by pursuing further education. At least Celaya has a
rudimentary knowledge of sex before she engages in it; however, she still comes
dangerously close to repeating the mistakes of her grandmother—engaging in
unprotected sex at a young age because she thinks she is in love. After the escapade in
Mexico with her boyfriend ends, her now dead grandmother appears to her and says,
“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 your body, but wait till you’re old enough to
love yourself first. How do you know what love is? You’re still just a child” (406).
Because people in Celaya’s life talk to her about her sexuality, she is free to make
choices for herself about the future she wants. Rather than discussing sex as merely a
physical sensation which is wrong for women to partake of, the Grandmother addresses
the emotional and spiritual nature of sexuality that necessitates maturity on the part of
those who engage in intercourse. She breaks with machista and marianista tradition in
that she does not condemn sex as bad. Instead, she qualifies it as good under the right
conditions, thus enabling women to talk about their sexuality and understand it more
fully. Breaking the traditional cultural silence about female sexuality gives Celaya the
option to become something other than a wife and mother should she choose to do so.

The most poignant evidence that Celaya has broken the silencing patterns of
previous Chicana women comes in the last few pages of the book. Her father,
representing masculinist societal norms, admonishes her to keep quiet about family
matters. As mentioned in the list of marianista tenets by Gil and Vasquez, women are not
to discuss family problems outside the home. “Only you have heard these stories,
daughter, understand? . . . To mention them makes our family look like sinvergüenzas,
understand? You don’t want people to think we’re shameless, do you? Promise your papa
you won’t ever talk these things, Lalita. Ever. Promise” (430). This passage ironically appears on the very last page, after she has just revealed all of the family (hi)story by narrating this book—indeed, we already know she has broken her promise, and we know why she did it. Becoming the family storyteller allows her to overcome the cultural pressure to remain silent and submissive. By revealing family secrets, Celaya frees herself from marianista and machista traditions that would confine her to a life of domesticity in the private sphere and negate her voice in the public sphere. Telling the stories alone may not effectuate all of the necessary changes for her to reach complete autonomy, but it is a step in the right direction, a necessary break with the tradition of silence. Delving into her family’s (hi)story may actually prove to strengthen her ties to her family. Thus, her choice to speak out using the family as her subject may allow her to assert her voice without separating herself from the familial bonds that are essential to her cultural identity.

The inherited marianista and machista attitudes exemplified in Caramelo, as well as others not mentioned here, have created a pervasive atmosphere of silence for Chicanas today. Exceptions abound, and I do not suggest that there are no autonomous, assertive women in the contemporary Chicana world. Rather, my purpose is to pinpoint the historical trend toward Chicana silence as it appears in Caramelo and to identify language as a remedy that allows Celaya to overcome cultural silence, as perhaps it could for the many Chicanas who do indeed feel that their voice is barred by gender roles and inherited biases. When Gloria Anzaldúa declares, “Language is a male discourse” (76), her intention is not to prohibit women from speaking. This section of Borderlands: La Frontera is in fact titled, “Overcoming the Tradition of Silence.” Referring to the
slanderous words applied to the women of her culture who transgress the bounds of imposed silence, she writes, “Hocicona, repelona, chismosa, having a big mouth, questioning, carrying tales are all signs of being mal criada [poorly raised]. In my culture they are all words that are derogatory if applied to women—I’ve never hear them applied to men” (76). While men enjoy the freedom to speak about what and whom they will, even in public, female discourse has been restricted in many situations to the private sphere of home and family. Celaya’s father leaks many of the taboo family stories to her, but hypocritically forbids her from speaking of them herself.

In the home Chicanas gain a distinctive type of authority, and it is this unique space that Cisneros has learned to manipulate. With their allotted authority in the domestic space, Chicanas can utilize their respected expertise with regard to home and family to begin to speak in areas outside of that realm, such as history. Speaking about the authors she examines in her book, which include both Sandra Cisneros and Gloria Anzaldúa, Sonia Saldívar-Hull notes that they, “investigate domestic and other female spaces as they seek additional sources of history. . . . These women . . . discovered alternative archives in the gossip and rumors for which Chicanas are criticized and through which they are silenced; in the lacunae of family stories . . .” (25). While history’s narrative connection to story facilitates this connection, Chicanas are uniquely qualified to contribute to historical discourse because of their authoritative role within the family. As the member of the family most affiliated with the day-to-day affairs of the home, women are the logical choice to tell family stories. They are given charge of the family as their cultural role.
Cisneros has discussed the empowering nature of storytelling with regard to her own writing. In her interview in *Latina Self-Portraits*, she states, “I realize that a story has the power to quiet a listener, and I develop that. Sometimes it’s an anecdote, but it has to have the power to make people listen” (qtd. in Kevane and Heredia 48). Telling stories reverses the role of Chicanas as listeners of others’ opinions and demands, and puts them in the role of speakers who command attention. By combining storytelling with the site of the family, Cisneros creates a space in which Chicanas, including herself, can speak authoritatively. Cisneros typically bases her literary material in the private sphere and has enjoyed worldwide attention in doing so. She comments, “It seems crazy, but until Iowa [and the Writers’ Workshop] I had never felt my home, family, and neighborhood unique or worthy of writing about” (“Writer’s Notebook” 72). It is this loophole—using the authority over the domestic sphere which marianista and machista tradition readily gives to ironically break the cultural silencing of women which the same traditions have caused—that Cisneros highlights and explores with her narrator, Celaya. Celaya can escape the silencing of marianismo by utilizing the language available to her in family stories. Despite the generational pattern that her female role models have followed, Celaya is able to safeguard the acceptance from others of her culture and assert her own voice in history at the same time. She refuses to submit to the pressures that would quiet her female voice. Instead, she becomes the family storyteller. By bringing all of these traditions to light, she is able to trace back their roots, actually strengthening the family bond without becoming a marianista. Only when problems are understood can they be remedied. Thus, only by exposing the female oppression in her family through
the stories she has been forbidden to tell, can Celaya, along with Cisneros, find her way to empowerment.
Chapter 2

Seeing History through Story

Sandra Cisneros initially reveals her tongue-in-cheek attitude toward “official” historical claims—a sentiment that becomes a prominent issue in *Caramelo*—with the alternate title of her book: *Puro Cuento*. Loosely translated into English, this title would be, *Nothing But Story*. By emphasizing the fictional nature of her work, she belies the powerful historical statements that run parallel to the family stories she tells. Obviously, as a Chicana feminist, Cisneros does not wish to repeat the grand historical narratives constructed and propagated by the dominant, patriarchal white male power structures of the past, and thus in *Caramelo*, she presents significant historical moments from the viewpoint of a Chicana “other.” However, she must also avoid replicating epistemological modes rooted in empiricism if she is to successfully revise the history of her culture and people; otherwise, she risks slipping into the same patterns of privileging one historical voice as “true,” while discounting all others. When some empowered Enlightenment thinkers (Hume, Gibbon, and others) molded historical discourse to fit into scientific, empirical modes, they foolishly attempted to eradicate the inherent narrative qualities of history (note the embedded word “story”). As Shari Stone-Mediatore argues in her book about storytelling, “Empiricist social scientists dismiss narration as a ‘contaminant’ of knowledge proper” (4). Of course, the elimination of narrative was impossible, since as Cisneros points out in the disclaimer to *Caramelo*, “After all and everything, only the story is remembered.” When the stories stop being told, history ceases to exist. Because Latin American societies more readily subscribe to spiritual or metaphysical views of reality, which Anglo society has a tendency to
categorize as less valid because they are not self-proclaimed “fact,” Latino cultures (including Chicano) are more likely to preserve the innate connection between history and story. Cisneros draws upon her own unempirical cultural traditions of storytelling to get at truth by celebrating the ambiguities of fiction. Fiction is a border crosser, much like Cisneros and others of the Chicano diaspora; it resides somewhere between reality and imagination, which allows it to assert truth without occluding alternate voices. In his essay, “The Storyteller,” Walter Benjamin cites one of the downfalls of modernity as the eclipsing of meaningful interpretation by the desire for information, which halts further discussion. By drawing upon Chicano storytelling traditions and retelling Mexican and Mexican-American history through the conduit of fiction, Cisneros circumvents the positivist dead ends of the privileged historical account—what Benjamin calls “information”—and creates a space that celebrates ambiguity, presents new ways of looking at history, and allows for the furthering of historical discussion.

When the Enlightenment philosophers of the eighteenth century transformed Western civilization by recognizing only observable reality as valid evidence of truth⁶, they alienated nonscientific modes of thought, including narrative history. In her book Reading Across Borders: Storytelling and Knowledges of Resistance, Shari Stone-Mediatore notes that “the opposition between story and truth is rooted in Enlightenment epistemology which presumes the task of knowledge to be the representation of objects and thus the proper function of language to be denotation” (5). The proverbial schism between fact and fiction deepened, or perhaps even originated, with the rise of empiricism as the only reliable means to knowledge. Most dangerously, however, one

⁶ In Francis Bacon’s essay, “The New Science,” he posits that, “Man, being the servant and interpreter of Nature, can do and understand so much and so much only as he has observed in fact or in thought of the course of nature: beyond this he neither knows anything nor can do anything” (39).
strain of the Enlightenment resulted in empiricists constructing a self-sustained system of assessing truth that fails to admit alternatives modes of thinking, thus blinding society at large to anything but the already accepted truths within the existing epistemological framework. From the late eighteenth century into the early nineteenth century, positivism emerged out of previous Enlightenment philosophies through thinkers like Auguste Comte. Positivistism, as explained in the twentieth century by Herbert Marcuse, continually narrows its focus because it builds only upon “proven” fact, seeks to disprove the metaphysical, and forces the natural sciences onto social issues. The positivist mindset sterilized historical discourse, which centers on non-quantifiable human experiences, so that rather than conveying the nuances and ambiguities involved in real life experiences, which stories often succeed at capturing, history became formulaic and univocal. Positivist thinking would propose the existence of one “true” historical account, which scientific study should be able to determine. History became saturated with dates and statistics, and the preferred version of “what really happened” according to the centralized societal powers (these same empirical thinkers), became stagnant and reified. Marginalized voices were hushed and dismissed as untrue—since only one truth could exist—or were at best considered ancillary side notes.

Walter Benjamin, along with other members of the Frankfurt School, was concerned with the silencing of marginalized groups caused by positivist ideologies. Because he lived with the constant threat of fascism as a Jewish intellectual in early twentieth century Europe and was highly influenced by Marxism, Benjamin pushed for the democratization of culture. He completely opposed the tendency of the dominant power structure to hold a monopoly on social and historical discourse and recognized the
dangers of positivist thought with its propensity toward a single-minded view of the
world at the expense of all other alternatives. In Thesis VI of his “Theses on the
Philosophies of History,” Benjamin discusses the dangers of culture “becoming a tool of
the ruling classes,” and admonishes, “Every age must strive anew to wrest tradition away
from the conformism that is working to overpower it” (255). Benjamin saw the disastrous
societal consequences of privileging a single mode of thinking. As Michael Löwy points
out in his study on Benjamin’s theses, Benjamin was “radically opposed to the
evolutionist and positivistic brand of ‘scientific socialism’” (208). Forcing history into
the mold of a “social science” during and after the Enlightenment had already led to
social dangers in Benjamin’s own fascist-ridden era; he therefore called for historicists to
“brush history against the grain” (257) in his Thesis VII, warning against “empathizing
with the victor” (256). The dominant societal group, especially an ideology-driven
authoritarian group (like the Nazis), will always dictate their own history, disallowing
dissension or any subversive thoughts whatsoever to enter their constructed narrative.
Thus, the “history” to which Benjamin refers must be questioned and challenged, even
refuted. Alternative accounts must be brought to light; otherwise, the buried truths will be
lost, and the voice of the marginalized “other” will never be heard. Although not in the
exact words, Benjamin is championing the side of the “colonized” or “the defeated,”
(208) as Löwy calls them. In reflecting upon Benjaminian philosophy, therefore, all
marginalized groups can stand firm with this viewpoint. Only by allowing, even
promoting, the historical accounts of “other,” subaltern voices can historical discourse
safely exist for the benefit and progress of free society. Cisneros uses stories to “brush
history against the grain” and present the long ignored Chicano perspective on Mexican
and Mexican-American historical events in the United States. She uses fiction to retell
history from an-“other” perspective that has not been able to enter historical discourse by
means of exclusionary positivist thought.

The biggest blind spot in positivistic historical discourse is the perseverance of
narrative within the supposedly factual system. The grand historical narratives passed on
as hard truth are still narratives, or stories. As Cisneros writes, “It depends on whose truth
you’re talking about. The same story becomes a different story depending on who is
telling it” (156). Even the privileged version of history is a chosen series of events
strategically placed together to convey a specific message by emphasizing some parts and
downplaying others to achieve the desired effect. No matter how objective a historian
tries to be, myriad factors influence the construction of historical texts. One of the most
prominent historians of the eighteenth century, Edward Gibbon, suggests that, “The duty
of a historian does not call upon him to interpose his private judgment. . .” (150).
However, these types of interpretations are inevitable when writing history. While
professional historians today openly recognize this aspect of their work, the general U.S.
population still conceptually perceives history as sound and reliable fact. Cisneros closes
this persisting imagined gap between history and fiction by conflating the two in
Caramelo. She shows how history engenders story and vice versa while in the process
poking fun at the pretensions of the empirical view of history as a social science. The
most obvious manifestation of her jeering takes place within the footnotes she adds to
many chapters of the novel. Adopting the form of footnotes usually connotes added
information or further explanation of background that will clarify the claims made in the
main text; these are usually the “actual” and more esoteric facts behind the cursory
information of the text. Even in fictional works, footnotes tend to step out of the story to
give information that exists independently of the text. But in Caramelo, the footnotes are
a mix of what might be fact or could just be additional invented fiction. Even in the
“Chronology” section at the end of the book, Cisneros includes opinion-based, subjective
entries and mixes them with traditional objective entries that merely document the
passing of laws, dates of birth, and other statistical information. She shows how history is
derived from story, claiming such events as Betsy Ross being approached to make the
U.S. flag as “nothing but a story invented by Ross’s descendents a hundred years after
her death” (435). Conversely, she demonstrates the actual events around which stories
have been formed, such as the 1921 entry that states, “November 14, a bomb is planted in
la Virgen de Guadalupe’s basilica in Mexico City, but, miraculously, the tilma [cloth
with her image on it] is unscathed” (426). The miraculous, seemingly fantastical, legends
surrounding the image of the Virgin stem from historical events. Cisneros embraces the
idea that life is often more “imaginary” than fiction and uses it to underscore the
connection between fiction and history, which are oftentimes indistinguishable.

Sometimes real life and history is fantastic, but nonetheless true. Positivist thought would
eliminate those events as impossibilities in their scientific theorizations. By excluding
more metaphysical and spiritual aspects of life, positivist thinkers ironically become the
makers of narratives. They construct their own story.

By heralding rather than shunning the narrative aspect of history, one can not only
see past the inherited false distinction between history and story, but augment the impact
of history on societal progress. According to Stone-Mediatore, restoring narrativity to
historical discourse “challeng[es] us to rethink history in terms of the personal, the
emotional, and the bodily elements that have been excluded from history proper,” and also “respond[s] to the inchoate, contradictory, unpredictable aspects of historical experience and can thereby destabilize ossified truths and foster critical inquiry into the uncertainties and complexities of historical life” (9). Telling stories, rather than reporting “what really happened,” becomes a powerful tool in actually enhancing the accuracy, validity, and truth-value of historical discourse. If history is to document the real lives of people, it must go further than reporting facts and statistics because these are not the heart of the human experience. Stories can do more than just report, they explain our passions and desires, our worldviews.

Walter Benjamin laments the decline of the power of storytelling, a fictional form, as the increased demand for “information”—his term for what is essentially the positivist brand of “factual” knowledge. In “The Storyteller,” he writes, “Information . . . lays claim to prompt verifiability. The prime requirement is that it appear ‘understandable in itself’” (89). This description is uncannily reminiscent of the evidence required by the positivist thinkers who constructed the grand historical narratives accepted by mainstream society today. Their “facts” are provable within their own self-contained system, but remain stagnant there, unable to interact with truly revolutionary ideas. Benjamin recognizes the ways that this mode of ascertaining truth actually impoverishes society. He says, “Every morning brings us the news of the globe, and yet we are poor in noteworthy stories. This is because no event any longer comes to us without already being shot through with explanation” (89). Empirically based historical narratives tell the public what to think rather than letting them interpret the stories for themselves and come to their own conclusions.
Sandra Cisneros is a self-proclaimed storyteller, feeding off of her own Chicano cultural traditions which have grown out of Mexican culture and its long-standing oral traditions. The link between history and story remains intact in Latino cultures, as demonstrated linguistically by the Spanish word historia, which can mean “history” in the traditional Anglo sense but can also refer to a fictional story. In Mexican and Chicano cultures stories perform a positive societal function, but this cultural practice can be interpreted pejoratively by outsiders who fail to understand it. As Cisneros herself explains in Latina Self-Portraits, “I see so many things in the Mexican way of storytelling. It’s a way of being nice to you even if it is a lie. . . . The Mexicans are cuentistas [storytellers]! They don’t do this to deceive you or tell you bullshit. They do this because they want to give you a gift, a flower of a story” (qtd. in Kevane and Heredia 55). Stories are prized in Mexican and Chicano culture. They signify as a part of personalismo, a way of relating easily to others—even strangers—and treating them warmly.

The cultural acceptance of stories in Mexican and Chicano cultures also catalyzes their viability as a means to truth. Stories represent just one of the many ways in which Latino cultures veer away from the empirical exclusion of anything but fact as valid—a mode of thought which usually dominates others in U.S. mainstream culture—and tend toward spiritual or unexplainable explications of history. Dreams, visions, visitations from the dead, among other mystical events are all generally accepted occurrences, and therefore, fanciful tales become more believable as well. Latino cultures’ interpretations of Catholicism tend toward the miraculous, which at least partially accounts for their credulity of the fantastical. While Anglos generally demand hard proof that a story is
true, Chicanos often accept a story’s claims on faith until they can be proved false. For Chicanos, who are a marginalized group living their own culture within the constructs of the more dominant Anglo culture, these differences can cause daily conflict with the bureaucratic and rationalistic aspects of U.S. mainstream society.

Mexican and Chicano cultures’ high estimation of the value of stories appears in *Caramelo* when immigration officers stop at Celaya’s father Inocencio’s upholstery shop, demanding to see proof of his legal status. Although he is legal because of past military service, he does not have his documents with him at the store, and so he attempts to “prove” it to them by telling the officers stories from his experiences in World War II. While frantically searching for his papers at home, Inocencio recounts his experience to his family. “What do you think la Migra said then? ‘We don’t need stories, we need papers.’ Can you believe it!” (375). His shock at their insistence on physical evidence illustrates the cultural differences in accepted epistemological methods. To him, the stories he told should have been enough to warrant the officers’ belief in his legal status, but they were not. Centuries of the same cultural rift between empirical versus nonmaterial means of getting at truth have resulted in the dismissal of Chicano accounts of history in the United States. The “official” historical account has required “fact,” even though these facts are largely impossible to prove. It is this notion that Cisneros refutes and ridicules by conflating historical and fictional accounts and preserving Mexican modes of storytelling as she asserts historical truths in *Caramelo*.

Cisneros more flagrantly rebels against the empirical version of history and its univocal privileged account by injecting traditional Mexican storytelling forms and linguistic constructs into her contemporary novel. The translation of this language from
Spanish to English only heightens its power; it becomes Chicano in a sense, a hybrid cultural creation, while also gaining efficacy by speaking the language of mainstream Anglo culture. The first chapter of the section in which Celaya is telling her grandmother’s story, the section through which Cisneros retells Mexican and Mexican-American history most densely, is titled “So Here My History Begins for Your Good Understanding and My Poor Telling” (91). Only near the end of the book, when we learn that Celaya has been commissioned to tell these stories by the grandmother herself, do we find out that this is the way “the [Mexican] storytellers always began a story” (409). Members of Mexican or Chicano culture, or those very familiar with it, would probably have already recognized this cultural marker. In other chapter titles as well, Cisneros hearkens back to culturally familiar dichos, or sayings. Because she writes them primarily in English, only bilingual readers (which includes many Chicanos) will notice the cultural ties. She calls one chapter “God Squeezes,” (118) a phrase spliced from the traditional Spanish dicho, Dios apreta pero no ahorca [God squeezes but he doesn’t choke]. Similar references appear regularly throughout the novel. Cisneros uses these and other traditional language forms to decenter the conventional Anglo reader. Most Anglos, as a part of the dominant culture, normally affiliate easily with empowered teller of history. However, by realizing that Cisneros’s account does not share their own cultural paradigm, they are forced to re-evaluate their nonchalant acceptance of the grand historical narrative with which they are familiar. It adds to her overall tone of historical resistance by forcing the reader to view from an outsider’s perspective, interchanging the normal locations of the center and the margins. By adopting storytelling forms which marginalized Chicano readers will connect with but which members of the dominant
Anglo culture will find slightly alienating, Cisneros reasserts her position against the
grand historical narratives which have obfuscated her culture’s contributions to historical
discourse in the past.

With several key passages in *Caramelo*, Cisneros challenges mainstream
historical thought both by bringing unknown events to light and showing well-known
accounts from a Chicana perspective as these situations arise in the lives of her fictional
characters. Because her retellings of history often conflict with the accepted narratives of
both Anglos and Mexican-Americans in the United States, they illustrate a subaltern view
of history, a look from the perspective of the powerless, which answers Benjamin’s call
to “brush against the grain of history.” Relevant examples of this type of historical
radicalism within *Caramelo* include reassessed accounts of the Texas Rangers and the
Mexican Revolution, as well as relatively unknown, historically silenced events such as
the death of the Child Heroes of Chapultepec and the U.S. military’s search for Pancho
Villa. Each of these examples particularly informs the Chicano experience and infringes
upon accepted mainstream historical narratives.

Even today in Texas, many Anglos remember the Texas Rangers with typical
Texan pride, as a type of cultural state heroes (or one might even say national heroes
since many Anglo Texans seem to emotionally disregard the end of the ten-year Republic
of Texas). They see the Rangers as bold law enforcers in the lawless days of the old
West. However, Cisneros takes initiative in the midst of her story to reveal the Chicano
perspective of the situation in Texas, which vastly contradicts the nostalgic Anglo view.
She limits her reference to the Texas rangers in the actual storyline to a mere mention by
one of Narciso’s uncles that he was glad he never moved to Texas or he might have been
deported by them. But, in a footnote at the end of the chapter Cisneros writes, “In 1915 more than half of the Mexican-American population emigrated from the Valley of Texas into war-torn Mexico fleeing the Texas rangers, rural police ordered to suppress an armed rebellion of Mexican Americans protesting Anglo-American authority in South Texas” (142). Even though this land was still Mexican territory at the time, Anglo history has omitted the fraudulent authority of the Rangers and the atrocities they committed, including what Cisneros calls “the death of hundreds, some say thousands, of Mexicans and Mexican Americans, who were executed without trial” (142). The story of Caramelo, then, helps bring to the public eye the possibility that the real land thieves were the Anglos and their Rangers, not the unruly Mexicans of the Old West of the popular imagination. By jarring the nostalgic view of the Texas Rangers, Cisneros induces her mainstream (even Anglo Texan) readers to rethink their passive credence of the accepted historical narrative of the American settlement of the West as noble and right. Furthermore, by legitimating the position of Mexicans during this time in history, Cisneros establishes a rooted past for Chicanos in what is now and was then becoming the United States; for a people who often feel disenfranchised on both sides of the border, this assertion provides a source of Chicano heritage and identity. Cisneros later revisits this point through the character of Celaya’s high school friend, Viva, who has never been to Mexico, even though she is culturally considered Mexican. Viva explains, “My family’s from here. . . . Since before this was Texas. We’re been here seven generations” (328). By spotlighting the Chicano presence in Texas since it was Mexico, Cisneros reasserts Chicanos’ rights to a homeland and thus presents a fresh way of seeing history
that allows us to rethink contemporary cultural and national boundaries and border politics.

Because many Chicanos feel disinherited by Mexico as well as the U.S., the Chicano historical voice often differs from accepted Mexican historical accounts. The Chicano view of history has been almost completely ignored on both sides of the border because Chicanos reside culturally in the ignored liminal space between the two nations. Thus, Cisneros can add new perspectives to Mexican historical narratives as well. In retrospect or from a safe distance, war tends to be glorified, and the Mexican Revolution is no exception. It is easy for people of Mexican heritage to take national pride in the grand heroes of the Revolution—figures such as Emiliano Zapata and Pancho Villa—and to look back on their cause as noble and worthwhile. Chicanos that are disenfranchised from Mexico, a nation not completely their own, are less prone to the nationalistic sentiments that induce a blind nostalgia concerning the Revolution. Wars receive a great deal of attention in the grand historical narratives, yet war is always brutally violent, messy, and unwanted by many of the anonymous individuals actually involved in the day-to-day struggles of battle. Cisneros shows the underside of war, the untold drudgery that was the Mexican Revolution, “the million citizens of Mexico City [who] found themselves caught in the crossfire” (126), from a Chicana perspective.

Cisneros shows war without glorifying it through a fictional description of Narciso’s military service. He feels less than heroic as he is given the duty of burying the corpses that have been strewn throughout Mexico City during the Ten Tragic Days of the Mexican Revolution. There is little or no ceremony, only disgust at the stench of the dead and a nagging longing to go home; through Narciso’s thoughts, Cisneros shows the
senselessness of war. She describes “…the children lying in the streets as if they’d fallen asleep there, the old women and young mothers, the shopkeepers who should not have been caught in this business. What was happening to the country?” (128-29). Even though it is admittedly fictional, Cisneros’s depiction of the Mexican Revolution might be more true to the way those involved really experienced it—foul stenches in the air, needless violence, and the feeling of just wanting to escape and run home, as Narciso does—than the aggrandized versions of the Mexican Revolution and its heroes. By any account, it can claim just as much credibility and adds another dimension—one more geared toward the personal and domestic realm—to the spectrum of different viewpoints about the Mexican Revolution. The “war wound” which Narciso carries throughout his life actually comes from the susto [extreme fright] that he gets when he is about to be shot as he is fleeing his war duties for home. What is often considered heroic in hindsight is in actuality rooted in the banal, undesirable details which history chooses to ignore, but which are perhaps more relevant to human experience than accounts of victorious battles and brave generals. Seeing the Mexican Revolution from Cisneros’s alternative perspective helps us re-examine the inherited historical lies and take a fresh look at the past, proving that fiction can claim just as much stake on truth as the “facts” of history.

In addition to ignoring marginal perspectives of historical situations, mainstream historians have erased some events altogether by deeming them unimportant. Events that are typically left out of the annals of history tellingly include those that cast the dominant society—in this case Anglo-American culture—in a less favorable light. The accounts of the child heroes of Chapultepec and the U.S. search for Pancho Villa both fit this category; Anglo dominated official history hates to recognize the mistakes of the United
States because it questions our national ideals and identity. For marginalized individuals like Chicanos, who often experience derision and unfair treatment in and from the United States’ bureaucratic systems, showing exactly what the United States has done in Mexico is not only fair but necessary. History should fairly treat all historical acts without regard to the safeguarding of one nation’s pride or reputation. By introducing “the ‘child heroes’ of Chapultepec, young military cadets who threw themselves off the ramparts of this Mexico City castle rather than surrender to the advancing American troops in 1847” (125), Cisneros brings them into public discourse in the United States, even though their martyrdom signifies defiance against U.S. imperialism during the Mexican-American War. The history books rarely speak of U.S. military involvement in other nations, particularly Latin American nations that have experienced it the most, unless it lauds the U.S. as the benevolent big brother nation spreading freedom across the world. The U.S. is supposed to defend and protect others, not invade their nations in an attempt to take their land from them. Writing about young Mexican soldiers who killed themselves rather than surrendering to invading U.S. troops paints America as a fearsome and tyrannical nation.

Cisneros strengthens her depiction of the United States as a self-interested superpower by highlighting similar military invasions in the early twentieth century, with the Marines entering Mexico in 1914 and “once again in 1916” (125). She continues to emphasize the self-serving nature of U.S. politics by bringing to light the details of Woodrow Wilson’s 1914 invasion of Mexico and consequent search for Pancho Villa. Even though the U.S. had once tried “to bring about the destruction of General Huerta’s government by encouraging the selling of American arms to northern revolutionaries like Pancho Villa” (135), after Pancho Villa killed eighteen Americans in retribution for the
hundreds of civilian casualties caused by U.S. troops in Mexico, President Wilson funded a search for the Mexican rebel. The average U.S. citizen knows nothing about this search, probably because as Cisneros points out, “…Villa and his men eluded them to the end. Wilson withdrew the forces in January of 1917, $130 million later” (136). In their construction of the grand historical narratives surrounding U.S. involvement with Mexico, so-called “textbook” history overlooks the more embarrassing facts and hones in on only those events that favor the centralized power of Anglo culture and the United States government. Cisneros brushes against the grain of history by resurrecting historical narratives through her fiction that were long since buried by those who constructed the official historical accounts. As mainstream readers reconsider history from a Chicana perspective, they can see that the historical narrative to which they subscribe is riddled with holes. They begin to second guess the “facts” of empiricist history and are urged to uncover alternate versions, thus allowing historical discourse to progress rather than become stagnant.

Sandra Cisneros succeeds in her efforts to retell history, not because she asserts her version as right and the privileged narrative as wrong; this practice would only repeat the mistakes made by empirical historians of the past by replicating their dualistic mindset. Because their philosophies limited truth to a single, “factual” account of past events, Enlightenment historical thinkers and their successors, who subscribed to the same epistemological modes, created a binary of “true-false” that they basically equated to “fact-fiction.” If one version was true, all other versions and perspectives had to be false. To be truly revolutionary, one must first leave behind these modes of dualistic thought. As Gloria Anzaldúa writes, “A massive uprooting of dualistic thinking in the
individual and collective consciousness is the beginning of a long struggle . . .” (102). In order to truly defy the positivist inheritance that still influences historical discourse today, Cisneros must not only speak contrary to what has been said before, she must also abandon the empirical modes used to get at historical truth in the past. Anzaldúa also says that “it is not enough to stand on the opposite river bank, shouting questions, challenging patriarchal, white conventions. A counterstance locks one into a duel of oppressor and oppressed” (100). If Cisneros had merely rewritten history from her own Chicana perspective and claimed it as “what really happened,” she would run the risk of becoming the oppressor herself, one who silences other viewpoints as unworthy and invalid. She would also halt the continuance of historical discourse because monopolizing the truth leaves no room or need for further discussion of the topic.

Rather than staking a sole claim on historical truth, Cisneros celebrates the ambiguity of fiction as a non-exclusionary way to arrive at truth. As a member of a border culture, Cisneros is comfortable with ambivalence; she is both Mexican and American, and in some ways neither one. She can cross cultural borders because she fits into both cultures albeit in different ways, yet she is not totally accepted by either of her cultures. As another Chicana feminist who shares an interest in many of the same issues as Cisneros, Anzaldúa makes the following statement on the importance of ambiguity for Chicanas:

The new mestiza copes by developing a tolerance for contradictions, a tolerance for ambiguity. . . . She has a plural personality, she operates in pluralistic mode—nothing is thrust out, the good the bad and the ugly,
nothing rejected, nothing abandoned. Not only does she sustain contradictions, she turns the ambivalence into something else. (101)

Cisneros so aptly uses fiction to assert historical claims because she feels at home in ambiguity. She does not equate validity with unequivocal, hard fact, nor does she require material proof for a claim to be true. Partially, she inherits this way of thinking from the more spiritual aspects of her Latina culture, as discussed earlier in this chapter, but it is also her position as a Chicana—a bordered person—that especially qualifies her to use fiction to get at truth, because fiction itself is ambiguous.

Fiction is a border crosser because it exists somewhere between fantasy and reality. It is purposely deceitful, made up of lies, and yet fiction is real because it exists and expresses what cannot be expressed by facts and figures. In his essay, “The Truth of Lies,” the renowned Peruvian writer and political activist Mario Vargas Llosa discusses the unique and powerful truths of fiction and the crucial role fiction plays in spawning societal progress. He writes that “by lying, [novels] express a curious truth that can only be expressed in a furtive and veiled fashion, disguised as something that it is not” (King 356). Some truths lie in human emotions and desires, the shape of human experience. They are unquantifiable and elusive; nonetheless, they are real. Because fiction openly lies and does not pretend to be factually true, it sidesteps the dangers of empiricism, which claims complete certainty in its own ability to discover all truth and disallows other means of deriving truth. Fictional truths differ from factual claims to truth in that they express the truth of imagined possibilities rather than pure reality as it is. Ironically, fictional writers often more closely approximate the human condition than do empirically
minded historians, whose principal aim is to document human experiences. Vargas Llosa explains the type of truths that only fiction can express here:

Successful fiction embodies the subjectivity of an epoch and for that reason, although compared to history novels lie, they communicate to us fleeting and evanescent truths which always escape scientific descriptions of reality. Only literature has the techniques and powers to distil this delicate elixir of life: the truth hidden in the heart of human lies. (King 362)

Literature lies but exerts amazingly powerful truths at the same time; thus it is ambiguous by nature, being both true and false, a mix of the two, or perhaps neither one. It invites questioning and discussion while empirical studies only make declarations. Cisneros uses this ambiguity in her treatment of history and thus avoids the pitfalls of claiming ownership to the only “true” historical narrative. Fiction allows her to assert truth without shutting off other possible historical voices and perspectives.

Fiction does not necessarily try to replicate reality, and therefore it opens up an imaginary space in which revolutionary ideas are possible. Vargas Llosa claims, “Within each novel, there stirs a rebellion, there beats a desire” (King 357). Fiction helps society move forward because it presents impossible ideas, expressing and creating a desire for change. Unlike positivism which relies on previously proved truths, fiction allows for a breach from the status quo. In his book *One-Dimensional Man*, Herbert Marcuse writes, “If the established society manages all normal communication, validating or invalidating it in accordance with social requirements, then the values alien to these requirements may perhaps have no other medium of communication than the abnormal one of fiction”
Whether she consciously realizes this or not, Sandra Cisneros subscribes to this philosophy in her writing. Because the dominant Anglo society has controlled historical discourse and disallowed marginal voices, her only option was to speak imaginatively though fiction. She uses fiction to retell a more radical version of history from a Chicana perspective, but more importantly, she does so with an alternative mode of asserting truth. Instead of trying to butt her way into the positivistic system that disallows claims that come from outside of the established system, she circumvents the whole system using the revolutionary power within the ambiguity of fiction, a framework in which she moves freely as a Chicana familiar with liminal spaces.

In *Caramelo*, Sandra Cisneros helps restore the value of storytelling that Benjamin describes. When stories are told, “It is left up to [the reader] to interpret things the way he understands them, and thus the narrative achieves an amplitude that information lacks” (89). Sandra Cisneros tells stories. She does not try to give a factual historical account of her people or interpret the events she presents for her readers. She leaves her own historical assertions ambiguous by questioning their actuality and intertwining history and story. Her methods are more powerful than past claims of historical truth because they open up a space for discussion about the grand historical narratives of the past, questioning and challenging their validity in content, but also refuting the epistemological modes used in their creation. She welcomes other voices and opinions rather than silencing them. Her stories provide new ways of looking at historical events through the lens of her unique Chicana perspective. Maybe the United States is not purely an emissary of freedom. Perhaps the current international border between the U.S. and Mexico was unjustly drawn, in part with the help of Texas Rangers who killed those
Mexican landowners who did not flee in fear. Possibly, the heroism of the Mexican Revolution was not worth its cost in human lives. Cisneros does not claim sole proprietorship of historical truth. Societal thought stops cold under such conditions. There must be a questioning of the “information,” as Benjamin calls it, that the dominant power structure claims to be true, or we fall prey to some kind of authoritarianism which excludes all voices and viewpoints but its own—a positivist tendency. Sandra Cisneros succeeds in adding meaningful insights into historical discourse because she works from outside of the closed positivist systems of the empowered historians of the past. She asserts historical truths without ending the discussion by using fiction as her medium; story helps us see history in new ways.
Chapter 3

Creating a Mythology of Chicano Popular Culture

From the days of feeling she had little to contribute in her writing workshops to the present, Sandra Cisneros has come a long way as a writer—so far that she now feels capable and called upon to speak to, and for, the Chicana/o community through her books. “I find myself in the role of guiding a community” (qtd. in Kevane and Heredia 54), she stated in an interview while writing *Caramelo*. Since Mexican-Americans make up the largest percentage of Latinos in the United States, the largest U.S. minority group (12.5% in 2000), the task to lead such a large group of people is monumental. However, despite their large numbers Chicanos are geographically scattered and, more devastatingly, culturally fragmented by their bordered existence—living in liminal spaces as neither Americans nor Mexicans, yet both. Although the struggle toward Chicana/o empowerment is not new, it is ongoing and still in need of binding agents to enhance feelings of community among the Chicano diaspora. Because they are doubly marginalized, first by their ethnic status and second by their gender, Chicanas experience a heightened degree of cultural marginalization, as I discussed in Chapter One. This disenfranchisement among both Chicanos and Chicanas leads directly to the absence of their voices in mainstream historical discourse.

As a genre of the masses, popular culture democratizes culture because it makes itself available to all social groups, regardless of class, race, nationality, and gender. This holds true no matter which of the much-debated definitions of “popular culture” one subscribes to. I will draw upon Neo-Gramscian hegemony theory for my definition of popular culture because it most aptly speaks to the fluidity of the postmodern conditions
of production and consumption, defining pop culture as the cultural products which evolve out of the space negotiated by the “dialectic between the processes of production and the activities of consumption” (Storey 226). It is not solely an imposed cultural tool of the empowered societal groups, nor purely the creative undertakings of the general populous, but a mix of the two. Technological innovations in media catalyzed the widespread availability of pop culture during the twentieth century, which is primarily the time period that Cisneros rehistoricizes in *Caramelo*. This corollary provides an opportunity for Cisneros to contribute a new historical viewpoint, as seen through the lens of Chicano pop culture. Because pop culture by necessity moves fluidly between the public sphere of mass production and the private sphere of individual consumption, all Chicanas—from feminists like Cisneros all the way down to the most *marianista* women—have access to its forms and language. It can also be used to unite unnaturally divided peoples, such as those of Mexican heritage on both sides of the border.

To be a united and cohesive group, a people must share a common mythology, the set of signs that defines their beliefs and values and helps uphold the cultural framework. Myths in the postmodern world do not necessarily deal with deity or explanations of natural phenomena; although these traditionally accepted narratives still influence our current mythos, mythology in the postmodern world depends more heavily upon the everyday phenomena that constitute contemporary human experience. Signs of ordinary life function as a basis upon which a community defines itself and a discourse inside of which culture is negotiated. Often, the everyday is best documented in what the population consumes—products, food, entertainment, etc.—particularly in the commodity-centered capitalist United States, but increasingly in the rest of the world as
well due to rampant globalization. Hence, pop culture stands out as a prime target for the examination of contemporary mythology. Roland Barthes, in his book *Mythologies*, thoroughly examines the communal dynamics of myth in contemporary culture, honing directly in on popular culture, just as Cisneros does in *Caramelo*.

In *Caramelo*, Cisneros tells the stories of her protagonist-narrator Celaya’s family, tracing Chicano history through the lives of past generations. This family represents the larger whole of experiences shared by Mexicans and Mexican-Americans in the United States. By telling their stories, Cisneros tells the history of her people. Benjamin pinpoints stories as a vital tool in fighting the rampant alienation inherent in modern industrial society, saying that we have lost “the ability to exchange experiences” (83). Thus, stories become even more crucial to bordered peoples, who are prone to more alienation than those in the dominant social group. By re-examining history through the ways in which popular culture signifies in the lives of *Caramelo*’s representative Chicano family, Sandra Cisneros creates a mythology of Chicano culture that disregards the unnatural national borders and the traditional gender divisions that alienate members of the Chicano diaspora. As a storyteller in the Benjaminian sense, Cisneros uses her mythology of pop culture to restore the value of communal experiences, fostering collectivity in the fragmented Chicano community.

Myth is most easily conveyed in narrative form, and therefore, Sandra Cisneros is most effective in configuring the mythology of Chicano pop culture as a storyteller, as defined by Benjamin. In Chapter Two, I discussed the value of fiction in retelling history because (unlike its opposite—“information”) it remains open for interpretation. Storytellers do not limit their audiences as to how the stories can signify for them, and
thus in her fictional way of documenting history, Cisneros embodies one of Benjamin’s two major requirements of a storyteller. The other involves the ability to facilitate communal experiences.

In “The Storyteller,” Benjamin identifies another reason for the decline in storytelling as “the rise of the novel at the beginning of modern times” (87). The term “novel” here is problematized by the discrepancy between contemporary and past definitions of the genre. In the postmodern era, we became accustomed to a wide variety of innovations in the form (as well as the content) of “novels.” However, in the early half of the twentieth century in which Benjamin was writing, the novel form was more conventional. Cisneros herself calls *Caramelo* a novel right on the cover of the book; yet, given the same body of work in his time, Benjamin would most likely have called it a collection of stories. The term “novel” as I use it here will refer mainly to the traditional form that Benjamin describes—an individualistic genre both in terms of its standard content as well as in the way that it is communicated. Benjamin here distinguishes the story from the novel: “The storyteller takes what he tells from experience—his own or that reported by others. And he in turn makes it the experience of those who are listening to his tale. The novelist has isolated himself. The birthplace of the novel is the solitary individual, who is no longer able to express himself by giving examples of his most important concerns” (87). The novels to which Benjamin refers are primarily the individualistic tales written by and about white men. The glorification of individual pursuits is prevalent in Anglo culture, but less so in Latino cultures where more value is placed on the group as a whole, be it a family or other community. *Caramelo* is not a “hero journey,” rather it documents the history and culture of the Chicano people through
the stories of various members of a representative family line. Cisneros speaks communally, not individualistically. Therefore, in Benjamianian language, Cisneros is not a novelist, but a storyteller. She seeks to unite her community, not elevate herself or her protagonist above the rest of society, and she adds to this effect by filling her stories with references to pop culture which is innately democratizing.

Popular culture came into vogue as a subject of critical inquiry during the twentieth century, rising dramatically during the emphasis on production and consumption of commodities in the postmodern era. Many critics consider pop culture as representative of the postmodern attempt at collectivity, using cultural commodities, in the wake of the disconnectedness and alienation that society inherited from the modern era. Some scholars have vilified pop culture as a capitalist means of controlling the masses, calling it a “hopelessly commercial culture.” In fact, they define it as “mass-produced for mass consumption. Its audience is a mass of non-discriminating consumers” (Storey 11). Others have taken the opposite standpoint and have celebrated pop culture as the ruling voice of the people. They see it as more authentic because it thrives on the demands and preferences of the masses and, therefore, reflects a true picture of a people. “Popular culture is thus the authentic culture of ‘the people’…. It is a culture of the people for the people” (Storey 12). I stand with Marxist theorist Antonio Gramsci, who posits a view that incorporates elements of both sides of the issue. He sees pop culture as a negotiation between the controllers of capital and the masses, which reflects the historical struggle for power. “Popular culture in this usage is not the imposed culture of the mass culture theorists, nor is it an emerging-from-below spontaneously oppositional culture of ‘the people’. Rather, it is a terrain of exchange between the two; a terrain, as
already stated, marked by resistance and incorporation” (Storey 14). Despite the manipulative power held by the producers of pop cultural commodities, the grass-roots power of the people to shape popular culture through their choices of consumption still benefits peoples who have otherwise been utterly powerless in mainstream society. Some power is better than none. Whereas Chicanos have been mostly ignored culturally in the United States, at least the negotiation involved in the creation of popular culture facilitates a type of communication between dominant and subordinate groups. Capitalist producers of commodities must acknowledge their consumers, or they cease to exist. As consumers, Chicanos can create their own culture by demanding products to suit their cultural needs and desires, and through this process Chicanos have been more empowered than they have perhaps recognized. Their collective voice bears weight, and by holding up a system of pop cultural signs in Caramelo, Cisneros identifies and fosters the unrecognized strength of the Chicano diaspora. Even though they feel disconnected, they share a common mythology that is manifest in one way through their shared popular culture.

In Cisneros’s creation of a mythology out of the everyday—as seen through pop cultural markers, her work resembles that of Roland Barthes in his famous Mythologies. In that book, Barthes recognizes that culture is historically constructed and that everyday objects and acts, when examined, identify contemporary cultural systems. As one of the most recognized figures in semiology, he sees these mythologies as a system of signs. Therefore, form dominates content. He is not so much concerned with what pop culture is or says, but how it functions as a language system. His book is compiled of short essays examining a diverse sampling of pop cultural phenomena, which he breaks down to
reveal how they were historically formed and what they reveal about (in his case French) culture. The most poignant example is his treatment of French wrestling which he praises for the way it announces its own sign system. It calls attention to its own artificiality. “Thus, the function of the wrestler is not to win; it is to go exactly through the motions that are expected of him” (16). The specifics of each wrestling match are unimportant; what is crucial is that the system of signs be maintained, for these signs are what the audience needs and craves. They want the “intelligible spectacle” (20), which they have come to expect and understand and which signifies culturally. Barthes concludes “The World of Wrestling” saying:

What is portrayed by wrestling is therefore an ideal understanding of things; it is the euphoria of men raised for a while above the constitutive ambiguity of everyday situations and placed before the panoramic view of a univocal Nature, in which signs at last correspond to causes, without obstacle, without evasion, without contradiction. (25)

Barthes takes a pop cultural event, wrestling, and proves it to be culturally significant and historically constructed. It is not wrestling itself, but its system of signs that signifies. As such, the wrestling helps people feel a common cultural bond because it is a language they all speak and understand. Cisneros, whether consciously or unconsciously, understands this idea and utilizes it in configuring the signs of pop culture to weave a mythology out of Celaya’s family stories. As a commonly understood system of cultural signs, this mythology fuses together a sometimes fragmented identity, on both individual and communal levels. The many splits and divisions in Chicano border culture fade away
in the shadow of the unifying mythology of pop cultural signs in which they recognize their common history of shared values and cultural norms.

Cisneros most notably incorporates Chicano pop culture into *Caramelo* by imitating *telenovelas*—Latin American soap operas that are also immensely popular among Latinos in the U.S.—which provide the overall narrative structure of her mythology, into which she weaves other references to pop culture that Chicanos recognize as communal signs. Thus, the *telenovela* functions in Cisneros’s mythology the same way that wrestling does for Barthes. The form takes precedent over the content. *Telenovelas* signify culturally because they provide a system of signs that the entire community understands. In a study conducted on the watching of *telenovelas* in the United States, researchers found that “telenovelas assist Latinos who reside in the United States in recreating and maintaining a strong cultural bond to Latin America. Specifically, by seeing the portrayal of key cultural elements in the narrative, including religion and setting, and hearing the language, Latin American culture was sustained for them in crucial ways” (Barrera and Bielby 13). More than for the fictional story or content of *telenovelas*, Chicanas and Chicanos alike watch *telenovelas* because of the cultural signs they manifest. They see the same “intelligible spectacle” that the French do in wrestling. Like wrestling, *novelas* call attention to their own conventions. The viewers recognize the superficiality of the melodrama. As stated in Barrera and Bielby’s article, “They all knew how it would end: problems solved, lovers reunited, long lost family members found, villains getting what they deserved” (2). The magic resides in the common cultural understanding of these signs and their historical background in the shared Chicano worldview.
Cisneros patterns the stories of Celaya’s family after the manner of the *telenovela* genre. The form of *Caramelo* is episodic, often withholding information until a later time when the audience gets the missing part of the story. Cisneros titles one of her chapters, “A Scene in a Hospital That Resembles a Telenovela When in Actuality It’s the Telenovelas That Resemble This Scene” (402). This chapter hearkens back to an earlier classicly *novela*-like scene in Acapulco in which the Awful Grandmother tells Celaya’s mother something to which the reader is not privy, which sends her into a rage. Only near the end of the book, in the aforementioned chapter do we find out along with Celaya that the secret was her father’s illegitimate child. The way the scenes are set up spatially in the book mirrors the overly dramatized scenes in *telenovelas* that, as Cisneros writes, “keep you coming back for more” (409). Throughout the novel, the characters compare their situations to the plot twists and turns of the *telenovela* genre, with lines like, “You’re the author of the *telenovela* of your life” (345). In her typical way of celebrating colloquial speech patterns, Cisneros also imbues her characters’ conversations with the melodramatic phrases of soap operas, like “Why are you so cruel with me? You love to make me suffer! Why do you mortify me?” (419). The speech patterns, plot structure, and even the vocabulary of *telenovelas* signify in the novel for their form, rather than their content. By employing this widely-recognized form for the telling of her stories, Cisneros unites the Chicano diaspora. Families watch *novelas* together, communally. As they read this book, the structure draws upon those communal experiences of getting together to feel connected by the cultural signs exhibited in the shows. The form is so familiar that it alone exudes a sense of community, since *telenovelas* are a commonality in Chicano daily life. Cisneros plugs the other pop cultural signs in the book into this *telenovela*
structure of Celaya’s family stories to create a mythology that reflects the history of her people.

In order to make her pop cultural signs impact Chicana/o readers more effectively, Cisneros establishes Celaya’s family as an archetypal Chicano family that represents the overarching Chicano experience. Although great diversity exists among the Chicano diaspora in the United States, there are some defining characteristics in Chicano life to which most Chicanos can at least partially relate. Cisneros uses Celaya’s family to depict the overall experience of existing in a border culture, where the roots of personal and cultural identity lie on both sides of the border. They are like the stars of a telenovela, with whom Chicanos sympathize and through whom they experience the representation of their own cultural norms. The surnames of Celaya’s parents indicate the mythic quality about these characters; Reyes (Kings) and Reina (Queen) are both common last names, but their Spanish denotations suggest this family as a model of what it is to be Chicana/o. Through these characters, Cisneros charts experiences and feelings common to the Chicano population as a whole, such as the circumstances of bearing immigrant status in the U.S. and frequent trips back and forth across the border. Also, because Celaya’s father came to the U.S. as an adult while her mother grew up in Chicago, her family illustrates a wide spectrum of “Mexicanness” and “Americanness,” so that cultural identity varies greatly among members of the same family. Because both cultures are present, Chicanos are able to choose to connect themselves to certain cultural norms, values, and traditions and ignore others. Innumerable factors go into the creation of identity, but many of the same influences are present across the board: the presence of both Spanish and English languages to some degree, cultural clashes between those from
the old country and those raised in the U.S., and the toggling between the pull of two cultures in the process of forming one identity.

Popular culture is a major player in cultural negotiation because people’s lives are primarily constructed by their quotidian experiences. Everyday occurrences define our existence much more heavily than the “big” historical events. The pop cultural forms and icons that crop up in the lives of the Celaya’s family also represent the experience of the larger Chicano whole and document their history in new and powerful ways. When Cisneros writes songs and movies into the text, she not only forces a redefinition of what qualifies for historical study, she also holds up cultural markers to recreate a history for her people. She knows that many Chicanos will connect with pop cultural excerpts because of the pervasive nature of popular culture. The mass-production and widespread dissemination of pop culture facilitates this identification with the characters as well as the other imagined readers of Caramelo. These symbols create a feeling of unification through memories of the past, in other words, through a common history. As it does for all Americans in the twentieth century and today, the history of pop culture comes closer to truly describing Chicanos as a people because of its daily interactions in their lives. People invest some of their closest feelings and desires into songs, television shows, movies, among other forms, thus binding pop culture to personal identity. Because popular culture is mass-produced, consumers of the same products have similar experiences, and thus cultural identities form. The rise of new media (radio, film, television, etc.) in the twentieth century sped up cultural exchanges and fostered common experiences among consumers that shared the same cultural values and tastes. Because
Chicanos and Mexicans share so much of their cultural heritage, they become connected through pop culture despite the imposition of national borders.

All Chicanas/os feel the ambivalence of the physical U.S.-Mexico border, which translates into cultural, national, and linguistic ambiguity and disinheritance. Chicanos are not seen by Mexicans as fully Mexican, yet they know they are not Anglo American either. They are both Mexican and American, and neither one at the same time. To break down this national duality and legitimize the borderlands as a viable space for cultural generation, Sandra Cisneros pulls a Mexican/Mexican-American pop culture icon—Tongolele—out of history and incorporates her into the story. Tongolele made a sensation in the Mexican night clubs and then cinema of the 1940s and 1950s. Her act was that of “Tahitian” dancing, but her real name was Yolanda Montez and she was anything but Tahitian. For that matter, she was not even Mexican by nationality, as Cisneros unfolds in a dialogue between Celaya and her Aunty. “Yolanda Montez direct from Oakland, California! . . . They invented all kinds of stories about Tongolele. That she was Cuban. That she was Tahitian. But that was just puro cuento [nothing but story]. She was like you, Lala, a girl born on the other side who speaks Spanish with an accent” (266). By exposing a “Mexican” film icon as actually a Chicana, Cisneros breaks down the duality of the border: authentically Mexican vs. not quite American. Mexicans willingly claimed Tongolele as theirs despite her “pocho” Spanish—a hybrid version of Spanish influenced by English that is usually scorned on the Mexican side of the border. Pop culture moves freely over physical borders and transcends the rigid hierarchies and categories of language and nationality. More than for what Tongolele sang or looked like, she signifies for her function as a link between culturally unified peoples unnaturally
disconnected by lines on a map. She helps dissolve the longstanding, but falsely
constructed duality of the borderlands.

The way popular culture travels back and forth from Mexico and the United
States in *Caramelo* signals the fluidity of culture across illusory national borders,
exposing them as manmade, superficial boundaries. Walls and rivers cannot stop the flow
of culture when the would-be divided peoples share common cultural beliefs, values, and
traditions. These peoples will demand the same cultural commodities, and free market
economies will always deliver what consumers want. *La familia Burrón* comic books
surface as a vehicle to cultural unification. Cisneros describes them as “a chronicle of
Mexico City life . . . primarily aimed at an adult audience, among them Mexican
Mexicans and American Mexicans, as well as Mexican Americans and some ’Mericans
trying to learn Mexican Spanish” (246). Here, she exposes the absurdity of trying to
adhere to geographically defined categories of nationality in the contemporary
transnational world, noting that “Copies of *La familia Burrón* are sold in Mexican
grocery stores throughout the U.S.” (246). Because they are reading the same comic
books, craving the same cultural signs as seen through these stories of Mexico City life,
Chicanos and Mexicans are all having the same experiences. When individuals who feel
disconnected from their roots in Mexico read *La familia Burrón*, they feel reconnected to
cultural traditions. Partly this happens because of the subject matter of the comic books,
but the knowledge that so many others on both sides of the border are reading the same
stories also helps create a sense of solidarity. Pop culture, here in the form of comic
books, crosses borders in the same way people do, and in the same way cultural identity
does. These things are uncontainable and transcend lines drawn on a map. In this way,
Cisneros’s pop cultural version of history scoffs at the hierarchies of “pure” nationalities versus border cultures and more closely approximates the fluidity of cultural identification in real life.

Popular culture also helps equalize the sharply defined gender categories in Mexican and Chicano cultures, merging traditionally separate male and female spheres. Because it is readily available to both men and women, longstanding gender gaps can be bridged by popular culture as it establishes a common ground that facilitates communication. Soledad’s character also best exemplifies this phenomenon as she uses pop culture to relate to her son. Near the end of the book, when Soledad is living with her son’s family in San Antonio, she and Inocencio both watch television in their own separate rooms, but they shout to each other about what channel the telenovelas and old Mexican movies are on. Though they are still apart, they come together in the medium of what they are watching; they connect through television. Soledad establishes the same pattern of using popular culture, especially novelas, to get close to her son earlier in the book. When her favorite son, Inocencio (Celaya’s father), brings the family to visit her in Mexico City, she lets him stay in bed and caters to him by sharing treasured bits of pop culture with him. “She brings out of hiding what she has been saving since his last visit. Lopsided stacks of fotonovelas and comic books. El libro secreto [The Secret Book]. Lágrimas, risas y amor [Tears, Laughter and Love]. La familia Burrón” (63). Despite the separate spheres of women and men in Mexican culture, Soledad and Inocencio can share popular culture like a language through which they can speak at the same level. Like Barthes’ sign system of French wrestling, fotonovelas utilize recognizable cultural signs which affirm shared cultural expectations and norms. Pop culture defies hierarchies of all
kinds, including the deeply ingrained gender split of Mexican and Chicano cultures by allowing men and women to share a common language of signs.

Not only can women more easily connect to the men in their lives through pop culture, they can also use it as a bridge from the confinement of the domestic sphere into public discourse. Cisneros demonstrates this movement through the female characters in *Caramelo*. Tellingly, it is Soledad, the most *marianista* of all of the women in the book who latches on most tightly to pop cultural forms. As Celaya tells her story, she imagines it in the form of a film. She interrupts Celaya’s story to say, “If this were a movie, a few notes of song would follow here, something romantic and tender and innocent on the piano, perhaps ‘The Waltz Without a Name’” (104). Not only film but popular music intercede in her interpretation and articulation of her own life. She is particularly attracted to the *novela*, which exists in both television and magazine forms and is enjoyed by both women and men. All her life she has been of victim of cultural silencing, but *novelas* provide her a language with which to speak that is not gender specific. She adopts the dramatic phraseology and over-the-top feeling of *novelas* into her everyday speech patterns, which helps her verbalize her experiences. Reflecting on the traumatic experience of being farmed out to relatives by her own father as a child, she says, “So this part of the story if it were a *fotonovela* or *telenovela* could be called *Solamente Soledad* [Only Soledad] or *Sola en el mundo* [Alone in the World], or *I’m Not to Blame*, or *What an Historia I’ve Lived*” (95). Placing her own experiences in the constructs of a familiar and widely appreciated pop cultural form, the *novela*, allows her to feel comfortable relating personal experiences. Turning her life into a *novela* legitimizes her story in her mind because it brings her everyday experiences out of the woman’s world of
domesticity. Instead, as she plugs them into the *novela* genre, her experiences become a part of public discourse that is culturally validated. Pop culture helps her as a woman raised in traditional Mexican culture to step outside of the *marianista* traditions of silence and speak about her experience in the public sphere. She wants her story told, and as a *novela*, she believes it would be of interest to a large public audience.

Precisely because pop culture moves dynamically between public and domestic spheres, Sandra Cisneros can use it as a vehicle to venture into the public sphere in the subject matter of her own writing. Cisneros typically bases her literary material in domestic or everyday life of mostly women and children, subjects in which Chicanas can exert authority within the confines of traditional gender expectations. She has enjoyed monumental success in doing so and has entered, even dominated at times, the public sphere of literature in America through the publishing and widespread acceptance of her works. However, she branches out even further into the public sphere with *Caramelo* by entering historical discourse. Although Cisneros seemingly adheres to traditional Chicana roles by constructing *Caramelo* around family stories, she connects these stories to the history of pop culture in America, particularly as it informs Chicano border culture. Pop culture could be termed a genre of the everyday because it is often consumed in the realm of domesticity and makes itself available to Chicanas. However, the mass production of pop culture takes place in the public sphere of the capitalist market economy. It crosses the borders that normally marginalize Chicanas, even within their own culture, allowing them a means to move fluidly across the rigid boundaries of public and domestic spheres. Although Cisneros had already entered the public arena of literary studies, by asserting a
historical voice in *Caramelo*, she models the way pop culture can function to bridge existing gender gaps for other Chicanas.

By telling stories about the Reyes-Reina family, Sandra Cisneros begins to heal the fractured Chicano community. Because they have historically been rejected as a legitimate culture by two nations, Chicanos have lacked the cohesiveness necessary to uphold strong communal ties. Chicanas, who have been doubly marginalized—first, under the same cultural dismissal as their male counterparts, and second, by the cultural silencing imposed upon them by their own cultural traditions—benefit doubly from Cisneros’s stories. She has the quality that Benjamin says so many (of the white male authors to which he refers) have lost, “the ability to exchange experiences” (83). The pop cultural mythology she creates through telling family stories works to heal a fragmented diaspora, restoring the worth of experience that Benjamin declares “has fallen in value” (83). All communities need stories to thrive, but particularly border communities like the Chicano diaspora need stories to remind them of the existence and validity of their cultural community. Through stories, Cisneros reminds Chicanas/os that in spite of the gender divisions within their own cultural traditions and the nationalistic marginalization they feel from both sides of the border, they have a unified and legitimate heritage. Cisneros brings together Chicano pop cultural icons and signs under the unifying structure of the *telenovela* form as she tells her stories in order to further Chicana/o cultural identification and to foster collectivity in the Chicano diaspora. By innovatively revisiting history through the lens of pop culture, Cisneros brings to light the undervalued, even unrecognized, border culture of Chicanos and celebrates it as legitimate and complete.
Conclusion

For the past decade or so, the United States has experienced what has been termed by some as the “Latin Explosion”—most obviously a pop cultural phenomenon that reflects the explosive growth of the Latino population. The slippery term “Latino” encompasses a vast range of peoples and cultures that vary in ethnicity, class, political affinity, and even language to an extent. What unites them and allows groups as different as Cubans, Argentines, and Mexicans in the United States to all identify as “Latinos” is a common history of colonization, first by Spain, which introduced the cultural economy and gender dynamics of Catholicism, and then by the United States, whether in an overtly political way or merely through the imperialism of economics. Because of their shared cultural heritage, the same gender dynamics—namely machismo and marianismo—exist throughout the Latino diaspora in the U.S. Thus, not only Chicanas, but all Latinas have been culturally silenced and have had their voices omitted from historical accounts even more than their male counterparts, who have also been denied historical expression. As the U.S. demographics shift to a more transnational and especially a Pan-American culture, our American sense of self needs adjustment. As I have examined her voice in my analysis of Caramelo, I recognize that Cisneros is just one of many contemporary Latina writers such as Julia Alvarez, Rosario Ferré, and Ana Menendez, among others, who are retelling history from the site of the family. They take their cultural proclivity toward the family (grounded in marianismo) which tended to bar them from public discourse in the past and use this space to reconstruct their own national histories, reaching back into history (be it Dominican, Puerto Rican, Cuban, or some other national identity) through the fictional lives of the multi-generational families in their writings.
The emergence of these Latinas’ previously marginalized historical perspectives through fictional family (hi)stories signals the transnational shift in American identity and is helping the U.S. mainstream redefine and re-imagine American history as a multi-voiced rather than a monolithic narrative, decentralizing the power of the mainstream in the U.S. from that of a colonizer to a more inclusive community of fluid and dynamic, negotiated cultures.

Now that we are well past the initial rise of cultural studies of the 1980s, Latina writers can do more than write and finally be heard; they are now branching into historical discourse, as I have shown that Cisneros does in *Caramelo*. Sandra Cisneros stands out as perhaps the most widely recognized Latina author among many celebrated female authors from marginalized communities today. What distinguishes the Latina writers from other critically significant authors like Toni Morrison or more recent ingénues like Jhumpa Lahiri is the concurrent relevance of Latinidad to the American identity. As Habell-Pallán and Romero note in their book, *Latino/a Popular Culture*, “The 2000 U.S. Census proclaimed that the 35.5 million Latinos have become the largest ethnic minority group in the United States” (4). In short, Latinos have become a force to be reckoned with, as advertisers and politicians alike have begun to recognize. The U.S. mainstream must finally confront the fact that we are not the only “Americans,” but rather one group of a Pan-American whole, arguably more directly tied to Latin America than to European nations, as has been traditionally assumed. In part, as the general population reads Latina/o literatures, it is trying to come to grips with this Pan-American reality that becomes more obvious every day in the United States.
The grand historical narrative that has driven U.S. identity formation in the past tells the story of such a select few “Americans” today that has become practically insignificant. The Puritan legacy and consequent centering of U.S. culture in New England no longer suffices to represent the whole of what U.S. culture has become (if it in fact ever did). As the U.S. becomes undeniably transnational, we are forced to reexamine our cultural roots and reconsider the center. What overarching historical narrative can possibly describe the varied backgrounds of the American population today? This conundrum leaves only one possible solution—the ongoing process of shifting from a single master historical narrative to a more productive, ongoing negotiation between many cultures and their varied histories. A geographic center no longer serves a viable function since culture now transcends spatial boundaries. Just as Chicana/o culture cannot be contained by the border but moves fluidly back and forth and continues to grow and change despite the lack of a physical homeland, other Latina/o cultures in the U.S. transcend physical separation from their origins and continue to thrive here. Culture is not a product of geographic spaces, but of peoples and ideas. U.S. mainstream culture must also change to accommodate shifts in population. Assuming current demographic growth patterns will continue, Latina/o histories will undoubtedly be the most significant narratives to be added to this system.

Contemporary Latina authors have converted the continuing legacy of *machismo* and *marianismo* from a cultural constraint into a unique domestic space from which they view and reconstruct history. They give their own Latina (female and ethnic) perspectives of the American experience, not just the U.S. experience. For example, in her book *In The Time of the Butterflies*, Julia Alvarez revisits the Trujillo era in the Dominican Republic
through the multiple feminine voices of the Mirabal sisters—female revolutionary figures who helped overthrow the dictatorship. The individual stories of these sisters all combine to give an enhanced view of those historical times, even when it is a fictional account that takes place primarily in the domestic sphere. Although little is seen of the actual revolutionary activities of the sisters, Alvarez brings to light the cultural attitudes and personal impact of Trujillo’s dictatorship on individual lives in a more real sense.

Inasmuch as the United States government placed the ruthless Rafael Leonidas Trujillo in power to begin with, all U.S. citizens, Dominican or otherwise have ties to this “other” American history. Perhaps even more than because of our involvement in Dominican politics, Alvarez’s story has become an intrinsic part of our national history because it represents the cultural history of some of the rising number of Latinos who live here.

Rosario Ferré, in her book *The House on the Lagoon*, similarly revisits through fiction the history of racial intermixing, U.S. intervention, and political uprisings in her native Puerto Rico, while Ana Menéndez most recently reexamined the life of the infamous Cuban revolutionary Che Guevara in *Loving Che*. In each case, the author revises history from the domestic space of the family, thus manipulating her culturally inherited female role to speak in the public sphere of historical discourse, not only among her own community but in mainstream U.S. society through the dissemination of her fiction.

As I discussed in Chapter 2 of this project, speaking historically through fiction affords Cisneros, and the other Latina authors writing similar family (hi)stories, advantages over merely writing history anew. In addition to getting around the positivist trap of ideological stagnation, in a very real world sense, fiction spreads more rapidly and widely among the popular imagination than purely historical writing does. People like a
good story, and they usually remember it better. Fiction has the power to draw its audience in and connect to them emotionally. Therefore, in order to change mainstream perceptions of American identity, fiction may have the upper hand over supposedly factual, unembellished historical accounts. By speaking from the site of the family, Latina authors are able to reach their readers on various cultural levels. In *Caramelo*, for example, Cisneros connects with a Chicana reader most directly because of the familiar cultural and pop cultural markers she places in the book to which Chicanas can most easily identify. However, she succeeds in purposely destabilizing, but not completely alienating non-Chicano readers. The use of Spanish and unfamiliar cultural signs causes the mainstream reader to experience what it feels to be marginalized or “othered” as Chicana/o culture takes center stage. Still, any reader can connect with the Reyes family because their antics and quirks resemble all family relationships; the domestic sphere brings with it universal emotions and interpersonal dynamics which transcend cultural bounds. Writing from the site of the family lets all readers identify with the fictional characters and therefore sympathize with the historical accounts presented through their stories. Thus, contemporary Latina authors are facilitating the shift of mainstream national identity from the mindset of the colonizer of these Latino cultures to the idea of Latino groups as a part of the transnational American community.

Latina authors like Cisneros and others are particularly suited to the task of forming a more inclusive American culture because they are already invested in the values of *familismo* and *personalismo*. In Chapter 3, I examined Cisneros’s emphasis on community rather than individualism as she strengthens her own Chicana/o community by creating a unifying mythology of pop cultural signs. The designated Latina role,
embodied by *marianismo*, prepares these women to focus less on the self and more on the family and other communities as well. While their self-sacrificing must be held in check and balanced with opportunities to reach autonomy, it serves a noble purpose in mainstream society today. Many traditional novels, as Benjamin suggests, have focused on a certain individual. Such is the nature of much of U.S. literature. While I do not deny that the exceptions are many, I see a trend toward individual journeys in classics like *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, *Moby Dick*, and *The Great Gatsby*, each of which tells the story of the growth or pursuits of one individual, tellingly male and white. As Latino values and literary paradigms merge with the mainstream, new readings on old texts will arise. For example, although Twain’s *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* pushes conventional boundaries by pairing Huck, a young white boy, with a middle-aged slave Jim for most of the novel, the text focuses primarily on Huck’s personal journey. Only once does Twain mention Jim’s wife and daughter, and even Huck’s own family ties are sketchily limited to his transient and drunkard father. *Familismo* and *personalismo* would transform a traditional Anglo reading of this text from honing in on the story of an individual to the story of families and communities. Cisneros, Alvarez, Ferré and other Latinas are changing the face of American literature, first by redefining what “American” means, and also by writing about whole families (*familismo*) rather than a single hero. The tendency to be warm and caring even to strangers (*personalismo*), brings readers closer to the subject matter of their works. For example, in Menendez’s *Loving Che*, the reader is invited to follow the Cuban-American narrator on an insider’s view of Havana at the same time that she herself is discovering her roots, especially finding out who her mother was. We see *personalismo* in the Cuban characters who invite her into their
homes to talk about her past; simultaneously, we experience the same warmth and hospitality as we are invited in with her, included in her discoveries. In order for the U.S. mainstream to come to accept “other” groups as an integral part of “American” society and culture, our mindset must transition from a singular to a multi-voiced historical narrative. As these Latina authors extend their voices to talk about history, they can help us focus on the community rather than the individual. The mainstream can stop acting as the colonizing consumer of “other” cultures and begin to coexist equally with Latinas and other historically marginalized groups.

Cisneros’s voice in Caramelo will help revise the historical perspectives of both her own Chicana/o community and U.S. mainstream society. She empowers the female historical voice (both her own specifically and in general) through language, namely storytelling, going up against ages of the historical silencing of all women but of Latinas to a heightened degree. The fictional power of storytelling allows Cisneros and others who choose to harness the same power the opportunity to assert historical truths without getting caught up in the exclusionary scientific modes of empirical and positivist thought, which stop societal progress by demanding only one version of the truth in history. Furthermore, by downplaying the individual and emphasizing the value of communities, Cisneros and other Latinas catalyze the necessary shift in U.S. mainstream self-conceptions, helping us to reexamine and redefine America to include all of the Americas, to which we are historically and presently bound. Latina literature helps to level the playing field, redistributing power from a previously male Anglo colonizing center to the marginal voices that are rapidly becoming the center in today’s transnational America. The histories of all of the Latino groups in the United States contribute to the
larger, changing American identity. Cisneros’s voice cannot be overemphasized as one of the key forces in the current transition in American identity politics. The scope of this study forced me to narrow my focus only to Cisneros and her work in *Caramelo*; however, she is merely a part (albeit an important one) of a larger movement of Latina authors speaking historically through the site of the family. A much larger, cross-cultural study of an obvious trend among many contemporary Latina authors similar to my study of Cisneros’s *Caramelo* remains to be done in the future.
Works Cited


