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Southern Bellas: the construction of Mestiza identity in Southern narratives

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SOUTHERN BELLAS: THE CONSTRUCTION OF MESTIZA IDENTITY IN SOUTHERN
NARRATIVES

A Dissertation

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the
Louisiana State University and
Agricultural and Mechanical College
in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy

in

The Department of Comparative Literature

by

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DEDICATION

This project is dedicated to all my family and friends who helped carry me through this process:

To my Dad, Daniel Braun Sr., Thank you for the confidence and courage to succeed.

To my Mom, Cristina Braun, Thank you for the commitment to empathy and love.

To my brothers, Daniel Braun Jr. and Timothy Braun, Thank you for being the best little brothers a big sister could ask for.

To my niece Rylie Braun, Thank you for bringing out my inner child.

To my friends Natasha Bingham, Katie Kennedy, Sandra Ovino, Martha Pitts, and Karen Quebedeaux, Thank you for the friendship and support.

To my best friend, Benjamin Lowenkron, Thank you for everything I am today.

To my grandmothers Hilde Braun (who, sadly, I lost last year) and Teresa Irula, Thank you, Thank you, Thank you.

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ABSTRACT

This project analyzes representations and self-representations of Mestizas living in areas of the Deep South that lack a significant Latino presence. Incorporating a range of media, I take a comparative approach to Southern cultural narratives and propose a re-reading of these works through an examination of identity formation and cultural negotiation. By centering the Southern Mestiza, this dissertation advances concepts of intersectionality to address the role of region, as well as race and gender, in the representation and experiences of women often overlooked in Southern and U.S. Latino studies.

The Introductory chapter summarizes the theoretical framework for the study, including feminist and postcolonial theories, Southern and Latina/o literary theories, and concepts of *mestizaje* and tropicalization that are vital to critical understandings of hybrid identities within U.S. cultural narratives.

Chapter One is a comparative analysis of Kate Chopin's *The Awakening* and Margaret A. Graham's *Mercy Me*. These novels explicate the processes of cultural negotiation for white Southern women defining themselves against Mestiza characters. Chapter Two analyzes constructions of Mestizas in Southern-set drama, film, and television and compares the various strategies of identity formation for white female protagonists in literature and popular culture. Chapter Three explores the role of the Mestiza in Cynthia Shearer's transnational and multicultural South. *The Celestial Jukebox* provides a realistic view of the contemporary South and also critiques the marginalization of Mestizas in hegemonic cultural narratives. Chapter Four analyzes the revolutionary writings of two Southern Mestizas authors who are reclaiming a presence in the South: Lorraine López and Judith Ortiz Cofer. These authors model forms of cultural negotiation in writings that require readers to actively engage in the transformative

process. The Conclusion articulates the process of interconnected cultural encounters demonstrated in the primary texts, and concludes by incorporating theories that embrace multiculturalism through personal consciousness-raising and a commitment to de-hierarchized communities.

INTRODUCTION

Definitions and Critical Overview of Hybrid Identity Formation and Writing as Resistance

Through my experiences as a self-identified Southern Latina, I have come to realize that these two identities (Southern and Latina) are viewed as separate in the popular mind, creating an obvious cognitive dissonance for those seeking to understand my identity: “Southern” as a signifier of a type of American, and “Hispanic” or “Latina” as a signifier of non-American identity cannot overlap in many minds due to a perceived contradiction in these identities. Through various interpersonal interactions, I internalized this cognitive dissonance, and as one striving to find my place, I was forced to explore our culture’s notions of identity and the limiting exclusivity of the labels provided by U.S. culture to define ourselves. What had once seemed a natural blending of cultures in a single but multifaceted identity, became problematic to claim as an identity as I realized that White and Black Southerners considered me Latina or Hispanic (but not Southern) while first generation Latinos considered me American (but not necessarily Southern). Through these interactions, I became curious as to how I came to know my own identity as a Southern Mestiza and I also started to question what these very labels meant, how they were being defined and through what means, and in what ways they were gendered. There was a distinction being made which others conveyed as normal and understood, but to me seemed arbitrary and secretive, creating a type of cultural alienation manifested by these dichotomized labels that I experienced early in my life.

Through interdisciplinary work in Comparative Literature and Women’s and Gender Studies, I began to study hybrid identities and to apply these theories to Southern Latina identity formation within the context of U.S. ideologies and cultural narratives, and more specifically to the construction of a Southern Mestiza identity through representation and self-representation in

U.S. Southern Literature and Popular Culture. From studying representations of Mestizas in canonical and quintessential Southern texts to locating texts written by and about Latinas in the South, I hope to understand my own formations of my “Southernness” and “*Mestizaje*” through study of the conceptual framework used by authors to represent this hybrid regional identity. While Mestiza writers explore the negotiated space of hybrid identities in a Southern context, acknowledging ethnocentric regional and racial constructions, non-Mestiza Southern authors have often included Hispanic women as foils to white protagonists in ways that have mostly gone unexamined by literary scholars.

In U.S. popular culture, Latinas are often portrayed as foreign and working class, whose subordinated roles are starkly contrasted against white protagonists. These representations construct Latina as “Other” and are rooted in European racial classifications inherited after the colonization of the Americas. Like Edward Said’s description of Orientalism, this dominant ideology of *latinidad* “has a history and tradition of thought, imagery, and vocabulary that has given it reality and presence in and for the West” (Said 5). Latinas are used to, but tired of, seeing ourselves represented in the same ways: the asexual maid, the cultural prop, the sassy spitfire, the virginal border-crosser or criminal drug mule, and in current right-wing discourse, the anchor baby’s “illegal” mother. These dominant images and stigmas invade our daily experiences and rarely reveal the socio-economic conditions and kyriarchal¹ ideologies that are behind these realities and representations. Images of Mestizas in Southern texts are no exception, and are “historically contingent, mass-produced combination of myth, desire, location, marketing, and political expedience” (Mendible 1). But through writing, Southern Mestizas bring to the attention of diverse audiences experiences of this hybrid identity in a regional context while simultaneously addressing historical and contemporary images of themselves that have

invaded the popular mind to “engage Latinidad as a fluid set of cultural boundaries that are consistently reinforced, challenged, or negotiated by and through Latina bodies” (4).

It is important to note that Mestiza Latinas do make up a larger racial demographic of the U.S. Latina population than non-Mestizas, and this is perhaps why we are represented more often in popular culture. The combination of our large demographic and our darker skin as racial markers, makes us more visible than some other racial groups in the Latina population. But to only represent us in this way not only denies the existence of our *hermanas*, but also contributes to colorism as darker Latinas are more likely to be portrayed in hostile ways, while lighter Latinas are either hypersexualized or given token roles that imply that lighter skin is more worthy of upward social mobility (Mendible 14).

Though my central interest is in the intersection of Southern and Latina identity in literature and pop culture, my dissertation’s main question is how the cultural construction of “Southern” is negotiated through interrelated levels that simultaneously include and exclude the construction of Mestiza identity by Mestiza and non-Mestiza authors who are attempting to understand their own raced and gendered identities in a Southern landscape. I have specifically chosen images of Mestizas in the Deep South—which generally includes Alabama, Georgia, Louisiana, Mississippi, and South Carolina—because of the overwhelming whiteness portrayed in Deep South texts where Mestizas appear (or write themselves into). There are numerous writings by and about Mestizas in areas of the South with a larger population of Latinos (like Miami or El Paso), but my particular interest is in images of Southern Mestizas who exist as one of a few Mestizas in the narrative setting and in what ways this alters the negotiation of a fluid and flexible hybrid identity. I realize there is a risk of universalizing the experiences of these Mestizas, so I must reiterate that this is a personal project as well as an academic endeavor—my

goal, in part, is to locate my own position with the South through the view narratives that mirror my own experiences. How the South contributes to these narratives with Mestiza characters is of utmost personal and academic interest to me, and, in turn, I am interested in adding a regional approach to U.S. Latina literary studies that the field still lacks. This regional approach is necessary for Latina literary studies, especially in understanding U.S. race and gender constructions. Therefore, this study advances concepts of intersectionality important to third wave feminism and proposed in texts by feminists of color like *This Bridge Called My Back* (1984) while adding to conversations within Southern and Latina literary studies. I am also interested in how these identities are gendered and I will analyze several Southern texts to show how Mestiza identity is specifically used to (en)gender Southern identity, most often in formulations of Southern (white) femininity that perpetuate racial hierarchies and often conflate beneficence and domination (Said 8). Of particular concern is the use of Mestiza identity by white-produced texts, with predominantly white characters, that critique Southern sexism but maintain racial hierarchies and cultural oppression. In contrast, Southern Mestizas use their writing as a form of cultural negotiation that attempts to critique these regional norms in ways that do not perpetuate racial hierarchies or promote horizontal oppression. The primary focus of this dissertation, then, is to historicize representation the of Southern Mestiza identity that permeates regional narratives while analyzing the concepts of negotiation relayed by Southern Mestiza writers that attempt to reflect on and reform a culture that has suppressed their subjectivity in and to the region. To do so, means re-reading canonical and popular Southern

texts where Mestiza characters have been critically ignored, and reading works by Mestiza authors through the lens of region.

The text selection ranges from prose, to poetry, to theatre, and to television and film, and analysis will utilize a range of interdisciplinary research foundational to cultural studies, and much needed in Southern studies to “present a coherent, all-embracing view of the South, its people, and its cultures” (Lowe 5). Texts will first be paired in thematic chapters that focus on specific tropes used to characterize the Mestiza characters in culturally static ways, which I will argue is a distinctly Southern construction, not just in the stereotypes themselves, but in how these racially othered characters are used by the authors to construct and explore a particular (white) Southern identity for the non-Mestiza characters who are involved in dynamic self-discoveries. These chapters include the trope of the silenced hypersexual Mestiza in Kate Chopin’s *The Awakening* (1899) and Margaret A. Graham’s *Mercy Me* (2003), and the trope of the invisible “dark” Mestiza in the play and film productions of Tennessee Williams’s *A Streetcar Named Desire* (1946) and the popular 80’s television program *Designing Women* (1986-1993). I will then analyze more nuanced Mestiza representation in Cynthia Shearer’s text *The Celestial Jukebox* (2005) which represents diverse characters in a global South, which will then be followed by a chapter analyzing the works of two Southern Mestiza authors, Lorraine López and Judith Ortiz Cofer, Southern Mestizas who most effectively demonstrate the personal struggle for autonomy and self-identification, using writing as a form of resistance against these dominant ideologies and as a way to legitimize and normalize hybrid identities by planting roots in U.S. literary history. In this way, writing becomes a type of cultural negotiation in the face of a U.S. dominant culture that defines itself as “not” Hispanic to a large degree while

simultaneously defying homogenous constructions of Mestiza identity through a multiplicity of representations.

The Mestizas in my chosen texts vary in nationality (Mexican, Mexican-American, Puerto Rican, Honduran), but all are represented as brown-skinned in some way or another in the texts. Terms like “Hispanic” and “Latina” are never used in the texts, which implies either an ignorance of or avoidance of such terms, revealing the discomfort non-Latinos and Latinas alike have with these labels. In fact, a recent Pew study (2012) shows that a majority of Hispanics choose to identify by their family’s country of origin rather than these pan-ethnic labels, signaling a belief in the distinctiveness between U.S. Latino/a cultures and the problematic nature of the terms as racial as well as ethnic categories (Pew 2-3). The Pew study suggests that those racialized as “Hispanic” or “Latino” by U.S. racial policies are often in disagreement and even confused by these very labels, though most of the respondents in the Pew study prefer the label Hispanic over Latino despite a lack of understandings of the definitions and differences between the two labels, especially in how U.S. governmental institutions define them. While these terms are a relatively recent addition to data collection reports, formally included in 1976, most of these forms allow for self-identification, which does little to formalize definitions due to respondent confusion and personal preferences (4), and implied or overt constructions in U.S. media and popular culture. Adding to the confusion, differences in self-labeling between Hispanic/Latino and by country of origin also differ vastly based on level of education, native or

foreign born status, income levels, Spanish or English speaking abilities and frequency of use, family involvement Latin American cultural traditions, as well as several other factors (Pew 12-26).

In the bulk of this project, the term Latino/a is used when referring to panethnic Latin American culture, whether by Latinos or non-Latinos alike. I use the term “Hispanic” less often and only in reference to often ambiguous U.S. ethno-racial definitions of Latin American identity or when quoting specific texts. Most importantly, is my definition of “Mestiza”: I use Gloria Anzaldúa’s “Mestiza” as a politicized term referring specifically to multi-racial and multi-cultural women of both Spanish and Native Latin American descent post-conquest, and who are negotiating this hybrid identity within a U.S. context. I am distinguishing between the essentialist notions of “Hispanic” and “Latina” and the performative aspect of “Mestiza” or “*Mestizaje*” based on Judith Butler’s notion of identity as constructed and performed. In other words, “Hispanic” is something you *are*, “Mestiza” is something you *do*. *Mestizaje* is a continual reconstruction of Latin American based ethnoracial identities that is both inclusive and differentiating. It is the process in which “Hispanics” and “Latinos” come to understand their identities within and outside of these very labels. As such, *mestizaje* takes into consideration the problematic nature of these labels by *problematizing* them. *Mestizaje*, thus, nuances understandings of hybrid identities by demonstrating the instability of this identity—an instability that is valorized and viewed as optimistically fluid and flexible.

Beginning with José Vasconcelos (1979), racial mixture is an inevitable advancement of human history and is notably exemplified in Latin American *mestizaje*. For Vasconcelos, Mestizos are a new race based on a synthesis of all races and cultures. His “cosmic race” is problematic, however, because it privileges European reason and enlightenment over the core

values of the *indio*, who he perceives as less rational, aligning his racial hierarchy with that of Europe.

Building on Vasconcelos's theories of multiplicity, Gloria Anzaldúa corrects the *indigenismo* and *machismo* inherent in original constructions of *mestizaje* by laterally positioning (in not prioritizing) indigenous and feminine cultural norms: first through a critique of racism and sexism within Mexican and Mexican-American cultures; then by delineating nation-building forms of *mestizaje* that oppressed Indians, women, and non-normative sexualities; and finally through a reclaiming of these marginalized voices and a re-centering of them within definitions of *mestizaje*.

Mestizaje has traditionally been thought of as a Mexican, Mexican-American, or borderland concept. Because of the broadening definition, which includes a destabilizing of all racial terminology, the concept has been applied to all of Latin America's postcolonial understandings of race and ethnicity. For this reason, I have included Mestiza characters and writers with different countries of origins, but who, when juxtaposed, demonstrate the problems with U.S. terminology and ethnoracial constructions, as well as portray the various ways that *mestizaje* is taught and learned, witnessed and performed. The term "mestiza" is not used in the texts; instead, implicit or explicit definitions of brownness are used with connotations of a homogenized identity. The Mestiza authors write against these limiting and essentialist constructions further nuancing the fluidity and flexibility of *mestizaje*. While I risk homogenizing the chosen Mestiza characters and authors, my goal is primarily to map a historical literary and pop cultural homogenization that surrounds the diverse identities of the fastest growing minority groups in the United States, eventually revealing how "ethnic self-designation reflects the dialectics between dominance and self-determination" (Comas-Díaz

115). Thus, the final texts reveal that there is no one singular Mestiza experience, nor one correct way to be or act Mestiza.

In *Mulattas and Mestizas* (2003), Suzanne Bost states that, “Mestiza writings often include models for negotiating these contradictions, embrace racial multiplicity, and retain an awareness of the historical implications of border crossing and mixture” (8). Mestiza writing, then, also demonstrates for the Mestiza reader the many pitfalls in negotiation strategies, but also the ways in which Mestizas can address these oppressive ideologies head on, instigating social change by raising awareness of issues normally not addressed in dominant cultural narratives. Through these texts, Southern Mestizas not only create a space to explore the multiplicity of Mestiza and Southern identities by subverting the myth that each is a cohesive culture defined in part by stable cultural identities, but also add to the literary discussions of notions of a Post-South or Post-Racial United States through an unraveling of the cognitive dissonance that maintains stratified gender and racial constructions. In essence, Southern Mestiza writers display the personal and social potential within hybrid spaces often considered disruptive and uncomfortable.

Scholars have ignored Mestiza characters in Southern texts thereby denying their importance to the texts (Barrish). This project will attempt to foreground these characters and underscore their importance in understanding constructions of identity. In this study, I will build heavily on Homi Bhabha’s theory of cultural hybridity and third spaces, and Gloria Anzaldúa’s theory of borderland identity. Culture, in simple terms, refers to the values and belief systems specific to a region that influence personal identity, interpersonal interaction, and institutional practices that become normative and self-perpetuating. For Bhabha, “[c]ultures are never unitary in themselves, nor simply dualistic in relation of Self to Other” (52). Through cross-cultural

contact, cultural identities and narratives are always in flux, especially in how they position themselves against cultures and peoples that contract the mythical norm² of Southerners as White/Black and Mestizas as foreign, often while still maintaining oppressive power structures that deny pluralistic identities in favor of ethnocentrism and essentialist notions of identity (344). Mestiza writers create a third space between seemingly dualistic categories that position them as objects rather than subjects. Through writing in this Third Space, Mestizas move towards subjectivity by negotiating a cultural hybridity and using their texts as a site of cultural exchange. By adding the regional intersection of Southern identity, Mestiza writers nuance our understanding of this cultural hybridity through representations of new identities that transcend dualistic thinking while underscoring regional spaces as hybrid spaces within a discourse of a homogenous national identity that often suppresses the inevitable conflict that occurs when opposing ideologies meet. The regional approach adds a new dimension to how this hybridized space has previously been analyzed, looking at this space itself as a shifting conjunction of multiple types of cultures for the Southern Mestiza, making the act of negotiation all the more precarious and dynamic. Bhabha's theories are therefore useful in analyzing these texts because "the theoretical recognition of the split-space of enunciation may open the way to conceptualizing an *international* cultural, based not on the exoticism of multiculturalism or the *diversity* of cultures, but on the inscription and articulation of culture's *hybridity*. To that end we should remember that it is the 'inter'—the cutting edge of translation and negotiation, the *inbetween* space—that carries the burden of the meaning of culture" (56).

This *inbetween space* is not static. It involves the negotiation of shifting borders. Gloria Anzaldúa discusses shifting borders of race and culture in her text "La Conciencia de la Mestiza: Towards a New Consciousness." She says the Mestiza "has discovered that she can't hold

concepts or ideas in rigid boundaries. [...] Rigidity means death. Only by remaining flexible is she able to stretch the psyche horizontally and vertically [...] and toward a more whole perspective, one that includes rather than excludes” (180). These borders are crossed, balanced, juggled, and straddled in multiple processes, generating new cultural identities that involve adopting multiple identities through a “double consciousness” (DuBois) in which one cannot help but define and measure oneself through and against dominant culture, in order to transgress these limiting labels and beliefs. This “double consciousness” means the uncomfortable realization that Brownness is often equated with impurity. In *Brown: The Last Discovery of America* (2002), Richard Rodriguez states, “No adjective has attached itself more often to the Mexican in America than ‘dirty’” (xii). *Mestizaje* acts as an “imaginary site for racialized, gendered, and sexualized identities,” and as a theoretical tool, allows us to analyze the dynamic space of transnational encounters (Arrizón 3).

Gloria Anzaldúa describes the future of the Mestiza as one where these paradigms are broken down, where dualistic thinking about race and culture are destroyed because the Mestiza realizes she cannot exist if it is impossible to unite or separate these different aspects of herself. Instead, a new consciousness must be formed and a cultural identity with fluid borders is crucial within these new constructions. For Southern Mestiza writers, writing is a performative act through which they relay these negotiations while providing models for claiming new identities, with their texts becoming and creating a third space within American Literature where further cultural exchange can occur by inviting diverse readers to participate through the act of reading in the transformative process and encourage social change that reforms a society’s oppressive structures through solidarity-building. The text becomes part individual story and part collective

story. Imani Perry describes the implications of how a text can work as a collective and individual story:

The problem is that fictional stories, especially ones on film, don't just stand as individual stories, but they do "representative work." They become part of the way we make sense of the world in which we live. The story of one novelist or filmmaker's imagination becomes the story of entire groups of people of "types" of people. This is especially true when the kind of social location depicted in the story is remote from the experience of the majority of the viewers. (1)

Cultural narratives as an institution not only represent these personal struggles and interpersonal dynamics, but also directly affect other institutions and often legitimize cultural norms and behaviors, which is frustrating for those trying to resist them. Hegemonic cultural narratives reaffirm ideologies for those who benefit from maintaining them. In texts that are committed to individual and collective change, the reader is not merely asked to be a witness to these negotiation processes, but to become part of them through consciousness-raising and social activism, uniting seemingly opposing cultures in a hybridized third space.

Due to her transformative powers, the Southern Mestiza is a danger to the status quo, and (as will be outlined in my analysis white-authored Southern texts) she is often physically marginalized and silenced in an effort to control that which creates such cognitive dissonance. Through depictions in these texts, Southern narratives fail to embrace the potential within that third space, often with justifications based on essentialist notions of identity. Southern Mestiza writing is therefore a subversive and defiant act against these depictions and a reclaiming of voice within the cultural narrative. While real-life face-to-face interactions can often be contentious, humiliating, and angering, these texts become a type of safe space where both writer

and reader can interact and negotiate in thoughtful ways that allow groups to understand each other as more complex than dominant cultural stereotypes imply.

Because writing has this potential, I also view this very project as transformative, showcasing the representations and self-representations of Southern Mestizas as a Southern Mestiza. This understanding is important to my qualitative research based on *grounded theory*—the understanding of the identity of the researcher as central to their research (Dozier). My identity as a Southern Mestiza provides a unique familiarity with the topic and access to family members, friends, and colleagues who also identify as Southern Mestiza, providing a (hopefully) non-voyeuristic interest into these identities. My target audience includes those Mestizas marginalized in our society, both within and outside of academia, as well as those White allies who give up their own privileges to help better our experiences.

The first paired texts will also be analyzed through the lens of Toni Morrison's theories of "playing in the dark", a strategy used by white authors to represent the presence of the "Other" as threat to cultural hegemony and a disruption to dualistic identity categories, but whose presence is still important in providing meaning in the lives of people who make up the dominant Southern culture. It is serendipitous that the paired texts span decades, allowing me to demonstrate the change (and lack of significant change) in U.S. and Southern identity formations. The tropes of silencing and making Mestizas invisible in these Southern texts underscore how disruptive these identities are to maintaining the current hegemonic definitions of Southernness. Edward Sebesta calls this process *banal white nationalism*—"the subtle, indirect, and unrecognized ways [in which we] build historical narratives that value whites over others and directly or indirectly negates the value of non-whites as human beings" (1). He categorizes these as narratives that deny or avoid mention of racism, predominantly center whites

in heroic roles (sometimes for non-white victims), or do not challenge current white hegemony. Part of my focus, then, is the “development of the Southern myth” (Gray xiv) and the role of the Mestiza in this myth-creating. In *Reconstructing Dixie* (2003), Tara McPherson argues that because Southern white and black femininity are interdependent, we must allow ourselves to view the two constructions not as separate, but as interwoven within an overarching construction of racialized femininity—what she terms *lenticular logic* (24-28). By analyzing how other racial categories are positioned within our understandings of gender, we add new dimension(s) to these interdependent constructions, and how they maintain the status quo. Analyzing multiple representations of hybrid identities in Southern narratives allows us to deconstruct these interdependent constructions in how they reproduce themselves over and over again, until they achieve myth status. Here I use Celeste Ray’s definition of myth as a “combination of facts, images, and symbols that people selectively renegotiate to create a desirable public memory, or a justification for a worldview” (2). These myths of gender, race, and place in the texts I will analyze seep into our cultural understandings of the South, real and fake—not as fiction, but as fictive narratives. Scott Romine argues that the “fake South [defined as the South mythologized in these cultural narratives, often in distorted ways] becomes the real South through the intervention of narrative” (9). It is these fictive narratives that continue to recycle themselves into cultural myths that contemporary culture then defends as real, doing so from hegemonic means (such as controlled consent) to aggressive and even violent means, as represented in the above texts. That these characters are often overlooked in academia calls into question how these ideologies are currently maintained at the institutional level and these first chapters attempt to address these issues and fill an obvious void in Southern and Latino Studies. The subsequent chapters, therefore, will focus on contemporary writings by white Southerners and Southern

Mestizas that center Mestiza characters within Southern cultural narratives, rather than relegating them to the periphery or to non-visible existence, and by placing these texts towards the end of my project, I hope to leave readers with an optimistic contrast to the more negative portrayals analyzed in the first section. These latter texts can be analyzed as performative in how they create a third space that acts as a site of exploration and resistance for the authors, one that invites readers to participate in the cultural exchange. In “Laugh of the Medusa” Hélène Cixous writes, “Woman must write her self: must write about women and bring women to writing, from which they have been driven away as violently as from their bodies—for the same reasons, by the same law, with the same fatal goal. Woman must put herself into the text—as into the world and into history—by her own movement” (875). As Southern Mestizas, these authors write the self and place the Southern Mestiza into real and literary histories while resisting and subverting the dominant images that previously defined her. Writing, Cixous states, is the locus where “woman has never *her* turn to speak—this being all the more serious and unpardonable in that writing is precisely *the very possibility of change*, the space that can serve as a spring board for subversive thought, the precursory movement of a transformation of social and cultural structure” (879). By narrating cultural exchange and negotiation, Cofer and López especially create the possibility for social change through representations of their searches for cultural empowerment. By applying theories of hybrid identities, we are able to challenge these previous myths while negotiating new constructions of identity that were otherwise thought to be incompatible in combination. The study of Southern Mestiza identity, then, is a necessary and exciting addition to this discussion, because, as Richard Rodriguez states, Brown writers do not just move “between” cultures, they move “among” and “because of” these multiple cultures (40),

making their writings pivotal to our understanding of fluid, malleable, and transcendent identities.

CHAPTER ONE

“From her ugly brown toes to her pretty black eyes”: The Silenced Mestiza and the Narrative Gaze in Kate Chopin’s *The Awakening* and Margaret A. Graham’s *Mercy Me*

While Mestizas often inhabit marginalized positions in white Southern texts, their presence, no matter how rare or brief, can reveal the ways in which Southern hegemony has imagined the impact of this presence. Borrowing heavily from Toni Morrison’s theories of the Africanist presence in literature, Southern theorists have begun to analyze the similar and contrasting ways in which white Southern authors reveal a “Mexicanist” presence. In *Playing in the Dark* (1992), Morrison states that “Through significant and underscored omissions, startling contradictions, heavily nuanced conflicts, through the way writers people their work with the signs and bodies of this presence—one can see that a real or fabricated Africanist presence was crucial to [Southern authors’] sense of Americanness” (6). Similarly, Mexicanism becomes, “both a way of talking about and a way of policing matters of class, sexual license, and repression, formation and exercises of power, and meditations on ethics and accountability [providing] a way of contemplating chaos and civilization, desire and fear, and a mechanism for testing the problems and blessings of freedom” (7). This Mexicanist presence is not without its own unique constructions, but cannot be analyzed as independent of constructions of African and African American identities in Southern texts, as both are “intrinsically connected to the history of political, economic, and ideological agendas of governments and social institutions” (Aparicio and Susana Chávez-Silverman 8). This “mythic idea of *latinidad* based on Anglo (or dominant) projections of fear, when applied to Latin Americans, is defined as *tropicalizing*, or “to imbue a particular space, or geography, group, or nation with a set of traits, images, and values [that are then] distributed among official texts, history, literature, and the media, thus circulating these ideological constructs through various levels for the receptor society” (8). This *hegemonic*

tropicalization “facilitate[s] the popular acceptance and justification of imperialist interventions, invasions, and wars” (8). To fully understand the ways Mestiza characters reveal these ideologies, we must place them “in the center [of our analysis]” in an effort to demarginalize those very groups (Crenshaw 31).

Chapter One compares and contrasts the texts of two white, female Southern authors, Kate Chopin and Margaret A. Graham. Chopin is obviously a canonical Southern author, but Graham is less known in academic circles, though she has received substantial attention in Christian book clubs and libraries because of her Christian-themed books. Chopin’s work, especially *The Awakening* (1899), is often used as an introduction to feminism for young female readers. Similarly, Graham’s books teach Christian morality to white, Christian women inspired by second-wave feminism. Her most recent and most popular works of fiction, the Esmeralda series, relates these lessons through the use of humor in overcoming everyday trials and tribulations. My chapter will focus on the first installment, *Mercy Me* (2003) where we are introduced to Esmeralda, our feisty (white female) protagonist in the fictional town of Live Oaks, South Carolina. The main focus of analysis will be a comparison of how two white female authors construct a narrative with white female protagonists and secondary Mestiza characters that are nearly completely silenced by their authors: Mariequita in *The Awakening*¹ and Maria López in *Mercy Me*.

Ladislava Khailova, building on Anne Goodwyn Jones’ idea of the white Southern female as the core of the South, states that, “the South is more dependent on the preservation of its traditional image of a lady than any other region. Therefore the Southern patriarchy has been very adamant in its fight to safeguard conventional gender scripts” (280). Edna and Esmeralda internalize and resist these Southern gender scripts in various ways, catalyzed by the presence of

the Mestiza characters, underscoring Bhabha's theory that the colonizer both fears and desires the colonized. Attention to the narrative voice in these white authored texts allows scholars to "see the dual tension between greater openness toward racial difference and further enclosures that simultaneously exclude new categories of difference" (Handley 9). The silencing of the characters reveals narrative strategies for controlling the human manifestations of that fear. Nevertheless, the protagonists' fascinations with the Mestiza characters' lives demonstrates the desire of the "Other" as an alternative models for gender scripts or as a justification to perpetuate dominant race and gender ideologies.

What interests me is how the narrative's use of the Mestiza characters sets up to prove the anti-racist (read: colorblind) tendencies of the white protagonists, with seemingly little self-awareness of the fact that the characters are silenced, thereby limiting any possibility of positive cultural exchange. The Mestiza characters are not allowed to speak for themselves. There is no narrative possibility of these characters contradicting the cultural ideologies that the protagonists themselves hold, thereby confirming the protagonists' definition as the only possible one and the one that speaks for Mestizas as well. Through the re-presentation of the Mestiza characters, the authors maintain a common white liberal hegemonic view of racism that leaves women of color out of the conversation in an effort to exalt the protagonists into a model of anti-racist femininity and allow the authors to revel in their own unchallenged cultural and moral superiority. In this way, these texts work as projects construct a type of Southern femininity and legitimize the processes used in this identity formation that essentialize Mestiza identity in order to maintain

aspects of the status quo that privilege them, ignoring the socio-historical context that created these inequalities, while appearing to be “anti-racist” (Omi and Winant).

Though these cultural interactions are limited by the authors, they are nevertheless revealing. The few times the Mestiza characters do speak, they speak Spanish and this must be translated to the protagonist by another character, as the protagonists are not granted bilingual abilities by the authors. Because of this, the interaction relies heavily on sight through initial and subsequent encounters with the Mestiza characters. Building on Rosemarie Garland-Thomson’s theory of staring, we can use these scenes to focus on and analyze how visual cues operate within these cultural interactions, at least for members of the dominant culture. Garland-Thomson describes staring as:

An interrogative gesture that asks what’s going on and demands the story. The eyes hang on, working to recognize what seems illegible, order what seem unruly, know what seems strange. Staring begins as an impulse that curiosity can carry forward into engagement [...] Spectacles elicit wonderment, but when we stare at one another something more complicated happens. We don’t usually stare at people we know, but instead when unfamiliar people take us by surprise. The kind of staring between strangers, this book suggests, offers the most revealing instance of the stare: how it works and what it can do. An encounter between a starrer and a staree sets in motion an interpersonal relationship, however momentary, that has consequences. This intense visual engagement creates a circuit of communication and meaning-making. Staring bespeaks involvement, and being stared at demands a response. (3)

In the two texts, the protagonists initially react to the unfamiliar with curiosity, and through the continued act of staring, they reveal racial-sexual stereotypes common in U.S. ideologies. These interactions offer the opportunity for personal and social change and to “rethink the status quo. Who we are can shift into focus by staring at who we think we are not” (6).

These texts also reveal the ways in which community defines and maintains the status quo. Scott Romine, in *Narrative Forms of Southern Community* (1999) defines community as

functioning through coercion to “resolve its internal conflicts and legitimate its hegemony” by establishing a “natural basis of division and the collective basis of unity” (4, 6). Mariequita and Maria López embody the stereotype of the hypersexualized Latina. Through visual cues, the protagonists read this hypersexuality in various ways, but always within an ideology that links women of color with a deviant sexuality. Their presence in the texts does not just disrupt the personal lives of the protagonists, but also the hegemony of the community. Though Edna and Esmeralda have already internalized these stereotypes as revealed through the dynamic of interpersonal staring, the other characters in the story reveal how community works to normalize the ideologies that then justify the motives of our protagonists. Through their feminist intents to dissect old Southern mores, Edna and Esmeralda marginalize Mestizas. The result is an unsteady critique of the South that merely perpetuates racial stratification and Mestiza stereotypes.

Kate Chopin’s *The Awakening*

Kate Chopin (1850-1904) was born in St. Louis to a French mother and Irish father, both from prominent and successful families. She married French-born Oscar Chopin in 1870 and they moved to New Orleans after their honeymoon. Chopin was a prolific writer, focusing mainly on her observations of Louisiana culture. Though she received some success as a writer, her works were reclaimed by feminist literary critics of the 1960s, and her works have since become a staple to feminist and Southern literary canons. This rediscovery of Chopin’s writings provided literary historians like Per Seyersted and Emily Toth a chance to research and document extensive biographical information about the 19th century writer (Petry 2). *The Awakening*, her most famous text, was met with mixed reviews by her contemporaries, and Chopin was hurt by the negative responses, which were particularly harsh (8-10). The novel is now widely read as a realistic local color representation of New Orleans Creole culture and

gendered social conventions, and more recently as 19th century texts that blends literary movements of the time, from romanticism, to transcendentalism, and to naturalism (Leder 237). As the oldest primary text in this project, it provides us with an earlier, rare example of a Mestiza character in Southern Literature.

The character Mariequita in Kate Chopin's *The Awakening* has largely been ignored by literary critics despite the importance of her presence in the text. Though Edna, the protagonist, is obviously the focus novel, it is her interactions with other characters that initiate her transformation, and in fact, this dynamic state cannot exist without the noted presence of the Other—the mirror that points out the need to and for change, and forms a potential model for this change. Critics have focused on Edna's sexual awakening and the limited maneuverability a patriarchal society creates for women who question gender norms, in effect, truncating Edna's full transformation. Recently though, critics have started to analyze the text as a critique of Edna's and society's inability to achieve cultural awakenings, describing the text as “equally a tale of missed opportunities for racial and cultural awakenings” (Dingledine 199) and the local color novel as a way for Chopin to demonstrate “how fiercely the fortresses of southern identity resist any challenge to its interlocking hierarchies [of race and gender]” (Ewell, “Unlinking Race and Gender” 31). Read as a “white woman's” text, centering both culture and race, Chopin's work becomes a critique of Edna's inability to utilize a cultural third space for personal transformation and cross-cultural connections.

Edna's entrance into a cultural third space occurs during her vacation to Grand Isle, a bourgeois vacation spot on the Gulf of Mexico. Here she encounters Mariequita, a personified symbol of the third space, but this pivotal meeting is preceded by Edna's reluctance to accept the cultural differences of the area itself. The Gulf is a “distinctive border zone” that the “*isleños* of

eastern Louisiana (originally Canary Islanders), the former Mexicans of the Texas coast, and many other Spanish speakers experienced [as] a continuous cultural region long after it ceased politically to be a *Seno Mexicano*” (Gruesz 490, 477). Chopin’s novel takes place not long after U.S. Mexican War: “While the U.S. defined itself as the world’s first independent and anti-colonial nation-state, it simultaneously incorporated many of the defining features of European colonial networks—including the color line—into its economic and cultural life (Sing and Schmidt 5). Despite the new racial demographics of the U.S., racial ideologies struggled to maintain hegemony. The South’s position near Mexico forced Southerners to question the role of Brownness in a U.S. White/Black racial binary.

Indoctrinated by imperialistic views of nature and natives as lazy, listless, and primitive, Edna responds with suspicion and bourgeois adherence to social codes. After a night of wine, Edna settles into a hammock where she begins to feel “like one who awakens gradually out of a dream, a delicious, grotesque, impossible dream, to feel again the realities pressing into her soul” (556). The temporary release from oppression that the island provides is overcome by the realities of the life Edna lives off the island. In the midst of alternative social norms, Edna is unable to learn “the relative unimportance of material gain, the strength of community and past, and the almost magical peace gained through opening to others rather than retreating entirely to the self” (Dingledine 206). Edna retreats into herself “yielding to the conditions which crowded her in” (556). After a “troubled and feverish sleep” Edna awakens to a sense of “something unattainable” sensing a transformation (557). But transformation requires self-reflection, and Edna is “not seeking refreshment or help from any source, either external or from within. She was blindly following whatever impulse moved her, as if she had placed herself in alien hands for direction, and freed her soul of responsibility”(557). This unrest signals the beginnings of a

transformation, but only the first step. As the novel progresses, Chopin reveals Edna's inability to transcend this level into a more complete transformation, and it is this fatal flaw that prevents her liberation.

Our protagonist Edna meets Mariequita, on the way to *Caminada Chênrière* with Robert, the character who awakens her sexual desire. Earlier that morning, Edna had sent for Robert, something she had never done before, and the narrator reveals that Edna "did not appear conscious that she had done anything unusual in commanding his presence" revealing a subtle but important change in Edna's behavior (558). Robert does not seem to interpret anything unusual, but "his face was suffused with a quite glow when he met her" implying that he is nonetheless affected by the request. After coffee together, the two join the group to *Caminada Chênrière* where Edna first meets Mariequita who is described as a "young barefooted Spanish, girl, with a red kerchief on her head and a basket on her arm" (558). She has a "round, sly, piquant face and pretty black eyes," small hands and broad, coarse feet (558). Edna immediately notices that Mariequita does not attempt to hide her feet which are dirty from "sand and slime" (558). Edna's list describing Mariequita reveals differences in race and class, as well as varying cultural values ascribed to these identities. Bound by the cult of true womanhood, defined by the "tenets of purity, piety, submissiveness and domesticity," Edna immediately notices the racial and cultural differences that define women of color as Other to white women: Mariequita is not bound by rules to hide her feet, nor is she ashamed to be seen in this state as a white woman would be made to feel (Birnbaum 214).

One of the sailors, Beaufelet, is annoyed to have Mariequita on the boat claiming she is taking up room. The narrator reveals that in reality, Beaufelet is angry with Monsieur Farival who perceives himself the better sailor. Social codes prevent Beaufelet from arguing with

Farival, but permit and even encourage the anger to be directed at a lower class woman of color. Sensing the tension, Mariequita is “saucy the next, moving her head up and down, making ‘eyes’ at Robert and making ‘mouths’ at Beaudalet” (559). Mariequita’s actions may initially be confusing to the contemporary reader. According to *A Dictionary of English Etymology* “making mouths” is derived from the French expression “to mock” with utterances or pouts (427). From a Latin American perspective, at the risk of presentism, the mouth is used to point (a pucker motion and slight nod are used to indicate to who or what the speaker is referring). This seems to support Edna’s view of Mariequita as “saucy” as she is falsely apologetic to Beaudalet but then appears to mock him with Robert.

Mariequita confidently subverts a gendered status quo and Edna admires this minor act of rebellion from a woman who is dominated by a man for no real reason other than emotional release. Chopin writes, “Edna liked it all. She looked Mariequita up and down, from her ugly brown toes to her pretty black eyes, and back again” (559). Rather than a quick glance, Edna is staring, intrigued by Mariequita. Noticing this, Mariequita queries as to why Edna stares at her and asks if she is Robert’s sweetheart, assuming that jealousy may be the cause of the stare. This reaction could be read as a learned response from Mariequita who has come to understand her status as a sexual rival to white women and their stares as an implication of her sexual intentions and character. Chopin reveals to us the effects of the colonizing stare on marginalized groups, and in particular, the ways in which this stare sends gendered messages of sexual rivalry that keep women of different races from forging bonds.

Robert denies a romantic relationship with Edna by revealing that she is married with children, and Mariequita brings up a story of another married woman who ran off with her lover. Robert evokes a myth of marital fidelity and commitment to family, but Mariequita quickly

dismisses this explanation through her understanding of this as a false myth. The narrator states that “no one present understood what they said,” (558) but readers are given insight into their conversation free from the language barrier. Though Edna does not know what they are talking about, the narrator, through Mariequita and her conversation with Robert, allows the reader a more subversive view of love and marriage, and a foreshadowing of Edna’s future actions in the novel. Mariequita articulates a hint of what Edna wants, but only for the reader’s and Robert’s comprehension, not for Edna’s. The linguistic barrier positions Edna as an outsider who must rely only on visual observations, limiting her access to the third space. Unlike Edna, the reader is allowed greater access through the narrator’s translation. As such, the text itself acts a third space where readers can engage in the cultural exchange while witnessing Edna’s alienation from it.

As the vacationing group sails to the *Caminada Chênière*, Edna feels “as if she were borne away from some anchorage which had held her fast, whose chains had been loosening—had snapped the night before when the mystic spirit was abroad, leaving her free to drift whithersoever she chose to set her sails” (559-560). Robert begins to speak only to Edna, ignoring Mariequita, and underscoring Edna’s emerging liberation as attractive to him. Edna realizes she would like to spend time alone with Robert and he invites her to several outings, offering to take her to Grande Terre at night, describing a romantic moonlit sail where the “Gulf spirit will whisper to you in which of these islands the treasures are hidden” (560). Playing along, Edna laughs and says, “I’d give it all to you [...] Pirate gold isn’t a thing to be hoarded or utilized. It is something to squander and throw to the four winds, for the fun of seeing the golden specks fly” (560). Flushed, Robert responds, “We’d share it, and scatter it together” (560). The two use romanticized myths of pirates and treasure to initiate flirting and fantasy, but it is the invention of a “Gulf spirit” that introduces the novel’s Mexicanist presence and mythologizes the

Gulf as transformative and liberating space (Thornton 96). Through this scene, Chopin reveals Edna's commitment to myth and fantasy, rather than rooting herself in the reality and potential of the third space.

As Edna and Robert flirt, Edna notices that Mariequita has become sullen and eventually walks away, "casting a look of childish ill-humor and reproach" at Robert (561). Edna accepts the socially dictated role of compulsory sexual rival, and Mariequita suddenly transforms from object of admiration to childish Other, defeated by Edna's sexual skill. Society's positioning of the two women as sexual rivals (and maintained by Robert) isolates Edna from Mariequita. Rather than fully use this third space to develop empathy and self-awareness, Edna reacts in the same colonizing way as Beaufort, marginalizing Mariequita for momentary emotional gain.

Edna and Robert continue their flirtations into the evening, but at a dinner service the next day, she is informed that Robert has decided to go to Mexico for business. Seated across from him, her "face was a blank picture of bewilderment, which she never thought of disguising" and Robert returns the glance "embarrassed and uneasy" (567). News of Robert's imminent departure stirs up discussion of Mexico. Madame Ratignolle warns Robert about Mexicans calling them a "treacherous people, unscrupulous and revengeful," admitting that she has known only one Mexican, a tamale vendor, that she imparted trust because of his soft-spoken ways, but who later murdered his wife (569). Though Edna is more concerned with Robert leaving her, the scene reveals stereotypes of Mexicans and the normalizing of broad cultural stereotypes based on singular and individual events that appear to confirm these stereotypes. Edna once again turns inward, isolating herself from the dinner group by focusing on her own sense of loss.

A few days later, Edna is on the beach with Mademoiselle Reisz discussing the rivalry between the brothers Robert and Victor. She relays the story of a Spanish girl whom Victor

“considered that he had some sort of claim upon” (576). Victor encounters Robert with the girl, though Reisz cannot remember exactly what the two were doing, and he becomes so jealous and insulting that Robert “gave him a thrashing on the spot that has kept him comparatively in order for a good while” (577). Edna asks if the girl was Mariequita, and Reisz confirms that it was, describing her as “a sly one and a bad one” (577). The implication is that Mariequita was at fault for the scuffle confirms stereotypes of Latinas as sexually conniving and disruptive to social order. It is important to note that after the U.S. Mexican War, Mexican women were central to miscegenation debate as marriage-worthy for white men (which would have undoubtedly created tension between white men and women, and Mexican women and white women) (Mendible 8). Reisz, therefore, offers the white female voice of this debate that views Mexican women as romantic foils to white women and as trouble-makers to the white male homosocial order.

Edna decides she’s had enough of Reisz’s “venom” and goes for a swim to escape from her. For both the reader and Edna herself, it is unclear why Reisz’s story angered her so much, making her “depressed, almost unhappy” (577). We cannot know for sure if Reisz has her facts correct, and she admits to not remembering all the details, but as a narrative strategy, Chopin gives readers a glimpse of Edna’s own confusion and vague emotional responses. It may appear that Edna is jealous of Robert’s involvement with Mariequita, or perhaps she is tired of Reisz’s gossipy tendencies, but either interpretation signals a perceived connection between her own status within a sexist culture and the gossip that surrounds Mariequita, creating an anxiety within Edna that is difficult for her to articulate, or even fully acknowledge: All women are subject of gossip, sexually policed, and ultimately treated as public property in the economy of romance and marriage. As an escape from Reisz, Edna decides to go for a swim, which she had not intended on doing that day. In the water, she swims with an “abandon that thrilled and

invigorated her” (577), reiterating the theme of water as freeing and foreshadowing the end of the novel.

Images of Mexico and Mexicans are repeated when Robert returns from Vera Cruz after a financially disappointing trip. Edna admires a tobacco pouch given to him by a Mexican girl, using it as an excuse to discuss Mexican women, and in veiled ways, Mariequita: “They are very handsome, I suppose, those Mexican women; very picturesque, with their black eyes and their lace scarfs” (638). Her use of “black eyes” and “lace scarfs” mirrors the description of Mariequita in the previous scene on *Caminada Chênrière*. Robert responds, “Some are; others are hideous. Just as you find women everywhere” (638). Edna continues to ask questions about the gifter, asking what she looked like and if he visited her house. Robert minimizes the Mexican girl’s status, calling her unimportant and “ordinary,” returning the pouch to his pocket, “as if to put away the subject with the trifle that brought it up” (638). For white men, successful business trips to Mexico were a masculine rite of passage, with Veracruz serving as a commercial rival, especially with New Orleans (Barrish, Gruesz). Edna’s concerns also display the female concern of Mexico as a sexual rival. Robert’s return reignites Edna’s jealousies and repositions her as sexual rival. Read against the scene with Mademoiselle Reisz, this scene reveals that perhaps it was, in fact, a reaction to Robert’s potential relationship with Mariequita that led Edna to escape into the water. As Robert leaves after the brief visit, Edna is struck by a “transcendently seductive vision of a Mexican girl” and feels more isolated from Robert than before (640).

In the final chapter of the novel, after Robert has left Edna, Mariequita is one of the last people to encounter Edna before her final swim. Mariequita and Victor are working together fixing one of the galleries. Victor describes the dinner he had at Edna’s while Mariequita hands him tools, sitting near him, with dangling bare feet. He remembers the luxurious dinner and Edna

as “blazing with beauty and diamonds” (652). Mariequita becomes jealous, deducing that Victor is in love with Edna, and he allows her to think this. It is interesting that Mariequita refers to Edna refers to her as “Mrs. Pontellier” rather than “Edna,” emphasizing race and class differences. In the novel the narrative voice signals the protagonist’s growing sense-of-self by shifting from the use of “Mrs. Pontellier” at the beginning of the novel, to “Edna” by the novel’s end (Toth 659). Mariequita’s recognition of Edna’s status, marked by the temporary return of her formal name after a discussion of her lavish wealth, reminds readers of Edna’s social position and bourgeois world that she currently inhabits as “Mrs. Pontellier,” as viewed by the Other. Understanding his ability to construct a sexual rival for Mariequita, Victor conjures an image of Edna that implies a sexualized male gaze. Mariequita threatens to “go off and leave [Victor] to his fine ladies” (652). She asserts her sexual independence by citing the many men, some married, she can run off with, “confirming her status as the only female character in the novel who takes adulterous sex for granted as an ever-present possibility” (Barrish 65); in response, Victor asserts his masculinity by threatening to kill one of these men with his hammer, pleasing the crying Mariequita with his show of jealousy. Like Robert, Victor positions Mariequita and Edna as sexual rivals, but in this instant, Mariequita seemingly triumphs, though it should be noted that, like the scene with Robert, she is described as childish and ill-humored. As Edna approaches, Victor and Mariequita are described as “youngsters” who are “dumb with amazement” at her presence (652).

When Edna first appears, Mariequita is jealous that Edna and Victor may be lovers meeting for a rendezvous, but seeing Edna’s indifference to Victor alleviates these suspicions. No longer sexual rivals for any of the male characters in the text, Mariequita is now free to

admire Edna: “She contemplated with the greatest interest this woman who gave the most sumptuous dinners in America, and who had all the men in New Orleans at her feet” (652).

Edna seems indifferent to Mariequita as well, no longer reacting to her with curious admiration. Mariequita notices that Edna is different in this last scene and admires her, a reversal of the scene where the two first meet. Having no interest in Victor, Edna does not view Mariequita as a sexual rival and is therefore free to displace her from any equal footing by viewing her with indifference as childlike, returning her to status of socially inferior Other. This is further emphasized by the diminutive name Mariequita is given throughout the entire novel and the use of the formal “Mrs. Pontellier” in this final scene. When Edna suggests she would like to go for a swim, Mariequita runs to get her some towels, without any hesitation, fulfilling her gender, class, and racial role.

Edna changes and approaches the water alone. In this final scene, whiteness is affirmed as Edna scans the “white” beach, strips off her clothes and savors the water on her “white feet” and lifting her “white body” into the waves as she swims deeper into the water (654). Edna is alone on the beach, the “population textually held at bay” through her “fundamental commitment to the status of whiteness” revealed in her emphasis on her white surroundings and her own white body (Birnbaum 316). Though Edna enters the water contemplating her gendered role in society through her thoughts of Robert, her husband, and her children, it is clear that race is an unconscious concern as is revealed through Chopin’s narration. Edna appropriates the image of the barefoot and brown-skinned Mariequita to achieve the feeling of freedom and liberation she originally associated with her. Mariequita teases Victor about the many men she can run off with, something Edna would never be permitted to do in her white bourgeois Southern society. This conversation occurs after a discussion between the two of the upper class dinners Edna

attends while adorned in jewels, emphasizing the class differences between Edna and Mariequita. Entering the water, Edna is now barefoot like Mariequita, her whiteness is nevertheless emphasized to imply that Edna's bare feet symbolize a freedom from gender restrictions, but that still relies on racial hierarchies: Edna may want to *be like* Mariequita, but she does not want *to be her*. Part of the infantilization of Mariequita (and Victor in this scene) is in part due to Edna's realization that her infatuations with Robert, Victor, and Mariequieta were juvenile; as an adult woman, Edna realizes she was involving herself and mirroring her life after people who have just barely reached adulthood. But certainly, race and class are also a factor in her distancing from Mariequita. Barbara Ewell discusses how Edna's rebellion is in part possible because of the black servants that allow her the freedom from daily responsibilities and concerns. This commitment to racial hierarchies inhibits complete subversion of gendered hierarchies because of the interlocking nature of these oppressions. Similarly, Edna's appropriation of Mariequita as a sexual archetype prevents any real challenges to this hierarchy, denying the potential of both personal and social change.² By emphasizing the whiteness of the landscape and Edna, Chopin allows Edna to embrace the whiteness the South, but in the last scene this whiteness drowns her, signaling that the whiteness is not simply part of Edna's consciousness, is the overwhelming and suffocating whiteness of the South. The scene could be read as the color white as blinding, symbolizing a South blinding itself of potential transformation through white-centric norms and oppressive mores. Through Edna's last scene, Chopin contrasts Mestizas against a blinding whiteness of the South with Edna as the embodiment of the space between them. Because the whiteness is overwhelming though, Edna chooses to remove herself from these constrictions symbolized by removing her upper class garb, she enters the water of the Gulf of Mexico to escape these norms as she did in the scene with Reisz, and drowns herself rather than allow the

whiteness to drown her with its limiting and restrictive paradigm that traps white women who do not want to conform to these Southern norms. This prevents her full transformation, but by choosing her own death (implied by her swimming to Mexico, an impossible feat), Edna exerts a type of control over her life—with few options, she chooses to escape through death rather than adopt and perpetuate race, gender, and class oppressions. As a result, the novel's mythical Mexicanist presence and subversive *mestizaje* as symbols of fantasy and freedom, contribute to the discussion of changing dynamics of Southern femininity and encourages discourse of new forms of femininity that learn from cross-cultural contact. By the novel's end, Edna is physically immersed in the Gulf's third space between the South and Mexico, and through the ambiguous ending, Chopin allows Edna to remain there, free from cultural trappings.

Margaret A. Graham's *Mercy Me*

Margaret A. Graham is a Christian fiction and non-fiction writer and an occasional newspaper columnist who resides in Sumter, South Carolina. With an interest in theology and contemporary Christian writing, she has taught Bible studies and held writing workshops in schools and churches for 31 years and travels the country speaking to Women's groups and book clubs. Her most recent works of fiction, the Esmeralda series, relates Christian lessons through the use of humor in overcoming everyday trials and tribulations.

While relatively unknown in academic circles, Graham's Esmeralda series has received substantial attention in Christian book clubs and libraries, beginning with *Mercy Me* (2003), its sequel *Good Heavens* (2004), and the latest installment *Land Sakes* (2005). A fourth text in the series is forthcoming. Esmeralda, the feisty protagonist in this series, is from the fictional town of Live Oaks, South Carolina. Set in the present day, the series relates Esmeralda's daily experiences of learning and teaching lessons of faith. She is a white, middle class, 60-ish widow

who has become a kind of matron of the town, volunteering and helping neighbors as a member of the Willing Workers Sunday School Class in the Apostolic Church. Retired and without children (her only child died immediately after birth), she lives alone, passing the time sitting on her glider, drinking tea, and admiring her garden. Along with the overt Christian project, Margaret A. Graham fashions an idealized image of the South—a quaint, family- and community-oriented South—seemingly trapped in a romanticized past. It is only through pop culture referents and contemporary social problems (cell phones, AIDS crisis) that readers are reminded that Esmeralda’s story is a modern one.

Beginning with *Mercy Me*, Graham creates an image of a South and a Southern way of life that is threatened by outside, non-Christian influences. Through the sequels, we witness the South’s potential to influence (in positive, faith-based ways) the rest of the country as Esmeralda moves to North Carolina to work with addicts from all over the United States (in *Good Heavens* [2004]), and then onto a cross-country trip that ends with a cruise to Alaska (in *Land Sakes* [2005]), bringing her down-home Southern wisdom everywhere she goes.

Using first-person narration, Esmeralda’s worldview appears simplified, and as readers find out, she had to drop out of school in the eighth grade when the local Mill closed leaving many in need of income. Graham’s community of Live Oaks shrinks ever-smaller because Esmeralda only associates with a few members of the Church and the Willing Workers. Coincidentally, Esmeralda lives in Live Oaks, and as several critics of *The Awakening* have pointed out, *Caminada Chênrière* means “the island of live oaks” (Dingledine 202). The Live Oak is a Southern symbol of strength because of its resistance to hurricanes. The setting for the two protagonists’ potential transformations both occur in areas named for this symbol, but both locations also act as isolated areas—an island geographically and culturally separated, and a

town cut off from and resistant to the outside world. Although the setting in *Mercy Me* superficially portrays a charming and old-fashioned existence, several social inequalities and ideological contradictions are unintentionally brought to light, both Esmeralda and the author.

The small, church community of Live Oaks is mainly white middle class, with few outsiders. Inequalities in the town go unquestioned by the narrative voice in order to naturalize, both biologically and through God's mandates, challenges faced by citizens in the town. Race, gender, and class privileges are taken for granted as Esmeralda views the obstacles others must overcome as evidence of God's will and vindication for her own unwavering faith.

In Graham's Live Oaks, there are only two persons of color, though it is not through overt, descriptive narration that readers find this out. Elijah, the only Black character mentioned in Live Oaks, is an older gardener and handyman. His main source of income is his mule, which he uses for plowing until it dies of old age. Esmeralda hugs the grieving Elijah, promising to make sure his mule gets a proper burial. One of the Willing Workers reminds Esmeralda that "it was not proper for a white woman to hug a colored man" (*Mercy Me*, 59). Esmeralda retorts, "I never noticed he was colored" (59) (of course she doesn't mention that "colored" is an outdated term). Despite the fact that white characters are often described by hair or eye color (in a general descriptive manner), people of color in the texts only have racial markers mentioned through other narrative ploys, underscoring a type of Christian "colorblindness" important to Graham's project.

Though Esmeralda comments on outdated modes of interracial etiquette, other inequalities remain unquestioned. Elijah lives on the outskirts of town in a small shack away from the rest of the population. There is no critical mention of why this is—though historically aware readers know that this is the ripple effect of the plantation era. Not only is he physically

segregated, but rarely do others visit him to socialize. Interaction is limited to the small talk that occurs during his service to his patrons. It is through Eliza's labor that Esmeralda's lush garden even exists, a fact clarified when she is reminded of him every time she admires it. His existence in her mind is only tied to the product of his labor.

Reminiscent of Harriet Beecher Stowe's asexual Uncle Tom, Eliza speaks in a different dialect from others in the town ("I do's it [hoe] from sunup to sundown"). As Toni Morrison notes, "the way Africanist idiom is used to establish difference [can help us to] explicate the ways in which specific themes, fears, forms of consciousness, and class relationships are embedded [within it to construct black characters] as alien" (52). Eliza not only represents Graham's ideal Black man (asexual and hardworking; non-threatening), but also exists to buttress Esmeralda as the ideal white woman: Southern, Christian, and colorblind. It is through her friend that his race is revealed, but Graham also uses the scene to demonstrate Esmeralda's progressiveness as a Southern woman when she reacts to what she sees as an outdated form of interracial etiquette. Rather than critique this rule itself, she deploys a colorblind argument that does little to critique the very notion of the rule and those who unwaveringly maintain it.

Eliza exists in Graham's text to further define Esmeralda, and Esmeralda assumes a relationship of mutual respect and familiarity, but it is clear that she knows very little about Eliza and what he does in his free time: Esmeralda (and really Graham) needs Eliza to be passive, quiet, and dedicated to his work (it is mentioned that he works from sun-up to sun-down, but there is no mention as to why he must work such grueling hours and at whose insistence). He is there to prove her anti-racist tendencies, not to act with his own agency. But this only goes so far, because Esmeralda does not question the rule that forbids Eliza from riding in a car with white women.

Like Edna, Esmeralda is unable to embrace the possibility of a racial or cultural awakening. Esmeralda is also bound by the cult of true womanhood, with only minor contemporary changes that allow her to be forceful rather than submissive. She views herself as a progressive Southern woman because she is not actively racist. Unlike *The Awakening*, *Mercy Me* does not read as critique of this tragic flaw, but juxtaposed next to each other, both reveal how race and class privileges blind the two female protagonists to these possibilities.

Esmeralda is outside sitting on her front porch after supper when she first encounters Maria. Maria is walking down the street, eventually stopping under a streetlight. Esmeralda is curious as to why she stops, assuming she needed to “hitch up her pantyhose or something” so she cranes her neck, “trying to see if she was anybody I knew—I knew nearly every woman in Live Oaks” (79). Thinking about it, she realizes that no woman she knows “would be out that late at night by themselves” (79). Continuing to watch from the porch, Esmeralda concludes that the woman must be lost. Until, that is, headlights of a car reveal that “this woman was not dressed right” with barely enough clothing “to hide her nakedness” (79). Realizing what the woman is doing standing under a streetlight, Esmeralda exclaims, “Well, I don’t have to be hit over the head with a sledgehammer to know a thing when I see it. That woman was nothing but a streetwalker!” (79). Unable to sleep, Esmeralda watches her for hours as she “plied her trade” (80). No cars stop, which Esmeralda calls “a credit to the community” (80). Maria finally gives up at four in the morning, and Esmeralda goes to bed “thoroughly disgusted” (80). In this first encounter, Esmeralda stares at Maria, a disruption to the town as an outsider and as symbol of immorality. Unlike Edna’s staring, Esmeralda’s results in repulsion, immediately judging and stigmatizing a woman she doesn’t know. Garland-Thomson describes this process as pushing others away based on perceived immoral or unnatural traits (45).

Unable to sleep, Esmeralda thinks about what she should do about the situation, deciding to keep the information to herself and “see how it went,” thinking that if she told anyone that “there was a prostitute in town and every woman in Live Oaks would lock up every husband or boyfriend they had got” demonstrating the fear of sexual competition and also stereotyping men as sexually weak, needing to be protected by pious women (80). The next night, Esmeralda stays up to spy again, her role altering from stalker to voyeur. This time Maria has a client in a white truck and Esmeralda is saddened that “such a thing was going on right under my nose,” (80) suggesting her role as moral police. When Esmeralda spots Maria again a week later, she decides she will hide in the bushes to get the license plate numbers of the client in the white truck (87). Esmeralda views it as her responsibility to intervene, at least in passive ways, to prevent the moral decay of her home town.

Outsiders in Graham’s texts are treated with suspicion and create a sense of paranoia within the text. They are described as immoral migrant groups (Gypsies, hobos, roving bands of outlaws) that bring destruction and crime. Several secondary narratives occur within the texts about the negative impacts of these groups on the town or describe them as ever-present threats circulating around Live Oaks, creating a more exclusionary representation of small-town Southern life. Within this Us/Them binary, it is also important to note the importance of place, home, and community in the moral constitution of the characters. Outsiders are not just non-believers; they also lack the moral backbone that can only be created and maintained by the constant support (read: surveillance) of a close-knit community.

Esmeralda’s paranoia extends to xenophobia when she displays her distrust of foreigners. When meeting a German man, she automatically links him to the Nazi party (*Good Heavens*); Romanians are all Gypsies, and all Gypsies are con-artists and thieves (*Land Sakes*); and she

knows Italians by the smell of garlic on their breath (*Land Sakes*). Only with the German character does Esmeralda feel any shame or embarrassment about her own limited world view, and only briefly so, affirming the stereotypes by assuming she's met an exception to the rule, the exact conclusion she eventually reaches with Maria. Esmeralda also displays a suspicion of "big government" and is distrustful of bureaucrats.

Committed to her plan, Esmeralda sits on a stool behind her hedges with pencil and pad in hand, close enough to read license plates. Maria arrives, and with a closer vantage point, Esmeralda is able to describe her in detail: "Her skirt was short, and them skinny legs were wobbling on heels as high as ever I'd seen. There was something draped around her shoulders like a scarf, and it looked like that was all she had on. Mercy me, I had seen such women on TV, but seeing one live was something I could do without" (89). Esmeralda's class privilege reveals that her life has been relatively free of crime, having only witnessed it on TV. Watching her closer, Esmeralda sees that she is relatively young, but with an old face, and "twitching like a scairt rabbit" (89). Despite acknowledging Maria's fragile condition, Esmeralda reveals that "Under any other circumstances, I would've felt sorry for her" (89). Esmeralda is not only ignorant of the social trappings that may lead a woman to prostitution, but she also equates profession with moral fiber, permitting her to deny empathy to the woman despite her physical frailness.

Esmeralda cannot leave without Maria seeing her, so she is forced to wait as long as Maria is by the lamppost. Finally, at about three in the morning the white pickup truck drives up, and distracted by her "disgust," Esmeralda nearly forgets to take down the license number (90). Taking the plate numbers the next day to the Sheriff, it is revealed that the truck belongs to the sheriff's son. Thinking quickly, she tells the sheriff that she was merely looking for the owner to

offer to buy the truck in an effort to avoid embarrassing him (91). Horace, the Sheriff's son finds out about her inquiries and visits her house, labeling her a nosy woman and calling her Christianity into question: "You don't live in the real world, Esmeralda. You and them religious pokes have got nothing better to do than take away the right of people like me. A man has got a right to his own kind of pleasure if it don't hurt nobody else. What harm is it to you?" (94). Esmeralda derails his critiques by offering him some tea. Horace points out her voyeurism and hypocrisy, confirming that she is naïve to certain social problems. Horace threatens to burn down Elijah's shack if she tells anyone. Outraged, she yells, "Are you threatening me? How dare you!" and kicks him off her property, calling out that that his sin will "find" him (95). It is interesting that Horace threatens Elijah rather than Esmeralda herself, and she still responds as though it is a personal threat.

Afterwards, Esmeralda feels ashamed of herself, considering that Jesus would "love that whoremonger until that sorry person gave up and repented" (96). Esmeralda decides to stop spying on Maria claiming she had "lost interest in the streetwalker" but still occasionally looks to see if she is under the lamppost. She checks again before bed and a few times during the night betraying her statement that she has lost interest, but Maria does not show up again (105). She continues to watch out for the woman, thinks a lot about her, and prays for her. She is still confused about the situation: "I just couldn't understand why she sold her body when she could be working an honest job. Standing on a street corner in all kinds of weather, begging men to have their way, well, to me, that would be hell on earth. Not to mention the fact that such a life was sure to lead to hell below. I knew some hookers made good money, but I'd beg before I'd do that" (110). Esmeralda's strict sexual mores and class privilege inhibit her from understanding

Maria's position, focusing her blame onto Maria's character rather than external forces of inequality.

Early the next morning, Elijah shows up at her door to ask for help with an emergency at his place. They drive to the edge of town and pull up to a boxcar near his house. When the children see Elijah they come running to hug him. He tells her there is a sick lady in the boxcar. Elijah doesn't know her name, but Esmeralda realizes immediately she is the mother of the children, the implication being that skin color links them. Unable to feel a strong pulse, they bring her to the car and Esmeralda notes "In the daylight she looked like somebody out of one of them concentration camps, her eyes sunk in her head, her lips drawn back over her teeth" (114). Bringing the children ride with them, she describes them as "dark skinned and had black eyes—just about her prettiest little things I ever seen" (115). Esmeralda's focus on their dark skin and eyes belies her earlier insistence on colorblindness and demonstrates an awareness of their contrast to her whiteness.

After asking about the family, Elijah tells Esmeralda that they just wandered in one day and set up in the boxcar. Elijah doesn't know Maria's name because "Don't none of them speak English" and Esmeralda responds "Must be Mexicans," thus revealing a Mexicanist presence as well as the conflation of multiple Latina identities in the use of "Mexican" (115). Elijah reluctantly mentions she works nights, underscoring an understanding of the moral judgments likely to be made about her, and Esmeralda figures out she is the streetwalker. Worried about Maria leaving the kids alone at night, Elijah assures her that he had looked in on them occasionally. As the only other person of color in the town, Elijah understands Maria's social position, and this facilitates a type of friendship between the two with him keeping her existence

a secret from the rest of the town. Though Esmeralda assumes her community includes Elijah, it is clear he does not feel the same way, and this is underscored by the fact that the two characters of color are spatially separated from the rest of the town, a message that is lost on Esmeralda.

At the hospital Esmeralda is asked to fill out paperwork for Maria: “I had to make up a name. The only Spanish name I could think of was Carmen Miranda, so I wrote that and gave her age as twenty-three. *What difference does it make?* I thought. I didn’t have time to answer a lot of questions” (117).³ In *Life on the Hyphen* (1994) Gustavo Perez Firmat discusses Carmen Miranda as the image of the homogenous Latina identity. Miranda was Portuguese-born, but raised in Brazil. She was known in the U.S. for playing multiple (or sometimes ambiguous) Latina nationalities; often described in animalistic ways, she embodied Latin America for the white and male Hollywood gaze while also acting as a symbol of the “public Latina body” (Mendible 10-12). Though Graham’s scene is supposed to be read as humorous, it serves to underscore the lack of agency given to Maria López as she is not only spoken for, but re-named. As readers we are asked to be complicit in this act, as this scene of a woman dying of AIDS is used for comic fodder. This is played up when a nurse asks “Who is Carmen Miranda?” and bewildered at her lack of pop cultural knowledge, Esmeralda responds, “Honey, Carmen Miranda is the most famous singer and dancer in the whole U.S. of A.!” leading to humorous descriptions of nurses treating Maria as a celebrity (118). Interesting though, and probably not Graham’s intention, is her use of the name “Maria López” in the naming of the character which is an extremely stereotypical name for a Latina character. Though originating from an act of ignorance, Maria’s celebrity status as Carmen Miranda does provide her better care than she would have received as Maria López.

With the kids in need of a place to stay, the town Pastor and his wife, who have been unable to have children of their own, agree to take them. Despite Elijah's connection to them and their bond with him, no discussion is made of making him guardian. Elijah refuses to leave them, "No'm. I'm going with the chillum. It'll be a strange place for them, and they need me to spend a little time with them till they settle in" (122). Through the town's Spanish teacher, Esmeralda learns that the patient's name is Maria López and that she is from Guatemala having come to the U.S. after an earthquake that took the lives of her entire family (127). Esmeralda spends time in the hospital caring for Maria until she is told the hospital must release her due to incomplete records and need for the room space. Esmeralda decides to take Maria home and receives help from the entire town.

During moments of lucidity, Maria cries for her children, and in an effort to calm her down, they bring the children to visit. Upon seeing the children, Esmeralda narrates, "I tell you, those children never looked so good. They were scrubbed clean, their hair was cut and combed, and the clothes they were wearing wouldn't made any discount store proud. Those were three beautiful children" (136). Esmeralda's and the towns beneficence is confirmed in the appearance of the children. During this scene, all three children are finally named, with no indication as to how the Pastor and his wife addressed them before this scene.

Learning that Maria is dying of AIDS, the town has the children tested and Esmeralda decides she must try to find their father, because without him, the children might get sent back to Guatemala, a horrible fate in her eyes. This threat is multiplied by her fear of government: "*I'll see to it those precious children are spared the clutches of big government*" (151).

Through the translator, we find out about Maria's past as a migrant worker following her boyfriend after the earthquake. This group of migrants (and by extension, all migrant workers)

are described as a “rough bunch, stealing and drinking, fighting” running from the law after murder and theft (155). When her boyfriend dies from a drug overdose, the men in the group begin hitting on her, angering the women in the group who abandon her on their way through Live Oaks. Graham could have easily ended the description of Maria’s tragic past after the death of Maria’s boyfriend, which would have sufficiently explained a position of isolation that Maria needed to overcome. Instead, Graham further condemns both male and female migrant workers, suggesting that Maria is the exception in a barbaric culture (and therefore worthy of Esmeralda’s sympathies). In *Race, Gender, and the Politics of Skin Tone* (2005), Margaret L. Hunter discusses this U.S. tendency to scapegoat non-white societies as more misogynistic:

Mexican men’s constructed hypermasculinity has been an alibi for white men and their own patriarchal power. Instead of recognizing the real barriers and discrimination that Chicanos face in social and economic arenas, whites turn to machismo as an explanation for Mexican Americans’ lack of mobility. Further, white men and women can divert attention from their own patriarchal attitudes and practices by focusing on the concept of machismo and Chicanos. (34)

Graham chooses to perpetuate this myth of the more-sexist Latino, and though she critiques the white men who patronize Maria’s prostitution, she does not situate the acts of her white male citizens within a system of patriarchal oppression. She portrays Latino men as part of a naturally lascivious culture, while white men act singularly and just need Christianity to reform their ways. In other words, white male sexism is somehow normal sexism (a “boys will be boys” type of gender oppression), whereas non-white, specifically Latin American, sexism is different, worse, and worthy of critique. Though Graham does not use the word “machismo,” it is clear that the gendered and racialized connotations of the term, and its hegemonic use in U.S. discourse, have been internalized and has influenced her writing. As the social commentator, the translator says, “Esmeralda, I know being a hooker is a bad sin, but what else could Maria do? I can see why she

wound up like she did—couldn't speak the language, had no way to feed her children. Afraid of the law..." (155). Esmeralda responds, "It's sad, Lucy, it's sad. And to think such as that went on right under our noses" (155).⁴ Despite the lesson in social injustice, Esmeralda continues to see the incident as a community problem, rather than extending the story into an example of collective oppression. The scene also reveals that Esmeralda distrusts any intrusion of "big government," but does not interpret her intrusive behavior in the lives of others in the same way, legitimizing her Southern Christian agenda.

Similar to the distancing used with Elijah's dialect, the use of an unfamiliar language by both Chopin and Graham serves to mark Mariequita and Maria López as foreign and alien, evoking "tensions between speech and speechlessness" and establishing a cognitive split between speech and text, to reinforce class distinctions and otherness as well as assert privilege and power" (Morrison 52). Graham uses Maria López's Spanish to distance the character from others in the text and to signal a fear of modernity that is doubled by her stereotypically tragic backstory. Through the translator, it is revealed that the children were born in the U.S., making the adoption a real possibility. With Maria's death imminent, Esmeralda needs her to sign the adoption papers. The children arrive for a final visit, and Maria tells them to behave, to love Jesus, and to watch out for each other. Finally Maria frantically asks Pastor to take her kids. He exclaims, "Oh, thank her, Lucy. Thank her! Tell her we will love them and care for them and do everything we can to bring them up as she would want us to" (177). Through Lucy, Maria says she wants them to adopt the children so "they can never be sent back to Guatemala," confirming Esmeralda's perceptions of this option as unthinkable (178). With the problem of the adoption solved, Esmeralda focuses on saving Maria's soul before she dies. This successful conversion is

followed by Maria's death a little while later. Within moments, town members reject the idea of learning Spanish for the sake of the children, and commit to teaching them English (184).

Similar to post-colonial fiction and non-fiction narratives of the "Indian problem" of Latin America, Australia, and other colonized countries, or of the "Black problem" in the U.S. South, Live Oaks must deal with the "immigrant" problem. Shocking parallels to racist systems of "whitening" ideological cultures emerge in the remainder of *Mercy Me*. One of the first strategies of these systems is to reprogram the children in order to assimilate them into white culture--and to do this, the children must first be separated from the maternal figure through considerable distancing of language and space.

With their mother gone, the kids begin asking for Elijah, desiring the comfort of their closest guardian. Elijah is permitted a visit, and during Maria's memorial, the Pastor tells Elijah that he will always be part of their small family. The memorial closes with Maria's three children singing a song in front of the congregation that they have been taught. The final scene in the novel takes place in Esmeralda's home, with a visit from a friend who tells her how strong and compassionate she is, a blessing to the community.

Maria must die so that her children can be assimilated into the community, and the community maintains its white middle-class Christian hegemony without a constant reminder of Maria's position as a potentially subversive agent and the cultural structures that created her oppression. Through death, she is effectively and permanently silenced. Maria's death answers the prayers of the white, childless Pastor and his wife, symbols of the utmost piety and moral goodness. Maria is martyred, giving the ultimate sacrifice by dying and allowing her children to be placed in the hegemonic order and inherit the racist ideologies in order to maintain that order.

Live Oaks can return to its previous state, with a few new assimilated citizens. The children will not have their mother and will be separated from Elijah, the only other adult they know, but they will learn English and have nice clothes—a happy ending in Graham’s South which seems to fetishize and fantasize about speedy Hispanic assimilation.

Conclusion

Because racial constructions within regional identities are interdependent, it is impossible to discuss the Mestiza characters without also analyzing their juxtaposition to and against white and black characters in the texts. Similar to the Africanist presence, the Mestiza characters are used “to limn out and enforce the invention and implications of whiteness” and their stories used “as a means of meditation—both safe and risky—of [the authors’] own humanity” (Morrison 52, 53). Discussing Chopin Jessica Adams states that the author, “investigates ideological tenets of plantation life translated into urban spaces and postslavery society, the plantation and its racial and gender dynamics shadow the action without ever appearing” (25). I would argue that the image of the plantation shadows the action in Graham’s text, but with less critical analysis; instead, Live Oaks resemblance to a plantation system is constructed as nostalgic, as Adams suggests, “as part of a process that attempts to separate slavery from the meaning of the plantation” (17). Despite Graham’s portrayal, “slavery’s physical and psychic violence is always active within scenes of nostalgia,” but Graham deflects this more overtly onto the character of Maria López (17). Chopin on the other hand subtly acknowledges this plantation system and even links it to the ideological tents of Mexican labor in and outside the U.S., connecting racial projects that supported white Southern economics. A primary reason for this may be Chopin’s history in Louisiana, and New Orleans, in particular, which has been referred to as “not part of the South” by Southerners and non-Southerners (16). As a major multi-ethnic city and New

World port, New Orleans' "history of French and Spanish governance" (16) and "French and Catholic strains in its character" and its "Napoleonic civil code, its festivals of Mardi Gras and All Saints', its devotion to the culinary arts, and its general tolerance of liquor, languor, and lewdness" have set it apart from the rest of the South (Ewell, "Introduction" 10). While Chopin's work acknowledges both Black and Mestizo women (though briefly), Graham's text only involves one woman of color, implying only one type of woman of color can be visible at any given time in her Southern world. Comparing the two texts, one could argue that in Chopin's South, although there are no scenes that explicitly mention interaction between Black women and Mestizas, the possibility of this multi-ethnic and racial contact is implied within the margins. In contrast, Graham's South makes room for only one and erases the possibility of a South where non-white women of different races may interact outside the scope of white existence. For both authors, the Mestiza characters represent a wild, almost uncontrollable sexuality, but only Chopin permits her character to remain a part of a Southern landscape and gain a voice and agency in the last chapter of the novel, whereas Graham silences her permanently, erasing her existence along with that of Black women, effectively allowing white women to inherit a contemporary plantation-style South that destroys the presences of the Other and eliminates the cognitive dissonance that occurs within third space contact. In essence, both Edna and Esmeralda encounter this third space, but Edna acknowledges the inherent trappings in, complicating our understanding of interlocking oppressions, while Esmeralda not only silences, but destroys the potential within this space in order to maintain hegemonic control. More than a "space" however, this cultural contact is embodied by Mestiza characters that signal a potential model of empowerment and ego-transformation to Edna, and signal a risk of foreign modernity, but also an opportunity for ego-gratification to Esmeralda. Moreover, in seeking individual forms of

gender empowerment, either explicitly or implicitly, the two protagonists perpetuate a Western definition of female empowerment that excludes Third World Women from this discourse, effectively implying that *Mestizaje* is static and ahistorical (Mohanty, 2003). Returning to Anzaldúa's definition of a multicultural society constantly in flux, these novels demonstrate the way "Rigidity means death" (180). For Edna, the hegemonic power of white Southern femininity, revealed after the appearance of the Mestiza, means spiritual death. For Esmeralda, her rigid maintenance of Anglo- and Christian-centric South means death for the Mestiza. The novels, thus, reveal how white female Southerners include or exclude the Mestiza in their versions of the South, and because the texts were written over a century apart, they underscore the rigid ways the South continues to define itself through cultural and regional narratives. Both novels, consequently, reveal the ways in which aging Southern white women utilize the Mestiza to engage in and re-enter Southern communities that define female inclusion based on very rigid race, class, gender, and age criteria.

CHAPTER TWO

“With her soft mournful cries”: Mestizas that are Heard, But Not Seen in Tennessee Williams’s *A Streetcar Named Desire* and the Television Program *Designing Women*

Latinas are stereotyped in several ways and in several types of cultural mediums. In the previous chapter, I analyzed the image of the sexualized Mestiza in two Southern novels, both written by and about white women in the South. Though the novels were written in different centuries, both reveal how slim, pretty Mestizas are viewed by the white female protagonists negotiating their own roles in the South and the different assumptions they make of Mestizas in this understanding. While the images the exotic and seductive “spitfire” and immoral or victimized “tragic Mestiza” are staples in our cultural narratives, there are other, equally persistent stereotypes that appear in Southern popular culture. The Latina stereotypes of the “dark lady” and the “female clown” are ubiquitous in 20th Century U.S. media. The “dark lady” is often portrayed as “mysterious, virginal, inscrutable, aristocratic, cool, distanced, reserved, and opaque and is often contrasted in films with the Anglo woman, who is direct, boisterous, and transparent” (“Media Stereotypes” 436). In contrast, the “female clown” is often comically unaware of social etiquette, sexually aggressive, working class, tempestuous, sartorially disheveled, and hot-tempered, and she is used in U.S. cultural narratives as comic foils to white characters. When these characters are positioned within Southern texts, their representations change slightly depending on the Southern authors understanding of their white Southern characters. Like literature, popular culture “provides the scripts for certain emotional paradigm scenarios, teaching us how to feel ‘properly’ southern, while also recognizing the complexity of such scenes of instruction” (McPherson 5). For the Southern Mestiza searching for models of a hybrid identity that includes internalized images of Mestizas in the South as contrast to the (white) Southern female, perpetuates the idea that Southern and Mestiza cannot overlap within a

single person. These images force the Southern Mestiza to choose a single script that contradicts a pluralistic identity achieved through lived experience, and the ways the Southern Mestiza is portrayed, warn her of the consequences of attempting any agency. If she is not silenced, then she must be made invisible.

This chapter compares the characters of the nameless Mexican street vendor in the play and film adaptations of Tennessee Williams's *A Streetcar Named Desire* (1946) and the unseen immigrant maid, Consuela, in TV's *Designing Women* (1986-1993). Like Mariequita and Maria López, these two characters are juxtaposed against two examples of failing Southern feminine ideals, Blanche DuBois and Suzanne Sugarbaker respectively. In the novels previously discussed, the authors describe the characters for the reader to imagine, but linguistically distance them from the protagonists and the readers. The visual medium of *Streetcar* and *Designing Women* utilizes a different technique to distance viewers, relying mainly on the offscreen voices of the Mestiza characters, creating a haunting effect. It is also important to note that the Mestiza characters discussed in this chapter embody the “dark lady” and “female clown,” both of whom stereotyped as old and/or unattractive. It is important for Mariequita and Maria to be seen (but not heard) by the protagonists because of their roles as hypersexualized Latinas. The Mexican vendor and Consuela, on the other hand, are not sexual rivals to their white counterparts, and as old or ugly women, patriarchal narratives prefer to keep them offscreen and unseen, with only their voices reminding of us of their presence in the South. In other words, the first chapter demonstrates how Mestizas are denied agency in text through silencing or distancing through Spanish in a medium that relies heavily on communication

through language. Chapter Two analyzes how Southern Mestizas are denied agency in a visual format by denying them screen time in a medium that relies heavily on visuals.

It is also important to note that the white female protagonists of *Streetcar* and *Designing Women* are portrayed respectively as tragic and comic images of the aging Southern Belle in a changing South. In response to this change, the Southern Mestiza as a narrative trope is altered—rather than visible-but-silenced, she is invisible-yet-loud. She is seen by the female protagonists, but no one else. Her aural presence, therefore, is the death rattle of the Southern Belle's long-lasting reign.

The two texts also allow us to view the effects of these interactions, though limited, on the cultural institutions of family, home, and work. *Streetcar* shows us a glimpse inside the home of a family in turmoil, both in the relationship of siblings and parental influence, and in a marriage and relationships with in-laws. *Designing Women* includes this family dynamic with the Sugarbaker sisters, but because the show mostly takes place in the workplace (which is also Julia's home) and the interaction between Suzanne and her maid Consuela is always framed through their work relationship and living situation (Consuela lives with Suzanne), we also get the added component of viewing these cultural negotiations in professional institutions.

Tennessee Williams's *A Streetcar Named Desire*

Tennessee Williams was born in Mississippi in 1911. When he was young, his parents separated (divorce was not an option), but later he moved with his mother to Missouri to rejoin his father. Williams described his father as critical and insensitive, and watched as his father continued to drink and womanize on his mother (Forman). Williams began writing at a young age, his first success being *The Glass Menagerie* (1944). After a few less-popular plays, Williams wrote *A Streetcar Named Desire* (1947). Though said to be surrounded by supportive

loved ones, Williams was a product of his parents' insecurities, inheriting his mother's "shaky self-confidence" and his father's "self-destructive indulgence in drugs and promiscuous sex" (Forman 13). The first performance of *Streetcar* was met with seven full minutes of uninterrupted standing applause and the play eventually won the Pulitzer Prize in 1948 (Welsch 23, Banach 21).

In *A Streetcar Named Desire*, Blanche Dubois visits her pregnant sister Stella in New Orleans, staying with Stella and Stella's husband, Stanley Kowalski. The Kowalskis live in a small, run-down apartment in the tenement of "Elysian Fields." The shanty apartment shocks Blanche who grew up at Belle Reve (Beautiful Dream) a family plantation in Laurel, Mississippi, which has recently been lost to bankruptcy. Blanche represents the Old South, and plays the part of Southern Belle despite aging, poverty, and a social fall from grace, all of which contradicts the popular image of the young, rich, and socially active Belle. Throughout the play Blanche resists telling others how she survived financially after the death of most of her (male) family in World War II, without help from a husband or other patriarch. As an intrusion in the Kowalski household, Blanche is treated badly by Stanley who suspects she is lying about the bankruptcy, thereby stealing money from Stella and himself. Attempting to uncover the truth, he cruelly reveals that Blanche had to prostitute herself to survive at Belle Reve, though she did so as much out of loneliness as for money. Stanley crushes Blanche's chances to marry his friend Mitch who now views her as "unclean," and in a last-ditch attempt to rob her of any remaining dignity, Stanley rapes Blanche, causing a mental breakdown. Refusing to believe the rape has occurred, Stella has Blanche committed to a mental institution.

Streetcar is as much about external conflict as internal conflict, revealing "the uncertainty of human destiny and the inadequacy of human capacity in coping with complex circumstances"

(Yuehua 87). As a Southern Belle facing changes in a New South, Blanche leaves the broken dream of Belle Reve to arrive in New Orleans where her new fantasy is destroyed as well because of her inability to change a deeply internalized image of herself created through Southern cultural and gender socialization. As a metaphor, Elysian Fields is where the dead “were made to drink of the water of the river Lethe to forget all traces of their mortal past” (Leonard Quirino, quoted in Ribkoff and Tyndall 327). At the beginning of the play, Blanche is dropped off at Elysian Fields by the Streetcar “Desire” before the next stop at “Cemeteries,” introducing Williams’s themes of sex and death. While the setting is important, nearly all interaction takes place inside a home (Stella’s). In Greek mythology, Elysian Fields is where the heroic are sent after they die. This is fitting for the post-war setting, and Stanley is a former Army officer and Blanche attended to dying family members Mississippi. Because the dramatic elements must mirror Blanche’s mindset, New Orleans, and in particular the house itself, are imagined or portrayed in the films as treacherous and dark, subverting popular images of New Orleans as vibrant and colorful. New Orleans is an important setting the text. Alecia Long describes two persistent images of New Orleans:

People believe two things about New Orleans. The first is that it is different from the rest of the United States. According to most observers, the city was and is a place apart—stubbornly unlike the rest of the rapidly homogenizing nation and region. The second, related belief is that the city is decadent, and that its cultural distinctiveness is related to its reputation for tolerating, even encouraging, indulgence of all varieties. There is ample historical evidence to support both of these popular beliefs. (1)

While the Sugarbaker house in *Designing Women* is a symbol of a modern, economically and culturally viable Atlanta, New Orleans, through Blanche, becomes a symbol of New South realism confronting Old Southern romanticism. Thinking her sister’s home will be a safe haven from the destitution she left behind at Belle Reve, Blanche is confronted by a racially and

culturally diverse city, one that is chaotic, indulgent, and unlike the South she hoped to reclaim. The first person Blanche encounters in New Orleans is a black woman, setting up Williams's New Orleans as, "a cosmopolitan city where there is a relatively warm and easy intermingling of races in the old part of town" (Graham 32). New Orleans precipitates her mental breakdown as she attempts to rebuild an old, white South "within the context of a vibrant black culture" (31).

It is not just the "vibrant black culture" that precipitates Blanche's breakdown. The cultural diversity of New Orleans is unfamiliar to her. Stanley is a working class descendent of Polish immigrants, and Blanche interprets him through a lens of Southern aristocracy which placed Polish immigrants and working class whites much lower on a white racial hierarchy. Williams's stage directions frequently include the sounds of blues and polka music (as well as the voice of the vendor discussed below), signaling the cultural diversity of the exterior community. The class differences are prominent in the constant offstage voices and all-night chatter, which confuse Blanche, but also remind her of the aural disruption at Belle Reve during the war. Stanley and Stella are unaffected by these noises and have assimilated into a culturally and racially diverse society. In fact, they live in a complex that is racially diverse and Stanley socializes with men of different races and nationalities. While Blanche judges Stanley in classed ways, he judges her through his own working class understanding of gender norms. For him, women should appreciate a man who works hard to provide for his family. He was not born into wealth like Blanche, and as a child of immigrants, he values hard work as entrance into transnational U.S. society. These contradictory ideologies create the tension between Blanche and Stanley, both of whom are unable to understand the position of the other.

Though Stella is more sympathetic to Blanche's inability to understand New Orleans culture, Stanley is infuriated by her overt cultural shock. For him, Blanche is classist and

xenophobic, and this triggers his use of rape as a leveling mechanism. Angered by her refusal to face reality, Stanley “strips Blanche of all her romantic pretensions and reveals her attempts to disguise her true nature” (Yuehua 88). This reality of who she had become at Belle Reve cannot be successfully incorporated into an identity reliant on the cult of true womanhood. This pretense angers Stanley who views Blanche’s pretense as a critical judgment of his own masculinity. Blanche’s identity is reliant on male participation in the pretense, as the Southern Belle needs gentlemanly suitors who ignore past sexual transgressions and the aging of women. The relationship between Southern men and women, to Blanche, relies on the simultaneous sublimation and acknowledgment of sexual desire. This is symbolized in the soft light and colors used for Blanche, highlighting positive attributes while hiding the negative ones. Stanley does not follow this Old Southern script; he is emotional, unashamed, and proud, symbolized in the bold colors and strong lighting that characterize him. Blanche refuses to let Mitch see her in full light, associating dim light with magic and acknowledging the old script as hidden behind reality: “I don’t want realism! I’ll tell you what I want. Magic!” (545). To Stanley, and eventually Mitch, this pretense equates lying, a false reality. Like Chopin’s Edna, Blanche constructs a fantasy around the life she wants. But while Edna creates a fantasy of a less repressive future, Blanche creates a fantasy about a long-gone past.

Blanche reveals one of her first traumatic experiences at Belle Reve in Scene Six when she meets love interest Mitch, Stanley’s poker buddy. She reveals that her first and only marriage to Allan Grey was cut short when he committed suicide after she found out about his homosexuality (as they dance to a popular polka song that is also played when Blanche is in New Orleans). Though they shared a close friendship, the revelation that the marriage was essentially a sham forced Blanche to confront Allan who was forced to admit his entire romantic and sexual

life was a falsehood. With the stakes much higher for him, he commits suicide, consequently solidifying a major aspect of Blanche's identity formation—the belief in the importance of false pretense and convincing performances under a watchful public eye. To Blanche, the pretense is fantasy and play, rather than malicious deception. From learned experience, Blanche knows that a skillful flirt and beautiful Belle receive favors and status from men, the Southern Belle's only means of financial support (Fang 104). Moreover, this fantasy acts as a coping strategy to deal with the traumatic events of violence and death that Blanche experienced at Belle Reve, exemplifying “elements of trauma theory, specifically symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD): 1) involuntary reliving of the traumatic event(s); 2) dissociation; 3) self-destructive behavior; 4) guilt, shame, denial, and the compulsion to repeat the story of trauma, and 5) the shattering of the self” (Ribkoff and Tyndall 326). While the play also portrays recovery from PTSD, Blanche's mental recuperation is disrupted and she is re-traumatized by Stanley. This trauma is then doubled by her sister, who Blanche feels abandoned her to struggle alone and now privileges marital solidarity over a familial one. Blanche's trauma directly confronts her definition of the “Southern Belle,” while Stella's perceived abandonment goes against Old Southern norms that value family bonds. Stanley's non-conformance to Old Southern masculinity and his physical and emotional victimization of Blanche send her spiraling further into mental illness. Unsympathetic, Stanley is able to use the stigma of mental illness, and especially its association with the “hysterical” woman to trivialize Blanche's emotions and convince Stella that he did not treat her sister brutally.

In the Elia Kazan film version of *Streetcar* (1951), Marlon Brando's charismatic Stanley evoked solidarity with the character, causing audiences to mirror his views of Blanche. Brando, who was also in the original Broadway production under Kazan's direction, adds a sexual

attractiveness to the character of Stanley that alters readings of the character as more sympathetic. The original trailer for the Kazan version focuses on Blanche and describes her as a woman who “wanted so much to stay a lady. A vivid vibrant exciting story, because every searching chapter was written by men. Men who taught her to trust and to hope, to love and to hate” (from “Extras” on Kazan DVD). The copy reads, “She tried to give her heart honestly, completely--Always fighting to rise above her past.” Two more versions of the trailer were produced for theatrical re-releases of the film, but both focus on Marlon Brando as Stanley. The 1958 trailer mentions the five Academy Awards won by the film and describes Stanley as “A man who had two women living in his house. Reacting to his savage appeal.” The 1970s trailer entices viewers to view Brando “In the role that labeled him the most exciting sensual man ever.” The centering of Stanley in the later trailers demonstrates Hollywood’s recognition of Brando’s appeal and their willingness to further marginalize Blanche in order to draw in audiences. Stanley/Brando becomes the protagonist of the film and Blanche becomes one of two female characters who cannot resist him. The implication is that Blanche and Stella compete over Stanley, instead of Blanche and Stanley competing for Stella.

Vivien Leigh, who plays Blanche in the film, also performed in the London production of the play, and she is made to appear older than her age in the film version to better match Blanche’s age—Leigh is a young woman, playing an older woman who is trying to appear younger than her age. Leigh’s diminutive size contrasts sharply against Brando’s broad shoulders and emphasizes Blanche’s frailty against Stanley’s forceful presence. The visual medium of the film version allows Kazan to further emphasize this difference with high shots of Leigh, making her appear smaller, and low shots of Brando, making him appear larger. The space within the apartment is narrowed to create a claustrophobic feel as the two characters are forced to interact

in the decreasing set size, also heightening Blanche's feelings of being trapped before the rape scene.

Though the film stays true to the Williams's play, there are other differences due to the film format and Hollywood's censorship guidelines of the 1950s, particularly in regards to homosexuality and rape. The film glosses over mention of Allan as a gay man by merely calling him "tender." In contrast to Brando/St Stanley's brute masculinity, Allan's "tender" character is weakened and feminized, resulting in the film subsuming themes of non-normative sexualities and gender performances within Southern gender scripts. Despite this omission, Williams's links Allan and Blanche through marriage, and in essence, demonstrates the damaging effects of Southern-tinted compulsory heterosexuality on those who are not straight men. The haunting image of the vendor, therefore, adds a racial dimension to these sexual roles in the South, suggesting that people of color exist outside of normative sexual dynamics.

Blanche refused to (and now feels guilty for refusing to) participate in Allan's straight performance in their marriage, whereas Stella enthusiastically participates in Stanley's hypermasculinized performance as a straight, working class male. Blanche, then, in rejecting Stanley's performance as intoxicating, becomes a threat to Stanley's carefully scripted heterosexual marriage built on hypermasculinity and hyperfemininity, in the same way that a homophobic/heteronormative society would view Allan, demonstrating that the hyperfeminine woman and the non-hypermasculine man both act as threats to constructs of aggressive straight masculinity. Therefore, the two must be destroyed psychologically (to the point of suicide or mental illness) in order for these hegemonic constructions to maintain themselves. Stella, on the other hand, adheres to Stanley's working class script. She is permitted to sexually express herself as long as it is with her husband, whereas Blanche is expected to repress her sexual past because

she is unmarried. Although the text suggests that Old South heteronormativity is oppressive, it does not imply that New Southern heteronormativity, represented in Stanley and Stella, is any less oppressive--in fact, Stanley and Stella have a very dysfunctional relationship that is not meant to act as a model of subversive sexuality.

Many of Blanche's monologues about her past are juxtaposed with the presence of a blind Mexican vendor (played by Edna Thomas).² This character is often ignored in analysis of Blanche, though Bert Cardullo briefly analyzes her image as a symbol of Blanche's spiritual death and what Blanche has become, and representative of all the deaths at Belle Reve. The Mexican vendor is old and poor, only speaks Spanish as she repeatedly chants the same phrases, drifting through the foggy streets of New Orleans, selling her flowers door-to-door. She is dressed all in black and resembles a ghost that appears to remind Blanche of death and haunt the text with her presence. Mary Ann Corrigan notes that Blanche, whose name literally means "white," often wears pastel colors and is in soft light. She is visually contrasted against Stanley too, who wears vibrant colors and is in strong light. During the rape scene, a menacing atmosphere with dark shadows is described (in the Kazan film version, the vendor's voice is heard, though this is not mentioned as direction in the Williams play) (553). Nuancing these theatrical elements, the Mexican vendor is dressed in black though she carries vibrant flowers and often walks in shadow. The film adaptations are more liberal with the use of her calls and take liberties as to when she is visible or not, but her presence should not be ignored especially in a text that underscores issues by juxtaposing contrasting characters and elements (Griffin).

The vendor is not the only Mestizo character. Stanley has a Mexican friend named Pablo who appears in two scenes during a poker game at Stanley's house. He occasionally speaks in Spanish, though relies mainly on English, and in the film adaptations he is much darker than the

vendor and is costumed in stereotypical ways: he has a large mustache, wears a hat reminiscent of those worn by Mexican “banditos” in Westerns, smokes a cigar, and laughs uproariously. He is a member of the Stanley’s social circle, but against the image of the blind vendor, his presence connotes that immigrant men have easier access into New Orleans culture. He exists outside the realm of the Latin American street vendors who have not been granted this access. His status is underscored by his relaxed performance inside Stanley’s house. Unlike the wandering vendor, Pablo is located at the center of a multicultural South.

Williams describes the first entrance of the vendor in Scene Nine while Blanche is caught in a lie by Mitch: “She is a blind Mexican woman in a dark shawl, carrying bunches of those gaudy tin flowers that lower class Mexicans display at funerals and other festive occasions. She is calling barely audibly. Her figure is only faintly visible outside the building” (546). Though Williams describes her late in the play, film and theater adaptations introduce her chants earlier, always juxtaposed against Blanche’s monologues, and often interrupting them. Along with the chants of this vendor and a Mexican tamale vendor (who is only heard twice), sounds from the outside also consist of blues and polka music and occasional arguments from other tenement occupants. New Orleans, and specifically this neighborhood, is filled with multicultural interactions, vocal and musical; it is dark and wet and foggy, and initially portrayed as vibrant and exciting, but as the play progresses and Blanche’s mental stability falters, the sounds are intrusive, almost ear-splitting, and the lighting matches this feeling with quick contrasts between dark shadows and “blinding light.”

As the conversation between Mitch and Blanche continues, she defends her lies saying, “Never inside, I didn’t lie in my heart...” as the Mexican woman calls out “*Flores para los muertos*” and “*Corones para los muertos*” (546). Hearing her, Blanche states, “What? Oh!

Somebody outside...I—I lived in a house where the dying old women remembered their dead men...” (546). The polka song fades in as the vendor continues to chant of her “flowers for the dead” and “wreaths for the dead” (my translation).¹ Her voice reminds Blanche of the old women at Belle Reve, the vendor’s voice mirroring the cries of grief Blanche heard at her former estate. Blanche begins to talk of “regrets” and “recriminations,” remembering how she took care of the dying when her family had lost everything, even their help: “‘Yes Mother. But couldn’t we get a colored girl to do it?’ No, we couldn’t of course. Everything gone but the--” (547). The Mexican Woman interrupts with “Flores” and Blanche continues:

Death—I used to sit here and she used to sit over there and death was as close as you are....We didn’t dare even admit we had ever heard of it! [...] The opposite is desire. So do you wonder? How could you possibly wonder! Not far from Belle Reve, before we had lost Belle Reve, was a camp where they trained young soldiers. On Saturday nights they would go in town to get drunk—[...]--and on the way back they would stagger onto my lawn and call—‘Blanche! Blanche!’—The deaf old lady remaining suspected nothing. But sometimes I slipped outside to answer their calls...Later the paddy-wagon would gather them up like daisies...the long way home... (547)

The blind Mexican Vendor is overtly linked to death, to Blanche, and to the women at Belle Reve, both in disability and in vocal cries. Like Blanche, the vendor is a foreigner in New Orleans, old(er), poor, and carrying gaudy flowers that mirror Blanche’s costume jewelry. Blanche’s monologue signals the loss of white female privilege and of white supremacy as she is stunned that she must perform tasks originally intended for Blacks in the South. She also reveals that she used sexual desire to distract her from the death that surrounded her. The vendor’s role as a tropicalized racial other and her ghost-like haunting of Blanche in the context of New Orleans, signals that “Blanche’s fading story unfolds not simply in the face of an encroaching darkness but *because* of it” (Graham 32). The vendor is a symbol of an inescapable New South and the death of the Old South, social changes that Blanche is unable to accept. The part of the

dialogue that mentions the deaf old lady and the paddy-wagon in the Williams play is left out of the Kazan film, thereby losing the link between dead bodies at Belle Reve and the vendor's flowers, but in the original play, the vendor carries the dead like the paddy-wagons at Belle Reve. The polka music fades and the vendor "turns slowly and drifts back off with her soft mournful cries" and Mitch tells Blanche that she is "not clean enough" to marry (547). Blanche throws him out, her "throat tightening with hysteria" and begins to yell, "Fire!" as the light of the skyline and the sound of the distant soft piano are both described as "blue" (548).

In the 1995 Glenn Jordan version of the play, the vendor (played by Carmen Zapata) is barely visible, though a possible explanation is that this version chooses darker, seedier lighting, similar to film noir. The vendor is introduced at the end of Scene Two, and is portrayed true to Williams's description. In this version, Blanche (played by Jessica Lange) has a face-to-face interaction with the vendor, opening the door as the old woman approaches, both contrasted in low light so that dark circles appear under their eyes. Blanche gasps, her hand over her mouth, then shakes her head and backs away. Dramatic music swells as Blanche slams the door and shuts the curtain in an effort to keep out death and its truth.

In Monsouri Lotfi's 1998 operatic version, the vendor (played by Josepha Gayer) is viewed by Blanche as she opens the door. Gayer is much younger than the other actresses who play the vendor, though this may have more to do with the operatic nature of this version and the age bracket of female opera singers. In this version, when Blanche kicks out Mitch and yells "Fire," the vendor sings loudly and in English: "Flowers and Crowns! Red and Yellow, the lilies of sin and the roses of shame. Buy them ladies, wear them. For you are dead. As dead as my blackened bouquets. Though you were fair. You will fade and shrivel and burn. And no one will care. Flores para los muertos. Into the fire. Nothing to drink." The symbolism of the flowers as

Blanche is made more overt, and the vendor chastises Blanche directly, forecasting Blanche's future in her song. She casts Blanche into the fire, with "nothing to drink," which references both Blanche's thirst for a different life and her current alcoholism.

Returning to Kazan's *Streetcar*, Blanche actually speaks to the vendor during Scene Ten right before the rape scene, whispering "No. Not now" when offered flowers. An interesting touch is that both women are wearing necklaces of similar length, and both with round pendants. Thomas also has her basket of flowers tied to her neck, suggesting that, like Blanche, she carries a heavy burden. After shutting the door, Blanche begins to pack attempting to leave the house. She spots the vendor moving slowly towards her in the shadow, and flees back inside the house to call for help, saying she is "caught in a trap" and implying that she can't stay in the house with Stanley and she cannot go outside where the vendor lurks.

The final scene takes place weeks after Stanley rapes Blanche and Stella has the baby. Williams forces readers/viewers to imagine what has taken place within these weeks. We no longer hear or see the Mexican vendor; instead, the Varsouviana is heard, haunting Blanche's last acts in the Kowalski house. During this scene, Stanley plays poker with his buddies as Stella and Eunice (the neighbor) pack up Blanche's belongings so she can be moved to the mental institution. Although we do not know what was revealed in the weeks between scenes, Stella reveals to Eunice that Blanche has accused Stanley of rape. Defending her decision to send her sister away, Stella says to Eunice, "I couldn't believe her story and go on living with Stanley" (556). Blanche's insistence on living in a fantasy world is juxtaposed against Stella's use of similar survival tactics. Eunice confirms the need for this performance by telling Stella, "Don't ever believe it [the rape accusation]. Life has got to go on" (557). Eunice has a volatile relationship with her husband, similar to that of Stanley and Stella, and her advice connotes that

violence is normative in these working class marriages. She convinces Stella to construct a fantasy based on ignoring the actions of their husbands, even if it means turning her back on her own sister. Stanley judges Blanche for her pretense, unaware that Stella must do the same in order to convince herself to stay married to a violent man. The image of the blind Mexican vendor, thus, acts as a metaphor for the protagonists' various tragic flaws that prevent them from seeing the truth of their realities. Most important is the vendor's connection to Blanche's mental state: there is no indication that anyone else in the play sees or hears the vendor, and she could in fact be a figment of Blanche's imagination, indicating that Blanche perceives a tropicalized South as dark, mysterious, and dangerous.

By the end of the play/films, Blanche is the blind woman, and she is led away from the kitchen by the mental hospital doctors "as if she were blind" (Williams 564), with the adaptations mirroring this gesture. The vendor, as the trope of the "dark lady," acts as a disruption to the hyper-gendered construction of the marriage between Stella and Stanley, as does Blanche. Blanche is "blinded" in a sense by Stanley and by other traumatic events in her life. Her chatter is unbearable to Stanley; Blanche must be dealt with in way so that she can no longer create a disturbance to the household. As she is led away by the doctor, Blanche states, "Whoever you are—I have always depended on the kindness of strangers" (563). Blanche remains committed to her fantasy, speaking to the doctor as though he is a gentleman suitor, despite the fact that strangers have not been that kind to Blanche. In fact, many of the men from Blanche's past allowed her to believe this myth of the Southern gentleman in order to take advantage of her sexually and financially. In this final image, Blanche has become the old blind woman, and she is literally marginalized as she walks offstage. The final line of the play is spoken by Steve, the neighbor, as he resumes the poker game that was disrupted by Blanche's

departure. Through the men's dismissive reaction, Williams critiques gender roles that relegate women to the margins of society and leave them at the mercy of the men in their lives.

Designing Women

Designing Women was a popular television program that ran on CBS for seven seasons from 1986-1993. Set in Atlanta, Georgia, the sitcom revolves around the lives of four white Southern women and an African-American male employee, all working in an interior design firm. Mostly dialogue-driven, much of the action takes place in their place of work, which doubles as the home of firm owner, Julia Sugarbaker. Though the four female cast members are confident and outspoken, and similarly linked by gender, race, and region, there are some differences in their identities which function to provide multiple perspectives during their many conversations. Julia Sugarbaker, the oldest of the group, is a widow with one college-aged male child. Played by Dixie Carter, who is from Tennessee, she is educated and opinionated, eloquent and invested in social justice, and acts as the "representative of the public sphere within the group" (Dow 132). Her younger sister, Suzanne Sugarbaker (played by Delta Burke, who is from Florida), is a former Miss Georgia World who has been married several times, is childless, and lives off of alimony from previous marriages. She is the wealthiest one of the group, but is also the most superficial and self-centered, and unlike her sister, revels in her privilege and adherence to Southern social codes. Her role in the design firm is to scout for clients, often using her beauty and charm to attract older rich men for business and as potential husbands. Mary Jo Shively (played by Annie Potts, from Kentucky) is a divorced designer, who is level-headed and committed to gender equality, though often addresses the daily struggles women face with impossible beauty standards, gender positive child-rearing, and sexual harassment. Charlene Frazier (played by Jean Smart, who is from Seattle, Washington) is the beautiful and folksy

office manager with a fascination for celebrity gossip and supermarket tabloids. Anthony Bouvier (played by Mesach Tayler, who is from Boston) is the single, former felon, office assistant and delivery man who is made partner in later seasons, and acts as the masculine voice against the feminine discourse of the four main characters.

Designing Women also acts as a “case study that illustrates the blurring of the demarcations between women’s private talk and the public sphere,” (Dow 125) exemplifying the feminist tenet of the personal as political while simultaneously empowering female audience members, a particularly powerful component in a pop cultural hegemony that devalues women-centered programming, perspectives, and representation in public forums (127). Created and written by Linda Bloodworth-Thomason, the show brings to light issues that affect women, and through the dialogue, provides feminist critiques of political rhetoric and day-to-day oppressions. The ensemble cast offers “multiple opportunities for character identification” through its “multiplicity of viewpoints” and “encourages rejection of monolithic definitions of femininity and feminism” with characters that are all “valued” and “sympathetic” (Dow 137).

As a feminist text, *Designing Women* offers liberal or feminist-minded women an opportunity to publicly engage in feminist discourse covering issues that are often considered private, female concerns. Nevertheless, these progressive viewpoints are still founded on white feminine identity and several episodes demonstrate the lack of race and class analysis by white feminists that has been so historically problematic in public feminist discourses to date. The diverse character viewpoints allow for audience identification, until complex intersections of race, class, and nationality distance audience members who inhabit those intersections. While working class women and women of color can certainly identify with many discussions of the overarching issues that affect women in the United States, audience co-performance in the

program (and other cultural texts) can be disrupted when issues specifically related to other minority women are used as comic fodder rather than dealt with in the same critical way as those that affect the female protagonists in the program. The program often fails to challenge these issues, instead choosing to portray them comically and simplistically, thereby normalizing white middle-class stereotypes of these othered groups, and trivializing the complex and interlocking oppressive systems that keep all marginalized groups from achieving equality without acknowledging the privileges that white feminists and white women gain from them. As a tool for empowerment, the program fails to acknowledge women of color in the audience, denying them the same opportunities as other women who might watch the show. While the show proclaims to portray experiences of women, it becomes clear that it doesn't fully incorporate women of color, or specifically, Mestizas of color, who exist on the periphery of the program's central plotlines. In failing to do so, the program asks female viewers of color to identify with one or more of the white protagonists.

A majority of the action takes place in Julia's house, revolving around issues of work and gender, while the action that takes place at the residence of the other women usually reveals issues of women and home. Not always central, but appearing in several episodes, is the issue of regionalism, with Atlanta representing Southern place. The exterior screenshots of the houses display traditional Southern residential architecture, the most important of which is Julia's large late-Reconstruction era, Victorian-style house within a modern landscape, subverting images of plantation homes or rural shacks as standard Southern architecture while simultaneously positioning the past within a cosmopolitan present—the "New South" (Goodstein 170-71). Often the women discuss negative images of Southerners as "dirt-eaters" ("Getting Married and Eating Dirt," Season 3, Episode 4) or reference Northern privileging of New York interior design and

architecture (“Howard the Date,” Season 2, Episode 11). While it has been argued that TV attempts to have “no sense of place” (Goodstein 171), *Designing Women* actively acknowledges and incorporates a Southern sense of place through character discussions of collective and personal memories associated with their Southern heritage, adding to a multiplicity of Southernness, but one that is almost solely constructed as white. In this way, the program “supports the series narrative both through its reference to an accumulated sense of the past—the pasts of the Old South and the home as women’s sphere—and to an awareness of the present—the rise of the New South and the extension of women’s sphere to include the once-forbidden world of work” (172). Therefore, this sense of place is consciously constructed in the images used in *Designing Women* (as it is *Streetcar*’s New Orleans tenement) through the use of architecture and other conventions of the Southern “consensus narrative,” with architecture acting as “a manifestation of the social, political, and economic systems that govern cultural production” (173) while signaling commonly held beliefs, values and myths associated with the South and Southernness. Linda Bloodworth-Thomason, who is from Poplar Bluff, Arkansas (the same town the character of Charlene is from), has asserted that the program is “Southern in tone” and consciously portrays “the intelligent sophisticated south” not seen in pop culture (quoted in Goodstein 177, 183).

My analysis will focus on the relationship between Suzanne and her unseen Latin American housekeeper, Consuela. While the four main female characters discuss personal and political issues that critique patriarchal structures, the character of Consuela, and specifically her relationship with Suzanne, underscores the lack of critical awareness of how whiteness and white

femininity intersect and contribute to these oppressive structures. At the same time, the show contributes to a long line of Latinas as maids in popular culture.³

In the first two episodes Suzanne is introduced as flighty and manipulative, sex-obsessed and gold-digging, and she uses her own beauty to access to power and money. Suzanne exists in a world of privilege and romanticizes the Old South, viewing herself as a Scarlett O'Hara fighting new Southern liberal norms that threaten her position and privilege. As such, she lacks marketable skills in the New South and this alienates her coworkers. Suzanne is socially independent but financially reliant on ex- and future-husbands, forcing her to flirt wildly with men and position herself in competition with other women (characterized as the "Dixie Bitch" or the "Belle Gone Bad" who shamelessly manipulates men for financial or social gain) (Goodstein 178). Her participation in the performance of Southern Belle is portrayed as a way to gain access to financial and social mobility. While often used for comic fodder, Suzanne is sympathetic because viewers are permitted to see the fear of destitution behind the pretense, and therefore the precarious position within the marriage contract, even for "gold diggers." As the symbol of the Old South, Suzanne lives in the house most associated with that paradigm, "a neo-Georgian mansion featuring classical portico with double-story Doric columns" (178). Delta Burke, who, as one of the stars, was expected to embody this as well, received a large amount of backlash because of her unapologetic weight gain which contradicted popular opinions of the white Southern Belle as perpetually thin and beautiful (Butler 15). Burke's biggest sin was that she didn't struggle to maintain this ideal or alter her personality to fit the stereotype of sexless fat woman, and by proxy, neither does Suzanne. No longer a slim, Southern vamp, her larger body aggressively questions Southern patriarchal notions that bigger women can only by comical sexual aggressors. Susan Bordo explains this Western view of the female body in *Unbearable*

Weight (1993): The “slender, fit body [acts] as a symbol of ‘virile’ mastery over bodily desires that are continually experienced as threatening to overtake the self” (15). Also coded through race and class, Suzanne’s excessive lifestyle can only be shown through wealth and snobbish behavior. Burke was eventually fired from the program (some sources say for her weight-gain while others say she was difficult to work with), though her full-figured character still maintained characteristics of Old South beauty queen, and this rubbed the public the wrong way because of the perceived incompatibility of larger woman acting this way.

As the symbol of Old Southern femininity, Suzanne is reliant on the service of others, especially her domestic employees, the most important of which is Consuela. Consuela is verbally introduced at the beginning of the third episode of Season 1 (“A Big Affair”) after Suzanne is complaining that she was unable to figure out how to use the self-service pump at a gas station, unintentionally insulting a helpful family by tipping them a quarter. For Suzanne, the worst part of her day is that she is planning a dinner party and finds out her cleaning lady is unable to work because “she’s hemorrhaging or something.” Suzanne’s privileged position creates socially awkward situations with the working class as well as a lack of empathy for her employees. A brief conversation illustrates the show’s perceptions of foreign employees:

Julia: [To Suzanne] You are incapable of hiring decent help.

Suzanne: Well, for your information I have just employed a full-time housekeeper through a local agency. As a matter of fact she’s arriving today and I’m told she’s a perfectly lovely woman.

Mary Jo: Where is she arriving from?

Suzanne: Well, I don’t know, one of those little countries where they’re always having

trouble. She would've been here sooner but they had an outbreak of something on the boat and all of her animals are in quarantine.

Julia: And you believe that? That is the oldest excuse in the world. [Audience laughter]

The audience laughs, normalizing the belief that foreign help exploit stereotypically third world excuses that rely on white upper-class guilt to get out of work, rather than satirizing Suzanne's behavior. Julia has already been framed as the intelligent, politically conscious character, making her vocalization of this stereotype confirm a privileged ideology of working class immigrants, and by extension, making it acceptable for viewers to embrace this belief.

In other episodes it is revealed that a young Julia was active in the Civil Rights movement, attempting to liberate workers of color in her household, while Suzanne insisted that these same workers run her lemonade stand. Julia, in fact, is characterized as a political lecturer, taking advantage of daily occurrences to translate "private concerns into public advocacy" (Dow 132). The message is that racial awareness is limited to people of color in the U.S., whereas cultural differences trump any similar allied relationship between white women and immigrants of color. There is no discussion of whether Consuela's excuse might be factual, nor sympathy extended for an immigrant woman arriving in a new country. Instead the women avoid critique of Suzanne's simplistic and dismissive worldview (something they usually critique), perpetuating stereotypes of third world workers who benefit them within global labor systems. Suzanne does not know where her new housekeeper is from, and to her, all "those" countries are the same and in constant political turmoil, which for her signals "backwards." By extension, all the people from such countries are the same, and in later episodes she confuses where Consuela is from, saying once that she is from San Salvador, then later implying that she is from Haiti. She also confuses Uruguay with Paraguay ("or one of those 'guay' countries"), conflating Latin

American countries and Caribbean countries (Season 3, Episode 13, “One Sees, the Other Doesn’t”). Consuela’s existence as Latin American servant resembles that of plantation-era slaves whose pasts, unique cultures, and countries of origins were erased or dismissed as irrelevant to their role as U.S. laborers. In fact, neither Suzanne nor the other women seem to notice the resemblance to past Southern slave systems and racial hierarchies despite frequent mention of the horrors to the South’s Black slavery past. Continuing with the scene, the topic of the new maid is dropped as Suzanne attempts to set Charlene up on a date.

In the scene that follows, more is revealed about Suzanne’s new employee:

Suzanne: [Entering room] I just stopped by on my way home from the market to make sure we are still on for dinner.

Mary Jo: *You* went to the market? What’s happened to your maid?

Suzanne: Oh, Consuela’s home, cooking. And for your information she’s gonna work out fine. She does have a couple of little idiosyncrasies. Actually it’s kinda cute. She just learned how to say “Boo.” Seems they don’t have the “boo” word in her country, so every time I walk into a room, there she is crouched behind a door yelling it. Well, actually screaming is more like it. I guess it is getting on my nerves just a little. [holding hand to temple as if she has a headache.]

The subject again is changed, emphasizing cultural stereotypes through humor and lack of characters’ critiques of the situation. Consuela is portrayed as childlike and socially inappropriate, a cultural rather than a personal flaw. Despite previous characterizations of Suzanne as lacking ability to effectively communicate with the working class, this cultural clash is not blamed on her. Instead, the other characters acknowledge the inappropriateness of Suzanne having to go to the market herself, and their image of Suzanne as whiny and out-of-touch allows them to ignore the potential issues she faces as an immigrant to this country while

simultaneously normalizing Third World immigrant stereotypes. For a show that rarely misses an opportunity for critique, the silence surrounding the issue is impossible to ignore.

The final lines in the scene confirm their views:

Suzanne: Consuela's brother is a gourmet meat packer, and he's slaughtering something special for us.

Julia: [as Suzanne leaves] I can't put my finger on it, but something about this doesn't bode well.

The implication is that the animal being slaughtered is one that is not a socially acceptable form of meat in the United States, a social norm that is often used to exoticize and stigmatize cultures with differing dietary norms. It is not clear if Suzanne interprets it in the same way, or whether she is more accepting of alternative food sources, but through Julia's final comment, the prominent and acceptable ideology is delivered as a negative interpretation of non-normative consumption.

The next scene presents the four protagonists and their dates in Suzanne's dining room discussing Southern stereotypes:

Mary Jo: Well, I'll tell you what I resent, is how the TV and movies always show Southerners to be so stupid. And have you noticed the women are always these oversexed loons sitting around in a satin slip and no air conditioning.

Charlene: That reminds me of that story about the Southern woman who goes to this real la-dee-dah cocktail party in New York City, and she turns to a Northern woman and she says, "where y'all from?" And the Northern woman looks at her and says, "we're from where we don't end our sentences with a preposition." So the Southern woman looks at her and says, "oh, well then, where y'all from, bitch?" [all laugh] [...]

The program is very conscious of place, with several episodes discussing Southern history and contemporary images of Southerners. While Mary Jo critiques U.S. pop culture, her comments reference Southern representations of Southerners as well and act as a nod to Suzanne's

character, who is described as oversexed and often appears in nightgowns of satin and lace. Mary Jo normally acts as the pop culturalist, contrasting “between such public representations of women and her lived experience” (Dow 133). The North/South dichotomy is verified by Charlene in her joke, and while demonstrating a similar perception of Southerners, uses humor in a social setting to uphold images of Southern wit and pride. Her anecdote also positions binary gender norms between Northern and Southern women that implies dueling images of femininity—the Northern image based partially on formal education and perceived superiority displayed through rudeness (or at least this is the Southern-skewed message), and the Southern image based on civility, and eventually clever assertiveness in the face of impoliteness.

Suzanne attempts to enter the conversation:

Suzanne: I don’t know but there’s something about being from the South that is different. Someone was asking me just the other day, Suzanne, what do you suppose it is that makes Southerners so splendidly unique?

Julia: Oh, c’mon, who was asking that?

Suzanne: I don’t know Julia, but someone was.

Suzanne is immediately silenced, her contribution to conversation positioned as inferior in contrast to others, and Julia as the voice of reason questions the validity of her story, something she does not do with the others (the sibling relationship plays an important role in this). Suzanne’s anecdote is truncated because the assumption is that she has made it about herself, rather than providing nuance or humor to the discussion of images of Southerners in general. Suzanne, as aging beauty queen, represents an old-fashioned performance of the Southern Belle identity. Julia is juxtaposed as the New Southern Woman and therefore is provided room to silence and critique Suzanne as her sister, a competing image of modern Southern femininity. For Suzanne, the importance is not on the truth of her story, but how it

contributes to a conversation about Southern pride. All for the better if it also adds to her own mystique--a self-exoticizing Southern Belle. For Julia, Suzanne's flaw is in presenting the story as fact and not contributing to a communal discussion, rather than framing it as fiction and about a community in the same way Charlene does with her joke.

After further conversation, Suzanne leaves the dining room to check on dinner. As the swinging door closes, audiences hear a "Boo!" and plates crashing.

Suzanne: Consuela, you've got to stop that!

Consuela: [Off camera. Thick accent] Ha ha ha! I scare you, I scare you!

Suzanne: [Off camera] That's my blouse!

Consuela: [Off camera] Get your filthy hands off me! [everyone in dining room looks uncomfortable]

The guests are aural witnesses to Consuela's behavior, but she is still not visually present in the scene. The altercation is played up for humor despite the implied physical confrontation. Guests look uncomfortable but make no move to intervene. Their racialized reactions indicate that this was an expected outcome and not an incident worth acknowledging, underscoring Suzanne's ineptitude in dealing with her employees and stereotypes of strange foreigners in need of behavioral control. Although they have just critically discussed negative images of Southern (white) women in pop culture, the protagonists, and by extension the show's writers and producers, seem unaware of (or don't care about) the negative stereotypes of Mestiza women that are being perpetuated, nor do they connect their immigrant/other stereotypes to the discussion of Northern views of the South. As her guests sit bored and hungry, Suzanne re-enters the dining room to provide an update on the meal:

Suzanne: It's just going to be a few more minutes. Consuela's taking the thermometer out the lamb right now.

Julia: Well I certainly hope it hasn't caught a fever.

Suzanne: Julia, I'm doing the best I can. She threatened me with a knife. It was just a little knife but still...more Gaspacho anyone?

Consuela is not only described as culturally strange, but as dangerous and deviant. Suzanne attempts to salvage her dinner party, but the accepted violence from an immigrant woman from a violent country is used to add humor to her failing notions of Southern etiquette and social norms. Consuela acts as a foil to Suzanne's commitment to Old South ideologies, allowing the audience to laugh at her failures, and by extension, Southern gender norms that are considered out-dated. The scene implicitly defines acceptable New South codes: Southern women are allowed to put Northerners in their place, but Southern women who insist on performing upper-class Old Southern etiquette are put in their place.

Consuela is further exoticized and stigmatized in the episode titled "The Slumber Party" (Episode 10 of Season 1). As Julia, Suzanne, and Charlene discuss Ayatollah Khomeini's policies of veiling women and stoning them for illicit affairs, Suzanne walks away from the conversation holding her head and the following discussion ensues:

Suzanne: I'm just a little bit nervous 'cause Consuela put a curse on me.

Charlene: Consuela? As in your maid Consuela?

Suzanne: There is only "one" Consuela. Only she wants to be called Connie now. [pouring coffee]. She's getting all Americanized: She wears my clothes, plays my records...this morning when I woke up, she was taking a bath in *my* tub, talking on the phone long distance.

Julia: Well, Suzanne. That is absolutely outrageous. Why do you tolerate this kind of behavior?

Suzanne: Because, I'm afraid of her. She's got all these little dolls and they have these pins stuck in 'em.

Charlene: You mean she's into voodoo?

Suzanne: Yeah and she's been threatening me.

Julia: What kind of threats.

Suzanne: Things like, if I don't let her use my electric razor, I will end up living with hobos and begging them to lance the boils on my back. [Audience laughter]

Charlene: Pretty nasty threat.

Suzanne: That's nothing. This morning we had a big fight, so I said there was a slight possibility I might have to fire her, 'cause you know I didn't want to make her mad, but she got mad anyway and she said I'd be dead by midnight tonight.

Julia: Why tonight?

Suzanne: I don't know, Julia, I guess she figures the sooner the better.

Several interesting issues are revealed in this exchange: First, Suzanne is now conspicuously mispronouncing Consuela's name, adding extra syllables with an exaggerated Southern accent (Cahn-sue-way-lah); Secondly, Consuela's attempted assimilation into American culture is trivialized through her mimicking of Suzanne's actions and the use of Suzanne's wardrobe and other resources. This behavior is assumed to be an act of insubordination and a cultural failing, an immigrant taking advantage of Southern politeness. Suzanne does not say that Consuela is sometimes allowed to make long-distance phone calls or that they have some sort of financial arrangement; it is simply assumed she shouldn't do this on Suzanne's home phone despite the fact that Consuela lives in Suzanne's home and probably still has family in country of origin. Julia, as the level-headed voice of reason, attempts to intervene and fire Consuela without further questioning of Suzanne's role in the tumultuous employer-employee relationship; there is no discussion of cultural differences that may catalyze this disruption of what they perceive should be a harmonious dynamic between superior and subordinate. Suzanne stops the intervention through mention of Consuela's curse, which plays on Suzanne's biggest fears: poverty and ugliness. Consuela has been characterized as a childish prankster, but this is forgotten at the

mention of a curse. Once silly, Consuela and her foreign curses are now portrayed as a legitimate threat. Suzanne's inability to fire Consuela is partially based on this image of the deviant magical savage and partially based in old Southern mores that prevent women from angering others. Julia walks towards the phone, performing her role as the no-nonsense business woman:

Suzanne: [Julia walks away] Where are you going?

Julia: I am going to the phone. I'm going to call her up and relieve you of her services. I am certainly not afraid of a little straight pin.

Suzanne: No, you can't do that.

Julia: Why not?

Suzanne: Because she's pretty good with that voodoo stuff. I mean she put a curse on that president in Haiti, what's his name, Baby Doc and his wife, Michelle, and now they are living in Switzerland without any credit cards. [Laughter]

Julia: Well that doesn't have anything to do with voodoo.

Suzanne: Oh no, well then how come she put a curse on one of my tropical fish, and this morning he was belly-up?

Julia: What could she possibly have against a fish?

Suzanne: She got mad because he wouldn't come over to the other side of the tank and rub noses with her.

Julia: The woman is nuts. [Laughter]

Julia indicates the improbability of Consuela's curse affecting international politics, and she has stigmatized Consuela as mentally ill. Suzanne's belief in the curse is mediated by her biggest fears and confirmed by a story about a dead fish. At this point, Consuela is portrayed as angry and vindictive, but none of the characters question whether she believes she has the ability to curse people and animals or if she is using Suzanne's fears against her. It has been established that Suzanne embellishes stories, but no character questions her version of events. Instead, an image of Consuela as angry and mentally ill is normalized through the conversation and the

audience laughter: they are not laughing at Suzanne; they are laughing at Consuela. Suzanne reveals that she found dolls with pins in them and her face glued on the heads. Mary Jo enters the scene and they fill her in on the curse discussion and she tells them that her daughter is having a slumber party. Within minutes, all of their plans fall through and Mary Jo uses the opportunity to ask them to stay over and chaperone. As they discuss the coincidence, Suzanne assumes that these series of circumstances are the work of Consuela's work because she probably wants witnesses at Suzanne's death. Sounds of thunder interrupt the scene and they acknowledge the ominousness.

In the next scene, the four protagonists are dressed in their nightgowns in Mary Jo's living room. Julia has fallen asleep, but is still present in the scene, occasionally snoring. It's 11:06pm and they have just watched a horror movie and take the opportunity to tease Suzanne about her imminent midnight death. They decide to play a game, proposed as a normal event at female slumber parties, where the participants criticize each other. While thunder crashes, Mary Jo and Charlene focus on Suzanne's flaws:

Mary Jo: Well from my part, Suzanne, you always present yourself as this sexy attractive person.

Suzanne: Excuse me, Mary Jo, but I think we can go a little further than "attractive."

Mary Jo: That's just what I'm talking about. You have this way about you that just makes other women feel like...eunuchs. [Lightening and thunder]

Suzanne: Well I certainly don't mean to do that.

Charlene: And that's another thing. You always say, "well I don't "mean" [squeaky and girly] to do that.

Suzanne: Well I don't. I've had trouble with women all my life. I guess I just attract jealousy.

Mary Jo: Suzanne, we're not jealous of you. We don't want to be you. We just want you to think that it's ok to be us.

Suzanne: Are you sure you're not jealous. I mean sometimes I can be pretty stunning. Ok, all right. Maybe I can change. What do you suggest, and keep in mind I don't have a lot of time.

Mary Jo: I suggest that there are *four* attractive women at Sugarbakers' and there are a lot of guys out there who would pick any given one of us—

Charlene: Darn right! And I suggest you start acting like you know it.

The game of criticism immediately focuses on Suzanne, hinting that this was the real reason for the game, and also revealing a gendered game where girls (and in this case women) are socialized to believe that they must police other women's behavior. Suzanne's flaw is that she knows she is attractive, and presents this in a way that causes rifts between her and other women. Her performance of a hyper-feminized and sexualized Southern Belle distances her from other women. Rather than a product of patriarchally produced competition among women, the critique is that Suzanne actively benefits by de-feminizing other women. Charlene points out this behavior by mimicking Suzanne's squeaky, girly way of speaking. By infantilizing herself to perform a hyper-femininity, Suzanne masculinizes other women, creating "eunuchs" of them. The norms of Southern Belleness force Suzanne to perform for men, even to the detriment of her relationship with women. Suzanne has always assumed that reactions from women stem from jealousy, but Mary Jo and Charlene reveal that this female hostility actually stems from lack of gender loyalty that invalidates other forms of femininity. For Mary Jo and Charlene, this forced competition and judgmental gaze is most hurtful because of the potential for friendship the women have as coworkers.

Mary Jo's daughter interrupts the discussion briefly when she enters the room and asks the women to keep it down, flipping traditional parent-child roles in the context of a slumber

party. Once she leaves, they return to the game and Mary Jo mentions that she resents Suzanne for having dated her ex-husband. Charlene backs up Mary Jo, emphasizing the importance of female bonds over romance and sex. The scene focuses on emotion and solidarity, which is only possible because Julia is asleep. While Julia silences Suzanne through combative logic, Mary Jo and Charlene appeal to her through emotion. Suzanne becomes defensive, but then admits that she knows the two of them are not jealous of her; in fact, she is jealous of them and their friendship. In a truly honest moment, Suzanne discloses that she has never had close female friends, and that she considers the two of them her closest friends. As they all hug, Julia awakens and proclaims, “I can’t put my finger on it, but something is wrong with this picture,” acknowledging Suzanne’s distance from the others, and their standoffishness to her. The scene between the women makes explicit the pitfalls of the patriarchal compromise for Suzanne and the potential for female bonds achieved through honest discourse, but also demonstrates that she does not view Consuela as a sexual rival or as potential friend as she does with her white colleagues.

Julia’s re-emergence in the scene ignites a return to the curse. Thunder crashes and the lights go out. Suzanne yells and jumps, fearing her death and falling on Charlene. The lights come back on and the women laugh at their behavior. Pointing out that Suzanne is still alive, Julia reiterates that the curse is nonsense. Mary Jo tells Julia that they achieved a “breakthrough” in their relationship with Suzanne. Suzanne backtracks, abandoning her newfound friendships:

Suzanne: Well I wouldn’t go so far as to say jealous. I know, but I was under duress. I thought I was dying. But I’m not, I’m alive. And I’m just going to go on living and laughing, and loving and doing something constructive with my life, I’m going to visit people in nursing homes. See the orphans and the handicapped. On second thought maybe I’ll just take a middle-income family out to a fancy restaurant. [...] You know what I’m going to do? I’m going to kill that Consuela.

When I think about what she did to me, I oughta just call her up on the phone right now and say, “Consuela, guess what? This is Suzanne and it’s after midnight. Ha ha ha.”

With death no longer imminent, Suzanne reverts back to her shallow ways, rejecting any potential growth from the events of the night. Her thoughts move from distancing herself from her previous links to new female friendships, to spiritual revival and community involvement, then to a superficial compromise, and finally childish revenge. She grabs Julia’s purse to get a mint and finds a voodoo doll. The doll is dressed in white, has dark brown or possibly black skin, has a pin in its face, and a red scarf tied around its neck. Suzanne asks why Julia has a voodoo doll if she doesn’t believe in curses:

Julia: I called Clarence Otto at the museum of folk history, you know he’s friend of mine, and he said the best way to ward off a curse is to put your own curse on the curser. Or is it the cursee?

Suzanne: So this is...?

Julia: Consuela.

Charlene: You little devil, you.

Suzanne: You know Julia that is just about the sweetest thing anybody’s ever done for me. [Decides to go to bed and says she’s going to take the couch which Julia had earlier claimed]

Julia: Suzanne, did I mention that Clarence says that taking the little pin out of the little doll leaves you very little protection?

Suzanne: [getting up from couch] On the other hand, sleeping on the floor can be very good for your back.

The scene demonstrates the power of the unknown Other, even convincing Julia that there may be some validity in the curse. Only through the expertise of someone with a formal education does Julia participate in the ritual, keeping it secret to protect her image as rational and logical. The doll reveals how Consuela is racialized as almost a Mammy figure, at least by Julia, despite

no indication that she has ever seen her. Charlene calls Julia a “little devil,” which implies Julia’s initiation in the “dark arts,” reiterated when Julia threatens to use the doll against Suzanne to maintain her position on the couch, appropriating a formerly trivialized cultural myth to get what she wants.

In Season Two there is less mention of Consuela. In Episode 17 titled “Return of Ray Don,” Suzanne loses all of her money and Consuela is heard in the background crying because Suzanne had to let her go. Suzanne tells Julia that “[s]he’s been howling like that since this morning,” equating Consuela with an animal, demonstrating a lack of sympathy, though this may be for Julia’s benefit. When Julia attempts to confront Consuela and tell her to keep quiet (attempting to silence her), Suzanne warns her not to because Consuela threw a sword at her earlier, and “she has a whole set,” further perpetuating stereotypes of the violent immigrant who is skilled at Third World warfare. In “High Rollers,” (Episode 18, Season 2), Consuela is forced to live with Anthony and develops a crush on him. Anthony says that she sits close to him in the car and stares at him through his home’s window with curlers in her hair. Anthony describes the circumstances to Julia:

Anthony: And her face wasn’t just pressed to the glass, it was mashed, nose was flat and lips was spread all over the window pane. It was Uh-gly.

Julia: [Agreeing with Anthony’s description] We are talking about a woman who picks stinkweed by the highway, who keeps voodoo dolls under her pillow, and slaughters live animals in the kitchen.

Anthony: You know that’s right. And I’ll tell you something else too. She’s got that little crack right here between her teeth that makes kind of a hissing noise. Sometimes you’ll have your back to her and she’ll hiss at you, turn around real fast and she’ll act like she didn’t do it. I’m telling you it’s a real bad noise. One thing you don’t ever want to do is get her tickled. Even something that’s just a little bit funny, something a normal person would smile ever so slightly about, she throws herself on the floor and starts rolling around and laughing like Frankenstein. [Imitates a

monster clapping] [...] She even wrote I love you in shaving cream on my garage door. You know it's always something that's just completely inappropriate. You know, by the way, I don't think she was too happy living with Suzanne either. On her application for her last address she wrote the bowels of hell.

Descriptions of Consuela are used as comic fodder, emphasizing her ugliness in order to justify these descriptions. Interestingly, Anthony's description of Consuela is very similar to those used to describe African Americans by white racists. The Black character distances the racist connotations of the description for the audience. The fact that Julia and Anthony are the ones involved normalizes immigrant and "ugly" women as targets of this hostility--these two characters usually represent progressive ideas concerning issues that affect women, the working class, and people of color. Their descriptions of Consuela devolve into disablist images of monsters, with no critique of hegemonic norms influencing their perceptions, despite the fact that these two usually provide this analysis.

In "Foreign Affairs" (Season 4, Episode 22) Suzanne arrives at work as the others are discussing a gaudy bed ordered by rich clients that now sits unclaimed in the business space of the home. She is wearing a light blue shawl over her head, tied under her chin, large black glasses, purple flower-print pants, and a large black coat that comes to her knees. Her entrance immediately evokes laughter from the audience because of its comical contrast to her characteristically feminine wardrobe. Mary Jo asks her if she has lost all of her money in the stock market and describes her as having become a "poor person." No longer interested in the oversized waterbed, the characters question Suzanne's "getup." Suzanne explains that she has an appointment with immigration because Consuela's work permit has expired and she might be deported.

Suzanne: Can you believe it? Four years of my life I have given up nurturing and building a relationship with my maid, and now they wanna take it all away from me. Do you

have any idea how hard it is to set up a household and find someone who will cater to all your likes and dislikes? I know she's into voodoo and she's temperamental, but you know, but we understand each other. If I want her to make me a peach pie in the middle of the night, she does it. And if she gets upset and throws a knife, I overlook it. [Audience laughter]

Charlene: Where's Consuela from anyway?

Suzanne: How do I know, Charlene, do I look like The National Geographic?

Suzanne is upset that her way of life may be disrupted and cares less (or pretends to care less)

about a woman who has lived and worked for her in this country for four years now. By

“understand each other” she really means that Consuela caters to her every need while Suzanne

overlooks Consuela's culturally attributed violent tendencies. The other characters continue to

ask Suzanne about her costume and Suzanne explains why she is performing Consuela's role:

Mary Jo: Why are you dressed this way?

Suzanne: Because, they ordered Consuela Valverde to come down to immigration today at 1:30, and I'm Consuela. [...] Because Consuela can't go. First of all you have to speak and understand English to become a citizen, and hers is marginal. And secondly, you gotta take a test on American government, and Consuela can't take tests. She gets nervous. I mean the other day at the supermarket they asked her to compare some kind of Cheese Whiz, she became hysterical. And third she's been moaning and wailing ever since I told her about this letter. [...] I read everyone's mail who stays at my house.

Charlene: That's against the law.

Suzanne: Then they should get their own house.

Suzanne portrays Consuela as hysterical and unable to complete simple logical tests, also

revealing that she reads mail meant for Consuela who “stays” at her house rather than lives with

her. Charlene criticizes this, not as an invasion of privacy, but as an illegal act, and Suzanne

dismisses these accusations by transferring responsibility to her housekeeper and other domestic

employees, blaming them for not having their own mailing address despite the obvious notion

that Suzanne wouldn't allow this anyway. Her domestic help are treated as children under the will of a parental figure. The group continues to discuss the outrageous events:

Julia: Suzanne, you know, this is outrageous. You cannot just march down to the INS and pretend to be your maid.

Suzanne: Why not?

Julia: Well, because first of all, I am sure that it is a federal offense. [...] Well, secondly they are not going to believe you. You don't even know what country you're from.

Suzanne: Well I've got all her information and papers right here. I want Anthony to go over this with me [lifts up a brown paper gift bag]

Anthony: Me? Why me?

Mary Jo: Because you're her girlfriend. [Audience laughter]

Anthony has been used by Suzanne as a domestic employee and in other episodes she feminizes him by forcing him to wear her clothing or primp her makeup. Suzanne's tendency to degender her peers was discussed in "The Slumber Party" when Mary Jo and Charlene tell Suzanne that she makes them feel like "eunuchs." Suzanne treats Anthony the same way, but this is not critiqued by the other characters, and instead is treated as normal behavior for Suzanne. As the image of a modern Southern Belle, Suzanne upholds and legitimizes her white, upper class beauty ideals through the subjugation of others. There is no question in Suzanne's mind that Anthony will help her. Although she usually complains about an ex-con working in close proximity to her, she assumes that he will participate in the con because of his past criminal record. Anthony attempts to reason with Suzanne:

Anthony: Suzanne, I can tell you right now that there is a picture of Consuela on her work permit, they are going to know that she's not you.

Suzanne: No they're not. She lost hers.

Charlene: Well they probably have another one on file.

Suzanne: No, they don't. They're supposed to but they can't find it. I called yesterday. They said she's gonna have to have another one made, and when she does, it'll be a picture of me.

Julia: Great! Then *you* can be deported.

Suzanne: Julia, don't be ridiculous. This is just a preliminary meeting with a Mr. Tremain to see if Consuela's a candidate for a green card. That's the next step. Then all I have to do is fill out a bunch of forms and come back later and take the test.

Anthony: What test?

Suzanne: A citizenship test. It's real easy. I talked to a friend of mine's maid, she says it's just a bunch of stuff like who was Yankee Doodle.

Charlene: Who *was* Yankee Doodle? [Indicating even Americans don't know]

Anthony: Suzanne, excuse me for being nosy, but has it occurred to you that Consuela is Spanish and you don't even have an accent?

Suzanne: No. Hadn't occurred to me. That's a good point.

Charlene: Anthony, you speak Spanish, don't you?

Anthony: Thank you, Charlene. Remind me to return this favor someday.

Suzanne: That's a great idea. It's perfect! Anthony, you could do this. And whoever goes down there today is the one that has to return to take the test. It's perfect, you are good at taking tests and you speak Spanish.

Anthony: No *hable español*. Je parle français.

Suzanne: Oh, come on. [taking head scarf off] Anthony please do this for me. All you got to do is wear this scarf and this coat and I'll pay you.

When Anthony refuses to help Suzanne out of domestic servitude, she offers him money, exploiting his financial situation.

Anthony: No, no, no way. [walking away] You can just forget about that--get it out of your mind.

Suzanne: A thousand dollars. [Waves head scarf]

Anthony: [after pause] Well, maybe I could just try it on [grabs scarf and puts it on head]

[Audience laughs, fade out to commercial break]

Raising her price, Suzanne is able to convince Anthony to help her. He puts on the scarf signaling a cue for audience laughter at gender-bending as a ridiculous and comical situation, and a device used several times in plotlines between Suzanne and Anthony. When the program fades back in, Julia is explaining that it is a federal offense to falsely represent oneself to a government agency. As the (often) realistic voice, Julia relays the consequences of this deception. Despite this, she makes no more effort to prevent her sister and close employee from risking federal prison. Anthony sits, reading the citizenship test manual in a purple flower-print dress, cheap earrings, his chest stuffed to resemble large breasts. Suzanne fixes one of her wigs on his head. He gasps, and Suzanne pats his shoulder, but then reminds him to keep his arms down during the interview (implying that he hasn't shaved and this would give him away). Anthony does not think he passes and he is becoming apprehensive. The other characters are trying to talk him out of the scheme as he reiterates that the money will help him pay off his student loans. When it appears he might change his mind, Suzanne raises her offer. Anthony mentions that on the paperwork it says that Consuela is fifteen years older than him. Suzanne explains that people age differently, aggressively powdering Anthony's face as he grimaces. This episode highlights Anthony's subservient position in the group. Despite his intelligence (he attends community college), he is often used as a comic foil, mainly in situations with Suzanne, as his gender is a "non-issue, and as a member of another oppressed group, Anthony is well-suited to participate in 'women's talk' that takes place in Sugarbaker's" (Dow 130). In several episodes, Suzanne uses Anthony as a girlfriend when the other women can't or won't succumb to her whims. He is often annoyed at being treated like a doll, but in some episodes he seems to enjoy both the friendship and his role as confidant. This is used as comic fodder, because Anthony

enthusiastically subverts traditionally masculine roles for Suzanne, the character who is characterized as the most feminine and frivolous. He is degendered and his relationship with Suzanne is asexual despite her suspicions, “a situation naturalized not only by general taboos against interracial romance but by the attitudes of both characters, who would clearly consider such a suggestion absurd” (Dow 130).

Anthony: Suzanne, it also says here that Consuela is Latino and I am Black.

Suzanne: So, big deal. Latinos come in all shades. So you’re a little bit darker. Maybe you’ll fit in.

Mary Jo: As long as you’re talking about differences, how about, Consuela’s never had jock itch.

Suzanne: [putting makeup on Anthony] Just fix this 5 o’clock shadow and you’ll be perfect.

Charlene: He looks pretty good. But your feet and your teeth are awful big for a woman.

Anthony: Don’t say that, Charlene. You’re gonna make me self-conscious. [Suzanne puts a blue flower on his head, then removes it in favor of a pink one. Audience laughs as she primps him]

Suzanne: You’re not going to get that silly nervous laugh of yours again, huh?

Anthony: I certainly hope not. Oh, Suzanne, she’s right. This just isn’t going to work. It’s hopeless.

Suzanne: \$2000. [Stamping foot] Now, let’s here your name again.

Anthony: [In high Spanish accent] My name is Consuela Valverde.

Suzanne: [Hugging him closer] Is he great or what? [Audience laughs; End scene]

Anthony’s tropicalization and feminization by Suzanne, and the audience laughter, highlight the gender binary that situates feminine traits as frivolous and absurd, assuming that Anthony should be upset and embarrassed by the experience. By focusing on this gender switch, the program can downplay the racial and class binaries that create a situation where a white woman can control a poor black man in order to get her way. Suzanne seems to actually enjoy dressing up Anthony,

which is reminiscent of white Western culture's love for dressing up black men as women, effectively marginalizing both black men and black women,⁴ and the other characters tease him about it, though no one is critically outraged at the racist and classist aspect of the scene, allowing audiences to ignore it as well.

The next scene shows Anthony and Suzanne entering the INS office. Anthony has a shawl on his head, is wearing a black jacket, and carrying a large black purse. Suzanne has her arm linked with Anthony's in stereotypical feminine fashion, though it is clear she is leading a reluctant Anthony. Suzanne tells Anthony to sit down and she will go tell the office that they are here.

Suzanne: [To Anthony] By the way, your hose are falling down.

Anthony: My goodness. [to another patron] My ankles are huge.

Agent: [Entering room] Consuela Valverde.

Suzanne: Right here.

Anthony: [standing up] Uh, me llamo Consuela Valverde.

Anthony must make a joke about his "feminine" body to disguise why his costume doesn't fit properly. They follow Agent Tremain into another room after Suzanne asks if she can come too, because without her Consuela gets nervous. Though Suzanne is not family, and is Consuela's employer, Agent Tremain allows it. We might ask, why Suzanne didn't ask to sit in with the real Consuela? The excuse she uses earlier in the episode for Consuela's inability to attend the hearing herself is that she gets nervous taking tests. If Suzanne is willing to ask to sit in with Anthony, she should have been able to do this with Consuela. This oversight implies that Anthony's nervousness is still less of a risk than Consuela's hysterical nature, but also reveals that a staple plot device—Suzanne using Anthony as cross-dressing doll and servant—is more

important to the comical nature of the show than allowing for a visible Mestiza character. In doing so, audiences can never see a potentially sympathetic Mestiza, allowing for continued Othering. Suzanne makes a joke about his promptness being unlike the DMV and another joke about having a bad picture taken at the DMV, and Anthony again laughs nervously. Suzanne uses her flirtatious charm to dispel any doubts and is annoyed when Anthony laughs nervously. Tremain explains the procedures while Anthony feigns confusion at spoken English:

Anthony: I tink I wood like berry much to become a cee-tizen.

Suzanne: Oh it's true. It's true. She talks all the time about how she would like to become a citizen, so she can help all the tired, and sick, and poor. Of course she knows all the words to the national anthem. [...]

Anthony: [nervous laugh] I'm sorry, my teeth are enormous [Suzanne elbows him].

Tremain hands them paperwork and says they should return in a couple of weeks for the swearing in, assuming Consuela's FBI check clears. At this news Anthony becomes nervous because he has been to prison. The scene switches to Julia, Charlene, and Mary Jo sitting in the office, when Charlene wonders aloud about what is keeping Suzanne and Anthony. Julia responds, "Charlene, are you serious? A six foot Black man dressed like Hazel just left here with Suzanne, his co-conspirator to defraud and deceive the United States government, and you're wondering what's keeping 'em? Well, it's been three and a half hours, I don't think you have to wonder anymore...I think it's pretty obvious they are in prison." The audience laughs, but because of the nature of the show, we know that there is little chance of real consequences for these two protagonists. Anthony and Suzanne return, and Anthony declares that he is out of the scheme because of the FBI check. He emphasizes his departure by taking off the jacket and stuffed bra underneath his dress and sitting on the couch with legs spread in an exaggerated masculine gesture. When they ask what happened, Suzanne says it went perfectly and even

thinks Tremain wanted to ask Anthony (as Consuela) out on a date. Anthony asks what could have attracted him most, the shoes or the shopping bag. Suzanne offers \$2500, but Anthony refuses. Mary Jo asks where she gets this money and Charlene explains, “She gets money from back alimony checks” and when Suzanne looks shocked that Charlene has read her mail, Charlene retorts, “I read everyone’s mail that comes across my desk. If you don’t like it, get your own desk,” turning Suzanne’s very words back on her. With Anthony out, Suzanne says she will take the test part of the process, hoping that Tremain won’t see her because the test is held in another building.

The scene changes and it is now four weeks later. Charlene checks the mail and Suzanne is anxious to find out her test results, and make Charlene read them when it is revealed that they have finally arrived in the mail:

Charlene: [reading] This is to inform you that Consuela Valverde...yes, yes you passed! [...] Look you got a 76.

Suzanne: Oh, a 76. I bet you I was the valedictorian.

Charlene: Well, actually that was one point above failing.

Suzanne: Oh who cares? I passed. Now Consuela can stay with me forever.

Charlene: Oh look you got a nice note from Julius Tremain. Dear Miss Valverde, Congratulations on your test results. I look forward to seeing you at the swearing in. Best regards, Julius ...

Suzanne: Swearing in? What the hell is that?

Julia: That’s when you take the oath of citizenship before a federal judge, Suzanne, you didn’t know that?

Suzanne: No.

Charlene: Well I knew that, I read it in your brochure.

Suzanne: I don’t read brochures. I can’t go to any swearing in. Mr. Tremain knows me as Suzanne Sugarbaker; he thinks Anthony is Consuela. [looks at Anthony]

Anthony: No, no, no way Suzanne. I did my part. [keeps refusing] Especially now that that Mr. Tremain sent me that note. That's not normal. [...] Maybe it's like you said, he wants to take me out.

Suzanne clearly knows very little about the citizenship process, and is portrayed as lacking in education and intelligence, nearly bragging that she “doesn't read brochures.” Despite this, Suzanne is happy that Consuela will get to stay with her forever, always available to cater to her. When Anthony understands that he has to return to INS to continue the scheme, he reveals homophobic panic at the prospect of being asked out by Tremain. The scene also plays on cisgendered privilege, laughing at Tremain's misunderstanding of Anthony's sex with the underlying assumption that he would care if he knew Anthony was really male, or that there is something “not normal” about Tremain finding a masculine woman attractive. Because Tremain is a Black male, any issues of interracial relationships are avoided, allowing for gender and gender performance stereotypes to be utilized as comic fodder. Adamant, Anthony refuses to go, saying, “I'm not going and that's final!” The scene cuts to Anthony in the INS office in a red dress and white hat with a short white lace veil, and white gloves. He is being sworn in with others (all of whom are people of color) and Suzanne cries and cheers as Tremain winks at Anthony. Anthony waves a small U.S. flag and avoids Tremain's wink by pulling the veil over his eyes and turning away, providing the final laugh of the episode for the audience.

Suzanne Bost discusses Anthony's feminization in the series, stating that “This effeminacy guarantees his distance from racist stereotypes of the black male sexual threat to southern white womanhood at the same time that his series of girlfriends comforts viewers that his gender flexibility does not challenge his heterosexuality” (130). His performance as Consuela “implies that all nonwhites are somehow the same and that race, nation, and sex are transferable among them,” but also subverts sexual and cultural stereotypes because Anthony

“passes and subverts preconceived ideas about his physical identity” by adopting clothing and language associated with the Mestiza (131). Though the episode subverts certain ideas about identity, Anthony/Consuela is used for comic relief that “rests on the taboo associated with mixed identifications and anxieties about the misunderstanding of bodies” (134), rather than a critique of race and gender.

Suzanne treats both Anthony and Consuela badly, demanding more of them than the employer-employee role would permit, these characters are actually her closest friends, and she relies on them for emotional support. Suzanne insists that she is helping Consuela stay in the country because she doesn’t want to lose her help. Although her motives seem selfish, she is in fact, emotionally reliant on Consuela, and it is Anthony who comes to her aid to prevent Consuela’s deportation. While *Designing Women* doesn’t acknowledge all perspectives of color within its narrative of the feminist experience, it is important to note that it does demonstrate a negotiation factor of feminist ideology, where the most superficial character, is the one who is closest to the characters of color. So even though we only see a limited view of this negotiation, it still builds a model of potential cultural transformation in a New South.

Conclusion

Blanche and Suzanne Sugarbaker are constantly aware of the male gaze and have been raised to believe that their Southern performance will charm strangers and allow them to breeze through life without major difficulties. A changing world with changing Southern norms, reveal that this internalized performance is reliant on unchanging external factors that unfortunately for both characters, are always changing. This creates conflict in the lives of these women, who live in denial that their performance is outdated, and unwanted. While Blanche is tragic figure, Suzanne is comical one, but both display the trivializing and dismissive way that the New South

views them. By using Mestizas, the texts underscore the new Othered identity that these women now inhabit, while also othering Mestizas. Suzanne is able to maintain some privilege by exploiting an immigrant Mestiza with less privilege. Blanche, on the other hand, is forced to see herself in the old Mestiza vendor, and this similarity between the two further unbalances her because it forces her to confront her lost privilege. Sadly, Blanche does not have Suzanne's community support and friends and family. Blanche is left to struggle alone, further abused by those who should have, according to Southern scripts, helped her recover.

In the film versions of *Streetcar*, the vendor physically mirrors descriptions of Consuela in size and age, which also resemble images of the Mammy figure. In *Ain't I A Woman: Black Women and Feminism* (1981), bell hooks describes the physical image of the Mammy: "She was first and foremost asexual and consequently she had to be fat (preferably obese); she also had to give the impression of not being clean so she was the wearer of a greasy dirty headrag; her too tight shoes from which emerged her large feet were further confirmation of her bestial cow-like quality" (84). The Mestiza characters, like the Mammy, are fat and wear head scarves, normalizing an image of the Mestiza that is as persistent as that of the Mammy. Though the vendor is asexual, she symbolizes Blanche's fading sexual appeal. As "female clown," Consuela is sexually aggressive, making Anthony uncomfortable. This similar casting and costuming underscores the similar roles that each group plays within a white Southern narrative of femininity. While Consuela (played by Anthony) wears vibrant flowers, the vendor carries them. Consuela wears a large black coat, while the vendor is dressed in black. Both bring death and spiritual darkness: Consuela through her violent physical and "voodoo" threats against Suzanne; the vendor through her ceremonial flowers used during funerals and other events that mourn the loss of a loved one (or celebrate their lives).⁵ They represent the Southern white view of the

scary, mysterious religious beliefs and rituals of Third World women. Both Consuela as “female clown” and the vendor as a working-class “dark lady” are juxtaposed against slim white Southern women who were formally upper-class, and as such, are described/portrayed in ways that denote their poverty and class judgment of lower-class clothing and rituals--Williams even uses the term “gaudy” to describe the flowers used by “lower class Mexicans.”

The Kazan film version of *Streetcar* is obviously the most popular and well known version, starring Marlon Brando and Vivien Leigh who also played Scarlet O’Hara in *Gone with the Wind*.⁶ The choice in casting Vivien Leigh doubles the symbol of Blanche as aging Southern Belle with older Vivien Leigh who embodies the image of quintessential Southern Belle. As such, this casting also brings to mind images of the Mammy figure--mythologized in the film *Gone with the Wind* (1940) by Hattie McDaniel--thus allowing for comparisons between Mammy and the Mexican vendor (as well as comparisons to Suzanne and Consuela) in the juxtaposition of femininity within a racial binary. Kimberly Wallace-Sanders describes the image of the Mammy in *Mammy: A Century of Race, Gender, and Southern Memory* (2008), stating that, “The mammy’s stereotypical attributes—her deeply sonorous and effortlessly soothing voice, her infinite patience, her raucous laugh, her self-deprecating wit, her implicit understanding and acceptance of her inferiority and her devotion to whites—all point to a long-lasting and troubled marriage of racial and gender essentialism, mythology, and southern nostalgia” (2). Similarly, the Mexican Vendor and Consuela are characterized by their voices, however, the stereotype is altered slightly to adjust for their Mestiza identities: the vendor is sonorous, but not soothing; Consuela is shrill and refuses to accept her inferior status. While the Mammy is portrayed as “no threat to the existing white patriarchal social order for she totally submits to the white racist regime” (hooks 85), the Mestiza (whether slim and attractive, or fat

and old) is portrayed as a threat to this order. Positioned in subservient roles, the Black Mammy and the Mestiza vendor/maid are characterized differently. As Richard Rodriguez articulates, “The Indian refuses civilization; the African slave is rendered unfit for it” (3). The images of the vocally intrusive Mestiza, then, very much resemble U.S. stereotypes of Native American chanting and the “savage” war-cry. While the Black Mammy serves as an image of an acceptable Black female role (one of a life resigned to domesticity), the loud Mestiza acts as an image of White culture’s frustrations about their defiantly uncivilized community members who refuse to quietly serve and care for the white upper class. This rebellious image would have been most glaring in a South that mythologized the Black Mammy and the White Southern Belle.

Like the mammy, the images of Mestizas in these texts position the characters as ‘Others’ who “threaten the moral and social order” of a South that Blanche and Suzanne try to maintain, and like the Mammy, they are “simultaneously essential for its survival because those individuals who stand at the margins of society clarify its boundaries; by not belonging, [they] emphasize the significance of belonging” (Hill Collins 70). The protagonists of both works reveal reactions to women of color who do not conform to their roles as silent, non-obtrusive citizens: Blanche attempts to shut out the vendor’s presence, and Suzanne struggles to teach Consuela the proper role of a maid.

The problematic trope of the tiny Belle as center of Southern femininity has not gone unnoticed by Southern theorists. In *Dirt and Desire: Reconstructing Southern Women’s Writing, 1930-1990* (2000), Patricia Yaeger replaces the “miniature” Belle with the “giant woman” as a prototype of the southern female figure (xi). The texts analyzed in this chapter juxtapose a large Mestiza against a slim Southern Belle, incorporating the intersection of body size that is not overt in the texts discussed in my previous chapter because the white protagonists in *The*

Awakening and *Mercy Me* do not view themselves as Belles. Edna and Esmeralda exemplify Yaeger's theories that white southern women's writing "creates bizarre and frequent emblems for white southerner's racial blindness in images of fractured or scattered whiteness, in scenes filled with partial bodies, cotton lint, flour dust, displaced snow, or racial masking" (xii). I argue that Chopin and Williams include these emblems intentionally to critique their protagonists' inabilities to incorporate a critique of race into her transformation, while Graham and the producers/writers of *Designing Women* display the very blindness that Yaeger criticizes. Yaeger also argues that the term "southern" has been whitened, and while she attempts to regionalize Black women (xii), I hope to regionalize Mestiza Latinas who have been deregionalized despite their active presence in Southern narratives and discourses. In my analysis and in my pairing of the texts, I am suggesting that one writer per chapter critically incorporates Southern myths while the other writer in the chapter does not. In *Writing the South: Ideas of an American Region* (1986), Richard Gray describes the good Southern writer:

He uses the myth in a transitive sense: as a mode of signification, a way of organising experience. But he also employs it in an intransitive way: by drawing our attention to the act of writing and encoding, he requires us to look at the codes, the particular system of language he is using. He writes *about* something and invites us to look *through* the writing to a world beyond it: and he also offers us a critique—which is to say, an examination and a placing—of process whereby the world has been translated into words. (272)

I hesitate to call certain writers "good," but as a foundational theory of literary theory that distinguishes between Literature (capital L) and literature (lower case l), I hope to show, through these pairings, that there are authors who use writings to work through their understandings of these myths, while the others exploit the myths to perpetuate the privileged position of the writer.

The visual format of the texts analyzed in this chapter also demand inquiry of audience participation (while also taking out some agency for the audience in imaginatively constructing

characters and settings). Whereas novelists may experience audience feedback in the form of reviews, dramatists, screenwriters, and directors often sit with audiences during performances or screenings. For a TV format, immediate audience demographic and responses are given in the form of Nielson ratings. Though all artists have a perceived audience, the artists of the texts discussed in this chapter have a more concrete idea of who their audience is. Because of this, we can analyze the Mestiza characters as being constructed for a white middle or upper class audience that would understand, if not expect, for the Mestiza characters to be portrayed in this way. These images, constructed by white authors and for white audiences, are encoded (by the image producers) in direct response to the ideologies held by the decoders (the audience) (Hall 124). In other words, the vendor and maid do not just happen to be Mestiza; they are Mestiza because they happen to be a street vendor and a maid. Any viewer, whether part of the target audience or not, has the ability to challenge the inherent message in these images, but because of the ubiquitousness of these stereotypes, challenges to these dominant images is frustratingly slow.

CHAPTER THREE

Mestizas in a Global South: Cynthia Shearer's *The Celestial Jukebox*

The Celestial Jukebox (2005), Cynthia Shearer's most recent novel, is starting to receive a lot of critical attention from Southern literary theorists. The novel takes place in the fictional town of Madagascar, Mississippi, where several culturally diverse characters and interwoven plotlines converge around the town epicenter, The Celestial Grocery, which houses a broken jukebox. Shearer's "jukebox" contains songs from several quintessential U.S. genres (blues, rock, country) symbolizing an interconnected and vibrant South, with distinct individuals, that are all nonetheless part of a larger entity. It is worth noting that the literal jukebox in the text only plays songs from before 1968 (the year both Bobby Kennedy and Martin Luther King Jr. were assassinated), and rarely works. Instead of playing songs the patron has chosen, it plays songs vital to what the patron needs to hear (whether he or she realizes it or not). The jukebox acts as a real and symbolic hybrid space, where cultural exchanges occur, with varied levels of success, mirroring the cultural interactions of the town itself. The novel is set in the late 1990s and culminates with several citizens of Madagascar watching the 9/11 terrorist attacks on TV, linking this event with the events of 1968. The Civil Rights Movement, which addressed a national problem, was Southernized by the country. The assassinations of Bobby Kennedy and Martin Luther King Jr. turned a "Southern" problem into a national one. The 9/11 attacks, conversely, brought the South into the rest of the country. Both events united a nation that often defines itself through regional distinctions; both events also forced a nation to re-define its "Other."

Madagascar is a microcosm of the new American South: diverse communities not only learn to live together, but are vital to the culture of the region because they have an invested

interest in the South as home. Maureen Ryan states that, “Contemporary commentators on Southern society and culture recognize that the South today is more urban than rural, more progressive than backward-looking, more secular than religious, more middle class than either aristocratic or impoverished, more like the rest of the country than uniquely tragic” (238).

Kathryn McKee and Annette Trefzer discuss Madagascar as a clear representation of the global South “not as an enclave of hyperregionalism but a porous space through which other places have always circulated” (679). The novel includes both characters who are not native Southerners, and those who can trace their Southern lineage back for generations. Some want to leave the South, some are returning to it. All of the characters have intimate or passing contact with each other, underscoring the South as pluralistic, but with a profound interconnectedness within itself and with the rest of the world. Thomas M. Wilson and Hastings Duncan describe how international borders are becoming obsolete in the face of modernity and globalization, which in turn calls into question the “role of individuals in these structures [...] especially in terms of their loyalties and identities” (1). These identities shift our understanding of borders from stable borders to ones that are more flexible in accordance with our self-definitions, while national borders and the cultural narratives produced in each still have real effects on these lives and identities.

When applied to Latin American and Latina cultures, Frances R. Aparicio and Susana Chávez-Silverman, building on Mary Louise Pratt, term this process *tropicalization*, defined as the “mutual influence that a subordinate and a dominant culture effect upon each other in the ‘contact zones’ of colonial encounters” (1). These “contact zones” act as “social spaces where cultures meet, clash, and grapple with each other often in contexts of highly asymmetrical relations of power” (2). In this way, Madagascar can be analyzed as a constellation of Southern

perceptions of what this contact zone might look like, and how individuals navigate these shifting borders in the face of modernity and globalization.

In *Grounded Globalism: How the U.S. South Embraces the World* (2007), James L. Peacock describes a global perspective that must also be grounded in the local in order for a region, the South especially, to achieve a transcendent identity that is free of the burdens of the past and aware of an interconnected future. This is a difficult but transformative process for a region that places high value on heritage. Through the novel, Shearer constructs a dynamic hybrid space with several examples of various types of border-crossing and border-crossers. She explores the implications and ramifications of these interactions for the individual characters as well as the community as it attempts to gain this global perspective while negotiating a new and ever-changing regional identity. Moreover, the novel recovers “the voices of African Americans and women in Southern literature to further assert the importance of other minorities in the historical and contemporary U.S. South, demonstrating that a multicultural South has existed for some time” while exploring the “current transformations taking place as new migrants settle in the fictional Mississippi Delta town of Madagascar” (Anderson 199).

Shearer brings Central America and Latino migration into her South through the character of Consuela, a Honduran woman, thus portraying a more realistic, Latino-populated South. Consuela means constellation, and her connection with Angus and migratory pattern within the South drive home Shearer’s interconnected and multi- and trans-cultural New South. Historian Raymond Mohl charts the increase of Latino migration to the South after the 1994 North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA), which removed trading barriers between the United States, Canada, and Mexico (409-410). He states that, “Globalization has brought a transnational, low-wage Hispanic labor force to the land of Dixie—a pattern of human migration

that has produced substantial cultural and demographic change in a region where change has always been slow and received with skepticism, if not hostility” (430).¹ Shearer’s novel is set in the late 1990s, when the most dramatic increase to the South’s Latino population occurred. In it she explores the experiences of immigrant Mestizos in a small, rural Southern town. Lidia Yuknavitch argues that “the growth of the United States has a shadow-self; the Native American, Central American, Mexican-American economies, cultures, and people have each experienced that ‘growth’ to differing degrees, as a form of occupation” (99). By constructing a multiethnic South that is influenced by new global economies, Shearer places this “shadow-self” directly into the image of changing Southern paradigms.

Angus, the owner of the Celestial Grocery, falls in love with one of the Mestizos, Consuela, from a distance when he spots her dancing in a field. Consuela speaks English with a Texas accent and cooks food for migrant workers, so Angus hires her as a cook in his store. He immediately regrets hiring “an illegal,” but cannot resist having her near. Despite her Texas accent, which he notes, Angus assumes she is not a U.S. citizen. Though Angus represents a New Southerner, he has internalized the very same stereotype that real Americans are not Latino.

Similar to the staring interaction described in Chapter One, Angus and Consuela initially only view each other from afar, but Shearer provides a more complex representation of this cultural exchange than the earlier discussed works, by allowing Consuela to be both seen and heard through her interactions with Angus. Though Consuela is given more subjectivity, her role is still largely to advance Angus’s transformation as he negotiates his own position in the South. In many cases, Angus vacillates between viewing her either as helpless victim or strong Brown woman, pest or love interest, sinner or saint. Through this plotline, Shearer is able to nuance the difficulty and discomfort of transcending dualistic thinking, especially when Angus sees himself

defined through the eyes of the Mestiza character, something the previously mentioned protagonists do not explore.² This text, therefore, allows us to return to an analysis of the intimate interaction of interpersonal relationships as influenced by cultural exchange.

Cynthia Shearer was born in Massachusetts, but moved to the small rural town of Alapaha, Georgia when she was nineteen days old. Her novels are set in small rural Southern towns, but her most recent novel, *Celestial Jukebox* describes a rural, yet global South, something not often depicted in Southern literature—one that is culturally and racially diverse. The novel begins, “Once upon a time in that part of Mississippi where every town’s name reads like a memory of some better place, a girl with a honey-colored braid down her back stood by the side of the road and stared at a hand-painted sign” (1). The novel opens with a fairy-tale aspect to this South, and starts with two women—one Black and one White—talking about food, but immediately moves outward to its other characters, implying that this old South of black/white binary race relations and centered on food was the real fiction, while this more global South infused with magical realism is the true South. It is interesting that the novel opens with a scene similar to that of the one in *Streetcar*--a black woman assists a white woman who appears lost. While *Streetcar* introduces Blanche arriving in a new and unfamiliar town, *Celestial Jukebox* introduces a white character who is returning to her town. In the former, the two characters are strangers, emphasizing Blanche’s entrance into a strange town and being addressed by a black woman in a way that is strange to her; in the latter, the two characters know each other (though initially they do not recognize each other), and begin interacting in a way that belies any racial hierarchies that are stereotyped as Southern.

As we begin to meet the characters, we are aware that there is no one protagonist. Shearer does not center one story or privilege one narrative within the text, but instead uses multiple,

racially diverse characters who influence each other's lives in significant ways. One reviewer refers to Shearer's South as "imbricated in a network of global commerce that ties its residents, regardless of their claims to aw-shucksitude, to each other and to the world in myriad and complicated ways" and through Shearer's representation we see the South's "perpetual incompleteness, the way in which the fantasy of a closed and coherent South is persistently exposed as unsustainable" ("Summer Reading"). Shearer's global South, set in the late 90s, also demonstrates the South's struggle to define itself in contemporary global terms that are still shadowed by Southern Agrarian definitions of Southern identity: 1) deep humanism based on family and friends, 2) closeness to nature especially through farming, 3) religion, 4) suspicion of technology especially northern and urban forms, 5) dislike of mass media, and 6) concern with race (Grisby). This mythologized vision of the South is always mediated against the South's history with slavery and racism. Madagascar represents a transnational cultural contact zone, as well as a temporal and hybrid third space where residents and newcomers negotiate a new identity between historical Southern beliefs and modern global ones, while acknowledging racial conflict and struggling with updated forms of slavery, as embodied in the image of the migrant worker. This highlights how "the religion of consumerism and the abuse of demographic knowledge by marketers propel many families toward dissolution" ("Interview"). The residents of Madagascar confront institutional racism perpetuated by a global capitalism that survives by obscuring the importance of interpersonal connections and disrupting communities for capital gain.

My central focus is on the Mestiza character, Consuela, who is primarily narrated through the eyes of Angus. Angus first encounters Consuela in the third chapter, "Schottische," which serves to introduce the Celestial Grocery and its owner. Angus is sweeping dead bees from the

store when he hears Tejano music outside. A group of men are sitting in a circle, smoking, when Angus spots Consuela “Apart from the group, a small dark figure danced in the field alone, spinning and turning slowly” (39). He watches her through binoculars as she dances, “Her skirt was full and black, with flowers embroidered on it. It swished around her shins as she stepped carefully amid the newly plowed furrows. She was barefoot. You didn’t see that much anymore, barefooted women” (40). Like the introduction of Mariequita in *The Awakening*, Consuela is barefoot, watched by a person curious of her unique behavior. Her bare feet are symbolic of a freedom from social norms, something that would grab the attention of someone who lives under the yoke of a society that is centered around a bevy of inherited social norms, as is the South. Angus notes that “She thought no one at all could see her” (40), and this protects him from a reciprocal gaze, allowing him to detail her actions:

She danced alone but held her head canted back a bit, as if in ceremonial tenderness towards some imaginary loving partner who was not there. It was the western dance called schottische. Angus had seen the lesson for it on television, cowboys with deadpan faces twirling women with petticoats flashing. But when the dancer in the field moved, she had a look on her face Angus had not seen in many years. It was a look meant to be private, full of the kind of light that only one man gets to see in a certain moment, usually in a bed. (40)

Like Mariequita, Consuela possesses an intriguing sexuality that invites stares from the characters who interpret the exotic women through cultural constructs as well as their current emotional states. Feeling voyeuristic, Angus lowers the binoculars, but unable to resist the private dance, raises them again, continuing his detailed observations:

She was older than he had thought, but she moved like a young woman. When the music ended, she curtsied to the empty air. She vanished into the trees, and Angus was left

alone with the broom in one hand and the binoculars in the other. He felt aggrieved and out of sorts, his habit when he was given the gift of sudden unsolicited understanding. (40)

Exactly what this new “understanding” is, is unclear, but Angus nevertheless perceives it as a gift, feeling an internal disruption caused by the sight of this woman. This disruption signals the start of his transformative process, while simultaneously portraying his isolation, viewing others from afar.

In the eighth chapter “Eat, or We Both Starve” Angus looks for the mysterious woman whenever he hears a rustle outside the door, unable to forget her. As he resigns himself to the notion that he will never see her again, he spots her briefly next door at the Rescue Mission with the other men as they admire the National Steel guitar, which appears frequently in the text, linking several characters. Realizing they are waiting for him to open the store, “he threw open the door ceremoniously, pretending to notice them for the first time” (88). Angus mirrors Consuela’s ceremonial-like dance through his welcoming gesture, but his actions are more performative, meant to influence his audience’s view of him and hide his voyeurism. He quickly pretends to be busy when they come through the door, thinking about the stereotype of Hispanic shoplifters, noting that it is “the rich Ole Miss kids you have to watch” (88). Their presence raises hegemonic racial stereotypes that, although Angus knows are untrue, still follow marginalized groups and root themselves in outsider consciousnesses.

Referring to her as “the dancer,” Angus is caught off guard when she stares at him, “rak[ing] her eyes mercilessly up and down his gaunt, lanky frame” (88). Angus loses his balance “under the strength of her stare” no longer safe behind his binoculars and considerable distance. He returns the stare, describing her “lovely [...] weather-beaten” face, her “wrinkles like soft confessions” acquired from smiling and squinting in the sun (88). Angus’s romanticized

observations reveal his attraction to Consuela as well as to the figure he needs her to be. He continues to list, seemingly taking inventory of physical appearance: “She had been quite beautiful once, he could see. She carried herself as if she still were. What was left of her beauty was mostly a kind of hauteur. She wore tight men’s jeans and work boots, a pink sweatshirt encrusted with rhinestone jewels that said *Selena 4-Ever*. Her earrings were baroque gold hoops, too big to be real gold” (88). Breaking the stare, she walks towards merchandise “giving him the benefit of the view of her shapely behind” then turns again looking directly at him (89). Consuela plays into the role he has assigned her through a coquettish dance of stares, reveling in the seductive power this audience of one has granted her. As if to provide her with accompaniment, Angus plays a Spanish song on the jukebox about deportation that pleased Hispanic customers in the past, “when there were more Mexican faces in the fields than black ones” (90). Meandering through the shelves, she inspects the merchandise and Angus’s “defenseless frame” in the same way “as if both were merely *suitable*, no more” making Angus uncomfortable and defensive, comparing her to Chinese women who “would have the modesty to lower her eyes and wait for him to inspect *her*” (90). Consuela returns the inventory stare, expanding it from his body to his place of work, making him feel defenseless. This scene emphasizes the power of the interpersonal stare, though Consuela gains control over its dominating potential, turning it back on Angus. Because he lacks the confidence to do the same, Angus is instead unnerved, thinking back to Chinese women who wouldn’t have had the social power. His commitment to unequal gendered power systems manifests during this scene, triggered by his discomfort and inability to deal with becoming the object of the gaze. Consuela

seductively fingers merchandise, eventually returning to the jukebox to play the only other Spanish song in it, one about unrequited love, playfully acknowledging this disruption of power.

As she inspects a dress that has been hanging in the store way too long, Angus realizes how much time he's spent in the store over a lifetime. Picking up his pace to a youthful speed, again in a performance for Consuela, he is saddened when they checkout and leave, losing an audience that catalyzed self-reflection and revealed the potential for personal change. Later that evening Angus watches her again through his binoculars as she begins to cook, using herbs from a small traveling garden. Reverting back to his voyeurism, Angus continues to feed his fascination without the potential for the reverse. Angus attempts to inhale the aroma of her cooking, inviting more of her in through other senses, but is unable to smell anything but his old store, signaling the futility of his refusal to engage in two-way knowledge-making. Feeling alone, he contemplates the irony of a life as the owner of the town's central store: "he was surrounded by others, yet he often felt solitary as some unnamed creature at the bottom of the sea" (92). Noticing her eat alone after the others had finished, he respects that she seems content with so little, proof to him of a life of hard work: "She was a survivor, much like himself" (92).

Consuela returns to the store the next day to buy cigarettes and browse, and as he stares at her from behind, she turns and catches him, "and he noted that that pleased her, before Angus snatched his eyes away" (92). Refusing to permit the consequences of a reciprocal stare, she stares when her back is turned and looks away when they face each other. He offers her a job as a cook, arguing that this job will get her off the fields and out of the hot sun. She stares at him, "appraising him not only as a boss-man, but as a *man*" and in response, "Angus felt his spine go straighter" (93). Seeing himself through her eyes, at least in how he interprets her stare, his

behavior changes so that he might see through her a more positive version of himself through her.

Assuming she doesn't speak English, Angus blushes with "pleased shame" when she responds in almost-perfect, Texas-accented English that she doesn't work in the fields, her job is to cook for the others in the group (93). He finds her accent "intriguing and charming" and extends the offer of meals for all of them. Consuela immediately begins the task of cooking, but when customers glance nervously at her, he realizes the problematic situation he has placed himself in by hiring an "illegal" (94). Though his initial impulse is guided by the desire to have her close to him through hiring her, the potential illegality of the situation threatens his personal happiness. His worries of involving himself in illegal activities are heavy with memories of oppressive and violent state systems in China, creating a paranoia that conflicts with his personal desires.

Upon his request she makes him eggs and bacon, sternly warning that it will give him heart trouble in a tone that thrills him. He responds that he already has heart trouble, using limited Spanish, which pleases her. Thinking to himself, "[i]t was no lie, his heart was in trouble, beating too fast for a few moments with five kinds of happiness" (94). Later that night, he hears her singing from across the fields, and ponders the loneliness of his life: "if you agree to be lonely the way the needle in the haystack is lonely, you can vanish into America, you can get sufficiently *away* from whatever drove you from home" (94). Escaping a hostile government, Angus's loneliness acts as a defense mechanism used to psychologically escape traumatic

memories, but Consuela's presence forces him to acknowledge his loneliness and the false belief that he has fully escaped his past.

The next chapter devoted to Angus and Consuela is "Incantation to Control Another," the eleventh chapter of the novel. Consuela has been working at the Grocery a while, using the store bathroom in the morning to get ready for work, and Angus is keenly aware of how she looks and smells, stealing glances as often as he can and utilizing breaks between meal rushes to make small talk. He notices the politeness of her sons as they eat, reminiscent of U.S. past when American youth were polite. When she cleans up at the end of her shift, he is reminded of serving-class women in Nanking who also carried water on their heads as Consuela does, "like moving flowers" (121). His view of Consuela is always framed through the cultural codes of China, reviving romantic memories he doesn't think he has, of a homeland he didn't think he missed. Watching her, he notes that she is "not ashamed" of the class implications, and he "found it dizzying to think much about the distances it was possible to travel in the human world" (121).

In the mornings, Angus waits in the window, watching her approach for her shift. She begins to add merchandise to the store: potted herbs by the porch, shirts, incense and candles with incantations on them. Receiving a 300 dollar invoice for the "hoodoo goods" he becomes angry, "the spell broken" and he feels "small and vulnerable, even defeated" (123). His image of Consuela as sexual sorceress is broken and he considers firing her until he notices customers buying the wares she's stocked, and that the new merchandise attracts new Hispanic customers. Though he longs for her, Angus's feelings are reliant on Consuela maintaining an unworldly status as an object to be admired. At the first crack in this image, Angus's reaction is to remove from his life the threat of humanizing Consuela. She is there for how she makes him feel, and he

runs from the prospect of her making him feel otherwise.³ When he sees that the business attracts new customers, he decides not to fire her, but again his decisions are based on how the situation advantages him.

He finds a flyer that she quickly snatches, and not fully understanding the Spanish copy, Angus offers to display it in the window, though she later takes it down. In the next section of the chapter, Angus is approached by Dean Fondren, a local farmer who warns that rumors are circulating about Angus's involvement in helping the Hondurans unionize. Only then does Angus realize the words on the flyer, again questioning the legality of his business arrangement with Consuela and his role in the cultural practice of hiring undocumented workers (126). He decides to fire her again, choosing to distance himself from the situation, but this time it is due to fear of legal ramifications. Beginning the firing process, he shows her a buckeye he keeps in his pocket for luck, and that it was given to him by Ariadne (the local sorceress and former midwife) the night his wife died, leaving him with a new baby to raise alone. She grasps it in her hand, "as if to capture Angus's heart in her hand" and he considers how close the buckeye had been to his private areas, and he suddenly feels exposed in her presence. This symbolic physical and sexual closeness stirs his romantic feelings. Agreeing that it is a lucky charm, she places it in her cleavage, embarrassing Angus who responds by looking away with a "crooked grin" unable to confront the interpersonal possibilities (127). She tells him that trouble might be brewing, but is vague, only revealing that Tulia (the overseer of the migrant workers) invited her to a dance. Angus feels "sorrow creep into his marrow, like a poison, a hex" (128). When she is ready to leave work, he lies and says he can't pay her until Monday because thinking of her dancing with another man at the casino has made him jealous. Angus repeatedly reacts in dominating ways whenever Consuela threatens the fantasy he has created for himself. He later punishes himself

through a fantasy of dancing with her, remembering that he never learned to dance, spending too much time alone. He gets drunk and dreams of dancing with an adoring Consuela and “her bird feet,” knowing all the steps of the schottische she danced the first time he saw her (130). With Consuela absent, he is unable to punish her in childish ways, so he reverts to his fantasies of her, without acknowledging how he has created and reinforced his own loneliness through his treatment of her.

In the following chapter, titled “High John the Conqueror Root,” Angus is waiting on Consuela who is late from work. He buys the National Steel Guitar next door that Consuela and her group had admired and hides it under his bed in the back of store. When he returns from the back room, Consuela is there. As he tries to face her, she steps and turns to avoid facing him. He jokingly acknowledges the awkward dance as she faces him. She is barely made-up or combed and has a black eye. He embraces and soothes her as she begins to cry, and he realizes she is bruised on her body as well, feeling ashamed for not paying her the night before. Seeing her vulnerable evokes sympathy and reflection of his own actions. He rocks her and murmurs *mamacita*, enjoying his role as protector, allowing him to be the hero in his fantasy, the only alternative to the previous one.

After coffee, Consuela tells Angus she is a citizen, “naturalized in Houston, Texas” so that her niece who was sent to work in the U.S. would be able to send money back home, but the niece never appeared. The coyote Tulia has taken her, and although they were able to retrieve her, Tulia kept the papers to her sister’s house that were used as collateral for the trip. She went to the dance to ask about the girl and her missing son Hector, and Tulia’s men beat her. Realizing that Consuela is an individual who exists outside his desires, he becomes aware of the very real danger that affects the lives of the Hispanic workers who cannot rely on the police or other

governmental institutions for their safety. It takes external violence to finally intrude on his fantasy and consider the plight of others which his isolation permitted him to avoid. This scene also reveals the abuses suffered by migrant workers in a capitalistic labor system that closely mirrors slavery. Angus comes to understand the effects of this system on the individual and governmental systems that keep other groups in fear of helping victimized groups, and through this process Shearer gives voice to Latinos in and of the South and is able to reveal the implications of anti-immigrant ideologies and governmental policies that effect Hispanic citizens and non-citizens alike. Angus is able to extend beyond himself and his needs, to a broader understanding of complex systems of oppression that are internalized by people like himself. Angus gives her the guitar, hoping to cheer her up, and although she appears pleased, Angus feels foolish for denying her pay that might have helped her situation, and gifting her a guitar that is unable to feed her. He notices that later her tamales are hotter than usual and he feels a twinge of fear at this change, assuming that it represents her feelings toward him. Finally seeing her as a multifaceted human, he becomes aware of how self-centered his actions were.

In “Money House Blessing” Angus notices birds outside the window, honored that they chose to perch in his tree, symbolizing his understanding of the gift Consuela’s presence has provided. Seeing them, Consuela greets the birds, saying they are native to Honduras as well. Suddenly, they fly off, making Angus aware of fleeting encounters. Angus feels protected by Consuela, the two having grown closer after the attack by Tulia’s men. Consuela is not as cheerful, so Angus plays songs on the jukebox to cheer her up, working up the courage to ask her

to dance when there are no customers. Facing personal transformations, Angus is still restricted by the insecurity his loneliness has fostered.

Later that day, Tulia arrives with Aubrey, and as the two approach, he positions himself in front of Consuela. Aubrey attempts to buy cigarettes but Angus ignores him because of his association with Tulia and his refusal to help with the victimized workers. Lashing out in anger, Angus calls Aubrey the N-word, reverting back to his vengeful acts of dominance. At closing time, Consuela quietly packs her things and asks to be paid, and again Angus pretends he can't pay her, confirming his regression back to his old ways. Regretting the decision, Angus watches her face age "right before his very eyes" and sees himself "through her eyes: *El hombre*, American *bok guey* with a fat American wallet" (205). Seeing himself defined in her eyes, he realizes that he has allowed himself to become part of the oppressive system he worked so hard to escape from. In a gesture of generosity, he leaves the room with the cash register open, and when he returns the money is still there, but Consuela has left. The next day he hears Consuela's van and knows she has left with her sons, possibly never returning (205). Taking some trash out, he notices the National Steel leaning against the dumpster, and he knows Consuela left it there as a message to him about money. Sweeping around the dumpster, he notices a green feather from one of the birds that had graced his tree, and he feels like the witness to a secret, and now with no one to tell (206). He understands that when graced by the presence of an outside phenomenon, you do not chase it off. Later, Angus dances to the Spanish love song of unrequited love, with an invisible partner, as Consuela had when he first spotted her. Reinvigorated by his re-entrance into a transformative space, he mirrors her liberated movements, "both hands raised in a kind of

benediction as he danced, feeling the confusions that come from having a big heart” (209).

Changed by his emerging understanding, his heart transforms from “bad” to “big.”

During Consuela’s absence, the citizens of Madagascar decide to convert the church into a living space for the migrant workers, providing them with a place to sleep with basic amenities. By working together to build the Hondurans a place to live, the community invites them into the South. It is Angus who suggests the new structure for and better treatment of the migrant workers, signaling the start of his successful transformation and immersion into a multicultural South.

Angus does not see Consuela for a while, and continues to long for her. He finally encounters her again in “By the Waters of Babyland” when he visits his newborn grandchild. Consuela is working at the nursery, and she seems angry with him. He assumes it is because he owes her money, but later realizes that she has mistaken him for the baby’s father: “*My life is an open book she can’t read*, he thought hopelessly. What would it take to be seen for what he was, somebody who needed company?” (397). Affected by his loneliness, Angus diverts blame to her, rather than accepting his role in creating his feelings. Consuela shows the baby’s mother, Lisa, how to wrap the baby tightly in a blanket “[t]ight like a tamale” (398) to calm her and Lisa compares the process to an eggroll, linking similarities in cultures through comfort foods in the same way the opening scene of the novel does. Consuela soothes the aches of the mother from childbirth and breastfeeding, and Angus remembers Ariadne the midwife, who had done the same thing for the birth of his son, though memories of the past no longer flood him with sadness.

When Lisa falls asleep, Consuela takes the baby and Angus follows her into the nursery. She shows him the crack babies, picking one up and handing it to Angus saying, “[h]olding

babies is good for the heart” (400). As if to answer his pleads, Consuela provides him with a companion to heal his heart. The sick baby that forces him to focus on the needs of someone else rather than his own desires. Angus comes to realize that true freedom from loneliness comes from actively engaging with and giving to others, and commits himself to frequent visits to the hospital to visit Consuela and rock sick babies. Sharon Monteith and Suzanne W. Jones state that, “Negotiating a sense of place involves reassessment of one’s past in a new present, [provoking] a cultural remapping of the region that allows us to inquire into new coordinates of southern identity” (7). By actively engaging in rather than withdrawing from Madagascar as a social and culture site, Angus begins to feel more at home through a communal ritual that involves reconciling with the past.

Through the conflict and eventual friendship between Angus and Consuela, Shearer is able to portray the tragic flaws and hegemonic processes that prevent people from achieving racial and cultural transformations within vibrant zones of cultural contact, underscoring Homi Bhabha’s definition of true hybridity as a deconstruction of hierarchies. Consuela is an example of the confidence and empathy this transformative process provides, and it is only by embracing these lessons that Angus is able to free himself from his own loneliness and the internalized systems of domination he perpetuated on others. His oscillation between fearing and desiring Consuela is influenced by gendered and raced stereotypes constructed in the South that view Mestizas in dichotomized terms as either exoticized Other or tragic Mestiza. As an immigrant, Angus rejected the potential to view Madagascar and himself as hybrid spaces that could provide models for flexible negotiations of self-identity. By truly seeing the Other outside of the labels that categorize them, he is able to view his own tragic flaws through their eyes, analyzing his relationship to an oppressive past, allowing for personal growth as well as mutually beneficial

cross-cultural connections. In this way, Angus becomes a personified example of a New South navigating a new cultural identity in the face of external forces and internal conflict so as to achieve multicultural understandings of how interpersonal relationships can be used to de-commodify racial and gendered Others in a capitalistic society.

Through Angus's spiritual journey throughout the novel, Shearer maps new definitions of community, particularly in the South, from a fictive imagined community, to one based on actual altruism. Communities are imagined "because the members of even the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow-members, meet them, or even hear of them, yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion" (Anderson 6) and "regardless of the actual inequality and exploitation that may prevail in each, the nation is always conceived as a deep, horizontal comradeship" (7). These communities naturalize and legitimize their identity by creating boundaries that "divide order from chaos, internal security from external threat" (Romine 5), constructing exclusionary definitions of insiders that are homogenized through cultural productions that mirror these labels (Romine 7-8). Angus's journey is a process of moving beyond these definitions to redefine community that resembles Audre Lorde's view of community as liberation: Rather than focus on differences and acting suspiciously to outsiders, community that privileges interpersonal relationships and communal support creates real bonds that allow a community and its members to easily negotiate identities that are fluid and inclusive ("The Master's Tools Will Never Dismantle the Master's House" 112). Angus and the other citizens of Madagascar are able to transform the town into a transnational space that incorporates difference to achieve shared knowledge.

Shearer's Mestiza subverts those that persist in popular culture: Consuela exists outside the beauty ideal as an older, plump woman, but Shearer portrays her as sexual in a way that

normalizes her sexual agency; Consuela utilizes “hoodoo” goods, but Shearer does not perpetuate the image of a threatening mystic Mestiza. As such, she acts as an ally to an existing movement of Latinas attempting this same critique of U.S. beauty and religious standards.⁴ By providing a nuanced Mestiza character, Shearer lays bare the destructive stereotypes about Mestizas that marginalize them within Southern society and broader U.S. culture. The texts discussed in the previous chapters appropriate the image of the Mestiza, and further marginalize the characters by denying them voice or presence. Shearer gives Consuela presence and voice, allows her to actively reject Angus’s stereotyping, and permits her agency as an advocate for the migrant population.

CHAPTER FOUR
Southern Mestizas Writing the Self:
Exploring Hybrid Identities in the Works of Lorrain López and Judith Ortiz Cofer

As emerging voices in the literary world, Southern Latina writers must challenge stereotypes of their identities that were perpetuated by non-Latina authors before them and that are maintained by contemporary Southern texts, a process called *hegemonic tropicalization*, or the “ominipresent [images] not only in literature but also in the popular media that circulates and exploits gender-based myths and stereotypes” (Aparicio 10). After a history of marginalization and silencing, the Mestiza writer’s text reclaims agency within the Southern cultural narrative by addressing or coming to terms with their own past and historical images of themselves, demands a voice through explicit identity negotiations and cultural critiques, and subverts derogatory stereotypes through writing as a form of social change. This *re-tropicalization* “stand[s] the dominant culture’s stereotypes and images on their heads from the margin, resemanticizing them [...] from hegemonic tools into discursive weapons of resistance” (12). In the predominantly white, male world of literature, the Mestiza writer must struggle against literary marginalization that often views ethnic literature as exotic or a special topic that has no place in the English language canon. As acts of subversion, these texts challenge dominant narrative standards while still working within these dominant cultural codes. In this way, Mestiza writers offer representations of hybridity while positioning their texts in multiple canons, subverting the very notion of canonization.

Latina writers write with an understanding that they are speaking for a community. Bridget Kevane describes Latina writers as “aware that their words have the power to speak to their community, to make a change, these writers have become intellectually responsible writers, conscious of speaking and writing for their community” (11). Because of this general

assumption, Latina writers are often judged as not being “representative enough of their ethnic communities” while others complain that “they are not good enough” (12). Latina writers are “criticized for having abandoned their homeland, their language, their culture” (16) when they write about loss of homeland, choose English as their written language, and explore issues of cultural alienation. The Mestiza writer faces what Trinh T. Minh-Ha calls a “triple bind” as female writers of color. Because these identities are seen as conflicting, Mestiza writers are asked to privilege one over the other (*Woman, Native, Other* 6). As Southern female writers of color, they must also consider exclusionary regionalism, and they have only recently been considered “Southern” writers by the academic community. Suzanne Jones observes that “Instead of worrying about who qualifies as a Southern writer or rigidly delimiting southern literature, we might more fruitfully ask questions about who is writing about the U.S. South (no matter their birthplace or residence), [and] what stories they are telling” (quoted in Bone 67). Inheriting a sense of place from Southern authors like Toni Morrison and Flannery O’Connor, who “self-consciously cultivated a sense of the region’s importance to her work, regional difference parallels racial difference in ways that deepen her understanding of both constructions” (Jackson 22), Mestiza writers in the South add new dimensions to our understanding of how race and gender are constructed in the South. While academia and literary scholars have embraced these new perspectives of the South, public audiences often ignore the importance of the South as a setting in these texts, focusing more on the protagonists’ ethnicities. Returning to the theories of Anzaldúa, we should view this cross-pollination not as a diluting of

traditional genres of literature, but rather see each category and genre as more fluid, something that can encompass multiple identities and definitions that often shift and sway.

Southern Mestiza writers model cultural negotiation, allowing readers to uncover strategies for their own identity formation, by demonstrating the fundamental problems with defining identity formation as a steady process towards a cohesive identity. Instead, these writers construct images of multifaceted, fluid, and unstable identities that counter the myth that defines this instability as incomplete or flawed. These narratives portray borderland identities that thrive through cross-cultural contact, deconstructing binaries and diversifying national and regional identities. By inviting readers to participate in this exploration, these writers create a cultural exchange that extends beyond the text, encouraging the reader to adopt these same understandings of fluid identities. This fluid flexibility transforms the individual, strengthening social skills while achieving personal empowerment, eventually extending outwards into political and social activism based on empathy and complex understandings of social structures.

This chapter analyzes the works of two Mestiza authors who live in and write about the South. Though not all of their texts incorporate the U.S. South, Lorraine López and Judith Ortiz Cofer both have several works that explore the Southern Mestiza experience. The two authors create very disparate Southern narratives: López's protagonist reveals Southern conventions through interactions with other Southerners; Cofer's narrative voice is more overtly aware of its Southern setting and her own (or the protagonist's) experiences in New Jersey and Georgia. For both authors, Georgia (the "South") is the place of uprootedness, both having moved there (and having their characters move there) later in life. Both write the South as alien and new, with the previous setting constructed as more normative and comfortable. This allows for a comparative analysis of region and how it affects the construction of Mestiza identity in various parts of the

country, which furthers my exploration of how the constructions discussed in earlier chapters are distinctly Southern and internalized by those marginalized by these ideologies.

Nahem Yousaf and Sharon Monteith describe immigrant and refugee literature in the contemporary South as having the ability to “ope[n] up the local through dialogic encounters with the global via characters whose initial dislocation from traditional referents lead to a reconsideration of Southern paradigms in Southern places” (223). These texts are able to “impress on the reader what it is to be Southern by exploring Southern places from extrinsic vantage points. In a rhizomorphic South, the literary tradition does not atrophy; new Southerners and South-watchers extend the region imaginatively” (215). In other words, interpersonal connections through cross-cultural encounters, whether lived or read in text, allow Southerners to view the South from different vantage points in order to redefine the South in a way that privileges multiplicity and deconstructs hierarchies. Cofer and López narrate the strategies involved in negotiating new identities through assimilation, accommodation, and acculturation. They bring with them outside, global perspectives of inside, local referents as they become “new Southerners” as well as “South-watchers” in the South. These narratives represent an outsider’s view from the *inside*, as these characters themselves become a new community of insiders, negotiating bi-cultural identities in a new multicultural South while at the same time providing representation of these cultural exchanges through the perspective of the “Other.” Southern Mestiza writers live as insiders and outsiders at the interstices of multiple cultures, and are in a unique position to contribute greatly to our understanding of the South and current U.S. racial formations.

These texts underscore the potential of both Southern and Latina literary genres to create an academic and literary third space where the two genres meet, negotiate, and exchange

understanding of identities, sharing and contributing to experiences and creating diverse perspectives in self-representations that are as prominent, interesting, influential and controversial as the traditional ones. Through experimental writing, they play with “multiple perspectives, temporal fragmentation, and stream of consciousness, often enabling the reader to experience different levels of reality” by “engaging in a more stylized writing, more aware of figurative language” rich with “metaphors and symbols” (Heredia 9). These writers are not just experimenting with language, there are reclaiming a voice that has long been silenced. In “Transformation of Silence,” Audre Lorde discusses female writers of color and their commitment to the power of language as resistance: “In the transformation of silence into language and action, it is vitally necessary for each of us to establish or examine her function in that transformation and to recognize her role as vital within that transformation” (43); “For we have been socialized to respect fear more than our own needs for language and definition, and while we wait in silence for that final luxury of fearlessness, the weight of that silence will choke us” (44). Southern Mestiza writers, as community representatives, reclaim this voice and advance the potential for transformation.

These texts can be analyzed as performative in how they create a third space that acts as a site of exploration and resistance for the authors, and invites readers to participate in the cultural exchange. In “Laugh of the Medusa” Hélène Cixous writes, “Woman must write her self: must write about women and bring women to writing, from which they have been driven away as violently as from their bodies—for the same reasons, by the same law, with the same fatal goal. Woman must put herself into the text—as into the world and into history—by her own movement” (875). As Southern Mestizas, these authors write the self and place the Southern Mestiza into real and literary histories while resisting and subverting the dominant images that

previously defined her. Writing, Cixous states, is the locus where “woman has never *her* turn to speak—this being all the more serious and unpardonable in that writing is precisely *the very possibility of change*, the space that can serve as a spring board for subversive thought, the precursory movement of a transformation of social and cultural structure” (879). By narrating cultural exchange and negotiation, Cofer and López create the possibility for social change through representations of their searches for cultural empowerment.

Describing contemporary representations of multiraciality, Suzanne Bost states: “Recent popular writings imply that with the changing of the millennium, America is being forced to adapt to new racial frontiers in which our familiar racial definitions are being undermined, support for civil rights is fragmenting, affirmative action quotas are changing the business world, genes are being manipulated, and technology is uncovering old racial secrets” (184). Bost says that these racial shifts are not greater than other shifts of previous decades. Mixed race people are studied and either celebrated or maligned, “the fascination with mixture corresponds to (and potentially masks) racist efforts to contain fluidity and to reinstitute categories” (185). Similar to the texts analyzed by Bost, Cofer’s and López’s work contribute to the discussion of identity formation and its gendered ramifications. Readers of the texts, as outsiders to this experience, are invited to engage in this process, playing an important role in re-considering paradigms of Southern and Latina/o identity and literature as they carefully navigate their way through multiple and layered cultural perspectives of representation and self-representation.

Lorraine López

In Lorraine López’s collection of short stories, *Soy la Avon Lady* (2002), two of the short stories include a Latina protagonist in Georgia: “Mother-in-Law’s Tongue,” and its sequel “Walking Circles” both involve the same character, Elaine, a Mexican-American woman living

in Georgia with her family. A third short story, “Crown on Prince,” includes brief references to this character (but the protagonist is her son, Ted), and a fourth, “Ivor’s People,” includes Elaine, but the protagonist is the title character, her tour guide in Antigua. In *Homicide Survivors Picnic* (2009), two short stories include Elaine, “This Gifting” and “Homicide Survivors Picnic” (2009). In the former, she is the teacher of the protagonist, exchange student Daisuke; in the latter, which takes place between “Mother-in-Law’s Tongue” and “Walking Circles,” Ted reappears as the protagonist, but is accompanied by Elaine on a trip to a Survivors’ support group picnic. This project will focus on “Mother-in-Law’s Tongue,” “Walking Circles,” and “Homicide Survivors Picnic,” in which Elaine’s connection to the South is most prominent.¹

Elaine is not physically described as Mestiza in the texts I study, but references to her brown skin are mentioned in “The Crown on Prince,” as is her use of Spanish, and readers are likely to racialize her as Mestiza, despite the lack of specific mention, because she is described as Mexican American in “Walking Circles.” Though published separately, all of the stories that center or include Elaine were written as part of López’s Creative Writing Thesis, and, in fact, there are other Elaine stories from López’s graduate school writings that have yet to be published. Therefore, I argue that Elaine’s race/ethnicity is present in all the stories, even those that do not make specific mention of it, and López herself admits that the Elaine stories are mostly autobiographical and are a reflection of the racial tensions she experienced in the South due to the South’s racial binaries (Personal interview). The importance of Elaine’s Mestiza identity in the stories might be missed by audiences who read the stories outside of the context of the series or the anthologies. In fact, those who read one of the short stories, where her race and ethnicity are not mentioned, might racialize Elaine as white, regardless of their racialization of an author with the last name López, which could provide interesting or problematic readings of the

texts. This lack of racial descriptors is not accidental, and López acknowledges that Elaine is ambivalent about her Chicana identity, mirroring López's own feelings of rootlessness (Bennett 84). López addresses this ambivalence with Chicana identity, stating that "Chicano/a identity was so narrowly prescribed and exclusive that many (including myself) felt left out" (quoted in Bennett 84). Along with exclusive definitions of Chicano/a identity, the U.S. government contributed to an understanding of race that was confusing and polarizing. Eileen O'Brien relates in *The Racial Middle: Latinos and Asian Americans Living Beyond the Racial Divide* (2008):

The influence of European colonization, however, and the more fluid boundaries between skin tones among Latin American peoples, meant that some persons of Mexican nationality were deemed 'white' and allowed to experience the privileges attached to that racial designation. Indeed, up until 1980, census takers were instructed to mark Mexican Americans down as 'white' unless their phenotype appeared to be "Negro, Indian, or some other race." (3)

This means that many Mexican Americans were arbitrarily permitted access into "white" status by the government (though not necessarily by the public), while others were denied this privilege because the census taker marked a specific phenotype as non-white. Those labeled as "white" realized that U.S. race privilege was defined as not-Black, and either internalized an anti-Black mentality, or performed this ideology as a social strategy to maintain their "honorary" white positions (16). Those labeled not-white realized that in order to gain racial privilege, despite official labels, meant performing race in a way that transitioned U.S. racial binaries from white/nonwhite to black/nonblack. In either case, an anti-black status is maintained through oppression of African Americans, though the latter attempts ethnic diversity within the nonblack

status, while the former encourages assimilation into white culture (and an escape from ethnic/cultural markers) (13).

Elaine becomes a symbol of this ambivalence to Chicana identity in a racially polarized South, adding to the diversity of images of Mestizas in the South who negotiate their hybrid identities in various ways. López's narrative voice does not judge her character for this ambivalence; instead, López explores the day-to-day interactions that raise questions about how we understand our identities. But the stories are also an exploration of both López's and Elaine's confrontation with race and culture that the author and protagonist didn't experience in places with a bigger Latino presence (like Los Angeles). Because of this, Elaine signals an emergence of this realization that her race is no longer invisible. While López relays stories of xenophobia and incorrect cultural/racial labeling (Personal interview), Elaine is written in a way that relays a comfort in class privilege that has allowed racial passing. Through Elaine, López portrays a Mestiza who is hanging onto class privilege, at the expense of her racial otherness, but is forced to confront this self-construction. In this way, López reveals an unstable racial hierarchy that permits Latinos to "pass," as long as they subscribe to a class hierarchy as well. When Elaine is forced to interact with a poor Black family, she must acknowledge that she has lived a lie.

In "Mother-in-Law's Tongue," Elaine and her husband Aaron are preparing for a funeral for their daughter's boyfriend, Terrell. The story begins with Aaron telling Elaine that the man who cuts their grass needs toilet paper to use the bathroom in the woods. Elaine demands that Aaron allow him to use their bathroom, and Aaron reluctantly agrees, uncomfortable with the "intrusion in the house" (197). As Elaine continues to get ready for the funeral, she decides on an outfit that needs no ironing: "She was determined not to be the kind of funeral-goer who belabors dressing and grooming. Besides it would be inconsiderate to let her daughter Tina catch her

trying out different outfits or overhear her grumbling about having to wear hose on a Saturday” (195). Though Elaine attempts to show consideration for her daughter, she is in fact annoyed by the need to iron or wear pantyhose, revealing Elaine’s focus on the funeral as a disruption to her comfort. She silently judges Aaron’s reaction to their employee’s need for a restroom, oblivious to the similarities in their reactions to different events that view the external as intrusive. By introducing the protagonist in this way, López is able to demonstrate Elaine’s discomfort with change, and also her inability to see this in herself although she is quick to criticize her husband for similar behavior. Elaine hears their lawnmower enter the bathroom and thinks, “They had never hired a man to cut the grass before, and for some indefinable reason, the idea of paying a grown man to mow embarrassed Elaine” (196). It is revealed that when he first arrived at their house to ask for a job, Elaine hid in the closet, later trying to catch a glimpse of him mowing the lawn, “[h]is flannel long-sleeved shirt and work gloves covered his skin from her view. Not that it mattered” (196). Elaine does not only fear change, but her actions also reveal a type of guilt over having the means to hire an adult, and attempting to see the color of his skin hints at guilt over race privilege. Though she hides herself from view, she still attempts to catch a glimpse of her new employee, to gain information that might satiate her guilt. Hearing that their temperamental toilet did not flush properly, she runs in after the man and flushes the toilet, Aaron remarking, “Not just years, but solid generations of poor dietary habits” (197). It is implied that Aaron holds similar views of race and class, but Aaron reveals them more overtly, whereas Elaine feels guilt, which she refuses to fully analyze. Aaron asks her if he should wear a suit to the funeral and Elaine suggests against it, “remembering the junked cars and broken down appliances scattered in the yard of Terrell’s mother’s house and the slack-faced, toothless woman herself” (197). The narrator also divulges that this is partly why Elaine chose her understated

outfit, because she “hadn’t wanted to outdress the other mourners, to draw attention to herself in that way” (197). Again, Elaine is uncomfortable with visible class markers, and assumes that they should not wear their better clothing to a funeral for those with considerably less money, influenced by what she perceives the others will interpret of her when they see her.

Tina, Elaine’s daughter, appears and Elaine takes note of her high heels, heavy makeup, and “particularly noxious” perfume (197), disapproving of her outfit. In a flashback, Elaine remembers hearing the news of Terrell’s death. Tina received an upsetting phone call and Elaine immediately assumed Tina had discovered that Terrell had been cheating on her, introducing readers to Terrell: “Terrell was a black man six years older than Tina, and from what Elaine could glean, he had something of a complicated life—unresolved relationships with former girlfriends, illegal aliens for roommates, a bit of a gambling problem, even a heart condition, and a five-year-old son that his grandmother looked after” (199). She and Tina drive to Terrell’s home in the country after hearing of his death, while Tina repeatedly mumbles, “It was just too good to be true. I knew I would end up losing him” (199). On the highway they pass Terrell’s cousin and some of his friends who pull over to talk to them. Elaine notes the cousin’s “thick calves” like Terrell’s and the friends’ “Mayan faces pitted with blemish scars and their long straight black ponytails” (200). The narrator exposes Elaine’s curious fascination with race, observing racial markers in those unlike her, but this gaze is one-sided, and the narrator takes no interest in viewing herself through their eyes. They tell Tina that Terrell was shot and she begins screaming and crying, “shattering through to the cloudless deep blue Georgia sky” (201). This is the second mention of Georgia as the setting, reminding readers of the regional importance of the narrative. They all continued to Terrell’s mother’s house and Elaine fantasizes about how she will throw her arms around his mother when they meet and “try to pull some of the grief from

this woman, whose son's death made her own inability to comfort her daughter seem insignificant" (201). Unable to understand her daughter's grief, Elaine creates a fantasy of bonding with Terrell's mother that involves carrying some of the grief this woman must have over her own son's death, visualizing how she wants to be viewed by the Other. Driving up she describes the "shanty" with junk in the yard, cardboard in the windows and a ripped front screen (201). Elaine's preoccupation with race and class markers interferes with her ability to fully sympathize or focus on the emotions of others. Inside the house, Elaine becomes aware that Terrell's mother does not shake her hand but is instead muttering about a fine to get Terrell's car back from the sheriff as she rocks in a dinette chair, shattering Elaine's fantasy of a bond created during these events because she is unable to view herself as sympathetic in the eyes of Terrell's unnamed mother. Elaine continues to describe the shabby furniture for a full paragraph until Tina announces she is pregnant, interrupting her critical description. On the way home, Elaine is still perplexed as to why Terrell's mother seemed to focus more on the fine than her son's death, assuming the death didn't upset her as much as it should, underscoring Elaine's inability to empathize with Terrell's mother or understand the stress that another bill creates for those clearly lacking the money, and demonstrating that Elaine is still upset that she was unable to perform sympathy for a grieving audience.

Returning back to the present day, Tina has left early for the funeral, and Aaron is telling Elaine that Tina should return to work at "that chicken restaurant" or else he and Elaine will have to raise the baby. Aaron has been vocal about not wanting Tina and the baby to stay in the house, muttering about the "disturbing" "inconvenience." (204). Aaron clearly is able to distance himself from the emotional realities of others, and even on the day of a funeral, unabashedly insists that his life and home not be disrupted. Before leaving the house, she admires Aaron's

demeanor, “cool and orderly as an accountant on a day off,” and she becomes self-conscious of her own appearance as “someone more prepared to hang out washing than to go to the funeral of her grandchild’s father” (205). Despite her attempts to minimize her class status through less flashy clothing, Elaine momentarily realizes the inappropriateness of her outfit, and also her failings at attempting to mirror Aaron’s distancing behavior.

Aaron and Elaine go to a flower shop and she decides against a funeral display because she finds them “tacky,” instead deciding on the “Mother-in-Law’s Tongue,” a plant with pointy-edged leaves, “so appropriate for the discreet young man her daughter had described to her” (205). Elaine ignores the displays that are clearly marked for funerals because they do not fit her class-influenced perceptions of acceptable funeral arrangements. Instead she chooses a plant that matches her image of Terrell, ignoring the social setting in which the plant will be given. The young florist warns her not to touch the tip and Aaron suggests against a plant for a funeral. Despite the name and the warnings, Elaine is drawn to the plant; as the florist wraps it in green cellophane and a blue ribbon, she focuses on the class performance, “pleased at the elegant sight it created” (205). Later at the funeral the narrator compares the humidity to a city “trapped in a suffocatingly steamy plastic bag,” linking the plant and Elaine as both suffocating under pretense (206). Aaron, as if to acknowledge the suffocating heat, asks that if he dies in summer, he not be buried at “mid-day in Georgia” (206). She ponders Aaron’s potential death and her mind wanders to all the changes she could make to the house if he were gone, implying that even superficial cosmetic changes to the house are viewed by Aaron as intrusive, and that his worldview dominates the household. She tells him she will not bury him at mid-day, thinking that she “had made up her mind already to cremate him,” revealing her unspoken desire to ignore his wishes, something she can only do once he is dead (206). Aaron’s role as a patriarch, who

determines the moods and rules of the household, is oppressive to Elaine. Her decision acts as a form of rebellion against the hegemonic order.

At the funeral Elaine realizes she is underdressed when she sees other guests in fine suits and ornate dresses. She had assumed that all guests were poor and wouldn't own nice clothes for a funeral, and her embarrassment at displaying any wealth, along with her erroneous class assumptions, has led her to wear clothing that seems disrespectful. Elaine is self-conscious as she is led to the front pews. Trying to give Terrell's mother a sympathetic nod, she is disappointed when there is no indication of recognition from Terrell's mother, again exposing Elaine's preoccupation with an image she has constructed. This fantasy distracts her from truly engaging in a reality that privileges other peoples' feelings, instead focusing on the disappointment of a missed opportunity to be viewed as sympathetic.

Elaine is handed a fan "affixed to wooden sticks the size of tongue depressors" and silently mocks the image of a confused Jesus kneeling before a rock. When handed a program, the non-churchgoer Elaine is astonished at "churches preparing agendas for their service" (207). Thankful for the closed casket, Elaine notices the picture of Terrell petting a dog on the program, "smiling so kindly at the dog in the photo and now sealed in the coffin up front" (207). Now distracted by the fan and the agenda, Elaine wonders why Tina didn't mention Terrell died a month before his birthday and is curious about what happened to the dog. During the preacher's sermon, Elaine reveals that Terrell had made his living selling crack cocaine, and during the choir's singing, she notices Aaron's anthropological interest in the funeral. Similarly, Elaine observes the crying mourners and Terrell's mother shouting in grief and is alarmed by this behavior, sharing with readers that she was numb at her youngest son's funeral, and that she had

refused to let her tears ruin her mascara at her mother's. Distancing herself from emotions limits Elaine's ability to empathize with others and to understand her own emotions.

Two women begin picking up the flower arrangements, announcing who brought it and reading the cards, and Elaine realizes her plant is the "paltriest" with others having brought arrangements similar to those she had found "ostentatious." Unable to find a card, the two women ask the crowd who brought the plant and inquire as to the message for the family. Elaine admits it is theirs but is unable to think of what to say, remembering she had been harsh to Terrell on several occasions. Unable to think of anything to say, with uncertainty she says, "He was a very nice person," and the women give the plant a "disgusted" look, providing Elaine with a first glimpse of how these Others view her and paltry participation in their community (201).

The ushers open Terrell's coffin and Tina begins to weep against her mother. With the procession of mourners walking past the casket, Elaine notices that Terrell's mother has to be escorted outside after nearly fainting, but narrates the event with little sympathy. When it is their turn to pass the coffin, Elaine glances into the casket, upset by what she sees: "This is not Terrell! Not at all. This was a papier-mâché replica, a horrible fake. The skin was lumpy, badly patched. It looked worse than wax. It reminded her of topographical maps she had made in elementary school with flour and salt and covered over with cracking tempera paints" (210). She remembers that the Georgia Bureau of Investigation had kept the body for nearly a week, and the result is a body that looks "smarmy" and like he "knew a secret he wouldn't share" (210). Elaine realizes it is the worst embalming job she has ever seen, describing the body with feigned

outrage, again avoiding any real critique of class inequalities that may have instigated this outcome.

When Tina walks up to the coffin, she whispers accusations at Terrell, calling him a “stupid ass” and telling Elaine, “I shouldn’t have loved him” because “[i]n the end, he was just another fool” (210). Elaine feels gratitude to the young man for linking their lives forever through her grandchild, grateful he had freed Tina from danger and opened a place for her in Tina’s life. Though Elaine’s thoughts could be interpreted as introspective, they continue to reveal her self-centeredness, focusing on how the external personally affect her. As Tina and Elaine walk out of the church, Elaine feels like she is “leading a wounded comrade from battle” and she reaches for Aaron but he is still inside the cool church shaking his head, and Elaine assumes he also has harsh words for Terrell. But Elaine, promising Terrell, decides to never speak against him again, using others’ anger to bolster her own sense of enlightenment (211). As a middle-class Mestiza, Elaine felt no connection to a young working-class Black man. Her love her daughter and future grandchild initiate her transformative process, connected to both her daughter and Terrell through their multiracial child. The child, thus, embodies cross-cultural connections and diversity.

“Walking Circles” takes place a few months after the funeral, with Tina’s pregnancy nearing the due date. Elaine is in the hospital with Tina and they are walking the wings “like comrades, like guards conducting an odd but relentless watch on these peaceful, somnolent premises” (213). Elaine is Tina’s birthing coach and takes great pride in the new friendship. Linda, Terrell’s mother, who is now named in this story, lags behind, with Elaine glancing back at her like she’s herding her, wishing Linda would become another member of the group. When Elaine calls her Laura, Tina corrects her, telling her it’s hard to understand Linda because of her

teeth. Despite the lapse in time, Elaine still has not learned the woman's name, but still places importance on the fantasy of friendship she created in the first story. Tina is embarrassed by the woman's old slippers while Elaine is ashamed she hasn't visited Linda since the funeral. Tina doesn't want Linda there and is hoping no one thinks she is with them, revealing that she has inherited her mother's selfish distancing. Tina complains that Linda gambles all day while everyone else works, and Elaine quiets her while thinking that the place Linda gambles at is probably illegal, considering her own job "reading poetry and fiction manuscripts for a literary journal" and wondering if it can really be considered work rather than "eavesdropping on other people's daydreams" (215). This reads as a narrative nod to the reader, as we eavesdrop on Elaine's daydreams, acknowledging the limitations of daydreams to fully engage cross-cultural connections. More work must be done, for Elaine and for the reader.

Tina reveals that Linda is always wearing Terrell's old clothes and Elaine only now understands that it is because of grief, and remembers that she kept her son's unwashed pillowcase after he died. Elaine is slowly developing empathy for Linda, but only in the face of Tina's lack of empathy. Never a self-starter, Elaine's transformation begins with trying to be better than her daughter or husband, and though this can catalyze effective transformation, it is still limited by an arrogant response to external events. Tina tells her that Linda doesn't wear the clothes out of grief, but out of a display of status because of the name brands. It is revealed that Tina's only information about Linda has been based on rumblings from Terrell when he was alive, and she's never really given Linda a chance or taken the time to know her for herself. Viewing this, Elaine begins a transformative process, not wanting to appear as her own daughter

appears to her. Catalyzed by the birth of her grandchild, Elaine attempts to embrace diversity and change, but Tina hinders this process.

Elaine goes back to find Linda and stops at the nursery door to look at baby names. She remembers teaching middle school to black and Latino students, “regular classes” because the white students would all be in the “gifted group” though they all had varying learning abilities and “pushy parents” that would have insisted on separating them from the minority students: “just a another way around desegregation in the New South” (216). Elaine’s transformation starts to include a reflective process, analyzing her understanding of the world through a more nuanced analysis of interpersonal, institutional, and regional inequalities. Around the same time, Tina had begun giving her trouble, messing up at home and at school, and Elaine would admire the young white girls who fit in and loved their parents, again demonstrating Elaine’s reliance on introverted daydreaming rather than incorporating external realities to fully transform. López exposes institutional racism that provides white students with better education and also denies them the opportunity to learn with minority students in a classroom setting. The real-life effects of this educational segregation perpetuate racial hierarchies, defining race and providing access to certain privileges along a White/Non-White racial binary. These exclusionary practices and institutional/residential segregation create a social system where middle-class Mestizas like Elaine rarely have contact with African Americans. Similarly, the working-class Blacks in the story live on the periphery of White society and witness that often subtle anti-Black strategies used by non-Black racial minorities in order to maintain a position within white society.

Elaine finds Linda sitting in a rocking chair and considers finally offering words of sympathy, but decides against it, due to Linda’s perceived scorn of her. She smells alcohol and cigarettes on the woman and Elaine suddenly feels tired, and worries she will lose this baby like

she lost the rest of her children, through death or emotional distancing. Elaine continues to rely on the habit of self-pity, not empathizing with Linda's similar circumstances. Elaine tries to speak to Linda, but she remains quiet and Elaine wonders why she "let these awkward silences grow between them" (218). Elaine tells her there is a word for the two of them, "comrades," that she learned from her Spanish-speaking parents, but "[i]n truth, Elaine, a sixth-generation Mexican American, never really understood how *comadrazgo*² worked, but she wanted to make some connection, establish a bond between herself and the strange dark woman in the rocker" (219). Elaine attempts to emphasize her own Otherness to create a bond between the two, realizing that she has silenced this woman by not really seeing her. But she betrays her own perceived enlightenment, describing Linda as a "strange dark woman" and revealing that Elaine cannot really get past Linda's Otherness. Elaine continues to explain to her what it means, and Linda abruptly tells her that she can't understand "[w]hat all you just said" (219). Despite Elaine's attempts to form a connection, she has no tools to communicate with someone she perceives as so different from her, and Linda unashamedly airs this problem in Elaine's fantasy: Linda has no understanding of these Spanish concepts, and neither does Elaine. This bond cannot be formed through pretense. This is the only real mention of Elaine's cultural heritage, and although other characters, especially those of color, are described, the narrative voice rarely describes Elaine or those within her immediate family. Elaine attempts to use a cultural connection to bridge a racial divide, but Linda refuses to allow this woman to temporarily Other herself because the action admits that Elaine views Linda as Other. For Linda, Elaine's words are

condescending, and she rebuffs Elaine's attempts to bond meaningfully through superficial non-white connections.

This absence of description is nevertheless important, demonstrating that Elaine considers herself white, through the invisible marker of whiteness in the text. Unlike Cofer's narrators, who analyze how education and money can "whiten" people of color, Elaine is unaware of how these same privileges have allowed her to assimilate into white culture and actively ignore Others in the community. She specifically mentions that she is sixth-generation, emphasizing her Americanness even as she employs Latin American ideologies. Elaine's parents speak Spanish, and she at least indirectly learned aspects of her cultural heritage, but she struggles to remember them and the lack of mention of this in the text underscores a conscious or unconscious resistance to these lessons.

In comparison to Cofer's texts, this absence of description also implies that Elaine may be participating in racial passing, as lighter-skinned Latinos are most often allowed easier access into mainstream white culture, something that Cofer's darker skin does not allow. Though not explicit with Elaine, studies show that lighter-skinned Latinos, especially those that do not speak Spanish, are often rejected by their own Latino communities because they lack identifiability, either linguistic or phenotypic (Alcoff 162). She utilizes a type of strategic essentialism to bond with Linda through Otherness, but through social mistakes, has revealed herself to be part of the dominant class rather than Linda's potential ally.

A Nigerian midwife tells Elaine that the contractions have stopped and Elaine is soothed by her voice, letting it "wash over her like warm bath water," using the midwife to substitute for what Linda refuses to give her (220). Tina is upset and frustrated, wanting to have the baby that night, and Elaine remembers an incident when Tina had overturned the dining room table,

complete with food and china, because she didn't like the casserole her mother had cooked. When they tell Linda that they must go home, she asks "for reals? [*sic*]" (221) and walks out of the hospital without another word. Linda is distanced from Elaine through race, class, and dialect, further constructing an image of Linda as alien and heightening Elaine's discomfort during these encounters. This interaction Elaine stares after her, "baffled" because "[i]t was hard for her to understand when people displayed antipathy or even indifference toward her" (221) revealing an astonishing sense of privilege based on how others have perpetually engaged with her in positive ways, due to race and class status and also demonstrating her unease when she doesn't immediately receive this privilege. Elaine's attempts to make eye contact are brief, and she tends to stare at people of color as curiosities, inventorying physical features that focus on difference. This colonizing stare has created a situation of privilege; she rarely is stared at in the same way, and social pretenses abound. Confused, Elaine decides Linda must be mentally ill or have "an emotional deficit of some kind that immunized her against friendliness" blaming Linda rather than reflecting on how Linda might be sensing her unconscious pattern of superiority, her pretense, and her near-demand that they be friends (221). Reacting to her colonizing stare with anger, Linda rattles Elaine's sense of self. Elaine can only explain this by assuming Linda must be mentally ill, her curiosity turning into dismissive hostility when she doesn't get the reaction she wants. Elaine stigmatizes Linda, as she did Terrell, to justify the failed connection, assuring herself that it is not her fault. Later, Tina agrees that Linda must in fact be crazy, which is why she is hard to understand, and when Elaine responds that this is sad, Tina replies, "I think you just like feeling sorry for people" confirming for readers that Elaine likes to extend sympathy, not for others, but for what it does for her image of herself (222). For Elaine, the desire to befriend Linda is partially built on the need to deny many of her own race and class privileges.

Linda's rejection signals the stratifying nature of Southern racial ideologies. Elaine would rather stigmatize Linda as mentally ill in order to avoid admitting her own participation in this system. Because Elaine cannot admit that she has internalized many of these racist messages and directly benefits from them, she blames Linda for the inability to form a bond.

The next morning Tina storms out of the house after a distressing phone call. Elaine and Aaron get into an argument when he grunts at the incident and Elaine accuses him acting indifferent, "never surprised, like you couldn't care less and I'm the stupid one," hinting that Aaron's cold demeanor and isolationist household have influenced Elaine's own loneliness and misunderstanding of outsiders to their world (223-24). They discuss the possibility of co-workers upsetting her, having described them as "a cult," a "trio of women—witches all—boiling up innuendo, imagined slights, and petty accusations in the great cauldron of gossip they swirled between marking prices and ringing up sales on the computerized cash register" (224). Outsiders are not only confusing, disturbing, and intrusive, they also seem to possess mystical powers. Dismissing Aaron's warnings to not interfere, Elaine calls the store and imagines them cackling about her when she asks to talk to Tina. The worker on the phone tells her that Tina doesn't want to talk to her and doesn't want her at the birth. Disturbed, Elaine begins to understand the marginalizing effects of an exclusive group that positions her as the intrusive disturbance.

Elaine considers driving to the store to talk to Tina, convinced the women have turned Tina against her, and Aaron tells her to let it go, changing the subject by saying they should go get plants at the local vegetable nursery. She looks out the window, spotting playful cardinals and Aaron gets the hose to get them to stop, warning that they will "kill each other" because they are "very territorial" (226). The birds mirror the action of Tina's coworkers. Before he can get to them, two rip open the chest of another, and it bleeds on the ground until Aaron smashes it with a

brick. The brutal attack by the birds, initially appearing playful to Elaine, is in fact a territorial act, the victim put out of its misery by the authoritarian patriarch. The scene also acts to foreshadow what Elaine is about to do to Linda.

In the next scene, Elaine is planting tomatoes when Tina calls to say she is in labor at the hospital. Aaron doesn't go along because he was not invited by Tina, and it is revealed that Aaron is her stepfather and he is relieved at not having to attend the birth because again, it is a disruption to his life, something he can't smash away with a brick. As she leaves, Aaron warns her to "be careful" though it reads as a forewarning rather than advice (227). Linda and Tina's coworkers are at the hospital when she arrives and Tina allows Elaine to stay in the room when the midwife tells them some should leave. Elaine herds them out of the room, but when Linda remains, she is uncomfortable when Tina asks her to leave the room. When she tries, Linda looks at her with "deep black eyes, [...] staring long and hard" (228) making Elaine nervous at finally having this woman stare at her. Linda slowly leaves the room, "her gray slippers slapping with sullen dignity," the sound of her slippers invading Elaine's passive oppression despite the attempt to ignore Linda's stare (228). Elaine is comfortable staring out racial others and the text articulates lengthy racial descriptions as Elaine categorizes the markers of 'otherness' in those around her. But now, she has the stare turned back on her by an angry, condemning woman.

Tina asks her mother to keep Linda out of the room because she stares at her and this makes "her labor pains worse," mimicking her mother's physical discomfort at being forced to visually engage with the Other (229). Entering the waiting room, one of the coworkers insists that Elaine do something about Linda and her daughters because they are annoying, and have no business there, having never helped Tina during the pregnancy, mirroring the actions of the territorial birds. When confronted by one of Tina's coworkers, Linda responds, "I got more right

to be here than you. [...] I'm kin" which effectively silenced her, and now they are asking Elaine to pick sides (229). One of the coworkers hands Elaine a grandmother's gift and Elaine uses the moment to find out why Tina had not wanted her there. They explain that it was because Elaine had tried to convince Tina to have an abortion and had offered to pay for it; hence, the coworkers were judging Elaine for what they felt was a callous act and bragging that they tried to help her. Elaine only responds with "I see" and the women continue to try to get her to remove Linda, using the gift to coax her to their team. As a symbol of the majority, the women attempt to lure Elaine into performing and enforcing their exclusionary ideologies. She must actively reject the working-class Black Other to be accepted by this ruling group.

Excusing herself, Elaine returns to Tina without inviting anyone to the room or removing anyone from the waiting room, running away from making a decision. On the way, she runs into a woman that went to her middle school as a child, one of the white girls she had admired for her success and love for her parents, and she finds out she no longer talks to her parents. Elaine says she is sorry to hear that, but the woman responds, "It's okay. I'm used to it by now" (232). This white woman she had once admired as a child, not for what she was accomplishing, but for how proud she made her parents, is no longer in touch with the parents Elaine had daydreamed of being, shattering Elaine's fantasy as she realizes the unrealistic world she created for herself.

In the delivery room, Elaine coaches Tina through the birth. She asks if Tina really wants the coworkers to stay too, and Tina admits she doesn't, but can't ask them to leave because of all the gifts they gave her for the baby and the promises they've made to help her with some bills. Their involvement in the lives of others is pushy, forced, and without understanding or real care for what the other wants. Tina explains that it would be "bad for business" to ask them to leave, but insists she wants Terrell's mother to go. Elaine returns to the waiting room and explains to

Linda that Tina is uncomfortable with her there. Linda is upset at this news, and pokes Elaine in the chest, knocking her off balance. Linda exclaims angrily, “I got all the right you got to be here. You hear me? That is my grandchild. I got a right” (234). While the coworkers have used commodities to buy their “right” to be at the hospital, Linda values blood relations as the predominant factor in the right to stay, outraged and insulted that Elaine views her as an intrusive interloper rather than a legitimate member of the family. Having passively accepted Elaine and Tina before, Linda finally decides that these two women have excluded her long enough. As Elaine tries to explain further, Linda confronts her, “That’s bullshit. You are bullshit with your Spanish words and making nice like you’re all glad to be a grandmother with me. You are just bullshit” (234). Linda calls out Elaine’s pretense, demonstrating that there was no bond or allegiance, and that Linda had known that all along. Elaine is stunned when Linda storms past her, “majestically” walking towards Tina’s room and “casting resentful glances” at Elaine (234). Elaine has skimmed by on pretense; it has shielded her from confrontation and animosity from others. But Linda does not live in that same reality, and she decides to force herself into a familial third space where she is being denied entrance. Elaine runs to the nurses’ station and asks a nurse to help her keep Linda from the room. The nurse agrees to call security, asking Elaine what she looks like, and Elaine points at Linda and her sisters. Looking at them, the nurse asks, “So you want me to have security keep all the black people out?” Elaine tells the nurse that the midwife and one of Tina’s coworkers are black and are currently in the room, so “[i]t isn’t that, for God’s sake!” The nurse articulates the obvious role of race in the scene. Elaine defends herself against the implication of racism by pointing out the other Black women in the room, ignoring that one Black woman is the midwife (and is there working for the hospital, and by proxy, Elaine’s daughter), and the other Black woman is Tina’s friend, who has been permitted

access into the room because of her status within the group (which asks her to participate in the racist exclusion of Linda). Elaine employs a strategy of racism that refuses to acknowledge prejudice as motive behind actions when there is evidence of (often rare) inclusion of some minorities by the majority. Elaine mentions the other Black women in the room to prove she is not racist, ignoring that she had no say in their participation, but in the case of Linda, she does have some say.

Despite Elaine's protests, the nurse reveals that a very real class and racial segregation is occurring, permitting a few Others to enter the space, but only as long as they assist the privileged group. As the nurse calls security, Elaine runs into Tina's room, slamming the door and keeping the women out, though she feels "sick at heart—like a thief, like a coward" (235). Rather than the victimized bird, Elaine is the territorial one, ripping out the heart of the perceived outsider, losing sight of their similarities and the collective potential of solidarity. Read further, she is the patriarchal symbol, completely silencing the one deemed the trouble-maker. She has become like Aaron, choosing to marginalize difference, rather than embrace it.

The baby is finally born and Elaine cuts the umbilical cord. Leaving the room, Elaine is told by the nurse that Linda has been removed from the premises. Watching the nurse clean the baby, Elaine notices the dark eyes and fine features that she had noticed in Linda, and Elaine promises not to give herself away this time: "She would not lose herself in this child as she had lost herself in her own children," remembering Aaron's advice to "be careful" (236). Realizing that the baby resembles Linda, Elaine becomes aware of the biological ties that cannot be ignored and that her participation in the attempt to silence one genetic half of this child is an act of aggression not just to Linda, but to the child as well. She remembers Aaron's words and his cold isolation, and initially wants to continue to perpetuate the ideology he has forced onto her

life. Holding the newly cleaned baby, she realizes it is too late to keep this promise to herself (or to Aaron). Looking back at Tina and her friends, she “considered how they kept drawing and redrawing circles, putting people in and out, and how she had been a part of that, turning Terrell’s mother away as she had” and she decides that later that night she will go to the casino, find Linda and buy her a strong drink and one for herself. She understands now, that by passively following the oppressive and self-centered whims of Tina and Aaron, she has done to Linda what they have repeatedly done to her. By territorializing their homes, their workspaces, and their lives, they have symbolically killed any outsiders, and this child is an active symbol of a potential third space of transformative growth that acknowledges the external and incorporates empathy and cross-cultural understanding into peoples’ lives. After this realization, Elaine decides to approach Linda on her own turf, offering a gift that she will truly appreciate because its symbol of informality and friendship will validate her identity rather than stigmatize her.

Because Elaine is only able to view others through a colonizing lens, she assumes that Linda and Terrell are unknowable, impenetrable, and deviant. Through flexible understanding of others not exactly like her, Elaine understands that she was the one who created this rift, not Linda. Elaine remembers her mother, a “direct and forthright” woman and how Elaine had hurt her with her uncertainty. Her mother had loved her, and she realizes the importance of a mother loving her daughter despite not having the child she imagined. In the same way, she must accept Linda for who she is, not for what Elaine perceives she should be or imagines their bond should look like. Still holding the baby, she decides to be a supportive grandmother, knowing that Tina will keep drawing her in and out of the circle at her own whims, so for the moment, she just wants to hold onto the baby as she ignores the other voices in the hospital, fully entering the third space that the baby symbolizes. These other voices belong to the women who have defined the

rules of inclusion, and Elaine now admits that this inclusion is unstable. In order to mend the rift between herself and Linda, Elaine reassesses her ideologies of exclusion that manipulate and make demands on the Other. As a symbol of a fluid identity in a multicultural society, Elaine must first see herself as Other and as colonizer, as insider and as outsider. By destabilizing her own identity in relation to Linda, she can humanize Linda and transform herself. Though not revealed, the narrative voice implies that Elaine will now be more successful in her interactions with Linda.

In the final short story of the series, “Homicide Survivor’s Picnic,” the protagonist is Ted, Tina’s younger brother and Elaine’s second child. Through this different perspective, the story gives a slightly different picture of Tina and Elaine, but also incorporates a view of how their isolation affects another member of the family. The story takes place between the timeline of the previous stories, with Tina still pregnant, and Elaine still struggling to understand her life’s new trajectory. The three characters are off on a road trip to the titular event, where Tina can find support as the survivor of a relative’s homicide. The story begins with Ted swinging by his friend Danny’s house and Elaine responds: “ ‘Danny’—what kind of name is that, anyway? It’s shorthand for a thug’s name, a criminal’s name” (89). Tina looks over at Ted and, “arched an eyebrow. Daniel was their father’s name” (89). Elaine’s former husband was not present in the previous stories, but it becomes clear that there is animosity between the two that is not hidden from their children, and Ted is actually contemplating living with his father who has fits of anger but has become less volatile. This comment triggers Ted’s migraine, made worse by the Georgia heat, a “smothering humidity that cupped the heat and made him feel like a fly trapped in a giant, sweaty fist” mirroring the image of the plastic-wrapped plant Elaine gave at the funeral (91). This image of the Georgia heat as smothering heightens the tension between characters who are

stifled by the race and class ideologies of the South, manifested in the interactions of the characters.

In the car they discuss Ted's first and only pet, a black kitten named Gregory who had to be put down because of feline leukemia. The kitten had been "a little vicious and strange, prone to pouncing out to bite bare ankles and stealing newspaper to rip to shreds in the laundry room, making sounds like he was wrapping gifts in a fury" (92). Ted remembers how the kitten didn't react to anesthesia, so the vet had to use a cardiac stick. The narrator relays the disturbing scene: "But the vet, young and inexperienced, had missed with that and blood spurted on his blue scrubs, spotting the Formica table top. Gregory had stared past the nervous doctor straight at Ted, as if to ask, 'Why are you doing this to me?'" (92). Though they were all crying, including the vet, the kitten didn't make a sound, and Ted states, "He sure was tough" (93). Like the cardinals in the previous story, López uses the image of small animals, brutally killed, to evoke pity and horror from readers. In both scenes, a patriarchal figure kills the hurt animal in an attempt to put it out of its misery. Despite this motive, the reader sees the result as unfair and tragic. Similarly, actions between human characters, despite motive, reveal unfair and even brutal effects. The juxtaposition underscores the option humans have to avoid inflicting these consequences on others. Read against the previous Elaine stories, this image articulates Elaine's treatment of Linda.

At the picnic, Ted encounters other survivors of murdered relatives. When a couple who has lost their daughter asks Tina who she lost, she responds flatly that Terrell "was shot in the neck, dragged through the woods, and left there to die by this guy he thought was his best friend" (97). Refusing to talk more about it, she rests her head on the table, using one of Terrell's old bandana for cushion and comfort. Ted reveals that Tina has a new habit of falling asleep anytime

and anywhere, forcing her mother to drive her everywhere. Though Elaine repeats that she does this so Tina can move on and eventually move out, Ted infers from her tone that she is secretly excited to have another child to raise, causing Ted to wonder “what would happen if people weren’t allowed to speak unless they said what they meant” (98). Ted is beginning to realize the pretense that surrounds many social interactions, especially for his mother, and views it as an act of dishonesty that creates unnecessary interpersonal conflict. Though Ted does not link this directly to Mestizo identity, read against the previous stories, he articulates Elaine’s inability to incorporate a flexible identity in a multicultural society. This inflexibility is veiled behind pretense and Ted recognizes the distancing effects of this performance.

Ted had been in California with his father when Tina began dating Terrell, and he knows very little about him or his death because Tina rarely talked about him or the murder. Through his mother, he only knows that Terrell had “very thick calves” and was badly embalmed (98). Despite this lack of familiarity with Terrell, Ted hurts for his sister and feels “lonesome for her” sensing that she is drifting away. Ted reflects on this: “Now he couldn’t find her. And he was afraid to call her back, to call her name” (98). Unlike Elaine, Ted empathizes with Tina, more focused on her pain than his own feelings. He realizes that her grief is becoming detrimental to her own psychological and emotional well-being. This scene also underscores Elaine’s preoccupation with physical differences, often revealed in descriptions of race.

The picnickers begin writing messages to their loved ones on balloons. Ted writes a quick message to Terrell and is happy to see his sister actively engage in the activity. Watching his mother, Ted is annoyed by her enthusiasm and her habit of bragging about doing things no one else in Georgia might be doing at that time, “like it was some kind of a plus, like he should be thrilled to do things no one else in his right mind would do” (99). Elaine feels superior to the

rest of Georgia, and this influences her inability to self-analyze. She is giggling as she releases balloon after balloon, and Ted notices that she looks out of place with her happiness at a picnic full of mourners. Through the image of the balloon, Elaine rises above the rest of Georgia, and this allows her to ignore a reality of oppression and gloom. Readers are given an outside perspective of Elaine not available in the other stories, allowing an image of her as unaware or detached from others' emotions and the social codes of certain types of events. Elaine's privilege shields her from fully engaging with those suffering around her.

Tina decides that she wants to leave after the balloon activity is over. On the road, Elaine must pull over the car when Tina experiences a bout of morning sickness. Composing herself, Tina exclaims that the ravine they are stopped at looks similar to one she visited with Terrell (103). They were drinking champagne and driving around when Terrell pulled over in an act of jealousy. As Tina professed her love, Terrell drunkenly exited the car, refusing to believe her. He demanded that she prove her love, and ran across the busy highway with his hands over his eyes, shouting that Tina follow him. Hearing the story, Ted thinks Terrell sounded like a "guy who would be voted most likely to create misery" (105). Though he thinks Tina is better off without him, he knows that since Terrell's death, "she moved so gingerly that you'd think she had just come through a major surgery, like a heart or lung transplant, with no great chances of surviving her recovery" (105). Juxtaposed with the image of the dying kitten, Tina is portrayed as a feisty being, unfairly affected by a traumatic event. Responding to his sister's anecdote, Ted says, "You must have loved him a lot" (105). Tina responds: "Is *that* what you think? [...] I didn't love him nearly enough to prove it. Maybe he'd still be here if I did" (105). Tina hurries back towards the car with Ted following and trying to convince her that Terrell's death wasn't her fault, and for the first time he thinks about Terrell's murder and what it must be like to be

murdered by a loved one or trusted friend. Broadening the image of the dying kitten, López symbolically links Ted's perception of a betrayed kitten to Terrell's murder at the hands of a friend. In the previous story, through Elaine's narrative voice, this horrific event is minimized as Elaine struggles with her own personal transformation. Through the more empathetic Ted, the reader gets a full sense of the tragedy and how it has affected this family. Elaine, on the other hand, has trouble empathizing as easily because her access to social privilege demands that she not fully acknowledge injustice.

As Tina reaches the car, she pulls Terrell's handkerchief from her pocket. After hearing about Terrell's violent death, Ted now associates the handkerchief with the gang violence in California where his dad lives, different color handkerchiefs signaling gang affiliation, hinting about Terrell's past. Tina uses it to create a blindfold, and runs into the highway. Ted attempts to follow, but Elaine stops him just as Tina reaches the other side safely. Sobbing, Tina falls to her knees "like she was begging or praying" (106). Ted wonders if he can make it across, knowing that all he can do if he reaches his sister is to hold her until their mother reaches them with the car. Struggling free from his mother, Ted debates what to do: "He looked from her to his sister. How did he ever think he would get away? These two were too good at this. They would tear him apart like they said they would do to that baby in the story of King Solomon, and his father wanted a piece too" (107). For readers familiar with the previous stories in the series, this scene foreshadows the potential life Tina's baby will lead. Ted understands that he is caught between family members who all want to claim their territory, forcing Ted to "love them more than they bothered to love themselves" (107). Ted now realizes that the older members of his family are emotionally stunted, demanding that he do this work for them. As one of the only members of the family who seems to display real empathy for others, he allowed them to position him in this

role. But as a maturing individual, he realizes that he must make a decision for himself and stop allowing them to pull him apart. Taking a deep breath, he considers turning his back on them, hitching a ride to any state in which his family doesn't live. In the final line of the story, Ted "screwed his eyes shut and he plunged" (107). Elaine refuses to cross the busy road, demonstrating her inability to confront danger to aid another. As a symbol of a privileged and inflexible identity, Elaine errs on the side of caution, and avoids the risks inherent in creating cultural connections.

Though Ted's story does not overtly relay issues of Mestiza identity, as the more recently published addition to the trilogy from an author who critiques personal failings of rigid and exclusionary identity formation, Ted embodies the struggle of being pulled apart by different cultures that demand allegiance and conformity. As a symbol of the multi-cultural identity, Ted relates the personal turmoil associated with conflicting loyalties. As symbols of contradicting and competing cultures, Elaine and Tina demonstrate the self-serving motives of cultures that demand constant reassurance and unachievable persistence from those that exist within the divide. From his vantage point, Ted is able to critique the absurdity in others, but still cannot deny a loyalty that links him to each corner. He briefly ponders escape, but the loyalties run deep, and this is ultimately out of the question. Instead, Ted chooses to prove his love to his sister by mirroring her actions of love to Terrell, blindly following her despite the evident danger. This act also symbolizes a departure from the maternal as he leaves Elaine terrified and screaming on the other side of the highway, but knowing that if he makes it safe, they will all be reunited when Elaine picks them up in the car. The abrupt and ambiguous ending leaves the reader wondering about Ted's safety, questioning whether Ted cares if he dies or not, or if Ted

views either outcome as advantageous in some way. Ted hopes that his “crossing over” will force is mother to move as well and to actively engage with her loved ones.

The Elaine series provides readers with an alternative view of Mestiza identity. A risk in positioning the Mestiza at the center of this study is that it could result in universalizing Mestiza experiences, while also implying that Mestiza identity is an unproblematic model of successful cultural negotiation and fluid identity. It is unrealistic to think that Mestiza identification automatically provides Mestizas with the ability to create meaningful connections. Lorraine López adds to and diversifies images of Mestizas through unflinching portrayals of a character in the midst of this negotiation, living in an honest depiction of the South. Elaine stumbles and falters, but also experiences progress and personal transformations, as she struggles to grow as a Mestiza in a multicultural South. In this way, López critiques the South as well as the personal flaws that can inhibit Mestizas (and others living on neither side of the ethno-racial binary) from fully engaging in the third space of cross-cultural connections.

Judith Ortiz Cofer

Judith Ortiz Cofer is a Puerto Rican author whose autobiographical texts focus on her experiences in Puerto Rico and later, New Jersey and Georgia. Born in Hormigueros, Puerto Rico in 1952, she moved to Patterson, New Jersey in 1955, and then to Georgia at fifteen with her family and continues to live and work there with her husband, but her experiences in Georgia tend to be less of a focus in her autobiographical works or as a setting for her fictional texts, appearing sporadically throughout her extensive canon, though it is becoming a central focus in her more recent works. When she does mention Georgia though, her narrative is contemplative

and self-aware and reveals important regional constructions, whether internalized or resisted by the characters or Cofer herself.

In *The Latin Deli* (1993), Cofer writes auto- and semi-autobiographical work that spans her experiences in Puerto Rico, Patterson New Jersey and the South, addressing the themes of education, family, and religion. Especially notable is her negotiation of the various and often contradictory racial, ethnic, and gender norms of the different cultures she inhabits, revealing survival skills and cultural failings. In “Story of my Body” she relates being born as a “white girl in Puerto Rico” who became a “brown girl” in the United States (135). In Puerto Rico, the topic of colorism, she says, “is much more common in the conversation of mixed-raced peoples than in mainstream United States society, where it is a touchy and sometimes even embarrassing topic to discuss, except in a political context” (136). She also recounts a date with a boy named Ted, who is white and blond and has a great smile, and attends the same high school in Augusta, Georgia. She has to beg her parents to go out and her mother warned her to “be ready for disappointment” (145). She has been allowed to date a Gary, who wanted to be a Baptist missionary who would practice “his anthropological skills on my family” (145) and she thinks that he must have ended up marrying “a native woman from wherever he may have gone to preach the Gospel according to Paul. She probably believes that all white men pray to God for transportation and kiss with their mouths closed” (145). Ted calls the day before the date and says he can’t go: “His father had asked who he was going out with. Ted had told him my name. ‘Ortiz? That Spanish, isn’t it?’ the father had asked. Ted had told him yes, then shown him my picture in the yearbook. Ted’s father had known Puerto Ricans in the army. He had lived in New York City while studying architecture and had seen how the spics lived. Like rats. Ted repeated

his father's words to me as if I should understand *his* predicament when I heard why he was breaking our date" (146).

While Judith, as the narrative voice, has experienced racism and xenophobia before, this is her first experience of it in the realm of romance. Though she didn't experience this in a face-to-face interaction, she is made viscerally aware of how others are not just uncomfortable with her, but even repulsed. She is devastated and she remembers "my parents' respect for my pain and their gentleness toward me that weekend. My mother did not say 'I warned you,' and I was grateful for her understanding silence" (146). She realizes that she cannot escape these stereotypes, and that they will be inscribed onto her body because of her skin color and national heritage. Not only this, but others will expect her to accept this racism and pity them for abiding by a racist script. She continues: "In college, I suddenly became an 'exotic' woman to the men who had survived the popularity wars in high school, who were now practicing to be worldly: they had to act liberal in their politics, in their lifestyles, and in the women they went out with" (146). While others would view her with disdain, the racist script would permit some to view her as a marker of their own liberalism. She realizes that perceptions of her skin and size changed according to "aesthetic values of the times, the places I was in, and the people I met. My studies, later my writing, the respect of people who saw me as an individual person they cared about, these were the criteria for my sense of self-worth that I would concentrate on in my adult life" (146). Cofer offers an example of being on the receiving end of the colonizing stare, and how different stereotypes of Latinas affect what is behind this stare. Changing cultural values affect perceptions of her, and through transformation, she realizes that these values and perceptions are out of her control. Though they affect her self-worth, it is through transformation and positive

interpersonal experiences that she can control her own sense of worth in a world that consistently attempts to devalue or commodify her.

In “The Myth of the Latina Woman: I Just Met a Girl Named Maria” Cofer discusses how the Island travels with you, and that “for some people, the same things can make *you* an island—not so much a tropical paradise as an Alcatraz, a place nobody wants to visit” (148). Racial ideologies tropicalize Latinas of color, who then embody stereotypes of exoticized island culture which have been used as tourist attractions or as marginalized spaces. Critical of institutional and cultural inequalities, Cofer analyzes U.S. pop cultural images of Latinas as the Hot Tamale, that describe Latinas like food, objects to be consumed. Latinas are portrayed as the “funny Hispanic maid, mispronouncing words and cooking up a spicy storm” (153). This affects educated Latinas who are denied opportunities for upward mobility, even though education has saved them from class-related prejudices, the image of “Latina as whore, domestic or criminal” continues to affect professional and financial growth (154). This “internal colonialism” denies people of color upward mobility and limits access to institutional arenas like professional jobs and politics (Blauner). Because of the lack of positive images, Cofer understands her potential as a role model, saying, “My personal goal in my public life is to try to replace the old pervasive stereotypes and myths about Latinas with a much more interesting set of realities” (154).

In the autobiographical “Advanced Biology,” Cofer packs for a trip, first to Miami, and then to Puerto Rico to see her mother. As she packs, her “conservative outfits” trigger a series of formative memories that reveal her relationship to religion and in particular, her mother’s feelings about this: “She knows that over the years I have gradually slipped away from the faith in which I was so strictly brought up” (120). She remembers her mother remarking on her drab clothing comparing her to “Jehovah’s Witnesses who went from door to door in her pueblo

trying to sell tickets to heaven to the die-hard Catholics” (120). Her mother dresses in “tropical colors” going dancing on Saturday nights and still making mass on Sunday morning, and “had managed to liberate herself from the rituals, mores, and traditions that ‘cramp’ her style while retaining her femininity and ‘Puertricaness,’” (121). Cofer, on the other hand, “struggle[s] daily to consolidate my opposing cultural identities” stating that the move from New Jersey to Georgia gave her an “an education in the art of cultural compromise” (121). Though Cofer admires her mother’s ability to successfully navigate conflicting cultural identities, Cofer seems much harder on herself and her perceived inability to do so with ease. While her mother is liberated, Cofer has compromised.

Cofer’s experiences exemplify those of the “1.5 generation,” a term coined by sociologist Rubèn G. Rumbaut to describe immigrants who migrate to a new country when they are children or adolescents, often before they have fully formed a national identity in their native land. The concept was developed to distinguish their experiences from those of first generation and second generation immigrants because of the predominant feeling of being “stuck between” two cultures (Castells 35). Although all immigrants must negotiate bi-cultural identities, those in the first generation tend to feel as though their country of origin is their true “home” and have vivid memories of this home; those in the second generation feel more culturally linked to their country of birth as well, but are linked to another culture through their parents, and indirectly by racial and ethnic projects in the U.S. that might exclude them from full acceptance into U.S. cultural identity. For the 1.5 generation, contradicting cultures often make them feel as if they have no “home” culture. Cofer’s autobiographical narratives display the cultural negotiations

involved for the 1.5 generation that allow them to validate bi- or multi-cultural identities that incorporate multiple “homes” and disrupt nationalistic ideologies.

While in New Jersey, Cofer had a crush on her male study partner in Biology, who tells her that there is no God. Cofer reveals that “Biology is a dangerous topic for young teenagers, who are themselves walking laboratories” and this was made more dangerous by a young man now educating her on anatomy as well religion, two lessons that do not please her parents. A teacher calls their mothers and they are separated, their mothers worried about their closeness. After a fight with her mother that leaves them both in tears, Judith’s father tries comfort both of them, saying “We are family [...] there is just us against the world” (127). Her parents attempt to insulate Cofer, not just from outsiders but also from the new ideas that threaten their daughter and their family. But more than that, “Story of My Body” reveals that her parents also see the family as a shield from racism and the overt discrimination they all face as outsiders in the U.S.

In 1968 Cofer moves to Augusta, Georgia with her family, and her description of this move and her first reaction to Georgia is very telling:

[I]t was a shock to the senses, like moving from one planet to another: where Paterson had concrete to walk on and gray skies, bitter winters, and a smorgasbord of an ethnic population, Georgia was red like Mars, and Augusta was green –exploding in colors in more gardens of azaleas and dogwood and magnolia trees-more vegetation than I imagined was possible anywhere not tropical like Puerto Rico [...] People seemed to come in two basic colors: black and blond. [...] And I could barely understand my teachers when they talked in a slowed-down version of English like one of those old 78-speed recordings played at 33” (127-128).

Cofer describes the inhabitation of the planet in binary ways (“black and blond”), underscoring the binary identity constructions that exist in the South. This is also not the first instance where

Cofer compares the South to a different planet, completely new and unnerving. In the poem “Math Class: Sharing the Pie” in *Call Me Maria* (2004), Cofer describes her Southern teacher, Mr. C, as he stares out a window:

I know that he is missing the Martian-red ground, the green woods, and the hot sun of his native Georgia. Maybe he is thinking of juicy peaches, of red-orange pumpkins like the setting sun, and of a silver moon over a fishing pond deep in the green woods where a boy could sit under a weeping willow tree and think of numbers: the dozens of fish in the water, the hundreds of rabbits in the bushes, the thousands of birds navigating by the sun and the moon, heading south in the fall and north in the spring. 86

The surreal landscape passages, but particularly that in “Advanced Biology” is made even more unsettling by the immediate cultural differences, none more obvious than racial demographics in her new environment which perpetuate a racial binary, making Cofer’s outsider status a visual marker that disrupts this binary.

Once again in a biology class, now in the South, Cofer makes a friend, “a smart girl destined to become my mentor in things southern” and they decide to name a fetal pig being used for a class project Ira after her biology crush in New Jersey, and her new friend sprays it with a perfume called “Intimate,” symbolizing the importance of close and supportive interpersonal relationships in the cross-cultural exchange.

Cofer’s narrative returns to her packing, her mother, and her relationship with religion: “Why not allow Evolution and Eve, Biology and the Virgin Birth? Why not take a vacation from logic? I will not be away for too long. I will not let myself be tempted to remain in the sealed garden of blind faith; I’ll stay long enough to rest myself from the exhausting enterprise of leading the examined life” (129). It appears here that Cofer is comparing Puerto Rico, or possibly her mother, to a lack of logic. While this state is appealing, it is not right for her, at least not permanently. Cofer’s identity is newly defined as juggling a binary of logic/faith, and

although she seems to feel sorry for those who do not allow logic in (as she seems to imply about her mother) she nevertheless admires that her mother appears to figure out a balancing act that works for her, leaving Cofer feeling frustrated, but also excited to visit her mother's world as a vacation from her own. This balance is the effective psychological disruption of the binary, living outside contradictions forced onto us, allowing for personal and cultural transformations. While Cofer realizes that others resist the space between the binaries, she navigates the space by combining introspection with analysis of the external. She learns from others, but maps her own route, allowing others to learn from her but giving the space needed for others to define themselves.

In the poem "First Job: The Southern Sweets Sandwich Shop and Bakery," (*A Love Story Beginning in Spanish* [2005]), a 15-year-old narrator, new to the South, works as a waitress at a bakery in "the strange country called Georgia" (25). The poem begins by introducing Lillie Mae, another waitress in the shop: "Lillie Mae glows, she hates the word sweat, as she balances a platter of baked sweets over her head, showing me how to walk with grace even under the weight of minimum wage and a mountain of cookies, turnovers, and tarts, which she blames for her 'voluptuous' figure" (25). The title of the poem contextualizes the Southern setting, while the image of Lillie Mae conjures images of large working-class Southern women who are graceful and hospitable, and use gendered euphemisms, like "glow" instead of "sweat." They are associated with food (think Paula Deen), and are often portrayed as modern matriarchs of a New South, as seen in *Fried Green Tomatoes* (1991) and *Steel Magnolias* (1989).

Lillie Mae calls the narrator "shuggah," and trains her for the job and the ways of Southern women. Their employer, Mr. Raymond, "keeps [Lillie Mae] in a little house outside of town" (25). Though Lillie Mae makes minimum wage, the narrator suggests that she receives

certain privileges as the mistress of the boss. Describing how she got the job, the narrator states, “Lillie Mae hired me for my long black hair she couldn’t wait to braid, and for my gift of tongues, which she witnessed as I turned my mother’s desire for a sugar bubble she called a merengue into something nearly equal behind the glass wall” (25). Although Lillie Mae is not the employer, she is permitted to hire new staff, and is intrigued by the narrator’s ethnic markers, tropicalizing her as Other in this two-race South. Lillie Mae often asks the narrator to “talk foreign for my friend” (25), asking her to perform for patrons. The narrator states, “And I will say whatever comes into my head, ‘You’re a pig, Mr. Jones, I see your hand under the table stroking her thigh.’ If they’re impressed with my verbal prowess, I may suggest something tasty from our menu; if they presume I am Pocahontas at the palace, there only to amuse their royal selves, I tell them, smiling sweetly, to try the mierda, which is especially good that day. Soon I can make anything sound appetizing in Spanish.” (25). The narrator critiques the male patrons, hiding her insults behind a language they cannot understand, but rewards them with food suggestions if they acknowledge her skill. If the patron treats her like an ethnic jester, she tells them to basically “eat shit,” amusing herself because of their lack of bilingualism. Cofer links the image of Pocahontas to Lillie Mae’s desire to braid her long black hair, implicating those that racialize her in limiting ways, while differentiating them from the way Lillie Mae treats her. She insults them “sweetly” and learns to “make anything sound appetizing in Spanish,” letting readers know that she is acquiring the skills Lillie Mae has taught her, but is adding her own bicultural spin.

The narrator describes a scene between Lillie Mae and Mr. Raymond: “Lillie Mae carries her silver-plated tray to Mr. Raymond for inspection, looking seductive as a plump Salomé in her fitted white nylon uniform. He is a rotund King Herod asking for the divinity

though he knows it is on its way” (26). Cofer darkens the scene between the two, likening it to the beheading of John the Baptist, with Lillie Mae presenting her offering to Mr. Raymond, the king of the Sweets Shop. Lillie Mae “sorts her delicacies, pointing out the sugar-coated wedding cookies with the tips of her pink glu-on nails she is so proud of” explaining to the narrator that, “a woman’s hands should always be soft and beautiful; never mind you scrubbed, waxed, pushed, pulled, and carried all blessed day. That’s way a man expects” (26). Lillie Mae’s lesson reveals the Southern woman’s role as one that is dependent on the expectations of men: She must hide evidence of hard work and perform the role of caretaking beauty. The narrator watches the gendered dynamic between Lillie Mae and Mr. Raymond “as they talk shop and lock eyes,” but she cannot “imagine the carnival of their couplings;” instead, she sees them “licking their chops over strudel, consuming passion while ensconced in her edible house with peppermint stick columns and gingerbread walls” (26). Lillie Mae is now equated to the witch of Hansel and Gretel, luring in children for ravenous consumption. This equation portrays the narrator’s changing views of Lillie Mae as well as her view of Mr. Raymond as a child lured in by Lillie Mae’s seductive sweats.

After this image of Lillie Mae and Mr. Raymond, Cofer’s narrator changes focus to the kitchen area of the shop: “In the kitchen of the Southern Sweets the black cook, Margaret, worships at the altar of her Zenith radio. Hank Aaron is working his way to heaven. She is bone-sticking thin, despises sweets, loves only her man Hank, Otis Redding, and a smoke” (26). Cofer does not describe the race of Lillie Mae and Mr. Raymond, emphasizing their normative whiteness and the labor segregation in the shop. Margaret is thin, and though it is not mentioned, probably makes minimum wage as well. Her thinness stems from lack of privilege: she is not the mistress of Mr. Raymond (and he probably wouldn’t consider her for this role, nor would she

take it if offered); she works as hard as Lillie Mae, but does not have the luxury of additional resources; and she hates sweets—the narrator voice implying that Margaret refuses to participate in the gender roles that Lillie Mae subscribes to. Instead, Margaret listens to the radio, using pop culture as a way of distracting her from the daily grind, and she privileges the social progress of Black athletes and singers. By juxtaposing Lillie Mae and Margaret, Cofer reveals the ways gender and race influence the lives of two women of different races in the same work space.

Margaret “winks” at the narrator when Hank Aaron hits a ball, implying a type of racial solidarity, as they appreciate a Black man physically proving racial equality, revealing that Margaret and Lillie Mae racialize the narrator in different ways. The narrator’s presence in this shop, therefore, allows her to see herself as white women and black women interpret her. Margaret “dares to ignore Mr. Raymond when Aaron is up,” and the narrator states that, “Mysteriously the boss-man understand the priority of home runs, and the sacrilege of speaking ordinary words like my ‘triple decker club on a bun with fries’ frozen at tongue-tip when Margaret holds up one bony finger at us, demanding a little respect for the man at the plate” (26). For Margaret, Aaron is a metaphor of changing racial stereotypes and race relations, especially in the South. She ignores Mr. Raymond, not simply because the game is important, but as a mirror of what Aaron’s talent signifies to a Southern white patriarchy. And Mr. Raymond knows this, silenced by the power of the moment. In this instant, both Aaron and Margaret demand a respect previously denied to Black men and women. Continuing, the narrator states, “The windowless kitchen, with its soul-melting hot floors and greasy walls, had to disappear for her, like a magician’s trick at the sweet snap of the ball and bat that sent her into orbit, her eyes rolling back in ecstasy, mouth circling the O in wonder as if she had seen the glory” (27) Margaret’s work

station is stifling and oppressive. But her radio—her link to the outside world—is a reminder that things are changing, that the plight of Black men and women is not static.

At the end of the day, “Lillie Mae fluffs her boot-black curls, heads home to entertain her sugar daddy or to be along, glue on new nails, pin-curl her hair, and practice walking gracefully under heavy trays” (27). Lillie Mae’s gender performance is never over: it requires frequent practice on the nights it does not end in sexual favors for the man who financially supports her. She is reliant on this performance in order to survive her minimum wage job.

The narrator goes home to homework, “words to add to my arsenal of sweet-sounding missiles for mañana” (27). The narrator’s Mestiza performance requires emotional and psychological survival through her bilingualism. Her survival, unlike Lillie Mae’s, is reliant on linguistic skills. But like Lillie Mae, she must practice nightly. Leaving the shop, she finds her father waiting for her “in his old brown Galaxy [...] wary of these slow-talking tall Southerners, another race” (27). The narrator’s father has not acquired these linguistic skills and the narrator emphasizes his discomfort as she describes him sitting in vehicle that acts as a metaphor for his old world of Puerto Rico. While the narrator and other characters improve skills that act as coping mechanisms, the father is at a loss, forced to hide in his car, unable to integrate himself into the South, and feeling like an alien in the South. Cofer invokes the image of the “Galaxy”: her father hides inside of it; the narrator travels within, outside, and through it. Interesting is that Cofer ends this stanza in the middle of a line, something she does not do throughout the rest of the poem. The narrator’s father describes Southerners as “another race” (end of stanza), emphasizing his inability to understand this new culture and feel like part of it. The new stanza begins, “he must avoid or face; tired of navigating his life, which is a highway crowded with strangers sealed in their vehicles, and badly marked with signs that he will never fully

understand” (27). While the narrator faces this new “country” and its new people, the father is tired of this uncomfortable interaction. Cofer allows readers to sympathize with an older person who has become weary of the conflicts that arise from these cross-cultural encounters. The narrator is young and excited by the social play. Her father is exhausted, and prefers to hide, but he is probably also aware of the uncomfortable situations that can occur. While this influences his actions, it also prevents him from fully engaging in the surrounding culture. The narrator, on the other hand, seems to strive from this social play, mirroring Cofer’s own philosophy of cross-cultural interactions—uncomfortable and unnerving--as potential for personal growth and a chance to perfect social navigation.

The narrator offers her father a “day-old doughnut,” but he turns it down because, “at least from me he does not have to accept second-best anything” (27). The father’s reluctance to engage in society is not simply linguistic or cultural. While he is tired of only getting second-best from society, he refuses this status from his own daughter.

As the father and daughter leave the parking lot, they see Margaret in the back lot, “puffing small perfect clouds, her eyes fixed to a piece of sky between the twin smokestacks of the Continental Can, and beyond what I can see from where I am” (27). The narrator connects herself to Margaret again, implying that she realizes now that the racial connection between her and Margaret is more important than the gender connection between her and Lillie Mae, at least in this Southern context. The narrator wonders if Margaret is “[s]till tracking Aaron’s message hovering above us all in the airwaves?” (27). Margaret is focusing on a message that is beyond her, beyond the narrator, and beyond the South. The narrator can only guess at this importance, confused. In this way, Cofer reveals that despite the non-white connection, the narrator exists in a world that is outside of the one Margaret inhabits. Literally, the Mestiza narrator exists

between Margaret's kitchen (Black oppression and segregation) and Lillie Mae's dining room (White social interaction). While both sides accept the narrator, she still exists outside both, using the skills she has to navigate between them, while creating her own space. The poem ends with a final description of Margaret, who hears a fantastic hit by Aaron: "Her lips move and I can read the drawled-out 'shee-it' followed by that characteristic shake of her head that meant, Girl, in this old world, some things are still possible" (27). Empowered, Margaret lets the narrator know that change is happening, and she can embrace it, wonder at it, or she can hide like her father. While Lillie Mae starts off as the character that teaches the narrator the biggest lessons, it is Margaret that teaches her (and the reader) the most important—let the world surprise, because it will if you let it.

In *Lesson's from a Writer's Life* (2011), Cofer uses autobiographical experiences to offer pedagogical lessons for teachers and students of literature and creative writing. This text is also one of her most revealing about her life in Georgia. She begins, "I was the alien in my new school in Augusta, Georgia, when we moved south in the late 1960s. It was a turbulent time of race tensions, and I entered a world as strange to me as some of the planets visited by the Star Trek crew. Even the landscape baffled me with its red earth" (12). Cofer articulates the disruption caused by the move and emphasizes the diverse racial and cultural structures within the U.S.'s numerous regions, portraying a complex nation where even insiders can become outsiders through a move within that very nation. She explains that her family "became aware that there are many Americas, and Georgia is as different an America from New Jersey as a peach is from a mango, and that saying we were from New Jersey and thus Yankees was at times a more socially awkward admission than explaining our ethnicity" (63). Discussing the initial move, she states, "Everything about me, my black hair, my dark complexion, my New Jersey-

accented speech, and my Spanish-speaking parents, set me apart in a culture that was much more homogenous than the multiethnic barrios I had known in New Jersey” (12). Cofer nuances the experiences of the 1.5 generation by adding a third “home,” that of New Jersey. Like many 1.5ers, she mythologizes and romanticizes her “homeland,” amplifying her sense of loss. Cofer never shies away from sharing anecdotes of racism and sexism that she experienced in New Jersey, but the move to a different culture, even within the same country, creates feelings of apprehension that catalyze nostalgia for a homeland, exemplifying Gustavo Perez Firmat’s three stages of adaptation in *Life on the Hyphen* (1994): 1) substitution (copies of home culture through building cultural enclaves as her family did in New Jersey), 2) destitution (feeling ungrounded because of migration or cultural factors that disrupt identity), and 3) Declaration (“Here We Are,”—eventual empowerment and agency at which Cofer almost always arrives in her writings). Attempting to understand the culture and customs of the South, she realizes the integral part race plays: “Race in the South is a subtle system little understood by outsiders, and it was with a mixture of dismay and relief that I found myself neither in the center nor quite on the margins of turmoil and tension of the civil rights era in the Deep South. There were not enough brown people here to make us players of any significance. I could stay silent and invisible until I knew if I wanted to remain in this America” (63).

The lack of diversity in her new home state further marks her as an outsider, and she states that “In Georgia, I learned to empathize with the creatures in *Star Trek* who always had to prove their intentions were good, if they were. Understanding the alien’s point of view gave me an advantage: I knew I had to study the mainstream group, and eventually decide whether I could be a part of it. It was not merely a matter of externals—I had to learn their ways if I was to survive in the place I had landed. I learned to listen” (12). As an outsider who is viewed with

suspicion, Cofer understands that cultural negotiation isn't just a matter of fitting in, it is a matter of survival. Though she relates a conscious decision to question whether she *wants* to be part of the mainstream culture, she also knows that premature stereotyping will only make life more difficult; instead, she must observe and listen, and survive through interpersonal exchanges that include constant self-reflection and cross-cultural contact.

Cofer solidifies the importance of this through a story of her first friend in Georgia: "I was attracted to her because she waited for the bell to ring at the beginning of the day in the place I wanted for myself—the extreme far corner of the commons, against the wall, in no one's way. From that spot, away from the groups that congregated in cliques according to their levels of popularity, I could watch the action and take mental notes" (13). Initially, Cofer can't help but notice the girl that has isolated herself in the area Cofer views as the safest anthropological vantage point. It is also safe from high school politics, a dangerous and tumultuous phenomenon, especially for an outsider.

Arlene is tall, white, and beautiful, but "she hunched her shoulders and seems to want to blend and disappear into the institutional green walls" and Cofer notices that she always keeps her eyes down (13). Cofer understands her own urge to want to be invisible, but isn't sure why someone who looks like Arlene would also seem to want this: "When you look different, sound different, and are looked at as if you don't belong, the only thing to do is to not call attention to yourself—the wrong kind of attention, even a simple question like *where are you from?*, can be painful to the outsider, especially a self-conscious teenager" (13). In addition to curiosity, Cofer is drawn to Arlene because of a shared outsider experience displayed through Arlene's body language. Cofer is curious as to whether Arlene chooses isolation or has been ostracized in some

way by others who are phenotypically similar, implying that Arlene should be receiving the privilege of easy friendships.

After some hesitation, Cofer's parents allow her to visit Arlene's house after school. Arlene lives on the "outskirts of town" in an area Cofer had never been, "made up of small houses and even some cabins" (15). Not only does Arlene live in an area spatially separated from her peers, Cofer notes that, "Strangest of all, there were African Americans in their yards, on porches, and socializing on the sidewalks. It was an unusual sight because, in the late sixties, a city like Augusta did not have many integrated neighborhoods; even the school I attended had only two black girls in a population of over one thousand students" (15). Cofer realizes that the area is not only spatially separated, but this separation is class and race based. This segregation affects the demographic of her school and also solidifies her status as Other. Both Cofer's and López's images of racial segregation and Mestizo/Black encounters, portray the reality of race relations in parts of Georgia and other areas of the South (Blanchard, et al.; Goerman; Martin).

Arlene's neighborhood reminds Cofer of the "diversity of the barrios and multiracial society of New Jersey," something her family misses, "mainly for reasons of survival, not just political correctness: we were comfortable among multicultural, multiethnic people—we did not stand out" (15). This comfort is disrupted, and although her family experienced racism and ethnocentrism in New Jersey, the diversity of the community had allowed room for some cultural maneuverings. Their new home in Georgia and its lack of diversity left the family without this strong sense of community, underscoring their outsider status. Cofer notes, "In the South there were two colors represented in the population, and the line between them was clearly drawn" (15). This line represents volatile race relations based on racial binaries, leading to institutional as well as spatial inequalities. Cofer observes that her new friend walks "a street where there

seemed to be a blurring or some kind of space warp that allowed a white family to live in the middle of a black neighborhood” (15). Here, Arlene is a racial outsider, but is more comfortable than she is in school where she should technically fit in based on race privilege. Cofer notices that Arlene walks “a little taller and that people smiled at her; they saw her” (15). At school, Arlene is invisible, or at least attempts to be, uncomfortable in the setting. At home, Arlene is confident and part of the community. As they walk to Arlene’s house after being dropped off by the bus, an older Black woman hugs Arlene and asks about her siblings. She invites Arlene and Cofer to her birthday party being held the next day and promises to send over barbeque if they can’t make it. The scene indicates an engaged community, but also demonstrates how readily the community accepts outsiders through the extended invitation that Cofer receives. Before walking away, the woman takes Arlene’s hands and asks “in a low voice if they had enough to eat that night” (15). Arlene responds in the affirmative and thanks the woman, hugging her again before walking Cofer the rest of the way to her house.

Arriving at the shotgun shack, Cofer describes the house: “It was a dilapidated little house, boxy, longer than wide, with a red tin roof. There was a junk-strewn yard, and a tan sofa that looked like a dead animal on the porch. I was stunned by the rancid smell that emanated from the interior when Arlene opened the door. Toys were strewn on the floor and she had to move clothes from a chair so I could sit down” (16). Like Elaine’s reaction to Linda’s house, Cofer is unnerved by the poverty markers. Cofer’s narrative voice uses the opportunity to learn more about Arlene. In contrast, Elaine is too distracted by this difference to allow herself the engage in the unfolding events.

Watching Arlene look after her siblings, Cofer suddenly realizes the signs of Arlene’s poverty, also noticing that Arlene does not feel sorry for herself. Seeing Arlene as a complex

individual rather than a projection of her own feelings, Cofer understands that she “had been wrong about [Arlene’s] ‘alienness’ in comparison with mine. She was an integral part of the world in which I had landed, and I had committed an error in judgment in assuming that because she looked like the successful others she was naturally in a better place than me” (16). Though they share an experience as outsiders, the two experience this outsider status for different reasons, nuancing Cofer’s understanding of fluid and interlocking oppressions.

That night, Cofer pretends to sleep through an argument between Arlene and her father, and the next day Arlene invites her to her neighbor’s birthday party. Arlene also tells her some bad news delivered in the “sweet, melodious tones I once thought meant cheerfulness instead of simply being a way some Southerners have of expressing acceptance or resignation: a kind of Deep South brand of existentialism. ‘Bless his heart, Daddy’s got a new job. We’ll be moving.’” (17). Cofer analyzes this cultural trait, stating, “Later I understood that any statement of even the most profound disappointment or outrage begins with forgiveness for the perpetrator: *bless her heart, she left her children; or bless his heart, he ruined my life*” (17). Cofer realizes that Southern norms dictate an acceptance of character flaws and a resignation to disruption. As if “announcing a vacation,” Arlene tells her that they move around a lot, and she rarely knows when or to where. After she asks what Arlene will do, Arlene responds, “Honey, I have to go with the kids. My little darlings don’t have a mama now. I’m it” (17). Despite the constant disruption, Arlene is dedicated to ensuring that her siblings have some stability.

Eventually Arlene stops coming to school, and Cofer hears from others who do not seem to care about her whereabouts that “Arlene’s family is white trash. No accounting why they do anything” (18). Class stereotypes and adherence to them prevent others from understanding the

motives of Arlene's family or even being concerned about her disappearance. This reaction catalyzes a profound transformation for Cofer:

This statement contained the answer to what kind of alien Arlene was: it had nothing to do with what made us aliens. It wasn't skin color, language difference, or place of origin. She had simply been born to people who did not or could not follow the rules of their society, whether northern or southern, one that rejects the ones who stray beyond the boundaries of 'normal' behavior. At school, Arlene had been put in her place and ignored: against the wall. She had been made invisible so she could not remind the more fortunate ones of what one or two degrees of separating can do to anyone's life. (18)

Ostracized for different reasons, Cofer comprehends the underlying ideology that separates people and manifests as institutional inequalities and interpersonal failings: those that disrupt the status quo force others to question these very ideologies that privilege some and oppress others. For some, this questioning is so uncomfortable and unacceptable, that persons who catalyze it must be silenced and actively ignored. Through self-reflection and an active engagement in positive interpersonal relationships, Cofer nuances her understanding of these complex systems, allowing her to see similarities with Arlene, but also differences that are emphasized by the same underlying oppressive ideologies. Arlene seems to have an understanding of this, at least unconsciously, because as a member of the less-fortunate group, "she received the help she needed and the affection she craved, graciously, from people who were externally different, whose circumstances she shared, and whom she acknowledged as family. To me, these are the qualities of a survivor: to know how to give and to receive in equal measure" (18). This give and take requires an active community and commitment to member survival. Cofer notes that Arlene has two traits working in her favor: "she was capable of loving her sibling enough to work toward her goals, and given the most minimal support and encouragement, she'd attain her dream of becoming a nurse" (18). For Cofer, Arlene has the potential to survive because of her

capacity for love and her loyalty to her family, personal characteristics that Arlene is lucky to have. But Cofer also reveals another, external necessity—the gift of even a minimal amount of support and encouragement. Though Arlene received this in her neighborhood, this need is not always granted, and Cofer’s insight reveals a personal hope rather than a cultural given. As a metaphor for others in oppressive situations, it becomes clear that these two basic human requirements for survival are often unavailable, and Cofer’s narrative voice relates this heartbreaking truth simply, underscoring the relative ease in which love and encouragement could be and should be provided. By displaying hope for her long-lost friend, Cofer unveils a disturbing flaw in mainstream ideology that not only perpetuates inequalities for the oppressed, but also maintains arrogance and antipathy in the privileged.

Cofer’s relationship with Arlene puts her life in perspective:

I was not the poorest, loneliest teenage girl I knew, and my parents having transplanted us from familiar New Jersey to foreign Georgia did not mean the end of the world. At least I had a home with two parents, and they provided, if not luxuries, the necessities, and a little more. I also saw that Arlene’s survival depended on her trust and acceptance of others, and that is one of the lessons I did not learn from my parents, whose fear of the strange world outside the family group is a common one among immigrants. Not that I have completely shed my inclination toward suspicion and my guardedness, but I have learned to think of new places and new people as an opportunity to test my social skills. (18-19)

Cofer is able to stop focusing inward, and through a commitment to watching and listening, she also realizes the destructive nature of solitary self-pity. From her own marginalization, Arlene has learned the limiting effects of this type of behavior, teaching Cofer the importance of a fluid and inclusive definition of community is necessary to facilitate survival, especially in an ever-changing world. Unlike others who fear outsiders, Cofer learns that engaging with diverse groups is a test of personal character and integrity, something that should be culturally encouraged. Interpersonal failings are not personal failures; instead, these exchanges are stepping

stones to positive transformation. With Arlene as her inspiration, Cofer decides to be “not the alien who remains alienated but the one who becomes the guide” using her writing and personal persona to give others the love and encouragement that culture often denies them (19).

Cofer narrates the effects of this personal commitment to empowerment through stories in an anecdote about a visit to a middle school in Atlanta. The teacher assigns readings from Cofer’s *An Island Like You: Stories of the Barrio* (2009) and asks her students to prepare a short monologue based on their favorite character. The teacher warns Cofer that the only Latino student, Alejandro, might not participate because he was often “aggressively silent” and sat in the back of the room refusing to engage in class discussion. She fears that he is “destined to drop out of school to follow his migrant worker parents as soon as he could” (23). Alejandro surprises everyone by approaching the podium, “standing very straight, deliver[ing] a monologue that left everyone stunned by its power” (23). Alejandro chooses a character that Cofer describes as someone “who is in rebellion and close to losing everything, including his freedom. Everyone thinks he’s a gangster because he is just plain bad, but in reality he is grieving for the mother he recently lost and is unable to help his father, who has also been defeated by emotional pain” (23). Cofer describes the story as one of love and giving, and Alejandro plays the part, reading “dramatically, and with emotion” bringing tears to the eyes of Cofer and the teacher (23). Cofer watches Alejandro and then the reaction by his classmates who look on with “a mixture of wonder, curiosity, and maybe (I hoped) a growing sense of respect,” noting that later several girls approach him and he engages with them without being “aggressively silent” (23). Cofer learns that the teacher had attempted to assign stories that would encourage engagement and that he had become, “the Latino ‘expert,’ fielding questions about concepts and words that his fellow students would have had to look up” (23). Using Cofer’s stories, the teacher had made an attempt

to engage Alejandro culturally, using narrative to include him in the classroom community, providing empowerment through sharing knowledge as an outsider in a classroom now committed to diverse cross-cultural transformation. Rather than disappearing in the back of the class, the assignment forced the class to see Alejandro. By facilitating this environment, the teacher positions the other students in temporary outsider status, encouraging curiosity and inclusiveness as productive and essential.

Cofer does not hesitate to portray oppression in her life, and in the South, but her narratives tend to focus on characters with strength and resilience, offering sensitive critiques of their and her own personal failings. In “In Search of My Mentors’ Gardens”³ from *Woman in Front of the Sun* (2000), Cofer explains how Southern authors like Flannery O’Connor and Alice Walker inspired her Southern writing. After living in the South for a while, Cofer had tried to be “politically correct and non-judgmental about the strange idioms and customs of my neighbors” but admits that her ethnocentrism created biased writing where she saw herself as “part of the good minority group” who were “generous” and “tolerant” (95-96). She wanted to write “poems and stories extolling these virtues of my people while exposing the Others for the oppressors they were” (96). In the works of Walker and O’Connor, she found writers who didn’t put themselves or their own ideologies on a pedestal, instead critiquing themselves, their own communities, and everyone else. She doesn’t want her writing to be “simply tokens of culture and race, or to become artifacts of my particular time in history. I would like some powerful person to dump my words on someone’s lap to be used and needed” (103). Following the example set by radical feminists of color in *This Bridge Called My Back* (1984), Cofer writes autobiographical texts, in prose or poetry, that acknowledge--at least implicitly, though often

overtly--that this type of cultural project leads to theory and activism, models of subversion and paths for healing, both for the writer and the reader.

Living in the South taught Cofer to be flexible because “We can stand still and find ourselves in a different nation created overnight by decisions we did not participate in making. I submit that we are all becoming more like the immigrant and can learn from her experiences as a stranger in a strange land” (121-22). Cofer portrays this immigrant experience through transnational and trans-regional moves that all create similar experiences, like that of mythologizing a homeland--a reaction that is a very human response to culture shock and homesickness. These feelings are universal in that they can happen to anyone at anytime, and most people do experience it to some degree or another, therefore positioning this experience as a potential path to empathy and interconnectedness. Cofer hopes her writing becomes a model for this internal flexibility to external variances, providing empowerment for her readers. As a writer, this involves deep personal reflection as well as sensitive observations with a critical eye, and active listening with a discerning ear.

Of her life in Georgia, she says, “I have lived in the Deep South most of my adult life with my family, and I have learned to see the beauty of the place where my husband and daughter feel most at home. I have learned how to navigate the complex nature of race and class relations by maneuvering through the labyrinth daily” (*Lesson from a Writer's Life* 63). Choosing to engage, observe and listen, Cofer can appreciate a region that at first to her seemed alien and hostile. She reveals that her husband taught her that “it is possible, indeed necessary, to try to appreciate a landscape through the eyes of another. By his example, I began to see red clay not only as beautiful but as a yielding element, mysterious as the ocean depths. The Georgia earth can be plumbed for its history, in arrowheads and artifacts that can be used to make

numerous useful things; it can feed you most abundantly; and if inclined to do so (which I am *not*) you can harvest worms for fishing” (xi). For Cofer, “the phenomenon we call culture in a society is organic, not manufactured. It grows where we plant it. Culture is our garden, and we may neglect it, trample on it, or we may choose to cultivate it” (“In Search of My Mentor’s Gardens” 124).

Conclusion

These Southern Mestiza authors are writing about hybrid experiences in the New South, a label applied “as a way to accentuate recent changes in [a] seemingly unchanging place (Cravey 218). As such, they portray changes to this South, as well as Mestiza reception in a South that often views itself as stable and unchanging, and has therefore been inhospitable and even hostile to Latinos (221). These authors also show how these regional borders and exclusionary identities have always been a myth for those considered “Southern” and those not, as real lives always reveal that myths are just that—fictions maintained despite the existence of the contrary.

Lorraine López and Judith Ortiz Cofer portray the trappings of this myth as well as the limitations of binary definitions of identity. Their writings reveal the need for collaboration between people of color, women, and working-class people in the South, collaborations that have proven useful for Latino immigrants (Smith 236). These writers also demonstrate that borders are fluid and not always reliant on hegemonic definitions. Immigrants and New Southerners “scramble geography” and “displace” or “transplant” borders (Cravey 229).

CONCLUSION

In the introduction of this project, I introduce Homi Bhabha's third space model and Gloria Anzaldúa's concept of Mestiza consciousness. Both argue for a hybrid identity for both a culture and an individual. This identity requires reciprocity and flexibility, and involves confronting cognitive dissonance in order to understand that this discomfort is actually a signal of potential transformation, assuming one chooses to confront it, rather than hide from it. Bhabha and Anzaldúa embrace a paradigm of multiculturalism that incorporates a hybrid consciousness within a diverse culture. While binaries of identity ask us to define ourselves against the Other, cultural theorists ask us to learn who we are in relation to the defined other while acknowledging the cultural construction of this binary. In other words, we are not different because we *are* different; we are different because we have been *taught* that we are different. We must define ourselves inside and outside of this binary, through self-reflection of ourselves as individuals, as well as within a cultural context.

Building on the theories of Bhabha and Anzaldúa, Trinh T. Minh-Ha, in "Strategies of Displacement," states that "The challenge is how to really deal with the difficulties and complexities of difference that questions a whole system of truth and representation and allows each case of marginalisation to be dealt with as unique without losing sight of what it may share with other cases" (15). In this way, I do not argue that the Southern Mestiza creates a new, universal paradigm of hybridity or multiculturalism. Rather, I argue that her representation and her experiences contribute to the discussion of similar cases, while highlighting the particulars of her position.

Minh-Ha introduces the concept of the two spirals to describe "strategies of displacement": the concept involves "at least two spiralling movements happening in the same

space of exploration. You as onlooker position yourself differently according to different contexts and circumstances but so does the ‘other’ at whom you are looking. Each constitutes a site of subjectivities whose movement is neither simply linear nor circular. In the spiralling movement you never come back to the same and when two spirals move together in a space there are moments when they meet and others when they do not. Trying to find a trajectory that allows the two movements to meet as much as possible without subsuming one to the other is how I also see the process of translation” (16). Her theory connotes the constant interwoven connections we experience through interpersonal encounters. Whether resistant or actively engaged, we are linked to everyone around us. The goal is to find a trajectory that allows both to transform and progress, without maintaining harmful hierarchies. It implies difference that is equal, inseparable, and complementary, touching different places in time and space and interacting with each other and others (17). It means watching, but allowing yourself to be watched, while paying attention to the context in which the interaction takes place.

The texts discussed in this project portray a vibrant and dynamic third space where inhabitants are intrinsically connected in a constant motion of discovery and transformation. Without attention to our interconnectedness, we maintain the very structures that separate us, and we remain static, allowing our culture to stagnate. But through solidarity and commitment to social change, we can transform and progress.

This process of personal and social transformation involves confronting the discomfort we feel during cross-cultural interactions. This cognitive dissonance is uncomfortable, but signals a site of potential. The reactions of many who view “Southern” and “Mestiza” as mutually exclusive demonstrate an unwillingness to redefine identity labels when challenged with a counter-example. U.S. literature and popular culture perpetuate a limited understanding of

the diversity within Latina experiences by homogenizing our identities through racist and sexist representations that belie our lived realities. These representations neglect to portray our cultural negotiations and instead characterize us as perpetually foreign and as outsiders in our own country. As such, we are used as foils to white protagonists who are portrayed as dynamic against our static images.

The texts I have chosen position Mestizas in the Deep South, allowing for a regional perspective of identity formation. Southern ideologies affect the ways Southern Mestizas negotiate and challenge hegemonic our bicultural identities. The social realities of the South often perpetuate and normalize systems of segregation and inequality that invade multiple Southern institutions. Because these hierarchies are based on a Black/White racial history, Mestizos force the South to reassess these constructs, and Mestizas allow for an analysis of gender within these interlocking systems of oppression.

In Chapter One, I analyze the ways White Southern femininity is constructed against both Mestizas and Black men and women. This chapter reveals the tropes employed by authors who portray white Southern women at various stages of change in a multicultural South. Kate Chopin and Margaret A. Graham stereotype the Southern Mestiza as hypersexual and foreign. Both authors marginalize the Mestiza through narrative silencing. This strategy distances the protagonists from the Mestiza characters, but does allow us to analyze the staring process in unfamiliar, cross-cultural interactions. Scenes of staring reveal how Otherness, and in particular *mestizaje*, is constructed through xenophobic ideological influences. Deconstructing these scenes provides details of personal and cultural failings that prevent meaningful connections that transcend dichotomized identity labels. The Mexicanist presence in the works of Chopin and Graham divulges a strategy of tropicalizing people and nations. Chopin affirms a perception of

the Mestiza as a sexual rival to white Southern women, but also as a model for transcendence of oppressive cultural norms. Graham perpetuates an image of the Mestiza as a victim of her backwards culture, and a humanitarian project for good Christian women who are maintaining civility in the South. Though both silence the Mestiza, Chopin position her directly within a narrative of changing Southern codes that critiques society's failure to provide women with opportunities for solidarity-building and reciprocal transformations. Graham, conversely, completes her marginalization of the Mestiza by removing her completely from the South, thereby providing a case study of failed cultural negotiations due to unconscious perpetuation of white, Southern, and Christian hegemonies.

In Chapter Two, I analyze the stereotype of the “dark lady” and the “female clown” juxtaposed against images of Southern women committed to the role of Belle in the New South. The perception of Mestiza sexuality as dangerous to the social order is mediated through silencing strategies that disempower her. Likewise, the Mestiza characters in Chapter Two disrupt the fantasies of aging Southern Belles through the oral interjections. The visual medium of the texts calls for different strategies of dealing with her presence, leading to tropes that position the Mestiza offstage or offscreen. By characterizing her as haunting or buffoonish, in conjunction with mysterious mystical abilities, the texts minimize some of the social inequalities and cultural misunderstandings that create the conflicts between the Mestiza and her white counterpart.

The texts avoid scenes of staring between the protagonists and the Mestizas, but engage the viewer in the process. The visual format forces the audience to stare and interpret, but this can never be reciprocated by the fictional characters, and is always mediated through the writer/director. For Tennessee Williams, the “dark lady” foreshadows the death of the Southern

Belle. For Linda Bloodworth-Thomason, the Mestiza “female clown” is comic foil to the equally ridiculous modern Southern Belle. Because a majority of the actions takes place in homes, the Mestizas are positioned in relation to their roles in these lived spaces. The Mexican vendor is relegated to the exterior and is ignored by a majority of the cast. The Mestiza maid lives with her employer, and she harasses and exacerbates the Belle with her inability to conform. The implication seems clear: Allowing the Mestiza entrance into Southern culture, even at its fringes, is disastrous and unwise.

Chapters One and Two also allow for analysis of historical stereotypes of Black women in the South. The characterization of Mestizas in these texts reveals startling similarities between her and characterizations of Black women in the South. Black women have been stereotyped as hypersexualized (the Jezebel), caretakers (the Mammy), and uncontrollable or tempestuous (the Sapphire). Building on these Black female tropes, Southern narratives perpetuate negative images of women of color while also demonstrating the power that these images have on the Southern consciousness. These texts, therefore, expose the failings in cross-cultural interactions when dominant culture ignores diversity among women of color.

In Chapter Three, I analyze an image of a Mestiza that acknowledges these limiting characterizations. Cynthia Shearer positions the Mestiza within a South that is multicultural and permeated with cross-cultural interactions. Playing with Mestiza stereotypes, Shearer allows the reader to view Consuela (through Angus) in ways that mirror these negative images. As the novel progresses, she nuances this image, constructing a Mestiza that is multifaceted and complex. Shearer forces the reader to critique cultural assumptions about the Mestiza as Angus transforms his own understanding of Consuela. Angus and Consuela completely interact, gazing on the other and allowing themselves to be gazed at by the Other. They talk to each other, and

learn to listen to the Other. Although it is a tumultuous process, Shearer makes clear the advantages of confronting cognitive dissonance for personal transformation and social progress in a contemporary Southern context. Shearer's text narrates the often difficult spirally process articulated by Minh-Ha and engages the reader in this process.

Chapter Four analyzes the writings of Southern Mestizas struggling with their position in the South. Lorraine López and Judith Ortiz Cofer offer resistant writings that challenge Southern ideologies and honestly depict the many pitfalls inherent in learning to juggle multiple cultures. They reveal processes of cross-cultural connections that require viewing ourselves as Other and analyzing our roles in "othering" to maintain certain social privileges. These authors model the interconnected spiralling process for a community that lacks these paradigms.

Together, my texts offer various perspectives of non-Mestiza and Mestiza encounters in the South. These encounters articulate different negotiation strategies, and provide warnings and suggestions that challenge dominant cultural narratives. I have centered the Southern Mestiza within this investigation to analyze the unique ways her presence in the South adds to our understanding of interdependent identity formations. The Southern Mestiza is certainly an interesting addition to this discussion, but we need more identities that exist between the South's black/white binary to participate; for example, a comparison to Asian American identities and experiences in the South could allow us to deconstruct racial policies and social ideologies based on citizenship and cultural expectations of non-white immigrants. These issues are important because the real life effects of such policies leads to pay inequities, second-class citizenship status, and unfair treatment of non-white citizens and immigrants alike. Disciplines such as Sociology and Psychology are advancing qualitative and quantitative studies of these experiences, and writers are submitting their literary voices, but the literary theorist must engage

in this discussion through interdisciplinary studies that combine the personal with the political, and the anecdotal with the quantitative. In the interpersonal realm, Southerners must create a space for these emerging voices by embracing diversity in new definitions of community that privilege allying over oppression, and shared power over social inequality. The welcomed presence of Southern Mestiza authors by general audiences and academic readers leaves me optimistic that we are spirally upwards, gaining transformative powers through their strength. These new Southern *Bellas*, allow Southern insiders and outsiders to witness the changes to constructions of gender, race, and class in the South and the rest of the U.S. and engage in and within fourth and fifth spaces of cultural contact. Once we actively and eagerly negotiate these spaces, we can begin to break down silences in different public and private spheres of culture and engage in meaningful dialogue that leads to overcoming emotional unrest and cognitive dissonance.

END NOTES

Introduction

1. I am using Elisabeth Schussler Fiorenza's definition of Kyriarchy – “a neologism coined by Elisabeth Schussler Fiorenza and derived from the Greek words for ‘lord’ or ‘master’ (kyrios) and ‘to rule or dominate’ (archein) which “seeks to redefine the analytic category of patriarchy in terms of multiplicative intersecting structures of domination...Kyriarchy is best theorized as a complex pyramidal system of intersecting multiplicative social structures of superordination and subordination, of ruling and oppression” (*Wisdom Ways* 211).
2. I am applying Audre Lorde's definition of *mythical norm* as “white, thin, male, young, heterosexual, Christian, and financially secure” (in the United States) as she articulates in “Age, Race, Class, and Sex” (*Sister Outsider* [1984]). We define ourselves through these mythical norms, and those that exist within them define the norms in terms of their own experiences, while those that are not these identities “become ‘other,’ the outsider whose experience and tradition is too ‘alien’ to comprehend” (117).

Chapter One

1. Chopin has two short stories about Calixta, a woman who experiences a sexual awakening in “At the ‘Cadian Ball’” (1892) and commits adultery in “The Storm” (written in 1898; published in 1962). Calixta is white, so I have excluded her from my analysis of the Mexicanist presence in Chopin's work, but it should be noted that Calixta's mother is Cuban and her sexual impropriety is attributed to this cultural heritage by her bourgeois community. Read against *The Awakening*, the Calixta stories could imply that Chopin viewed Latin American culture as less sexually repressive to women, thereby acting as a model for more liberating gender roles or as a way to explore these roles through socially acceptable ethnoracial tropes.
2. Dagmar Pegues argues a similar position about Chopin's appropriation of the “Tragic Mulatta” trope in “Fear and Desire: Regional Aesthetics and Colonial Desire in Kate Chopin's Portrayals of the Tragic Mulatta Stereotype.” *Southern Literary Journal* 43.1 (Fall 2010): 1-74. As mixed-raced women, the Mulatta, like the Mestiza, permits Chopin to explore alternate models for female sexuality while critiquing gender oppression and racial inequality. Suzanne Bost elaborates on images of the Mulatta and Mestiza in *Mulattas and Mestizas: Representing Mixed Identities in the Americas, 1850-2000*. Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, 2003.
3. Interestingly, Graham's protagonist doesn't realize that her name, Esmeralda, is a common Spanish name and the name of several Latin American cities. Esmeralda is also a Gypsy character in Victor Hugo's *The Hunchback of Notre Dame* (1831).
4. Esmeralda repeats a variation of “under our noses” twice in reference to Maria—first in individual outrage at prostitution, then in a plural/communal reference to Christian

responsibility after she humanizes Maria; Horace, when critiquing Esmeralda, calls her “nosy.” While the sensorial focus of my argument is on the eyes and the act of seeing/watching, the image of the “nose” in the text also functions as a symbol of public policing of private lives, and “sniffing out” moral deviancy.

Chapter Two

1. Biographical data on Thomas is limited. She was 65 when she played the vendor, though appears *Streetcar* was her only major film. Pictures of her do connote non-white heritage, so it is possible she is of Spanish or Latin American descent. Because the play has several film adaptations, many actresses have played the role of the vendor. Josepha Gayer, an acclaimed mezzo-soprano, plays the vendor in the Monsour Lotfi operatic adaptation (1998). Information on Gayer’s race or cultural heritage is limited, but she is not phenotypically Mestiza. In the Glenn Jordan adaptation (1995), Carmen Zapata plays the blind vendor. Zapata was born in New York and is the daughter of a Mexican father and Argentine mother. She had a prolific acting career, appearing on Broadway and in several films and television programs. Images of her do not automatically connote a Mestiza identity, but she was active in both English-speaking and Spanish-speaking media, and is generally honored as pivotal to the Hispanic presence and Latino participation in popular culture. There is a lesser-known 1984 television adaptation of the play starring Ann-Margaret as Blanche DuBois, Treat Williams as Stanley, and Beverly D’Angelo as Stella. The Mexican vendor is played by Tina Menard in her final role before passing away 1993. Menard is Mexican and would be racialized as Mestiza. Though the ethno-racial backgrounds of the actresses is not a significant factor in the ways audiences would read the vendor, it does demonstrate the ways clothing and language are used to “race” a character.
2. “Corones” is a misspelling of “coronas,” which means both wreaths and crowns. The film versions of the play correct the pronunciation.
3. The trope of Latinas as maids in pop culture is an embarrassingly large catalog. Some of the more popular examples include TVs *Will and Grace* (1998-2006) and *Weeds* (2005-present), both of which include older, plump, sassy maids with thick accents. These characters resemble the trope of Sassy Black Woman who doesn’t take guff from white employers or peers. In film, examples include *Clueless* (1995) and *Crash* (2005), both of which portray foreign maids who are mistreated by their white female employers. A few examples of the young, thin, pretty maid exist, most notably *Maid in Manhattan* (2002), starring Jennifer López, and *Spanglish* (2004), both of which are romances that update the Cinderella story with Mestiza maids saved by White princes. Recently, Eva Longoria (of *Desperate Housewives* fame), announced a forthcoming TV project for ABC titled *Devious Maids*, which will cast several Latina actresses as maids working in Beverly Hills. In an NPR interview, actress Mexican American Lupe Ontiveros, who is U.S. born, states that she has been cast as a maid over 150 times, and now that she’s older, she is only cast for the “Abuela” role. In most cases she has been asked to use a thick Mexican accent despite having none. Because the mammy or mammy-like maid was played historically by Black women, and because women of color are underrepresented in

media, this could position Black and Mestiza actresses as rivals for a limited number of parts, while continuing to perpetuate the image of women of color as domestic labor to white women.

4. Many African American male comics have internalized this trope, dressing up as large black women who are obnoxious, sexually aggressive, and meant to be laughed at by audiences. Examples of this trope can be found in Tyler Perry's Madea films, Martin Lawrence's "Big Momma" series, and Eddie Murphy's *Norbit* (2007). In all of these films, the actors dress up as women who are meant to be trivialized, perpetuating myths of large black women as easily-angered and violent. As a socializing tool, these images teach black women that expressing anger or sexual desire is unacceptable, reifying the asexual and passive Mammy as the ideal.
5. In Anglo cultural narratives, it is not uncommon to link non-white characters to dark forces or to simplify their complex religions into an unknowable and threatening "magic." For Mestizas this manifests in different ways: If she is young, thin, and pretty, her "magic" is performed or read as hypnotic and irresistible (an example is Shakira's "Gypsy"); if she is old, fat, and ugly, her "magic" is linked to death (illustrated in this chapter's analysis of the vendor and Consuela). In the film *Drag Me to Hell* (2009), the white female protagonist calls in a Mestiza medium (played by Mexican actress, Adriana Barraza) to counter a curse placed on the protagonist by a Roma gypsy.
6. It should be noted that Tennessee Williams's wrote another play with a Mexicanist presence, *Night of the Iguana* (1961), which takes place in the Mexican village of Puerto Barrio on the Pacific coast of Mexico. The play is set in the summer of 1940, and while there are two indistinguishable Mestizo characters who act as employees and sexual partners with the white female protagonist, there are no Mestiza characters, making Mexican women in Mexico invisible and silence, fully marginalized in the text. The only mention of Mexican women, are in a cantina frequented by tourists in search of "cold beers and hot whores" (50). The film adaptation (1964), starring Richard Burton and Ava Gardner, features Mestiza extras, but they have no speaking parts and are merely on-screen briefly as patrons (or possibly as the "hot whores") in the hotel cantina.

Chapter Three

1. Mohl mentions the changing demographic of the South, stating that "By 2003, new census counts confirmed that Hispanics surpassed African Americans as the nation's largest minority" and "the most startling example is that of North Carolina, where the census recorded a sizzling 394 percent growth for Hispanics in the 1990s [...] 337 percent in Arkansas, 300 percent in Georgia, 278 percent in Tennessee, 212 percent in South Carolina, 208 percent in Alabama" (413). Taking jobs as migrant workers and farming labor, Hispanics were welcomed by most employers. The response by a majority of white USians was less than welcoming, revealing discomfort at the presence of this growing minority and these new workers were, "seen as a threat by African American workers who had previously worked in these labor intensive markets" (422). The U.S.

government began to restrict immigrant access due to the general public's backlash to the rising numbers of Hispanics (411).

2. Shearer refers to the cognitive dissonance created by competing belief systems. Raine, a white female character in the text, struggles to redefine herself outside of her husband and children. Acknowledging this discomfort she states, "Everything felt dangerous, but you had to ignore the danger and keep going, or die. What was the name for it, the pretending that everything was normal? *Dissonance*, Raine remembered with mutinous, bell-like clarity. *Cognitive Dissonance*" (84).
3. Angus's reaction mimics Adrienne Rich's definition of "compulsory heterosexuality" in which men seek to control women's sexuality through physical force or control of consciousness to assure "male rights of physical, economical, and emotional access" (29). This is achieved in various ways: 1) by denying women their own sexuality; 2) by forcing male sexuality onto women; 3) by commanding or exploiting their labor to control their produce; 4) by controlling or robbing them of their children; 5) by confining them physically and preventing movement; 6) by using them as objects in male transaction; 7) by cramping their creativeness; 8) and by withholding from them large areas of society's knowledge and cultural attainments. For a detailed study of compulsory heterosexuality, see Rich's *Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence*. (1980).
4. The HBO film *Real Women Have Curves* (2002) addresses the issue of weight for Latinas. Starring America Ferrera (best known for her role as the title character on TV's *Ugly Betty* [2006-2010]), the film portrays the struggle of a young Chicana struggling for body acceptance in the face of her mother's constant criticism of her weight. The film is an adaptation of an autobiographical play written by and starring Josefina López, a Chicana playwright. Interestingly, Ferrera's role in *Ugly Betty* explored similar issues of lookism, with Ferrera made to appear uglier while her character works at one of the most elite fashion magazines. Both characters embrace their looks in spite of constant disparaging remarks at home (Ana) or in the workplace (Betty). Significantly, it is mainly women who police other women's bodies because of an internalization of the compulsory beauty standards. The fat/ugly characters disrupt the notion that these standards are normal or ideal, and are often met with outright hostility from those who adhere to (or attempt to adhere to) them.

Chapter Four

1. Lorraine López's "The Threat of Peace" and "Batterers," both in *Homicide Survivors Guide*, include a secondary Latina characters who live in Georgia. I have left these stories out of my analysis in order to maintain focus on the development of ambivalent Mestiza identity in the Elaine stories.
2. *Comadrazgo* (comothering) is a "fictive kinship" among women that creates bonds based on "patterns of reciprocity [that] allowed women to care for one another as family and as neighbors" ("Southern Borderlands" 703). Similarly to the "godmother" relationship, the

comadrazgo system also incorporates the philosophy of community as family, with members responsible for each other, whether they were blood related or not.

3. This is a reference to Alice Walker's *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens: Womanist Prose* (1983), a nonfiction collection with essays ranging from exploring Black feminist philosophy to analyzing Southern women's texts.

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APPENDIX A: EMAIL INTERVIEW WITH LORRAINE LÓPEZ

This interview took place over email between March 5 and March 11, 2012

WB: Could you talk a little bit about the inspiration for your Elaine series and how you wrote it? What do you hope readers learn/gain from these texts? Why did you choose to write sequels? Do you foresee another addition to the Elaine series?

LL: The Elaine stories were borne out of my dissertation project, which is titled “The Personal Nature of Accident,” and this is a collection of linked-stories that present Elaine, Hammond, and her two children Tina and Teddy. The family, in these stories, has migrated from Southern California to Athens, Georgia in order for Hammond to attend graduate school. Only one of the stories from that collection has subsequently been published, and that is “This Gifting,” which appears in *Homicide Survivors Picnic and Other Stories* (hereafter *HSP*), but I have changed the characters’ names, so it does not appear to be an Elaine story, though it was initially written as one. The Elaine stories that appear in *Soy la Avon Lady and Other Stories* (“The Crown on Prince,” Ivor’s People,” “Mother-in-law’s Tongue,” and “Walking Circles”) were composed after the dissertation was written. Yet another Elaine story appears with “This Gifting” in *HSP*, and that is the title story, “Homicide Survivor’s Picnic.” Also, I’ve just written another Elaine story, though again, I have changed the characters’ names so it does not appear to be one, and it is titled “The Surrogates.” The Elaine stories are fairly autobiographical, inspired by my relocation to the South after living most of my life in Los Angeles, where race is not configured in the binary way it is here in the South. The tensions inherent to this binary have triggered many reflections on race for my character and for me. As to what I hope reader’s will learn or gain from these stories, I must confess that I write with only one reader in mind: myself. What I

hoped from these stories is a greater understanding of these circumstances, this region, and the characters, and I longed for this understanding to inform my life.

WB: I find it interesting that your texts span regions in the U.S. How has regional setting influenced your description of characters/plots? How has living in different regions affected your understanding of U.S. Latina/o identity or of your own self-identification? Have you noticed any stereotypes of Latinas/os that are Southern specific?

LL: Setting is a catalyst for my writing. When one relocates from one region to another, one's relationship with setting becomes pronounced and dynamic, usually in conflictive ways as one gets used to being in a new context. I find that I interact more with setting when I am in a new or unfamiliar place, and that interaction stimulates interesting actions and reactions, connections and disconnections that provide much raw material for story. Living in the South certainly made me more aware of my cultural identification, something I didn't have to think about much when I lived in Los Angeles, among many other Latinos. In the South, I found that I could pass; in other words, until I divulge my last name, people are generally not aware that I am a Latina. Clearly, I am not a Southerner. I do not speak like one and I am unfamiliar with most things geographic, wherever I am. But I speak English without a Spanish accent, I am five-foot-six, and though I have dark hair, my skin is fair, so I have few discernible racial markers. And yet, I felt my *latinidad* more pronounced in the South than it ever was in Los Angeles. As to stereotypes about Latinas/os in the South, I do notice that when my last name is known beforehand, Southerners express surprise that I speak English, and when they learn I work at Vanderbilt University, I am often asked if I teach Spanish or ESOL, even if I work in food services. People here usually

encounter recent immigrants who work in the service industry or agriculture, so they expect I, too, am a recent arrival in this country.

WB: I argue that Elaine can be read as non-white even though her race is not specifically mentioned. Did you consciously write her this way? Do you think it affects interpretations if readers imagine her as white or non-white? Or as Latina or not Latina? Have you heard/read any reactions to your Elaine series?

LL: Oh, of course, Elaine is Latina. She knows what she is, just as I know what I am. Neither of us wakes up in the morning thinking, *Oh, what a fine Latina day. I'll just stretch my Latina limbs and make my Latina self some coffee.* In the stories, too, there seems no more reason for me to broadcast her cultural heritage than there is for Lorrie Moore to trace the Scotch-Irish roots of her characters or for Sherman Alexie to hammer home in every single story the Native American-ness of his characters, and in his most recent collection, he presents a number of stories that do not identify the characters by ethnicity. With Elaine, now in a context where race is construed as a binary, sometimes she does feel on one side of the other of that binary. There is no specific place for her to be, so she enjoys the fluidity of this. She enjoys that she does not have to declare being this or that. Still, she knows who she is.

As to reactions to the Elaine stories, I've had a few. Mostly, these are positive. I would say I get more praise for "Ivor's People" than any other story in *Soy la Avon Lady*. Even my sister, shrewd and discerning reader that she is, loves that story. But once in a while, I will encounter readers who gripe about Elaine being "white" and about my not writing clearly about Latino/a characters, as if this were some promise I had made that I am now violating because I do not spell out the character's heritage. One reader, a former student of mine, complained that she did not like Elaine because she lacked morals, evident through her divorces and remarriages.

WB: Elaine is forced to confront her own racism and classism through her interactions with Linda. Could you discuss your juxtaposition of these two characters? What did you hope to reveal through their interactions and influence on each other?

LL: I can't say that I write to reveal this or that. I just write the story, and what is revealed emerges in the aftermath. I do like that Linda makes Elaine uneasy, uncomfortable and stressed about the vast chasm separating the two women who are now linked by a grandchild. She wants to like Linda, wants to connect with her, but ultimately she cannot do this, and that shortcoming shames and frustrates her, in the way the woman herself manages to do. Ultimately, Linda refuses to open herself to Elaine, despite her overtures. She rightly reads these as forced and false, so she remains aloof and unknowable to the other woman and Elaine reads this as stubbornness, even ignorance. So Elaine is forced to confront an antipathy, even a hostility that creates anxiety in her about racism and classism. But really, the two women just don't like each other; this new connection (the grandchild) pushes them into a conflictive space where they are in contention with one another—whether they recognize it or not—over the birth, over the infant.

WB: I position your Elaine series within a framework of New Southern Studies, although I originally read *Soy la Avon Lady* in a Latino/a Literature course. Would you characterize yourself as a “Southern” writer? Has Southern literature influenced your writing in any way? What else are you working on and does the South play a role?

LL: Definitely, I would like to be a Southern writer. I think Southern writer and Flannery O'Connor, Eudora Welty, Carson McCullers, and William Faulkner come to mind, and I would love to be in that company. I think my best stories in *Soy la Avon Lady* and *HSP* are set in the South, and I am often invited to read and present at conferences for Southern writers, so maybe I

am not alone in my desire to see myself as a Southern writer. I love this part of the country. This region has a terrible and traumatic history, but at least, it acknowledged and people are talking about race in the South, a subject that often gets elided in other areas.

Now, I am working on a new novel, working title: “The Darling,” in which the protagonist falls out of love again and again, with the help of the dead white male writers like Shakespeare, Flaubert, Tolstoy, Dreiser, Nabokov, and others. I am also working on a novella that is set in an artist colony for women in Wyoming (working title: “Postcards from the Gerund State”). And finally, I am composing a new collection of short stories. This will include “The Surrogates,” my latest Elaine story, though I have given all of the characters, except Tina, new names.

APPENDIX B: EMAIL INTERVIEW WITH CYNTHIA SHEARER

This interview took place over email between March 5 and March 14, 2012

WB: I read your novel as part of a course on the New South. How would you describe your understanding of the New South and literature of this New South, specifically your novel's positioning within these studies? As an author do you feel (or have you found) that this labeling limits readership or interdisciplinary interpretations of your novel?

CS: I need to say up-front that I had started this book with these Muslim characters in 1998 or so; so the whole 9-11 phenom came much later. I was watching Muslim immigration and anti-US sentiment long before the towers went down. After that, it took me a good six months to be able to have faith in my little Mauritanian guy again, and to have faith in the whole enterprise of writing the book, and to stick with it even knowing the Muslims were going to cost me some reviews.

In the mid-1990's I got a bit exasperated with the way the general public still seemed to want Old South southern literature, all about the travails of the white people, or all about the conventional and comfortable travails of racism between whites and blacks. I was basically bored with the usual constituencies of Southern Lit at that time. I had published my first novel and did not want to be consigned to the gulag of Southern Lit. I met an immigration judge who wandered through Faulkner's house one winter day, the first-ever immigration judge posted to Memphis, who was trying to understand Faulkner, and he kept saying things like "People have no idea what is happening, people have no idea what is happening." He told me about Mauritanians, coming from countries where slavery is still practiced, to the Mississippi Delta,

because the river reminded them of home. He told me how they were totally pleased to be in America carrying the luggage of white men at the casinos in Tunica for wages.

I was already aware of the huge increases in Latino populations in Atlanta and Memphis. But I was fascinated by the idea of the two separate black cultures colliding in the Delta. I wanted to write about all that. I wanted a book in which there was no Big Daddy in his plantation house or his bank or his brokerage, controlling everything. In a sense, Southern Literature is still seen by the average reader as some white man's big plantation on which everybody else is basically chopping cotton on tenanted land. The general reading public at that time saw southern writers, even someone as original as Barry Hannah, as chopping weeds on Faulkner's plantation or Walker Percy's plantation or Cormac McCarthy's or Charles Frazier's plantation or John Grisham's plantation. The average "great" Southern novel at that time was basically some male plantation on which the author was Big Daddy. So I wanted to get away from that. Big Daddy is a corporation now, not Burl Ives. It's Mississippi Chemical or the Nevada gaming companies.

WB: I was particularly struck by your sympathetic portrayal of Latinos and the issues they face as migrant workers, and I've read in several interviews that you completed extensive research to respectfully portray a multicultural and multiracial Southern town. Could you discuss your inspirations for the Latino characters, specifically Consuela? What do you hope readers gain/learn from these portrayals? Although my focus is on Consuela, I cannot analyze her without Angus. Their relationship reveals quite a lot about race and gender relations in the South. Could you discuss your choice of juxtaposing these two characters? How would you characterize

their relationship and what did you hope to reveal by their interactions and influence on each other?

CS: I can't remember how Consuela came to be, but she is partly based on women I have known either from my college days as a waitress, or from my childhood. There is a type of woman who refuses to relinquish her basic agrarian humanity, no matter what ethnicity, and I have always liked that kind of literary character. It was quite something to me, to see Latinos coming into the South, bringing agrarian survival ways with them at a time when the whites and black were ditching them. The instinct for "sustainability" cuts across all classes, and it is rooted in survival of hard times, in the universal idea of "waste not, want not." Angus was originally a character in a very short story I did in grad school; the store was called the "Sea Wing Grocery" then, and was based on a store in Rosedale. I think I latched onto these characters as a way of finding my way out of my whiteness, my grad-school-cultivated white angst that came from reading too many bitter Englishmen like Amis, Fowles, Donleavy. I wanted to spend time with characters who had something going on that was more real, more affirmative, more collaborative, more bedrock-humanity. If you've been to those Delta towns, you see them as odd islands of isolation in which there needs to be reciprocity of some sort if they are going to make it.

WB: Consuela is also linked with Ariadne through physical/behavioral descriptions, through midwifery, and through their connection to Angus. Could you discuss this juxtaposition? How would you characterize their similar roles in the text?

CS: Ariadne came about so I could indulge my passion for self-taught folk artists in the South, the overlooked geniuses whose art issued from trauma. I had read how the women associated with the Surrealists in Paris did not fare well and had a high rate of breakdowns and suicides, so I thought it would be interesting to have a character whose trauma had been that she was exposed

to a hot, hot artistic movement in Paris. There were at least 60 pages of her that didn't make it into the final book.

WB: As a Latina reader, I was excited to find a novel where the portrayal of Mestizas was nuanced, simultaneously referencing and subverting stereotypes about us. As a Southerner, I was excited to find a novel that represents the multicultural South I have come to know. Have you been able to hear/read other reactions by Latina/o readers? What else are you working on and how does the South play a role?

CS: The response I note the most is the white people who wish I had written about white people instead. One old lady attacked the book because I treat the Muslims like human beings. I am heartened by your response; sometimes people from other demographics have a turf protectiveness or they have a philosophy that one should stick to descriptions of one's own skin-tribe to be "authentic." I am more interested in escaping the boundaries of my own skin.

I'm working on a set of short stories set in Texas, and as I am now situated in another teeming immigration site, I am keenly interested in where all this immigration is going.

APPENDIX C: PROFILE OF JUDITH ORTIZ COFER

*This profile is based on an interview that took place over the phone on
March 14, 2012 at 3:15pm*

It is interesting to hear the voice of an author you've long read and admired. I became familiar with the works of Judith Ortiz Cofer as a student of Latina Literature, but it wasn't until I started studying Latina authors writing in the South that Cofer became a focal point of my studies as well as a personal (albeit textual) mentor. Her Southern set texts fulfilled an academic purpose that was intrinsically tied to a very personal endeavor of understanding myself as a Southern Latina. When my dissertation advisor, Dr. John Lowe, notified me that he had set up a potential interview between Cofer and myself, I was overjoyed. Through email exchange, Cofer and I set up a phone interview. Fighting my nerves, I called her a little after the agreed upon time, needing the few extra minutes to build up my courage to talk to one of my favorite authors. After a few minutes of small talk, I nervously began my interview, asking about her Southern literary influences.

Cofer began her literary studies as a major in American Literature, which, at the time, focused on a male-dominated canon. When she attended grad school in the late 70s she had a course in Southern Literature that exposed her to the writings of Flannery O'Connor. Through O'Connor she experienced an "explosion of awareness." O'Connor's writings spoke to Cofer as a woman, and the familiarity of the Southern landscape awakened a regional understanding of her own identity as a Southern Latina that is relayed through her writings today.

Cofer's interest in Southern literature led her to the works of Alice Walker and Eudora Welty, whom, along with Flannery O'Connor, were writing about issues that paralleled her life in ways she didn't find in the works of many of the classics she studied in college (though she jokingly admits that she is still a "classic English nerd" that loves *Downton Abbey* and similar

programs). She makes it clear that it wasn't just female Southern authors that inspired her writings: Tennessee Williams, James Dickey, and Truman Capote also influenced her writing as a Southern author. These Southern writers described a landscape that Cofer was trying to understand, after having moved to Georgia as a teenager. She tells me, "reading as a writer means you are taking notes; Southern writers were teaching me ways to look at this region that was my home—not just imitating, sometimes disagreeing, how to look at this new world."

Cofer is a multi-genre writer, utilizing poetry, prose, and expository writings, sometimes in the same text. She has even explored the picture book genre in *A Bailar! Let's Dance* (2011) and *The Poet Upstairs* (2012). I ask her how she chooses the genre that encapsulates an idea, curious as a literary scholar in the creative production of the texts I study. She tells me that she is partially influenced by her grandmother who was a "great oral storyteller" and Virginia Woolf who says to write about your "moments of being." For Cofer, essays explore these moments in "more logical ways," while poetry captures these moments of being, like an "album"; poems are images, captured moments, that even the author is unsure "what it's going to yield". Moreover, poetry is images that transmit metaphors, turning the "ordinary into the universal." She continues, "Otherwise, it's just a journal. But "art"? Art is...can I make it so that someone reading in Louisiana finds it meaningful? Art transforms."

Cofer pauses thoughtfully and relates a story about visiting her mother in Puerto Rico: Standing together at the edge of the ocean, Cofer's mother points out the beautiful blues in the landscape, saying "That's my ocean and my sky." Her mother's words inspired Cofer to consider the ways a person is attached to the natural landscape of their homeland. Attempting to capture this "image of someone claiming beauty for herself" inspired the poem "To Understand *El Azul*," and Cofer explains that her desire to understand this human need to be part of the landscape

motivated all of her Southern-set and often autobiographical texts: her experiences as a New Southerner allowed an opportunity to witness and write about the processes that make the South home for people losing the concrete links to former homelands. She explains that she will always feel “imaginatively connected” to Puerto Rico; it’s not simply her motherland, but the land *of her mother* who she used to visit every summer until she passed away. Her upcoming multi-genre text, *Peach Pit Corazón: A Georgia Reader*, acts as a “cultural elegy” about her mother. She describes it as a “study of what it feels like to understand that you have left your native culture in a physical way even it has not left your imagination.” Through her writing, Cofer explores the psychological pain of losing her mother, but she explains that the book ends with her coming back to Georgia after burying her mom and saying goodbye to Puerto Rico, and learning to belong with/in Georgia in the same way her mother lived with/in the island.

While Cofer will always be part of the island’s culture and language, home is now Georgia where her own family resides. Through her husband who is a Southerner and whose family has been in Georgia for “hundreds of years,” she observes this same connection to landscape, but also begins to feel it herself. In a forthcoming short story, “The Sign,” Cofer writes about seeing a painting of the Virgin of Guadalupe on the side of an old barn in rural Georgia. This image, more than a Latin American religious symbol, was a “signature on the land” that immigrants now inhabit. These immigrants, often made invisible as migrant workers and farm laborers, are leaving their mark on a land that is now home, marking their presence in the South. In this way, home is “not where you grow up, it’s what you make of it.”

While personal and communal understandings of place are important, I ask Cofer about the reception of Latinos in the South, particularly Georgia, and how this affects feeling “at home” for immigrants and New Southerners, and how these moment influence her work. She

explains that she has traveled all over the U.S. and has become aware of different versions of discrimination. The South, she says, has to learn to adapt to Brown and incorporate these new identities into its understanding of self that was historically based in a black/white binary. Cofer lives on her husband's family farm outside of Louisville, Georgia, and she critiques the stereotype of hostility to immigrants in rural Southern towns, saying that as the only Latina in farm country, she had to learn that the question, "Where are you from?" had a different connotation in a town with less than 3,000 people: Whereas in other parts of the South the question implies an assumption of immigrant or Non-American status, in a rural town the question is actually asking "What church do you go to?" or "What family do you belong to?" (Cofer states that the question is often phrased as "Who do you belong to?" and it took some adjusting to realize she didn't need to be offended by the question). She reveals that it is actually in more cosmopolitan cities that she may face assumptions that she is a shoplifter, though she emphasizes that there are "pockets of discrimination" all over the country: "It's the law of the jungle. I've learned to have my antenna up." Cofer returns to her poem "To Understand *El Azul*" making it clear that people are part of the landscape too, but the process of "claiming beauty" means first learning to find the beauty. As the poem states, "Each time we claim beauty from the world, we approximate its secret grammar, its silent syntax."

Cofer's Puerto Rican and New Jersey set texts have been anthologized and honored as powerful examples of Puerto Rican immigration in the South, but she is now becoming recognized as a Southern writer. While capturing "moments of being," Cofer explores an understanding of self that is self-reflective while extending beyond the self to analyze interpersonal connections in constructing a Southern Latina identity and a Southern sense of place. *The Latin Deli* was placed on the list of "25 Books All Georgians Should Read" in 2005,

and in 2010 she was inducted into the Georgia Writers Hall of Fame as the first Latina writer to receive this honor, joining the ranks of her literary influences, James Dickey, Flannery O'Connor, and Alice Walker. She even delivered the keynote address at the 2011 Eudora Welty Symposium, discussing Welty's influence in her own works. In this way, Cofer is marking her presence, and also the presence of Latinos in the South.

APPENDIX D: INTERVIEW QUESTION FOR JUDITH ORTIZ COFER

The following questions were sent to Judith Ortiz Cofer prior to the phone interview.

In “In Search of My Mentors’ Gardens” you explain how Southern authors like Flannery O’Connor and Alice Walker inspired your writing, particularly in how you critique Southern culture as well as your own ethnic identity/community through unflinching portrayals. How else has Southern literature affected your writing? What other Southern authors do you read/admire? Do you consider yourself a “Southern” writer, and if so, in what ways?

In “Story of My Body” you discuss being a “white girl in Puerto Rico” who became a “brown girl” in the U.S. Have you noticed any regional differences in how you are racialized in the South? Have you noticed any assumptions/stereotypes about Latinos that are Deep South-specific? How are these assumptions/stereotypes gendered or classed (or have you noticed how other intersections of identity alter these stereotypes)?

In *Lesson’s from a Writer’s Life* you discuss moving to Georgia and feeling like an alien in an alien land. Do you still feel this way? You also discuss issues of racial segregation and race/class relations. Have you seen changes in Georgia’s Latino presence, status, or reception (in the state as a whole, in the town you live or other Georgia cities)? How do you think Latino presence changes the South and how the South changes Latino identity formation?

In the “Alejandro” anecdote you discuss witnessing the impact of your writing on Latino readers. As a Southern Latina, I had a similar response to that of “Alejandro” in that your works have confirmed our presence and centered us within a Southern narrative that ignores us. Do you have other examples of reactions to your literature, specifically your writing set in the South? What do you hope your Southern-centered writings do for other Southern Latina readers? For non-Latino readers inside or outside the South? For Latino readers not in or from the South?

In several works you critique images of Latinas in popular culture and the way this has affected perceptions of Latinas which contribute to interpersonal and institutional oppression. In my dissertation I discuss representations of Mestizas in Southern literature and Southern pop culture. Do you see changes in contemporary portrayals of Latinas in media, whether positive or negative? Why do you think there are so few images of Mestizas in the South?

In my dissertation I juxtapose your Southern-set writings with those of Lorraine López. Are you familiar with her works or those of other Latina/o authors writing in the South? Do you see similarities/contrasts in themes between your works and theirs? What else are you working on and how does the South play a role?

VITA

Wendy Aimeé Braun was born in New Orleans, Louisiana, and raised in Slidell, Louisiana until graduating from high school. She received a dual B.A. in English and Spanish from the University of Louisiana at Lafayette in 2002 and an M.A. in Latin American Studies, with dual concentrations in Spanish American Literature and Human Rights, in 2005. She then entered the doctoral program in Comparative Literature with a minor in Women's and Gender Studies at Louisiana State University, where she also taught as an instructor in the departments of Spanish, English, and WGS during her doctoral work. Wendy will graduate with her Ph.D. in August 2012.