HYBRID LITERATURE AND HYBRID LIVES: THE TEXTUAL PRODUCTION OF IDENTITY IN LATINA LITERATURE

by

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(Under the Direction of Jay Hamilton)

ABSTRACT

This study grapples with the questions of Latina identity, specifically as communicated through two adolescent novels, *Esperanza Rising* and *Becoming Naomi León*, both written by Pam Muñoz Ryan. This study discusses the rising prominence of multi-cultural literature in America and the notability of hybrid identities throughout America. Individuals simultaneously coordinate and operate within different personal schemas. Multi-cultural literature supports the thesis that identity is dynamic, and vindicates the struggle of those who consistently walk in a hybrid identity. I argue that multi-cultural literature is best embodied through the generic construction of secular redemption. Examining personal redemption as a function of agency, we find that often characters' actions are based upon their individual levels of self-awareness and the influence of others in their lives. Multi-cultural literature maintains a variety of unique aspects, among which are family importance, focus on highlighting injustice in the world, and challenges to complacency.

INDEX WORDS: Multi-cultural literature, Latina, Female, Adolescent, Redemption, Identity, Hybrid identity, Personal Agency

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CHAPTER 1

MULTICULTURAL LITERATURE IN THE UNITED STATES

"All we . . .have are stories. Some come from other people, some from us. What matters is to understand how and where the stories are produced, what sort of stories they are, and how we can put them to intelligent use in theorizing about social life."

David Silverman (90, Sikes)

The study of ethnically diverse literature is pertinent due to the rapidly changing ethnic make-up in America. General American population trends have shown significant migration of people from the Northeast and Midwestern United States to the Southern and Western United States – with overwhelmingly higher numbers of migration to the South (Table 2, U.S. Census Data). Not only is the population balance changing, but the population composition via immigration is changing as well. In 2000 the annual number of permanent immigrants in the U.S. was 850,000, an estimated increase of more than fifty percent in the foreign-born population from 1990-2000 (1, Hill). Overall immigration numbers have risen in recent decades, every 31 seconds a new immigrant is added to the U.S. population (Knickerbocker).

Immigrants come to the U.S. from all over the world: data collected in the year 2000 shows that 52 percent of immigrants were from Latin America, with 26 percent from Asia and 19 percent coming from Europe (Knickerbocker). U.S. Census research

reveals that over half of recent immigrants are women. Data from the Pew Hispanic Center shows that most immigrant families have children (Kelley). Research suggests the stereotype that immigrants are adversely affecting the U.S. economy is misguided. Fifteen percent of the workforce is not native to the United States, and the immigrant population accounts for “approximately 17 percent of those with a bachelor's degree in science and engineering occupations, 29 percent of those with a master's degree, and 39 percent of those with a doctoral degree” (Knickerbocker). Research further shows that “1 in 5 US doctors is foreign born, as are 2 in 5 medical scientists, 1 in 5 computer specialists, 1 in 6 people in engineering or science occupations, 1 in 4 astronomers, physicists, chemical, and material scientists, and 1 in 6 biological scientists” (Knickerbocker).

Of the many different nationalities that emigrate to the United States, scholars have acknowledged a rise in the Latino influx. Denner suggests that Latinos are currently the most rapidly growing ethnic group in the United States (2, Denner). Data collected from the American Community Survey shows that of the total American population, which comes to 298,757,310; 44,019,880 people are Hispanic or Latino. This represents approximately 14.7 percent of the total U.S. population; a percentage large enough to merit study (ACS). While a percentage of the Latino population was born in the United States, a large number of Latinos have recently immigrated into the United States. Of the American Latino population 47.1 percent were born in a country other than the United States (ACS, selected characteristics).

These statistics suggest not only that a substantial percentage of the U.S. population self-identifies as Hispanic or Latino, but also that within this group of people

there is a wide variety of experience – especially for those who were born in countries other than the United States. This variety of experience is something that needs to be understood more fully, particularly regarding Americans who have lived vastly different lives.

More specifically in relation to this study, “Latina girls now constitute the largest minority group of girls in the country, making up 15.2 percent of the total number of the population under age eighteen in many of the largest school districts across the United States: 65 percent in Los Angeles, 50 percent in Dade County Florida, 53 percent in Albuquerque, New Mexico, 49 percent in Denver, 47 percent in Tucson, 35 percent in Chicago, and 24 percent in Boston” (2, Denner). Latina girls represent a minority group that has had a varied experience on many different levels, as they are perhaps asked to negotiate identity, gender, and ethnicity all the while navigating the social pitfalls of middle school.

Their unique experience merits further study simply by virtue of its prevalence today. Doing so also engages broader questions about the relationships between media, nations, and identity, which is the key focus and intention of this study.

American Immigration and the Media

The most important early effort to theorize and study media, migration, and identity was formulated in the early 20th century. While many scholars have written on the subject, one of the first to comment upon the immigration situation was sociologist Robert Park in the 1920s. In his study, Park describes many aspects of the influx of

immigrants into American cities. In his detailed description of the role of foreign-language press, Park emphasizes the importance of American censorship of such media, commenting that foreign influences are harmful and not trustworthy (448, Park).

While Park examines a variety of details and statistics of the immigrant life, a constant thread throughout his work is the desired assimilation to American society that immigrants must complete – or as he called it 'Americanization' (449, 460; Park). He suggests that immigrants' ideas might even threaten the innate social fabric of the United States (448, Park). Park and many other Americans distrusted the ideas in foreign-language press perhaps because of past experiences, especially during wartime. Park submits that German-American journalists during World War I, through the foreign language press, proposed an agenda of passivism, a message counter to an America at war. Some articles were blatantly anti-American, charging German-Americans with the duty to resist the influences of an inferior American culture (414-416, Park). Park continues that the government may need to exert some sort of control over the foreign press because it has been used in the past to prey upon racial divisions among immigrants and cause disunity in America, especially during World War I (427, Park).

Studies of the history of journalism echo this focus on media, migration, and identity through the lens of assimilation. While immigrant populations were indeed creating their own media, histories of journalism not only neglect to demonstrate the value of such works for the burgeoning new America that developed over time, but rarely mention such news outlets within the scope of their study (161, 163, Hardt). As

such, histories of journalism praise English-language outlets, while immigrant writers, along with their stories of struggle, become further marginalized (162, Hardt).

Over time, the concept of the immigrant experience and the scholarly approach to studying it in relation to media and identity has changed dramatically. Scholars now acknowledge that migrants have more than a choice of whether or not to assimilate. Studies in the social history of migration along with those in sociology help pioneer a view that migrants' identities are quite a bit more complex. For example, Bodnar purports that immigrants to a new land do not exchange one world for another as soon as they get off of the ship, suggesting instead that the experience and identity of migrants is a shifting mix of old and new dependent upon a variety of factors that may be economic, cultural, and political (211, 207-209; Bodnar).

More current scholars work with the premise that migrants do not shift unilaterally from one place and corresponding culture to another place and culture. Some scholars propose that migrants maintain an identity in their country of origin with the intention of going back (12, Rouse). Rouse argues that migrants' move to the United States and often back home again is not a one-way trip as much as it is a circuit, in which the migrant is able to negotiate and maintain both identities simultaneously (14, 15; Rouse). Rouse comments on the number of transitional places in lives of people throughout the world, or as he calls them "border zones" (17, Rouse).

In agreement with Rouse, Gupta and Ferguson comment on the fragmenting that takes place at borders, not only a separation of land mass/place, but also of culture (7, Gupta). Gupta and Ferguson continue that people and cultures are no longer relegated

to a static geographic location. Traditional labels of groups and cultures are no longer viable; in other words, I may no longer be able to identify a group of people by pointing to a red dot on a map (10, Gupta). Gupta and Ferguson suggest that communities are more of an imagined space than a physical locale, in large part to the globalization of the world and of people's lives (11, Gupta).

With the growing increase of immigration to the United States and general immigration trends throughout the world, studies are continually conducted regarding the negotiation of identity by people who have immigrated. In a study of the relationship between the country receiving the new citizens and the country of origin for these people, Portes concludes that society as a whole pays much more attention to the situations in the countries that receive immigrants than the countries that are left behind (17, Portes). Portes concurs with current research that says immigrants can hold new citizenship in the host nation while also maintaining allegiance to their country of origin (19, Portes).

A study by Roth uses the interaction of Puerto Rico with the United States to concur with Portes. The study emphasizes the importance of a multi-ethnic environment when developing a multi-national or multi-ethnic identity (944, Roth). Faas identifies this hybrid identity as a "chain of identities" noting how youth can maintain several different ethno-political identities simultaneously (316, Faas). Ironically, while almost all students in the study self-identified with several identities or a hybrid identity, such an idea was not widely accepted or understood at a racially diverse high school (317, Faas).

Latina Literature and Identity

Of the various media forms addressed in studies of identity and migration, one of particular interest is literature, especially due to a rise in prominence of minority literature in general and the mainstream sale of Latina literature specifically. The study of U.S. Latina literature is young. Recent academic developments have shown a rise in prominence for Latino/a literary theory, where earlier it had been neglected even within Latino/a arenas of study in the United States (5, Sandín). Such literature offers opportunities for interdisciplinary study and can be considered from a variety of perspectives (4, Kevane).

Latino/a literature is controversial. It challenges current thought by expanding tradition views of America and calling for a candid examination of the culture, no matter how complex it may be (3, Sandín). As Latino culture negotiates its place in American culture, it demands a corresponding place in American scholarship. Something so prominent must be studied. McCracken notes the promising future for the study of Latina literature (201, McCracken). She considers the following to be an indication of the health of the Latina literary movement: an all-encompassing study of Latina literature cannot be completed without a new book arising, therefore leaving the study incomplete. The literary movement is healthy because it is constantly growing. Informed consumers need to be able to understand such perspectives and their effects on both communities and individuals.

Latina literature has proven to be a useful site at which to consider issues of identity and migration, especially in terms of the identity of American. A number of

scholars and writers point out that Anglo-Americans need to understand that Latinos in the United States are not un-American, but simply Americans who are directing American culture in a different vein – altering the culture while simultaneously changing themselves (2, Sandín). Literature seems to be one such area of change. Scholars discuss how the borders of the U.S. no longer limit the American story; on the contrary, a large portion of America's stories emerge within other boundaries and told by women who find their identity in a hemisphere rather than a nation (1, Kevane). Until very recently, Latinas have only seen fragmented and inaccurate portrayals of themselves in literature; however the recent rise of Chicano literature has made strides to combat such negative and unclear portrayals (59, Eysturoy).

In an attempt to understand more scholarly perspectives on Latina literature and its interplay with identity, I now reference several studies that examine Latino/a literature and such authors' approach to hybrid identity. A study done by Mujčinovic examines the rise of Latina literature in the U.S., particularly literature that addresses the hybrid identity maintained by culturally diverse people. Using three U.S. Latina texts, *The Mixquaihuala Letters*, *How the García Girls Lost Their Accents*, and *Getting Home Alive*, Mujčinovic identifies commonalities in the novels, thus providing more general insights into the borderland experience felt by many U.S. Latinas. Mujčinovic purports that these authors identify the biculturalism of their situation not as something that only oppresses, but as a broader and valuable perspective gained through balance – the bicultural as a site of creative embarkation and a place of potential transformation (29-30, Mujčinovic,).

Mujčinovic cites the novels as a catalyst for resistance in terms of action, but also in terms of a state-of-mind (41, Mujčinovic,). Mujčinovic purports that biculturalism can be used to highlight problems and patriarchal hypocrisy (50, Mujčinovic,). Along with maintenance of multiple identities and self-identity comes the idea of belonging and the "need to identify where one belongs" (52, Mujčinovic). Mujčinovic highlights techniques used by Latina authors to highlight societal problems and empower a generation for transformation, something uniquely done by Latina writers in the U.S. According to Mujčinovic Latina authors seek and gain such empowerment by "investigating the creative potentiality of the cultural crossroads" in which they find themselves (29, Mujčinovic). Part of this examination of the cultural crossroads in which they find themselves is unveiling the dominant paradigms in society. An example that Mujčinovic cites is the perception of "otherness" as an exotic construct. While many see such characterization as a mark of value and honor, Mujčinovic states that instead of a celebration of difference such labels discretely create a power shift in that validates marginalization (29, Mujčinovic). Another key technique that Mujčinovic details is a move toward self-awareness in a hybrid identity. She posits that "self-meaning" is impossible without an acknowledgement of the internal duality in the lives of those that occupy borderlands. This infers that one must delve into two simultaneous systems of meaning and significance, working toward a greater understanding of who a person is within such cultural and psychological confines (60, Mujčinovic).

A study by Firmat regarding Cuban American literature explores the impact of hybrid identity on work. Firmat not only discusses general traits of Cuban American literature and Cuban American authors, but he also dissects several poems for the

reader, to illustrate the literary devices at play (17-26, Firmat). A prominent and reoccurring device that Firmat describes is the dichotomy of description and emotion toward the island of Cuba. Firmat submits that in the life of a Cuban exile conflicting emotions and ideas about Cuba swirl in their hearts, minds, and even in their artistry. Cuban writers communicate through their poetry and literature the familiarity, yet distance of approach; the memory and constant hopes for future that compose the internal complexity of their lives (20, Firmat). Another integral literary device that Firmat highlights is the role of bilingualism and the way that Cuban authors shift between English and Spanish, using linguistic codes as a symbol of hybridity. Such authors poke fun at the interplay between the two languages, linking pronunciations to inappropriate lingustic contexts, for instance drawing a connection between the English word tomato and the pronunciation of the Spanish phrase “tu madre” which means “your mother” (20-22, Firmat). In literature and poetry, language and word choice are key; interestingly, Firmat illuminates some of the way that such language choice is balanced in a life of hybridity.

Firmat asserts that Cuban American literature is unique in Latino forms of writing because it comes from the perspective of political exiles and their families (15, Firmat). Firmat also suggests that Cuban American writers maintain a complex political history as a result of the Cuban Revolution; however, he submits that generally Cuban American writers denounce the Cuban Revolution and its politics (16, Firmat). He proposes that Cuban Americans often maintain a “denial of displacement” in their treatment of Cuba, speaking of Cuba as if they still lived within the geographic boundaries of the island (19, Firmat). Continuing his discussion of Cuban Americans

and the emotional ramifications of their hybridity, Firmat describes the view of Cuba that many long-time exiles maintain. Such a long absence from one's motherland creates in fictional works and in experience a strange mixture of the "nostalgia of the exile with the discoverer's sense of wonder" (19-20, Firmat). The island remains a place of belonging internally, while such distance and displacement leaves the exile with the benefit of fresh eyes and imaginings of what the land might be like.

Firmat also addresses the struggle of the exile to learn the English language while preserving a mastery of Spanish, and how each language is respectively representative of Cuba or America (23, Firmat). Along with this often comes the loss of some first-language fluency, and the longing in the exile's heart for the wholeness that can only come from a mother tongue (24, Firmat). In examining specific poems and their accompanying authors, Firmat addresses the fact that many Cuban American authors, especially those that have lived in the United States more than in Cuba, use English as their language of choice (27, Firmat). Firmat closes his analysis by submitting that all Cuban American literature shares the theme of absence (28, Firmat). He posits that Cuban American literature, while rooted in the experience of exile, may not be characterized as literature of exile because many of the writers do not inject enough concrete experience of the island to make it such (28, Firmat).

Another study of Cuban American literature specifically examines the literature written by Cuban American women. Rivero suggests that a unique essence of Cuban American culture, what Rivero calls "Cuban Americanness," is innately absorbed into these works from the creative minds of the Cuban American women as they write (111, Rivero). Rivero further submits that the psychological aspects and emotional ties

involved in “exile memories” prompt Cuban Americans to feel a constant tie to the island of Cuba, or at least elicit some sort of questioning as to their relationship to the island (111, Rivero). Through her analysis of Cuban American female writers, Rivero argues that all these women demonstrate ambiguity with regards to their origins, which is tied into the notion of biculturalism and bilingualism (114, Rivero). Because they occupy two cultures and language simultaneously, they may feel conflicted as to a stable identity. Rivero proposes another common thread in Cuban American literature: the consistent presence of some sort of aberrant behavior in a character, often portrayed in a satirical manner, a phenomenon that she has labeled as the presence of “la locura nacional” or roughly translated “national craziness”(115-116, Rivero).

Rivero traces the development of Cuban American literature penned by female authors, marking the 1970’s as a time that began a new degree of consciousness that was reflected in literary works, one composed of difference from dominant culture and the formation of “an immigration generation”(116, Rivero). Here the authors began to understand their difference and consciously discuss what that meant to them internally and regarding to the world around them. Finally, Rivero bemoans some of the negative stereotypes that such literature faces. She submits that often these works are pigeon-holed as “conservative (read anticommunist) immigrant values, rather than as an artistic embodiment of cultural ethnonationalism with a meritorious place in the American scene” (119, Rivero). She argues that Cuban American Latina literature is not valued for the social, cultural, and political commentary that it truly is, not to mentioned given the artistic recognition that it deserves (119-120, Rivero).

The last study here examined looks at literature written by and for Brazilian

immigrants to the United States. Tosta describes the attributes of Brazilian works, herein known as Brazuca novels, but also the cultural intricacies of a Brazilian in the United States. Tosta asserts that Brazilian immigrants have a unique cultural stance in that they are identified by the American public as Latino. While he argues that Brazilians share many attributes with Latino cultures (such as their mixed heritage) and that they should maintain ties with Latino cultures, he also asserts that Brazilians in the United States must maintain a cultural significance all their own (580-582, Tosta). He suggests that Brazuca novels do just that, delineating Hispanic culture from Brazilian culture, all the while illustrating that Brazilians in fact share some similarities with Hispanic peoples and therefore maintain some commonality (581, Tosta). It seems the Brazilian immigrants to the U.S. are constantly on a narrow line between the two, half in and half out of the Latino culture (578, Tosta). Tosta further asserts that Brazilians have insisted on distinguishing between themselves and other Latino groups for many reasons, with linguistic difference being a point of delineation. He argues that they do so in order to avoid many of the stereotypes that seem pinned on Hispanics in the United States (578-579, Tosta).

With this cultural basis in place, Tosta enumerates many of the general trends in Brazuca literature. He posits that most Brazuca literature deals with Brazilian and American culture, along with the interplay of the two. He asserts that literature is a way for immigrants and displaced people to express themselves, and as such, many Brazuca works discuss issues of immigration (576, Tosta). Citing Ramos, Tosta describes a phenomenon in Brazuca literature in which Brazilian authors “create a dialogical relationship between a Brazil seen from a geographical distance and with the

authority of memory and a Utopian vision of a new Brazil, created from expectations as well as influenced and legitimated by the immigrant perspective and experience"(576-577, Tosta). It is a creation of a new perspective and writing on Brazil; a distanced view of the country, but an internal view of imagined perfection. Generally speaking, Tosta says that Brazuca literature focuses on simplicity, without complex language structures and most often with characters based on real people, describing the lived reality around them (577, Tosta). This canon of literature is not necessarily one of goal fulfillment or success; on the contrary, Tosta characterizes Brazuca literature as one of struggle with little victory (579-580, Tosta). It seems that Brazuca literature shows the reality of hard life, only shading into fantasy when considering the perfection that Brazil could be.

As such works become more widely read, "these fascinating stories, traditionally on the margin, are redefining American literature . . .broadening, muscling in, and expanding on what is considered serious American literature" (74, Kevane). McCracken argues, "as the Latino population of the United States continues to grow and contribute richly to this country's diversity, the narrative production of Chicanas, Nuevomexicanas, Puertoriquenas, Cubanas, Dominicanas, and other Latina women in the United States will continue to situate the ruptural elements of feminine ethnicity in the foreground of American letters"(202, McCracken).

Adolescent Identity and the Media

Related to the issue of Latina Literature and identity is the role that media play in the formation of adolescent identities. To further understand this issue, below I discuss

several studies that address adolescent media consumption. One study that examines adolescent identity formation and the role played in it by media uses a mixed qualitative approach. It interprets adolescents' rooms as cultural artifacts to illustrate their owners' media usage and the depth of influence maintained by the media (250, Steele). This study purports that mass media is a resource from which adolescents draw to compose their burgeoning identities (251, Steele). The study claims that media consumers often become so involved in the media that they are consuming, that they forget the boundary between reality and the text on the page they are reading (254, Steele). Further, the study suggests that students consume media with which they may most readily identity, and that they like to read/watch things that coincide with their self-conception or an image that they would like to emulate (255, Steele).

Through students' journals entries, interviews, and studying media present in the lives of adolescents, Steele and Brown have developed their own model to describe the interaction between teenagers and media (251 & 253, Steele). They find that adolescents do maintain an active role in their own media consumption, not only selecting media for consumption, but also utilizing the meanings that they receive from such media on a daily basis, in their everyday interactions (259, Steele). With this submission, it must be said that many factors impact the selection and effect of such media in a person's life. Among such factors are gender, race, socio-economic status, and even personal identity conception (259, Steele). Overall, the study argues that adolescents often consume media in a critical way; however, the effects of such media on the everyday life of an adolescent are multi-faceted and often hard to discern.

A second study that examines the role of media in the identity formation of adolescents takes a unique angle on the subject. Zittoun proposes that adolescents use media (books, movies, songs, etc.) as helpers when processing life transitions, forming new identities, and reconciling changes with their lived reality (xiii, Zittoun). Zittoun purports that such media are used as "symbolic resources" in the lives of youth. Through the theoretical lens of cultural development psychology, she argues such resources affect everyday development for people (xiii-xiv, Zittoun).

The study suggests that the use of media as symbolic resources may in fact spur legitimate internal change in a person (186, Zittoun). She contends that drawing on these symbolic resources may allow people to experience uniquely new thought processes and emotions (186-187, Zittoun). Lastly, she acknowledges that while the use of symbolic resources is not solely responsible for developmental changes in the lives of youth, it may be one of many contributing developmental factors (187-189, Zittoun). Clearly, these phenomena that she describes are extremely complex. However, the research continues to show that there is a role of media in development and identity formation in youth.

Another study that deals with the interplay of adolescent identity and the media that they consume specifically focuses on the importance of the novel in the adolescent's formation. Using the *Nancy Drew* and *Sweet Valley High* novels as a case study, Pecora describes the influence of adolescent novels in the lives of teens and their identity construction (49, Pecora). Citing Moffitt's study of teenage girls' consumption of adult romance novels, events in the books are relatable to the reader's experiences and what they feel society tells them to be (52, Pecora).

While this study examines the changing nature of the *Nancy Drew* novels as they became more formulaic and shift from mystery novels to romance novels, Pecora incorporates a social commentary along with the economic analysis. Formulaic books that are more manufactured than crafted portray an unbalanced view of femininity and an unrealistic reality (76, Pecora). Pecora suggests that the publishing industry has robbed the novels of dynamic characters and discouraged texts that invite multiple or imaginative interpretations (77, Pecora). Implied in this study is a challenge to writers to maintain high standards.

A final study of adolescent identity and the media is extremely pertinent to this thesis because it recounts the struggle faced by adolescent women that maintain hybrid identities and occupy geographic and social borderlands. Here, Durham submits that media fallacies remain central to the internal constitution of womanhood. Girls often learn the "appropriate" characteristics of femininity (194-195, Durham).

Durham affirms that adolescent insecurities and identity uncertainty are heightened for girls whose ethnic or racial background is not fixed and clear-cut (194, Durham). Described as a feeling of "limbo, " adolescents (particularly adolescent females) struggle to reconcile the different influences that are constantly cast upon them from media (often a variety of Western and other media) and conflicting cultures (202-203, Durham). Durham bemoans the lack of research concerning adolescents that occupy a hybrid culture and location (204, Durham). In response, Durham calls for more research to understand this phenomenon and a complete redefinition of culture in the media to try to fight against media myths that plague women and create conflicted internal identities (204, Durham).

The Rationale for This Study

Due to the richness of questions that have already been raised about media, identity, and migration, the study addresses these large issues in the context of Latina literature. Such a study not only helps move the existing research program forward, it also addresses a current lack in this program. Scholars consistently lament the lack of research on Latina adolescents. Research that is available seems slanted negatively: the current research is overwhelmingly about problems of Latina girls and negative social situations while it ignores the majority of girls that are not plagued with the stereotypically assumed social problems; even less is known about Latina girls who succeed (1, 10, Denner; 187, Thakral).

Little is known about this population because research funding is given priority in other areas; the academic community places little priority or value on the study of normal development of racial minority communities (10, Denner; 226, Guzmán). Scholars also say that current research is disproportionate to number of Latino adolescents in the United States; they compose a large cultural group and little study has been done (4, Denner). The field of Latino/a studies calls for research that looks more fully at the true population and not simply at its problematic contingents.

The Latina literary phenomenon gives a voice to a group once marginalized and seemingly voiceless. Latina literature is important to study because such stories "expose the assimilative fallacy that promises Latinos a place in the United States if only they would leave their cultural history behind... [leaving them feeling] that they cannot safely become American at all" (7, Sandín). Such literature reveals an otherwise

unknown hypocrisy – that Latinos feel they are asked to leave their cultural history to become “truly American.” Studying Latina literature is crucial for America because it expands ways to identify and grapple with the experiences of women at the borderlands of cultures (10, Kevane).

Having established an argument supporting the study of Latina literature and why it is important for others to study, I will disclose a bit about myself as a researcher and why it was important for me to study such topics. I am a Caucasian female in my mid-twenties raised in Georgia. My interest in Hispanic culture began in high school as I embarked on the study of the Spanish language. I was enthralled by the story told by my Spanish teacher, an older man of Cuban heritage who fled the country when Castro came into power.

My glimpses into Latino culture continued when during a summer job I was the only available translator for a Mexican lady who worked with us. As we grew to be friends, I was shocked when one day she related the story of her crossing of the American-Mexican border with the help of a “coyote,” as she called him, who aided her passage to the U.S., but consequently stole all of her money and abandoned her in New Mexico. I stood baffled at the thought of the kind of journey that must have taken her and her children from New Mexico to the state of Georgia with no money. The struggle that she must have endured and the resilience of her spirit intrigued me then, and continues to impress me now. My study of Spanish continued through my undergraduate career where I studied abroad in Argentina – a country full of rich cultural roots and hybrid combinations, but also, a country that maintains a history of political turmoil as well as continued cultural recovery. As I began to approach my thesis, I was

drawn to the study of Latina cultural composition in the United States, specifically through a textual analysis of books. Because people's stories are important, the study of Latina literature is important to me.

Theoretical Perspective

In order to adequately address the many relationships between identity, media, and migration in the context of Latina literature, the theoretical perspective to be used in this study is a broadly conceived cultural perspective. Such a perspective as will be used here has a number of facets and key theorists. One such theorist important for this study is James Carey, who works from the premise that society exists in and through communication. While a challenge to study, communication merits attention because it is the process and the means by which society as a cultural act comes into existence. As Carey claims, "communication is a symbolic process whereby reality is produced, maintained, repaired, and transformed" (23, Carey).

Other theorists in concert with Carey have elaborated this claim in a variety of ways. For example, Kenneth Burke defines a human as symbol-using, implying that this is a marked delineation from the other animals on earth, and that this must be studied in order to fully understand the way humans work in and through communication (4, 6, Burke). As Duncan elaborates, social interaction (the basic substance of communication) is achieved through symbolic action; society consists of symbols that people use to define and enact their social roles (3, Duncan).

To adequately understand the depth of the claim made here, one needs to make clear the relationship between symbols and reality. Carey submits that “the miracle of producing reality and then living within and under the fact of our own productions – rests upon a particular quality of symbols: their ability to be both representations ‘of’ and ‘for’ reality” (29, Carey). Burke describes today’s reality as a conglomeration of symbols that we have collected in the past and the symbols garnered from the media of today (5, Burke). What we call reality is a construction of the symbols that we adopt (5, Burke). Further stressing the importance of symbols, Burke states that the majority of our reality as we know it would not consist without the existence of symbols and systems of symbols (48, Burke). In agreement, Carey states “reality is brought into existence, is produced, by communication – by, in short, the construction, apprehension, and utilization of symbolic forms” (25, Carey).

Now that I have established reality is produced through symbol-use, I draw on further research that sees “language [as] . . .a species of action, symbolic action – and its nature is such that it can be used as a tool” (15, Burke). If language is symbolic action, which scholars say that it most assuredly is, then literature is also symbolic action and as such dictates and creates reality (44, Burke). In this study, as I examine literature, I am no longer examining simple writings, but language that is lived symbolic action and becomes the reality in which people’s lives are lived.

Thus, examining literature as an embodiment of language and as symbolic action becomes a means of examining the everyday cultural creation of reality. Geertz situates humans in relation to cultural constructs, saying “man is an animal suspended in webs of significance he himself has spun, . . . culture [is] . . . in those webs, and the analysis

of it . . .therefore [is] not an experimental science in search of law but an interpretive one in search of meaning" (5,Geertz). Following this line of reasoning, Geertz further states that cultural analysis comes when looking at what people hold valuable and understanding the social context behind them, their overall significance (9, Geertz). Johnson further cements such claims, asserting that there lies an inherent value in artistic artifacts (10, Johnson). Because literature and art maintain value, it is most assuredly worthy of study and instrumental in cultural creation (10, Johnson). While the term "culture" seems nebulous and vague at times, this study will operate under the concept that culture produces a context within which social actions and behaviors can be studied and described (14, Geertz). As I undertake the analysis of these writings, my ultimate goal is not an equation, but interpretation of meaning from the texts. This study of literature seeks to do just that; analyze culture by individually examining webs of meaning.

Of specific interest to this analysis will be textual references to identity, gender and racial/ethnic identity, as well as the portrayal of broad cultural phenomenon interwoven in the story. Every text has multiple meanings, influenced by the lens of the reader. By submitting one perspective and reading of the texts, this study seeks to offer a particular set of insights but will by no means be exhaustive (108, Saukko; 66, Kevane).

Research Questions

1. What are key expressions of identity in *Esperanza Rising* and *Becoming Naomi León*?

2. What kinds of identities are articulated through these expressions?

3. What are some key ways in which these identities suggest the particular situations/dilemmas of Latinas in the United States today regarding their relation to the United States?

Method

To address these research questions, this study addresses the topic of Latina teenage literature through a textual analysis of two books: *Esperanza Rising* and *Becoming Naomi León*, both written by Pam Muñoz Ryan.

Pam Muñoz Ryan is a former educator and school administrator who became an author at the urging of her college professor. She has written over 17 children's books, many of which have Hispanic influences. While Ryan has a varied family background, her Mexican heritage inspired the story of *Esperanza Rising*. The novel is loosely based upon the story of her grandmother's immigration from Mexico to the United States. The author maintains that the story is fiction. However, many of the names are in fact names of Ryan's ancestors; most importantly, the protagonist of the novel is named Esperanza Ortega, after Ryan's own grandmother (Ryan). *Esperanza* is listed among the 2001 ALA Top Ten Best Books for Young Adults and the Smithsonian Best Books of 2000. Ryan

also received the Jane Addams Children's Book Award for her work in *Esperanza Rising* (Ryan). Perhaps most impressive, *Esperanza* was honored with the Pura Belpré Award (Ryan).

Ryan's book, *Esperanza Rising*, opens with the story of a twelve year-old little girl, Esperanza Ortega, who lives on her father's farm in Aguascalientes, Mexico. The farm is named El Rancho de las Rosas. Esperanza is an only child, but lives on the farm with her parents and her grandmother, whom everyone affectionately calls Abuelita. Esperanza has grown up with the family of Alfonso, the overseer, who works for her father. Alfonso's wife, Hortensia, works in the Ortega home, and they have a son named Miguel with whom Esperanza plays as she grows up. The day before Esperanza's thirteenth birthday her father is killed by bandits in the Mexican countryside. Just days later, Esperanza's uncle who owns the bank that lent her father the money for the ranch threatens to repossess the family ranch if Ramona (Esperanza's mother) does not agree to marry him. To make matters worse, the Ortega family awakes in the middle of the night to find that their home and ranch is burning to the ground.

With no financial means, convinced that Esperanza's uncle had a hand in the house fire and that the Ortega family will not be safe from his wrath while living in Mexico, Ramona comes up with a plan to move her family with Alfonso's family to the United States. Abuelita who was injured in the fire is not strong enough to make the trip and goes to live with her sisters in a local convent. After an arduous journey, the families end up in California at camp for field workers. In a humbling experience, both families share a two-room cabin and Ramona begins to work in the fields while

Esperanza learns to take care of children at home. After a sudden dust storm in the fields, Ramona falls ill, an illness that progressively worsens until she can no longer work and must be hospitalized. As her mother maintains an extensive stay in the hospital and bills pile up, Esperanza elects to work in the packing sheds alongside the other women, even though this means that she must lie about her age. As Esperanza works to support her family, she gains much maturity. She even mentors little girls that live near her in the camp. She continually saves up money in hopes of bringing Abuelita to California to live with them.

After much waiting and a poor prognosis, Ramona's health finally begins to improve. Many months after the illness began and much to Esperanza's delight, Ramona is cleared to return to live with them at the camp. Miguel, who disappears after a fight with Esperanza and absconds with all of Esperanza's savings, miraculously returns with Abuelita, making the homecoming complete. Finally, the characters are left with a somewhat happy resolution: the Ortega family has been reunited and buds of romance have begun to bloom between Miguel and Esperanza. More importantly, Esperanza has a greater sense of self and has purposed to not let others determine her future.

The second novel to be investigated in this study is *Becoming Naomi León*. *Becoming* was named a Pura Belpré Honor Book in 2006. The novel won the Tomás Rivera Mexican American Children's Book Award (Ryan). *Becoming* was also recognized as an American Library Association Notable Book (Ryan).

Becoming Naomi León tells the story of a young girl who lives with her brother Owen and her great-grandmother, Gram, in a trailer park in Lemon Tree, California. Owen was born with physical deformities; however, as a result of several surgeries, he functions well and maintains relatively few emotional deficiencies. They live happily within the community of the trailer park, visiting with one another and depending on their neighbors Fabiola and Bernardo Morales, who are more like family than friends. One day a sudden visit from a stranger marks the return of Naomi and Owen's mother, Skyla. While Gram is reluctant to let the children spend much time with Skyla, due to poor experiences with her in the past and Skyla's many dealings with alcoholism, the children flock immediately to Skyla and for a while they happily reacquaint. However, it soon becomes apparent that Skyla maintains an ulterior motive; she begins to dote on Naomi with the exclusion of Owen, even verbally abusing Owen.

Along with mentions of her new boyfriend, Clive, Skyla shows signs of drinking again and begins to neglect the children. Eventually the family meets Clive, and discovers that Skyla and Clive have hatched a plan to take Naomi with them when they move to Las Vegas. Clive divulges that he has a daughter named Sapphire; he and Skyla have planned to take Naomi with them to live so that Naomi and Sapphire can be playmates. Clive wants to regain custody of Sapphire so that he can receive state funding for her dependency. The situation escalates as Skyla legitimately threatens to remove Naomi from her home with Gram and Owen; she in fact maintains legal custody of both Naomi and Owen. After a particularly scary episode in which Naomi flees to Fabiola and Bernardo's house for sanctuary, the next morning, Naomi awakens to find the trailer in which they live hitched to a truck on the way to Mexico. Gram, Bernardo,

and Fabiola have hatched a plan to drive to Mexico and try to find Owen and Naomi's father and get his help in the custody battle.

While in Mexico, Naomi reconnects with her Mexican heritage as she stays with Bernardo and Fabiola's family. She helps them participate in a Mexican cultural tradition, La Noche de los Rábanos, a local carving festival. After a failed search for their father, they finally run into him at the festival. When they meet him, Naomi and Owen discover that he did not abandon them as they had previously thought, but their mother kept him away from them. After a few days spent with their father, Gram, Owen, and Naomi leave Mexico with a note for the court that supports the children staying with Gram and their father's promises for future visits. Upon their arrival home, they must go to court for the custody hearing with their mother. Naomi is called to testify in the courtroom. Initially, she is timid and unwilling to tell the truth about Skyla's treatment of her and Owen. However, when she believes that the judge is leaning toward rewarding custody to Skyla, Naomi boldly speaks up, declaring the awful truth about Skyla. The judge rules that Naomi and Owen may remain with Gram and Naomi returns to her "normal" life at school and home with a stronger sense of self and a boldness to speak out that is immediately noticed by others.

These books were chosen for study for a number of reasons. One such reason is Muñoz Ryan's Mexican-American heritage. The perspective that she brings when writing her books lends credibility to the multi-ethnic experience that she is describing. Secondly, these books were chosen because they are well known and in many cases integrated into school curricula today. Young girls are currently reading these books; the texts are involved with girls' development. While some might suggest an analysis of a

non-fiction novel might be more important, the proposed study deals with two fiction novels because they have gained prominence in children's literature and because they maintain more of a reach than any one children's fiction. In my research, non-fiction that details the experience of a Latina adolescent is neither as readily available nor as consistently read. Lastly, these books have been recognized in their field as outstanding, as illustrated by the accolades listed above, and as forerunners in their genre while also recognized and praised by their peers.

A key reason for the choice of these books is also how prominent they are in schools. Research shows that cultural background of students affects their response to school curriculum as well (173, Montecinos). Narratives that describe the lives of marginalized groups prove important because students who are members of the non-dominant culture often maintain negative feelings about their own community, and positive literature may help combat such inequality in thinking (241, Arce). One study that used ethnic literature found it could compensate for holes in curriculum in a variety of areas, including literature and social studies as well as spur discussion, providing a point of common cultural identity, all of which are valuable for the educational process (165, Reyes). Such supplemental materials help students value their own heritage within the school structure and give them a positive cultural model.

It must be acknowledged that this study deals with two novels that describe the migration experience from Mexico to the United States. Therefore, this study is representative of just that, a small embodiment of migration experience from Mexico. It is by no means a comprehensive understanding or acknowledgement of the Latino migration experience nor an attempt to generalize the migration experience as a whole.

The field of multi-cultural literature maintains a plethora of titles that submit other migration experiences. The Mexican migration experience does not encapsulate the entirety of what Latino migration means.

The issue of genre

As one way of addressing these issues, a large component of the analysis of these two books will examine issues of genre. An analysis of genre looks at specific elements in narratives such as: characters, setting, iconography, narrative, and style of the text (133, Lacey). Genre criticism argues that genres are not simply collections of textual features, but the means by which mutual intelligibility of narratives is reproduced. It maintains that artists, usually within an institutional setting, create media products with full knowledge of established practices and regulations with the expectation that audiences understand such conventions and are even pre-disposed to use such knowledge to deconstruct and understand these media texts (134, Lacey). Genre criticism affirms that consumers of media texts use such generic constructs to understand and organize narratives (134, Lacey). Finally, generic criticism examines the way that institutions use generic constructs to classify and categorize texts in order to more easily market them to intended publics (134, Lacey).

Two additional points about genre analysis should also be raised here. First, when examining texts through the lens of genre, no text is replete with every element that constitutes a particular genre (134, Lacey). Instead, genre is a basic structure within which to analyze a story and classify the nature of the story, as part of the genre

or not (134, Lacey). Second, generic structures bring with them an interesting set of societal ramifications. Authors who veer excessively from generic constructs often risk being marginalized by audiences who are attached to the safety of generic consistency (136, Lacey).

In order to more fully illustrate the role of genre and Lacey's perspective on genre, included herein are a few film studies that illustrate the use and construction of specific genres in film. Warshow's pioneering study argues that the most successful types of movies created in American cinema are the Western and the gangster movie, in which guns compose the "visual and emotional center" of both as a function of violence and masculine presence (135, Warshow). In his treatment of the genre, Warshow analyzes the general traits of the main character in each (136-137, Warshow). For example, the gangster is portrayed as constantly active, in a devious way, a member of the societal outside; because of these attributes, Warshow asserts that these characters appeal to teenagers, who often feel like outsiders and maintain much of the same penchant for dubious actions born out of boredeom (136, Warshow). Warshow also examines the setting of each of the two movie types and its significance. For instance, a cowboy living in the wide open Western plains signifies freedom and lack of restriction (139, Warshow). Digging deeper culturally, Warshow discusses the motivations of the Western hero, suggesting that ultimately he fights to protect his honor, and his ability to stand up for who he is. In other words, Warshow says that the Western hero is "the last gentleman, and the movies which tell his story are probably the last art form in which the concept of honor retains its strength" (141, Warshow).

Observations about genre for Warshow yield observations equally relevant to American society. For Americans, the Western hero holds a place of honor; we as a society seem to believe that such living is still attainable (141, Warshow). Warshow also acknowledges the characteristics and conventions of form align a film within a genre and "make it what it is" (146, Warshow). With these general guidelines in place, Warshow then examines some concrete examples of western figures that align with this paradigm (144-151, Warshow). Warshow discusses the possible ways the generic paradigm can be broken, suggesting that movies which veer from this path seem innately to be missing something in the Western category (147-149, Warshow). Finally, Warshow asserts that what makes a Western beguiling, something worth emulating and watching, is the behavior of the central character as hero (153, Warshow). Warshow closes by asserting that the Western is popular because it is a generically stable form of art, one whose simplicity shines in the complexity and confusing nature of other works (154, Warshow).

Kitses's study of the genre of Westerns broadens somewhat the focus of Warshow, while retaining many of its features. Kitses embarks on a study of the Western genre through not only Western films but also an examination of the directors that brought these films into existence (1, Kitses). Kitses acknowledges that genres may take new forms over time, and maintain a variety of characteristics, all the while remaining a part of the same genre. For example, he theorizes that perhaps some science-fiction stories are generically Westerns, just with a different external appearance (3, 10; Kitses). He references the common storyline of a "morality play" or particular "journey structure" that is unique to the Western and shared by such science-

fiction films (3, Kitses). Acknowledging that stories with blended elements make generic identification more difficult, Kitses argues that highlighting the generic constructs that are identifiable does prove helpful in interpreting films (4-5, Kitses).

Kitses tracks the transformation of the Western genre through contemporary films, submitting that critics who have observed the demise of the Western were mistaken—that, by contrast, Westerns are still an integral American story (6-9, Kitses). While admitting the great deal of input the director has in the film, Kitses believes that "the genre is a vital structure through which flow a myriad of themes and concepts" (10, Kitses). In other words, these films take form and succeed in some part due to the effective structure of the Western genre. Even in films that veer from all of the generic constructs, the essence of the film and its distinctive quality is very much shaped along generic lines (11, Kitses). Kitses looks at the cultural phenomena that shape the generic structure of the Western, also asserting that the Western illustrates cultural trends of our lived time, for instance ambivalence as to the cultural justification of settling or "civilizing" the Western United States (13, Kitses). According to Kitses, the cultural messages put forth in the Western also account for many of the archetypal roles of characters involved – an example is the helping role of women or Native Americans, always serving as a foil for the developing hero, never the central character (13, Kitses). Kitses examines what to him is the perceived function of the genre – "enquiry into the roots and circumstances of American character" (13, Kitses). Kitses treatment of genre also takes into account the cultural climate at the time that the work is created (15, Kitses).

While genres may be examined from a variety of perspectives, one method of analysis affirmed by scholars is a comparison of narrative to the generic structure, looking particularly at the similarities and differences, in seeing how faithful the narrative is to the generic schema it infers (211, Lacey). Often such studies find the narratives as indeed included in the genre, while maintaining a mix of both similarities and differences (211, Lacey).

Nature of Redemption

In this study of Latina literature, I employ in part such an analysis technique, first examining the broad structure that constitutes a redemptive tale and then comparing the elements of both novels to the structure and its portrayal of redemption. Thus, in addition to looking at these novels in general terms of genre, I must consider more specifically what redemption means in the cases of these narratives and how it is communicated in media texts and literature.

The term redemption refers to being saved from something (often in a religious context) or regaining something, working to get something back (30, Sherry). Cross-culturally, stories of redemption are prevalent staples, whether in the repertoire of oral storytelling or myths that may be recorded in books. Many times, redemption is seen in religious terms, for instance in the way that suffering redeems – with Christ as the ultimate paragon (22, Sherry). Often characters in novels are seen as beautiful because of the hardships that they have experienced and overcome (169, Sherry). However,

redemptive themes may be present in novels and works without the presence of overt religious content (183, Sherry).

Generally speaking, there are several elements that constitute redemption tales as a genre (123, Sherry). Tales of redemption deal with human lives, the storyline of their lives and the way that their concrete actions have more nebulous ramifications – perhaps deep emotional and psychological impact (121, Sherry). The actions performed to be redeemed are not always the same. They may be physical actions, such as rescuing someone, or a psychological shift, such as a change of perspective and understanding (122, Sherry & 288, Schwartz). Whatever the act or shift, the protagonist also journeys or must fight through challenges to claw his or her way back to the normalcy of life (286, Schwartz). In overcoming such obstacles, the hero returns triumphantly, with an object, physical or symbolic, that signifies the transformation (292, Schwartz).

The style in which the redemption tale is written can also vary. As Sherry argues, the author might examine the situation for the reader – explaining the deep moral issues – or just present the details to the reader, as the flow of daily life to be understood through his or her own lens of examination. Less like the moral ending of a fairytale, authors are not necessarily asserting at the conclusion of the tale of redemption a universal truth, but simply the redemption of an everyday life. A major theme uniformly seen in redemptive tales is the transformative role of grace in human lives. This includes not only the presence of grace in one's life, but also the ability of humans to insert such grace in others' lives and thus participate in such a redemption (122-133, Sherry).

Secondarily, we must address the issue of appropriateness of narrative texts as a venue to examine the genre of redemption. Scholars maintain that art and literature demonstrate metaphysical human realities, showing consumers real and deep-seated emotions, like hope and repentance (168, Sherry). Sherry suggests further that redemptive texts deal with important issues and dichotomies, like good and evil, and consequently communicate universal truths and further our understanding of the nature of life (186, Sherry). While some might say that redemption can be better explained in theoretical or philosophical terms, Sherry makes the case that fiction also captures and describes human endeavors and inner workings (120, Sherry). Citing Nussbaum, Sherry asserts further that novels have innate qualities and characteristics that trigger human knowledge in a way unattainable through a more analytical approach (120, Sherry).

Specific redemption, female and ethnic

Redemption has stereotypically been carried out by men who show great agency in their own lives. In few cases, women are the heroines of their own stories, attaining redemption for themselves. However, some scholars suggest the rise of a new kind of feminine hero that can be seen in tales of redemption (289, Schwartz). Using *The Wizard of Oz* as a case study, Schwartz analyzes the role of Dorothy as a heroine. Schwartz proposes that Dorothy is a new type of female hero who is protected by a troupe of companions that sacrifice for her and aid her on her journey back to ordinary life (289, Schwartz). He argues that these friends, in their sacrifice, “become a part” of

the heroine and eventually equip her with the tools that enable her return to normalcy, signaled by a return home (289, Schwartz). A feminine hero maintains a band of friends that work for her eventual benefit, as opposed to the independent triumph so often pictured with male heroes.

Dorothy's end result seems to be common for heroines. Instead of significant physical changes, she experiences a "transformation-of-consciousness" and a kind of awakening (288, Schwartz). Ironically, Dorothy seems to occupy a borderland of her own. Schwartz states that in the end of the novel, Dorothy reconciles both worlds, that of Oz and Kansas, and is now adept at living in both and balancing the two (288, Schwartz). Schwartz asserts that redemption is based upon the point-of-view maintained by the reader (288, Schwartz). When the character is fully understood, she can be seen as redeemed by the reader (288, Schwartz). In the analysis of *Oz*, Dorothy ends content with an internal change, but no ambition to spread such change to others (289, Schwartz). Perhaps this is yet another unique feature of the feminine hero.

Finally, we discuss the analysis of redemption in the context of ethnicity. In a scholarly analysis of Toni Morrison's book *Beloved*, Kim purports that redemption, here within the context of religion, may be characterized specifically by an ethnic group (98, Kim). Here Kim argues that *Beloved* is powerful because it is innately a story of African-American redemption (98, Kim). By proxy, we can imagine that other ethnic minority groups may maintain their own variety of redemption. In this study, we seek to understand the usefulness of analyzing adolescent Latina literature as tales of redemption.

Conclusion

As we approach the study of these two books, we want to acknowledge the frames from which we will analyze these texts. Scholars have shown language to be symbolic action (15, Burke). Extrapolating this concept, we see literature and consumption of such as a symbolic action in which a person develops a sense of self. Through a textual analysis we hope to understand the webs of meanings made possible by these texts in the larger context of issues regarding identity and migration.

CHAPTER 2

ESPERANZA AND *NAOMI* AS TALES OF REDEMPTION

Among the many possible questions one can ask, the issues of identity and redemption are particularly central to a study of multicultural literature and of multiculturalism in general. Identity (how individuals conceive of themselves and in relation to others) and redemption (how the value and legitimacy of an individual life might be redeemed in the sense of becoming recognized and justified) are central points of contention both in socio-cultural realities of multiculturalism and in their representation.

With this in mind, this chapter will conduct an analysis of the two novels *Esperanza* and *Naomi*. Attention will be focused on how these narratives intersect with and articulate with theories and practices of identity construction and of striving to reconcile oneself with one's history (seen here as the goal of a secular redemption).

I analyze the two books within the structure of redemptive tales, as stories representing a human struggle. Operating from the perspective that identities are multiple and fluid, I assert that each person simultaneously manages conflicting identities – a trait that is integral to multicultural experience and multicultural literature. Identity shifts take many forms, some of which are attitudinal, based upon a change in geography or a physical change.

I assert that a unique function of multicultural literature is its ability to serve as validation for people who in fact occupy a hybrid space in their daily lives, the validity of which is also affirmed by these particular novels.

Contending that a person's self-redemption is based upon life agency, I examine in these novels many factors such as degree of self-awareness, decision-making capabilities, and influences upon those decisions. I find that the portrayal of agency is gendered – with male influence carrying greater weight in relationships than that of women. Finally, I discuss character development along a journey. Maturation and change is not linked to specific geographic location; instead, self-discovery is an internal process.

Identity And Redemption

In order to more fully lay the conceptual groundwork for the analysis, the ways in which identity and redemption can be narrativized and thus studied textually need to be discussed in more detail. Identity is the socio-cultural concept at the core of studies and debates concerning multiculturalism. The definition of identity, from its Latin root, is the state of being "identical" or something being completely unified with itself. As has been discussed in the prior chapter, early conceptions of migration and identity portrayed identity as the exchange of wholly one identity to wholly another, in which each identity was uniform and without contradiction, thus being consistent with such dictionary definitions. As referenced in the literature, early scholars who studied migration held a very essentialist view. When mapped onto migration patterns, essentialist views of

identity mean that migrants base their identity solely upon current physical location, independent of cultural influences or life experiences.

However, contemporary conceptions of migration and identity portray identity much more frequently in hybridized terms. In other words, identity is a fluid concept based upon a variety of aspects: life circumstances, location, cultural influences, etc. Identity is not an achieved goal, but a give-and-take relationship engaged by the individual. Correspondingly, identity formation is not a uniform synthesis, but instead many faceted and full of contradiction. No person fully fits any uniform stereotype or prescribed identity. Individual identity is not a state that is reached; instead, it is a continually dynamic process with no end or resolution. One's idea of identity is ever changing, as he or she rolls with attitudinal, social, and environmental changes – ideally realizing depth of maturity and self-awareness with age.

Such a conception suggests a key distinction. Of key relevance to this thesis is the distinction between conceptions of identity as more or less fixed, intrinsic to a person or passively bestowed upon them by a location, to a more or less fluid, cultural active process – the product of an interaction between person, culture, and place. For this reason, I will examine two of Ryan's novels to understand how identity is constructed in these examples of multicultural literature.

While the significance of identity stems from its centrality to the socio-cultural phenomenon, a second topic that in this study is equally central concerns the basic structure in which stories that deal with an aspect of multiculturalism are written. One such general structure that has great relevance to these works is that of tales of

redemption. While multiculturalism is narrativized in relation to a number of genres, including coming-of-age stories, tragedies, romances, and rags-to-riches stories, the genre of redemption is extremely useful for an analysis of multicultural literature in ways that have already been discussed. Both *Esperanza* and *Naomi* exemplify such a structure, especially with regards to its being an epitome of a story of human struggle. As previously discussed, redemptive tales innately wrestle with basic questions of the human life and struggle (121, Sherry). Redemptive tales honor struggle and trumpet the importance of grace in a person's life as a restorative element (122-133, Sherry). These elements are very clearly elements of the novels in question here.

Tales of redemption are particularly relevant to the narrativization of migration in that a journey—often both geographic as well as cultural—figures centrally in them. In a redemption tale, characters confront a conflict or problem. Usually, they go on some sort of journey – whether it be physical or emotional/psychological to wrestle with this problem. Of course, within this genre there are variations; for example, sometimes the journey is to rescue someone else and yet is also a journey of self-discovery. At the narrative's end, (stereotypically at least) all problems are solved, the couple falls in love and rides off into the sunset to live "happily ever after." We all know this story by heart; I would even argue that it is universal across culture.

This genre is well-suited to multiculturalism because (much like identity) redemption can be a mixed bag. Many modern tales of redemption demonstrate the realism of life by representing both its happiness and its hardship. Redemption tales leave room for such situations; real-life redemption is never complete, people's lives are never perfect. The realism of multicultural stories and its portrayal of struggle makes the

redemption that much sweeter, however partial it may be. Its message seems to be one of balanced encouragement: although situations are bleak, things can and will get better, maybe not everything, but something. Isn't that the story of hope in the human spirit? The modern narrative of redemption is most often a story of perseverance and hope rather than one that assures utopia. Surely that is characteristic of the multicultural experience – people who do not give up against harsh odds. People who strive to reconcile internal and external change not only carry on, but succeed.

For these reasons, the following analysis will focus on key relationships that constitute representations of identity and of redemption in these terms. We will regard them and analyze them as key relationships through which multicultural literature is constituted.

Identity Construction

As a key concern of the lived reality of multiculturalism, the representation of identity in the books provides insights into how identity is constructed in narrative. In these two books, identity representations are consistent with more recent scholarly studies. Identities are represented as fluid and dynamic; they are multiple, not singular, and shot through with contradictions.

In the first book, Esperanza simultaneously maintains conflicting identities of a teenager, a breadwinner, a benefactress, and a pauper. Because her life is changed so quickly, she is physically a pauper, but has not yet made the social switch: she has not yet internalized the reality of her poverty. Her mindset is still that of the daughter of a

wealthy landowner, even though that is not the reality of her circumstance (67, Ryan). In the second book, Naomi also demonstrates the multi-faceted nature of identity. She concurrently manages the internal identity of belonging and yet she is out of place; her identity shifts depending upon her location and situation. She is strong and protective of her little brother, yet vulnerable and desirous of her parents' love even when it may be detrimental (20,117, 120 & 71; Ryan). She is Mexican and American at the same time, balancing the variance that naturally comes from such a combination, feeling that she does not belong with American girls her age and relishing the embrace of the streets of Mexico that see her as normal (53 & 169; Ryan).

A particular scene in *Esperanza* illustrates the way that Esperanza must reconcile the changes in her external circumstances with her internal identity. This is clearly demonstrated as Esperanza and her mother board a train from Mexico to the United States. To be at the train station, Esperanza and her mother have ridden in a secret compartment in the bottom of a wagon overnight (59-62, Ryan). They have waited at the train station for a while and have now begun to board the train. Esperanza is shocked to realize that she and her mother along with Alfonso, Hortensia, and Miguel will be riding in the poorer section of the car, with the "peasants" as Esperanza labels them (66, Ryan). Esperanza has never been around people of lower economic means for any amount of time. The newness of the experience is reflected not only in Esperanza's verbal reaction to her mother, as she protests that her father would not have allowed them to ride in such a car and the people that surround them look suspicious, but also with the lengthy description given in the scene.

> But they did not board the fancy car with the compartments and leather seats or the dining car with the white linens. Instead, Alfonso lead them to a car with rows of wooden benches, like church pews facing each other, already crowded with peasants. Trash littered the floor and it reeked of rotting fruit and urine. A man with a small goat on his lap grinned at Esperanza, revealing no teeth. Three barefoot children, two boys and a girl, crowded near their mother. Their legs were chalky with dust, their clothes in tatters, and their hair was grimy. An old, frail beggar woman pushed by them to the back of the car, clutching a picture of Our Lady of Guadalupe. Her hand was outstretched for alms. Esperanza had never been so close to so many peasants before.
>
> 'Mama,' said Esperanza, stopping in the doorway. 'We cannot travel in this car. It…is not clean. And the people do not look trustworthy.'
>
> p. 66 & 67, Ryan

Through Esperanza's eyes, the reader is given nearly every detail, from the teeth missing in a man's mouth, to the trash that litters the floor of the train car (66-67, Ryan). Ramona, Esperanza's mother, quickly and kindly corrects her daughter's poor attitude, reminding her that they are now on a limited income and such accommodations are all that is within their means (67, Ryan). Ramona sweetly reminds Esperanza of their new social standing, saying " '*Mija*, it is all we can afford…[we] must make do" (67, Ryan). Esperanza still struggles to identify with the poorer people that surround her when a small girl tries to look at her doll: the doll that was the last gift her father ever gave her. Esperanza quickly pulls the doll away, prompting the little girl to cry (69, Ryan). Esperanza is again humbled as her mother takes some yarn that she has and makes a yarn doll for the crying child. Apologizing for Esperanza's bad behavior, her mother offers the gift to the child and again reminds Esperanza of the different life that they will now lead (70, Ryan). In response to Esperanza's berating comments about the

commonality of the little girl, her mother responds, " '[when] you scorn these people, you scorn Miguel, Hortensia, and Alfonso. And you embarrass me and yourself. As difficult as it is to accept, our lives are different now'" (70, Ryan). This is a clear illustration that Esperanza internally still feels very much like a wealthy landowner's daughter; however, she must now live the life of a peasant. She simultaneously maintains two conflicting identities.

Ironically, toward the end of the novel, we see a completely different and matured Esperanza who values people for who they are internally, and not their financial veracity. In fact, she gives that same doll away to a poor little girl in the camp (227, Ryan). Clearly, this details a shift in Esperanza's internal identity as she embraces the new role that she must fill.

Naomi also simultaneously maintains two conflicting identities. It is clearly illustrated in her family situation. Naomi openly welcomes Skyla's attentions toward her, without suspicion that something might be amiss. Naomi giddily daydreams about showing Skyla the soap carvings (a hobby that she has picked up) that she has done while Skyla dotes on her skills (44, Ryan). Naomi divulges those dreams in her stream of consciousness as she thinks; " I planted the image of me showing Skyla my carvings, one by one, and her fussing over my talent while I shined, proud as punch" (44, Ryan). This is a clear indication that Naomi desires to please her mother (63, Ryan). In a similar situation, Skyla bursts into their trailer with her hands full of shopping bags. She showers Naomi with new clothes, something that Gram has not been able to provide for Naomi on a limited budget. With her new clothes on, Skyla sets to braiding Naomi's hair (46-49, Ryan). Skyla compliments Naomi's face shape and chats with her about

silly girly things (49, Ryan). This is clearly illustrated in an exchange between Naomi and Skyla. "Skyla came in and stood behind me and looked in the mirror. 'Naomi, you have the perfect heart-shaped face. Did you ever notice that?'" (49, Ryan). Such comments are just the types of things that young girls without mothers may consistently lack.

However, the trust is instantly revoked when Skyla is unkind to Owen. Skyla agrees to take Owen to the children's hospital for a check-up. Skyla, Naomi, and Owen go together to the children's hospital, a location with which Owen is all too familiar. Because of his health problems, Owen knows the doctors well and they treat him as a friend (114-116, Ryan). On the ride back home from the hospital, Skyla begins to berate Owen, telling him that something is wrong with him, Owen becomes upset (116, Ryan). Through Naomi's eyes, we see the scenario unfold.

> 'Naomi!' Skyla yelled. 'Everything is *not* okay!'
>
> As we left the room, I saw Owen eyeing the tape dispenser on the shelf near the door.
>
> Skyla kept her eyes straight on the road and barely moved all the way home, except for her swigs from one of those plastic travel bottles that she kept pulling out of her purse. Even though it was dark, she drove too fast, weaving the car in and out of traffic. Owen pulled himself so far into his hooded sweatshirt, he looked like a swaddled cocoon."
>
> p. 116, Ryan

When they arrive home and Skyla prevents Owen from having tape on his shirt (a coping mechanism that his family indulges), Owen becomes even more upset and Naomi comes to his defense, physically jumping in between Skyla and Owen and verbally defending him (117, Ryan). Naomi passionately defends her brother: "I was

shaking like a leaf but my instincts moved my body right between Owen and Skyla. I said, 'It doesn't *hurt* anything'" (117, Ryan). Naomi simultaneously maintains a very open and closed stance toward her mother.

These points of contradiction, with the retained and refused traits and learned lessons, constitute the entire process of identity formation over time. The novels are rife with examples of identity shifts, attitude changes, external changes that affect internal differences, and many others. For example, Naomi's identity in relation to family changes even at the start of the book. Both of her parents are absent from her everyday life. While a daughter by virtue of birth, living as she does with her great-grandmother makes it impossible to operate day-to-day as a daughter. That changes when her mother returns and she finds her father in Mexico (19 & 213, Ryan). Because Naomi knows her parents for such a short time, however, she at best incompletely becomes to herself a daughter.

Naomi experiences another shift in her identity as she discovers that her father did not abandon her, but was told by her mother to stop pursuing their family (222, Ryan). Her identity shifts from orphan to a loved daughter. Her father wanted her and Owen (her brother). At the close of the novel, Naomi discovers a new home and hope in Mexico, thus uncovering more of who she is. However, her identity is still developing, as evidenced by the last line of the novel, "I was becoming who I was meant to be, the Naomi Soledad León Outlaw of my wildest dreams" (246, Ryan). As the verb tense here illustrates, Naomi maintains that her identity development is a continuous process, as she is "becoming" who she was made to be.

A similar ambivalence and complexity is represented in the identity of Esperanza. Her identity changes as she journeys from Mexico to the United States. Along with the economic changes that she faces, Esperanza learns to interact with people of an economic class lower than she is accustomed to in Mexico (70-71, 100; Ryan). As class lines fade and there is no longer “a river” in between Esperanza and those of a poorer class, Esperanza becomes a poor woman who must learn to love poor people around her. She gradually learns that all people are equal, and she comes to embrace and support the people with whom she lives. This is an internal shift in her, as she learns that her own value is not based upon wealth, but rather on personal substance and qualities.

As Esperanza learns to interact with poorer people, we see her internal perspective shift. A good example of this dichotomy is modeled in her relationship with Miguel. Miguel and Esperanza have grown up together, and they were best friends. However, one day, Esperanza spoke some words that changed their relationship. While probably echoing some sentiment she heard another girl say, Esperanza told Miguel that because she was rich and he was poor they “stood on different sides of the river” and because of their classes it was a river that could never be crossed (18, Ryan). Her arrogance silences Miguel. According to Esperanza, from the time of that conversation, Miguel remains very quiet and no longer confides in her or plays games with her (18, Ryan).

Class is a consistent site of social strife in everyday life, and as portrayed in these novels. Not only is class shown as an element of identity construction, but the novels also illustrate the external and often economic ramifications of class distinction.

Often, class is portrayed as a codification of social sophistication. However, in these novels, class seems directly tied to economic means and the cultural signifier of otherness. This is clearly illustrated in the difference of treatment shown in the work camps depicted in *Esperanza*. It could be argued that all of the workers at these camps are seen as lower class because they have very little money, and maintain a job that does not require a specialized skill set. However, there appears a class system within the camps that illustrates a clear delineation: the white workers that are from Oklahoma receive much better treatment than the workers from other countries, like Mexico (188 & 217-218, Ryan). Here the Mexican workers are seen as lower class than the workers from Oklahoma simply because they maintain many of the same characteristics of the dominant society in America at the time – economics has nothing to do with the situation, as both workers perform the same jobs.

Generally speaking, the concept of class is integral within multicultural literature because authors weave class themes into the text and highlight the injustice that is often present in our society. Secondly, class issues become an important factor, regarding the internal construct that characters in these novels maintain and the class identity internally adopted by Latinas. Independent of how people label these women, it is important to address the way that they internalize class identity and whether or not such internal class markers coincide with the way that others identify them. As a unique function of multicultural literature, class distinctions felt internally and externally may shift along with geographic changes and adaptations in hybrid identities. As is clearly illustrated in *Esperanza*, immigration may significantly alter a person's class standing. This aspect of the immigration experience coupled with the discrimination that

immigrants may experience demonstrates the necessity to address such class issues when deconstructing the components of the immigrant point-of-view.

The river separating the two classes is very much characteristic of her view of economic classes until well after she has moved to California. After working there for a time, and living among the poorer people, Esperanza owns them as her people and sees Miguel as an equal – even intimating that he is a love interest (247-251, Ryan). Miguel assumes a leadership role in Esperanza's life as he teaches her about the way that class systems work, especially with regards to discrimination that the lower class experiences (186-188, Ryan). These scenarios illustrate the internal shift in Esperanza's way of thinking.

In a way similar to Naomi, Esperanza's identity shifts from being one who is taken care of (a little girl with servants) to one who works hard to take care of others. Along with this physical change of activity comes a change in attitude. Esperanza learns discipline of heart and mind, and how to work with diligence and humility as she works in the packing sheds. At the end of the novel Esperanza has a clearer sense of who she is, but this sense is not static. The closing image of the novel shows Esperanza rising above those people who would hold her down, like a phoenix rising out of the ashes (250, Ryan). But the focus is more on the future: new dreams that Esperanza has, of raising a family, and working to survive in America (250, Ryan). This shows that her identity is dynamic, ever changing as she seeks to conquer new challenges on the horizon.

The representation of identity as constructed in these two narratives has important implications for making sense of the lived reality of multicultural identity. At the ending of both novels, the characters are not in a place of resolution, but still look into the future with hope for continued change, as they discover new selves along the journey. When moving from the narratives' inner worlds to the socio-cultural world of multicultural experience, casting identity in this way can serve as a validation for the unsettledness and confusion experienced through contradictions in identities. This may especially aid childhood readers, which is the intended audience for these two books. Readers wrestling with multicultural identities may glean from such literature a catharsis and solidarity, understanding that such conflicted feelings are not exceptional or out of the ordinary, but part of the process—not the achieved goal—of identity development. Such literature may serve as a means of freeing one from the necessity of fitting narrowly construed stereotypes of static identities.

More generally, these novels portray an identity struggle that multicultural readers may be experiencing, or prompt them to empathize with others who are trying to reconcile conflicting identities, whether they come from a multicultural background or not. These novels affirm space given in society for people to be human; developing expectations that are more realistic, not simply black and white rules sketched out on a sheet of paper.

Redemption and Agency

The narrativization of multiculturalism as exemplified in these works can also be understood through its relation and constitution in the genre of redemption. Whether conforming to the story of redemption or diverging from it, the relation of multiculturalism to the genre still provides a useful way of orienting a productive reading in relation to multicultural literature.

One key way in which characters are redeemed is directly addressed by representations of agency, in the sense that greater agency means achieving greater control over one's life and thus a greater chance of redeeming oneself. Furthermore, as one aspect of agency is self-awareness, it is important to understand the degree to which the main characters become more self-aware of their decisions and the actions that form their lives. Here we look at questions of decision-making and agency in the characters lives. Are overt, specific, and explicit decisions drawn? Or is agency simply the result of a hazily felt need, which is more a response to circumstances than the result of individual initiative? Is agency "active" in the sense that it is an action attributable to the character alone, or is it "passive" in the sense that decisions and plans for action are made for her?

Overall, neither girls' actions are ever entirely their own. Their decisions are influenced by those around them, and are more the response to necessity than a particular directed and intentional action.

The portrayal of family is especially important within these novels and the context of multicultural literature. Family attributions in Latino culture are particularly strong

when compared with a white-bread “All-American” ideal for family. I argue that American society conceives the family as a launching pad, or a place of growth at an early age, but when children become adults they leave the family home and make a clear delineation from the family, becoming separate and independent individuals. In other words, strong family ties are often shown as a sign of weakness or immaturity for American adults. Family may be seen as something that holds a person back from self-realization and sophistication. Ironically, as demonstrated in these novels and many other examples of multicultural literature, family is not only shown as a positive motivator in life, but also a venue through which children flourish. Instead of increased agency resulting in a journey away from the family, as many American coming-of-age and redemption stories might suggest, multi-cultural literature shows prosperity while a child is deeply involved with the family, and often this success is aided or comes through family ties.

There remains one caveat to accepting this generalization. Many of the familial traits and positive associations with family maintained by multicultural literature are shared by the culture of Southeastern U.S. Southern culture values strong family involvement throughout the life of a child. While most extended families do not live together, very often entire families live in small towns and convene regularly for holidays and birthdays. This runs counter to the American concept of individual children creating their own lives as they move away from their families. In many ways the atmosphere and expectations of the Southern family mirror Latino culture – offering an exception to the variance between Latino and American family dynamics.

In the case of Naomi, it seems that many of the big changes in her life are more passively received, as others older than her make choices that affect her life. This may be due to her age, as she is still under the care of her great-grandmother. For instance, Naomi has no input as to whether or not she and her brother go to Mexico to find their father. Instead, Naomi wakes up one morning and she is literally being driven into another country (130, Ryan).

However, this reduced sense of agency changes in crucial situations. When Naomi is the only one able to affect change in her life, she is forceful and acts with her own self-aware agency. A particularly clear example of this is when she testifies in her own custody hearing. Initially, Naomi is scared and reluctant to implicate her mother, however truthful it may be. Naomi's mother comes back for her only when she and her new boyfriend concoct a plan to pair Naomi with Clive's (Skyla's boyfriend) daughter and collect the welfare money that both girls would garner. Skyla (Naomi's mother) is abusive, both verbally and physically. When Naomi realizes that the judge is planning to send her to live with her mom, she tells the truth about her mother's bad intentions and actions. While the power to send her to live with her mother ultimately lies in the hands of the judge, Naomi chooses (and does all within her power) to remain with Gram and Owen, whom she considers to be her true family (236, Ryan).

Naomi's agency is best embodied in her time in the courtroom. Gram, Naomi, and Owen have just driven back from Mexico where they met Naomi and Owen's father. They must attend a custody hearing in which Skyla is suing for custody of Naomi so that she can take her away to live in Las Vegas with Clive's daughter, Sapphire. Naomi enters the courtroom surrounded not only by an unfamiliar setting, but also bombarded

by Skyla's insincere pledges of love that are screamed across the courtroom (228-229, Ryan). " 'I have missed you so much!' she said from across the room. Her voice was so sugar-coated that I wondered who the show was for" (229, Ryan). When asked if she tried to hide her history of alcoholism from the judge, Skyla retorts, "No, of course not. I am on medication and I have not missed one dose. And part of my rehabilitation is to establish a relationship with my children. More than anything that is what I want.' Skyla looked lovingly toward us" (231, Ryan). Hearing from the adults and seeming to weigh the documents provided to the court, the judge finally asks for Naomi to testify (233-234, Ryan). The judge explains to Naomi that generally, the state likes to reunite parents with children and unless Naomi has objections, she plans to give custody of Owen and Naomi to Skyla (234, Ryan). While initially frightened to speak up, Naomi repeats her father's encouragement to "be brave" and finally divulges the truth about Skyla, giving the judge enough information to rule in favor of her and Owen staying in Lemon Tree with Gram (235-240, Ryan). While initially frightened to speak up, Naomi repeats her father's encouragement to "be brave" and finally divulges the truth about S

> I closed my eyes and heard my father's words, 'Be brave, Naomi León.'
>
> I felt a rumbling in my mind, the sound a bulldozer makes when it is headed toward you. A sensation came over me, as if someone had unlatched a gate that freed a herd of lunging wild animals.
> I opened my eyes to find Skyla's gaze drilling into me.
>
> p. 235, Ryan

Despite the intimidation tactics implemented by her mother, Naomi overcomes her fear and reveals the truth to the judge.

> As if a dam had burst, I couldn't stop the rush of words. I told how Skyla just wanted me to be a baby-sitter for Sapphire and how she had started drinking again and about the slap and how there was more where that came from. I said I loved my school and my friend, Blanca. I told about my carvings and the Children's Hospital and Owen being an FLK and how Skyla didn't want him anymore because she thought he was a Blem. Then I told about my father and how we had found him. I told the judge…how I had been thinking 'Everything will be all right. I'll always be with Gram and Owen' at least a million times since Mexico.
>
> p. 236-237, Ryan

These statements among other factors, lead the judge to rule in favor of allowing Naomi and Owen to stay with their great-grandmother.

This change in agency is underscored after Naomi's arrival in the United States from Mexico, when people around her comment that she speaks louder (243, Ryan). Ironically, the volume of her voice coincides with an internal feeling of finding her own voice (246, Ryan). She confidently speaks – demonstrating more assertion in her own life and the promise of greater agency and ability to direct her own life. She has reached at least a new stage in her life, and thus a place of redemption, however still incomplete.

In the other book, Esperanza makes more of her own decisions. Esperanza's early actions are passive responses. In Mexico, she performs tasks that she is given; she thrives in a protected position and her roles are explicitly spelled out for her (4, Ryan). The agency that Esperanza shows in deciding to work to support her family seems in many ways to be a reaction to the circumstances she faces, and indeed it is. However, she consciously weighs other possibilities, without the counsel of those around her (165, Ryan). Instead of borrowing money from friends or figuring out another

way to earn money, she concocts a plan to feign that she is old enough to work in the sheds (165-167, Ryan). By doing this, she earns money and promises to take care of her mother.

Agency and gender

Gender is a point of contention for identity development in women. In the context of Latina culture, gender portrayals often align with dominant patriarchal gender roles. Specifically within these novels, gender portrayals show women acting within mostly domestic roles and those prescribed traditionally for women. While the novel depicts women working within society, these jobs are solely those deemed female positions, for instance working as a seamstress or working in sheds, as opposed to the masculine role of tending the fields. The protagonists in these novels are adolescents; therefore, many of the gender cues proposed by the works are offered in the form of adolescent lessons that the girls absorb. Their relationships with men and openness to guidance portray women as consistently in need of direction. Women illustrated in these novels demonstrate less of a take-charge attitude in their lives, instead maintaining a reactive stance to the circumstances that affect them. Again, gender is relevant for study because it instructs female readers as to the meaning of the label “woman,” prescribing for little girls and boys what a lady acts and looks like. Especially in formative years, these messages are crucial for self-perception and development.

In tales of redemption a crucial question to raise for books whose main characters are girls is the degree to which agency is gendered. In *Naomi*, women make

most of the practical decisions, as Naomi lives with her great-grandmother who ultimately makes the family choices. The only other people who exert agency in her life are her parents and a male teacher at school. It should be noted that her great-grandmother discusses many matters with their neighbors Bernardo and Fabiola (37, Ryan). In fact, Bernardo's family in Mexico lets Naomi, Owen, and Gram stay with them (131-132, Ryan). By contrast to the largely central female characters, the male influences in Naomi's life seem to be much more topical, as they do not make concrete decisions for her every day, as the women in her life do. However, at the same time, the male guidance in her life seems to inspire her more. Her school librarian Mr. Marable encourages her and helps her feel valued at school; Bernardo introduces her to carving, a hobby that she really enjoys; and Naomi quotes to herself her father's exhortation to be brave when she is nervous in court (59, 241-242, 13, 235; Ryan). While male influences seem to be fewer, they still carry great significance.

Esperanza tells a somewhat different story. Her mother and grandmother influence her actions, especially with social cues (69, Ryan). However, Alfonso and Hortensia prompt many of her mother's decisions. For example, Alfonso suggests moving to the United States and having his brother arrange a place for them to work (47-48, Ryan). Esperanza herself is greatly influenced by Miguel (79-80, 165-166; Ryan). He teaches her about class differences and restores her hope; explaining that it is possible to rise above people and things that hold her down (186-189; 221-224, 239, 250; Ryan). An important consideration that modifies representation of agency and gender is the age of the main characters. As they are both very young, teenagers at the oldest, the level of life agency that they attain or exert is limited by their stage in life and

the family confines from which they approach life. The agency attributed to the main characters demonstrate increasingly a self-aware ability to direct their own lives, even though it is often based upon advice of others. To the extent that they are women, this works contrary to a common feature of women being directed largely by men and is an important divergence that constitutes the novelty of multicultural literature.

While the main characters expand their agency (although limited by family and/or men rather than through their own effort), other more direct ways of discovering and exercising agency as a way of redeeming themselves in the narrative are similarly compromised and complex in terms of gender. The most direct agency that Esperanza exerts is taking responsibility to work and support her mother. In these forms, Esperanza takes on a masculine role as the sole breadwinner for the family and emotional support for her mother (178, 184; Ryan). Esperanza acknowledges this additional way that agency is gendered by noting how hard work makes her look and feel less feminine. Her hands look like that of an old man (180, Ryan). At the same time her agency is masculinized by the work world, Esperanza emotionally supports her mother in very feminine ways. Esperanza tries to make her feel better by talking to her and fixing her hair, things that are more female attributes (184, Ryan).

By contrast to the representation of Esperanza's agency, in the courtroom (the setting of Naomi's most "active agency") Naomi does not take on masculine characteristics, as she emotionally spills out all of the information that she knows regarding her family situation (236, Ryan). Rather than testimony in a focused or rational/logical form, hers is a cry of the heart to be heard and saved. To the extent that this character relies on traditional female capabilities to exercise direct agency, it can be

considered a constitutive exception to the traditional gendered depiction of agency that also helps constitute the novelty of multicultural literature.

Redemption along the journey

In addition to representations of agency, a second key way in which characters are redeemed is directly addressed by representations of the journey they take, in the sense that it is the terrain that defines their change and the distance traveled between states of compromise to an always provisional point of redemption.

The journey as narrativized is both literal and ethereal, as characters not only change geographic locations but also self-perceptions in the space that they occupy. One key way in which they journey that constitutes the multicultural experience is political, such as between nation-states. Yet, the journey between these places is more frequently not a one-way trip from exclusive origin to exclusive destination, but often circular or periodic – a feature noted by recent scholars of migration and as has already been discussed. In both of these novels, not only do we see the geographic terrain of these two books as constituted by the nation-states of the United States and Mexico; but, we see the main characters in both novels grappling with the reality of hybridized border zones.

In the complex borderland that immigrants often occupy, many slight psychological nuances demonstrate internal shifts due to geographic changes. Given the bi-lingual nature of immigrant life, the transition to a new country/language changes a person's inner relationship with his or her heart language and country of origin. While

he or she becomes more proficient in the language and culture of the new place, often these new experiences lessen the prominence of the original language in his life. For example, an immigrant cannot speak English without an accent, but her Spanish is forever marked by the influences of English. Thus, she does not master either language: ruined forever from the intricacies of her native tongue and never able to pass for native in the new country.

I propose that this concept is applicable to the internal borderland experienced by immigrants. It is not only relevant for linguistics, but also for cultural signifiers and a sense of belonging. Immigrants have said this half-in/half-out stance with regards to both cultures rob them of the sense of wholeness that comes with complete belonging – something only sincerely felt in their country and language of origin before they moved (24, Firmat). Ironically, after an immigrant has left his or her country, the feeling of wholeness may not be regained simply by a return trip to the country of origin. He is different internally, forever assigned to a limbo in which he does not completely "belong" in his new country or his country of origin. This dichotomy, or differentiation between comfortable origin and tentative transition, often leaves the immigrant with an internal construct of cultural difference independent of geographical change. If not marked by others, he himself notes his own cultural variance in both realms of influence, the old and new. It is as if he maintains a varying amount of each identity, simultaneously and dynamically as his identity changes and is (sometimes) unknowingly left in a state in which neither identity can ever be whole again.

However, the negotiation of border zones, here represented by circuits of migration, in each novel are different, as is the nature of the journey. The borderlands

occupied by these women are often more emotional and social than geographic – as we see each part of the journey and process of self-discovery characterized by a variety of emotions. Esperanza leaves Mexico and moves directly to California where she plants her life. Although her geographic journey only lasts a few days, it is characterized by great sadness. Esperanza feels that she is not only leaving Mexico, but that in doing so she is also leaving her father behind (56, Ryan). This is clearly illustrated the night that Ramona, Esperanza, Alfonso, Hortensia, and Miguel flee Mexico. They have arranged with a neighboring farmer to store a wagon in his barn. The group is fearful to leave from their home because they worry that Esperanza's uncles will intervene violently in their attempted flight from the country. Therefore, under the cover of night, they leave the servants' quarters they are forced to occupy because the fire ruined their home, take small bags and a modest amount of food, and set out on foot across their fields to reach the neighboring farm (56, Ryan).

As the group reaches the line of plants that delineates the border between her father's land and the friend's farm that holds their getaway vehicle, everyone in the party proceeds without pause – everyone except for Esperanza. Esperanza pauses because she does not want to leave her father's land behind and the group stops to reflect upon what was once a great ranch: "…Esperanza held back, and pulled on Mama's hand to keep her there for a moment. They turned to look at what used to be El Rancho de las Rosas in the distance" (56, Ryan). Esperanza finds herself in emotional turmoil as she feels leaving her father's land means leaving her father (56, Ryan). Esperanza struggles. "Sadness and anger tangled in Esperanza's stomach as she thought of all that she was leaving: her friends and her school, her life as it once was, Abuelita. And

Papa. She felt as though she was leaving him, too" (56, Ryan). While saddened with every step away from her father's land and the life that she once knew, Ramona comforts Esperanza with the promise that " 'Papa's heart will find us wherever we go'" (56-57, Ryan). This illustrates the sadness in a part of Esperanza's physical journey to California and her emotional journey of healing after her father's death. In her geographic journey, we begin to see seeds of social and emotional change that reach fruition in America: humility, her love for people, and persevering spirit.

In contrast to the representation of Esperanza's journey, Naomi's journey is very different. However, Naomi too navigates the border zones of her life both emotionally and geographically. Naomi's circuit of migration is U.S.—Mexico—U.S.—Mexico—U.S. She is born in the U.S. and lives in Mexico as a very young child, but is taken away by her mother to live in a trailer park in Lemon Tree, California (41, Ryan). Naomi experiences a wide spectrum of emotions in every location that she finds herself, America or Mexico. It seems that at all stages of her journey, much like the hybrid identity that she maintains, the emotional borderland that she occupies is a mixed bag – never one of complete happiness or misery. This portrayal seems to parallel the realities of life and perhaps the less than perfect actual existence of those negotiating such borderlands.

Not only is the nature of border zones central to the journeys of each character, the cultural hybridity of the circuit constituted by Mexico and the United States is also demonstrated by the presence of Mexican influences in the United States and American influences in Mexico. This is especially clear in the girls' lives socially and emotionally. While living in the United States, Naomi experiences Mexican influences through

Bernardo and Fabiola, her neighbors from Mexico (29, Ryan). She strikes up a friendship with a little girl named Blanca—who is Mexican because both of her parents are from Mexico, but who has ironically never been to Mexico (53-54, 241; Ryan). Naomi also learns to carve while she is in America, a heritage from her family in Mexico. While in Mexico, Naomi experiences the American stability of her family's presence and tastes a cheese that reminds her of America (157, Ryan).

Esperanza also experiences similarly hybridized moments. At the local market in the United States, she finds Mexican foods that she loves (189, Ryan). The family that surrounds her and the community in which she lives in the United States also reminds her of Mexico. Esperanza is reminded of the ranch upon which she lived because of the roses that Miguel and Alfonso transported over the long journey from Mexico and re-planted near their home in the U.S. (123-124, Ryan). These roses remind Esperanza of her father. The circuit of migration along with the presence of cross-cultural influences in both countries, demonstrate how personal associations with a particular culture or country is more important than a geopolitical boundary.

What's more, the significant "places" that the journey involves differ between these two books. No consistent correspondence exists between a particular place and the stage of the journey, whether origin, destination, or temporary way-station. *Esperanza* starts in Mexico, the journey takes place through Mexico and into the United States, ending in California. *Becoming* starts in California, journeys across the American border into Mexico, and then ends upon the family's return to Lemon Tree, California. In both novels, the process of self-discovery is not consistently tied to the journey stage of the story, nor is it linked to a specific country. Most of Esperanza's self-discovery and

development occurs in California, but that is simply because the majority of the book is set there after tragedy and a quick move. Naomi develops and discovers more of who she is during her time in Mexico and consequent journey back to California. Compared to the order of action in *Esperanza*, Naomi's journey to Mexico comes much later. As we have seen here, while location and stage in the journey is important for the characters, self-development here is not a geographic roadmap to follow, but an internal reconciliation over time.

Conclusions

In this analysis I have discussed the prominence of hybrid identities throughout America. Individuals simultaneously hold and negotiate different and multiple identities. To the extent that these two novels exemplify, multicultural literature supports the view that identity is dynamic, and may change based upon both internal and external features. This literature also vindicates the struggle of those who consistently walk in a hybrid identity. Personal redemption herein is investigated as a function of agency. I find that often characters' actions are based upon their individual levels of self-awareness, but also the influence of others in their lives, thus suggesting a complicated articulation of redemption.

Such influence and agency is mediated by both age and gender. Male influence seems to be more persuasive, even though it may be less frequently exerted. Younger people might exercise less direct agency because they are still under the purview of their parents. Redemption and self-discovery are seen to be largely functions of internal

change, and much less dependent upon geographic location—especially with reference to self-discovery along a journey. Seasons or stages in the journey are not uniformly linked to periods of self-development.

Class plays a pertinent role in both novels and the discussion of multi-cultural literature. Specifically in these works, class is illustrated as a site of conflict, based upon not just economic means but racial constraints and a feeling of "otherness" that is dependent upon the cultural climate of the dominant patriarchy. Class delineation maintains an aspect of social status and sophistication. It is most often demonstrated through discrimination (experienced by characters) in these novels and highlights the element of class conflict in the immigration experience.

Through this analysis, we can now propose more general relationships that constitute these narratives and that narrativize multiculturalism in particular ways. One of these is the gendered nature of agency. While the girls in these books demonstrate some agency, the majority of the agency shown is more passive – based upon the ideas of others. It seems that agency here falls along paternalistic gender roles, with men leading the way and women following suit. A variation of this traditional gendering of agency in these books is, when the characters exercise agency, they do so but by performing stereotypical male roles.

However, while present to some extent, such characterizations are less prevalent in these novels. To the extent that the narratives of these two novels exemplify a generic structure of multicultural literature, a unique facet of the genre is the consistent role of the family, including very extended family and close friends that are considered

like family. Where the emergence of conventionally American agency is often represented by the shedding of the limitations and restrictions of family, these two novels represent family as not only central throughout, but as aids to the exercise of individual agency instead of impediments to it. Part of the reason for this in these two books may be due to the age of each character. Because the characters are so young, they are not yet out of the family protection and are therefore making fewer independent decisions.

These novels explore the hybridity of multi-cultural borderlands, specifically that of a young female. These books deal with the patriarchal female roles, and in many cases reinforce those – illustrating women within the confines of traditional roles. However, the novels also demonstrate that women may operate outside of narrowly prescribed paragons. While many books have been written regarding the experience of straddling life in two cultures, this study shows that, more than the physical location, the internal shifts and development compose the more general terrain of the borderland experience. More than the physical and external adjustments, representations of these girls demonstrate the importance of psychological controls in reconciliation of a person's life station and location.

Along with the concept of geographic and emotional borderlands comes the loss and gain of immigration. These novels affirm facts from immigration research that details an immigrant's loss of belonging and feeling of wholeness. Gaining new skills and experiences in a new land and language often come at the expense of identification with a homeland and mother tongue. This leaves the immigrant in a place of "in-between" not at home in either location or culture.

Finally, we see the role of the redemptive tale. These multicultural novels demonstrate redemption in a new way as the main characters bring their own set of difficulties from which they seek redemption and through which they must struggle. In such stories characters overcome language barriers, huge cultural disparities, and more transitional troubles all the while dealing with typical human emotions of relationship difficulties and teenage angst. This is indeed a different kind of redemption, but one that is becoming a more prevalent chapter in the story of America – thus extremely important to encounter. In these ways, these more general features as present in our novels have much to say about the field of multicultural literature, as well as on the perception and experience of multiculturalism.

CHAPTER 3

CONCLUSION

To conclude the study, this chapter begins by summarizing the rationale, design, and key findings. It then discusses some key implications of the study as well as future directions that scholars interested in these questions from a cultural perspective might take.

Summary of Study Rationale and Design

Multicultural literature has increased in prevalence throughout American cultural in the past several decades, as authors with differing ethnic backgrounds have become more prolific and cultural strongholds have been shattered to allow wider readership of literature that is not necessarily deemed “mainstream.” Census data, along with a variety of other factors, clearly indicates that the face of America is changing, with a rise of diversity. The Latino population is currently the fastest growing group in America (2, Denner). There exists a wide variety of experience within the Latino community; at all points, assumptions of common experience simply because people groups may share a common language must be avoided.

Studies are continually being done with regards to immigration and the altered identity that migrants negotiate; however, few studies are done with regards to media and its contribution to such identity transitions. With the shift in American ethnic

composition comes a consequent change in what is tritely labeled the “American experience.” Many contemporary authors maintain a transitional voice – mixed cultural experiences that inform their writing styles and world perspectives. These perspectives allow a discussion and illustration of a very legitimate American experience that exists outside of the white bread, cookie-cutter white middle class repertoire. Because the population is ever changing and the field of literature has accepted many such voices; acknowledging that they compose a portion of the American chorus, an examination of multi-cultural literature is merited in these times.

I chose to examine multicultural literature and issues of identity, gender, and ethnicity through a textual analysis of *Esperanza Rising* and *Becoming Naomi León.* These books seemed an appropriate data set for several reasons. Ryan, the author of both books, maintains a hybrid identity of her own due to her Mexican-American heritage – therefore her writing is informed by a difference of perspective. These books are pertinent for study because they are currently in use in schools throughout the United States. Students wrestle with the cultural issues described in these novels. The novels have received praise in the literary field, specifically in children’s literature, which lends greater credibility and merit to the texts.

The key aspects of the phenomenon on which I focused were specific aspects that characterize multicultural literature, especially aspects that may be unique to the genre that constitutes it. This is important to analyze because of the rising prevalence of multi-cultural literature in America today and distinct nuances that characterize a new American voice.

Due to focusing on the phenomenon in this way, a broadly conceived cultural studies theoretical perspective fit because I implement the combined works of such theorists as Carey and Duncan (to name a few) who see communication as the fabric of culture and symbols as the basis of social interaction. This complements the study because these theories illustrate the way that literature, composed of symbols, may translate into lived reality.

Due to my choice of theoretical perspective, I formulated the following research questions:

1. What are key expressions of identity in *Esperanza Rising* and *Becoming Naomi León*?

2. What kinds of identities are articulated through these expressions?

3. What are some key ways in which these identities suggest the particular situations/dilemmas of Latinas in the United States today regarding their relation to the United States?

Given these research questions, I conducted an extensive examination of these texts. It must also be said that my analysis methods and research interests transformed over time. In the process of study, it became clear that these texts might give rise to information about not simply identity and gender portrayed in the novels, but give us clues as to some common threads that compose sectors of multicultural literature.

Through the process of analysis, I found that the issues of identity and redemption are particularly central to a study of multicultural literature and of

multiculturalism in general. Identity (how individuals conceive of themselves and in relation to others) and redemption (how the value and legitimacy of an individual life might be redeemed in the sense of becoming recognized and justified) are central points of contention both in socio-cultural realities of multiculturalism and in their representation. Thus, I conducted an analysis of the two novels *Esperanza* and *Naomi* in terms of how they intersect with and articulate with theories and practices of identity construction and of striving to reconcile oneself with one's history seen here as the goal of a secular redemption.

Key findings regarding the representation of identity coincide with findings of contemporary studies of migration and identity which portray identity in hybridized terms. Of key relevance to this thesis is the distinction between conceptions of identity as more or less fixed, intrinsic to a person or passively bestowed upon them by a location, to a more or less fluid, cultural active process – the product of an interaction between person, culture, and place.

As portrayed in the two novels, identity representations are consistent with more recent scholarly studies. Identities are portrayed as fluid and dynamic; they are multiple, not singular, and shot through with contradictions. The novels are rife with examples of identity shifts, attitude changes, external changes that affect internal differences, and many others. Such representations may serve as a means of freeing one from the necessity of fitting narrowly construed stereotypes of equally narrowly construed and static identities. These novels affirm space given in society for people to be human and faulted; developing expectations that are more realistic, not simply black and white rules sketched out on a sheet of paper.

While the significance of identity stems from its centrality to the socio-cultural phenomenon, a second focus is on the basic structure in which stories that deal with an aspect of multiculturalism are written. The genre of redemption is found to be extremely useful for an analysis of multicultural literature. Tales of redemption are particularly relevant to the narrativization of migration in that a journey—often both geographic as well as cultural—figures centrally in them. Compared to the classical narrative, the modern narrative of redemption is usually a story of perseverance and hope rather than one that assures utopia.

One key way in which characters are redeemed is directly addressed by representations of agency, in the sense that greater agency means achieving greater control over one's life. As one aspect of agency is self-awareness, it became important to understand the degree to which the main characters become more self-aware of their decisions and actions that form their lives.

Here I examined decision-making and agency in the characters lives. Through analysis, I found that neither girls' actions are ever entirely their own. Their decisions are influenced by those around them, and are more the response to necessity than a particular directed and intentional action. However, this reduced sense of agency changed in crucial situations.

I also found that agency was gendered in some important ways. In *Naomi*, and in contrast to the largely central female characters, men do not make concrete decisions for her every day, as the women in her life do. However, at the same time, male guidance often seems to inspire her more. While male influences seem to be fewer,

they carry greater significance. The agency attributed to the main characters demonstrates a self-aware ability to direct their own lives, even though it is often based upon advice of others. To the extent that they are women, this works contrary to a common feature of women being directed largely by men and is an important divergence that constitutes multicultural literature.

Other more direct ways of discovering and exercising agency as a way of redeeming themselves in the narrative are similarly compromised and complex in terms of gender. Characters take on a masculine roles to exercise agency, but hybridize it with feminine aspects or act in more conventionally feminine ways. To the extent that characters rely on traditional female capabilities to exercise direct agency, this is also a constitutive exception to the traditional gendered depiction of agency. This exception helps characterize multicultural literature.

In addition to representations of agency, a second key way in which characters are redeemed is directly addressed by representations of the journey they take. Characters not only change geographic locations but also self-perceptions in the spaces that they occupy. The geographical journey they take is circular or periodic, rather than linear. No consistent correspondence exists between a particular place and stage of the journey, whether origin, destination, or temporary way-station. In both novels, the process of self-discovery is not consistently tied to the journey stage of the story, nor is it linked to a specific country.

We also see the main characters in both novels grappling with the reality of hybridized border zones. The borderlands occupied by these women are often more

emotional and social than geographic. Not only is the nature of border zones central to the journeys of each character, the cultural hybridity of the circuit constituted by Mexico and the United States is also demonstrated by the presence of Mexican influences in the United States and American influences in Mexico. This is especially clear in the girls' lives socially and emotionally.

This analysis suggests two key components of the structure of multicultural literature that mark it as innovative and distinct. To the extent that the narratives of these two novels exemplify the generic structure of multicultural literature, one unique facet of the genre is the consistent role of the family, including very extended family and close friends that are considered family. Where the emergence of conventionally American agency is often represented by the shedding of the limitations and restrictions of family, these two novels represent family as not only central throughout, but as an aid to the exercise of individual agency instead of impediments.

The second key component of multicultural literature suggested by this analysis is in terms of the representation of redemption. The main characters in these novels overcome language barriers, huge cultural disparities, and more transitional troubles all the while dealing with typical human emotions of relationship difficulties and teenage angst. These aspects unfold as a process, not as a tale with a clear beginning and end. This is indeed a different redemption, but one that is becoming more prevalent in the story of America.

Implications of Study

This study suggests some unique attributes of Latino multicultural novels for girls. Primarily, both stories place great emphasis on family values and the positive role of family influence. Ironically, the girls in these stories value their families above all else, despite their family situations causing them great difficulty. The positive centrality of family in multicultural literature seems in strong contrast to teenage literature that may not be classified as “multicultural.” Often, in adolescent novels, parents are shown either as dupes or as entirely absent. This feature suggests the value placed on family ties in Latino culture. Ironically, it also serves as a foil to compare the status of American family culture. In a sense, it prompts the reader to examine his or her conception of family.

Multicultural literature also seems to challenge the established culture and established experience, among other things. It must here be noted that I am American, so my reading of multicultural literature reflects a reading of difference. Perhaps if I were not American, multicultural literature would challenge nothing in my way of thinking and living. However, I believe that multicultural literature gives voice to an alternative way that inspires introspection and examination of the way that things are run. It may well be, that the men and women who write multicultural literature are bright and challenge the establishment in their own lives—those who are content with the status quo may not feel the need to write.

Multicultural literature not only challenges traditional ideals, but it highlights and points to injustice and social ills in the world. Of course, the novels range in depth of

discussion of these issues. Some of the novels simply state corrupt actions as a fact. Perhaps a character in the book is sexually assaulted—this experience is used to demonstrate the depravity of society. However, it may also be portrayed as a simple fact of life with which one must tolerate, and overcome to continue in life.

In contrast to the more subtle illustrations of amorality, authors not only show readers an offense of which they may not be aware, but also prompt their characters to address it verbally. For instance, in many books, characters discuss racial and ethnic discrimination. Other books discuss political issues or unrest, and its prevalence, both past and present, in their countries of origin. Yet again, these novels not only offer a personal perspective—a person with a name and a face with which we may identify, but also broaden horizons and give food for thought. In some ways, these novels invite discussion and demand a response.

More generally speaking, multicultural literature seems in some ways not so distinctive at all, in the sense that it is the personification of the human struggle. Consistently, the experience in multicultural stories is one of hardship: financial, internal, physical. In reality, every story involving a man or woman is a story of labor—of a person scrambling to overcome circumstances.

The human story is portrayed in an extremely real and relatable way in multicultural literature. While this cannot be said for all multicultural literature, it seems that many such pieces are written from an immensely personal and intimate place. Most multicultural literature is framed as if a memoir, with the characters relaying details of their lives, from miniscule to more substantial. This approach makes the characters more engaging. The reader feels empathy and carries more of the characters' emotion.

This is particularly an interesting phenomenon for readers whose lives maintain very different backgrounds from the characters. This emotional common ground allows the reader to understand more readily when the circumstances or life place may be completely alien. This fact, coupled with the genre of redemption, makes multicultural literature even more a paragon for the human struggle – seemingly developing a new archetype for the American novel, with a new coming-of-age, and new struggle to belong, but carrying the same current of sentiment.

Lastly, I would argue that multicultural literature at its face invites self-evaluation. Admittedly, such self-evaluation is completely dependent upon the reader.
Any novel may be read on a surface level or with more depth. When faced with challenges to traditional ways of thinking, attention to societal ills, and perhaps identification with a character much different than oneself, it seems difficult to walk away without thinking.

Suggestions for future research

Here I offer some ways that the study might be enhanced or extended. These novels are rich texts that may be studied in a variety of ways. Future studies could interview Ryan, the author, to further understand what messages and broad themes she intended to communicate. Similarly, an interview with a teacher in whose classroom the novel is being read might be valuable, to ascertain the way that students interact with such literature.

Future studies in the same vein might inject more life (i.e. human feedback) into their studies, more understanding of how people interact with multicultural literature.

Perhaps a focus group—one group of ethnically diverse people and another focus group with homogenous characteristics—could be valuable for ascertaining people's thoughts on multicultural literature.

This is in many ways a pilot study, which represents fertile ground for variations and derivations. One such idea that would be extremely interesting, although time intensive, would be to set up a weekly reading group composed of young girls, ideally both Latina and other ethnicities. The students could read the book on their own time or in their classroom during reading time, and then every week the group could meet for a discussion to understand more fully the way that girls regard themselves in relation to the characters and the narrative.

Another interesting spin on the study would be to take a group of female immigrants, perhaps a group of women that are learning to perfect English. The novel could be used as literature in an ESOL program for adults or high school students and then have discussion in both English and Spanish about their interactions with the novels.

A further study that seems of interest would be to compare either *Esperanza* or *Naomi* to a classic redemption tale, for example *The Wizard of Oz*, *Les Miserables*, or another multicultural book, perhaps of a non-Latino culture to see if the redemptive model is still useful in making sense of a wider variety of what could be considered multicultural literature.

The final option that I propose is a study that specifically looks at the characterization of Latino girls, contrasting one of the girls from Ryan's books with a prevalent Latina personality on television, a cartoon character or not. This study would

be particularly interesting because it examines the variation in values emitted by television versus those put forth in books. The study could also contrast readership versus viewership in attempts to ascertain the reach of each portrayal. If time allowed, a panel discussion with girls who watched and read both materials would round out the study nicely.

In any case, the study of multicultural literature certainly should continue. As people with varied experiences continue to populate our country, their voices deserve to be heard and understood.

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