

Southern New Hampshire University

Latina Voices, the Immigrant Experience and the Missing Stories in American Literature

A Capstone Project Submitted to the College of Online and Continuing Education in Partial  
Fulfillment of the Master of Arts in English

By

Crista Camacho

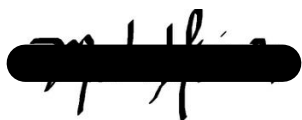
Santa Fe Springs, California

March 2022



Student: Crista Camacho

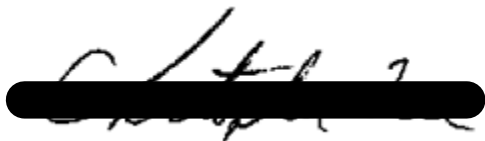
I certify that this student has met the requirements for formatting the capstone project and that this project is suitable for preservation in the University Archive.



\_\_\_\_\_  
Capstone Instructor

3/17/22.

Date



\_\_\_\_\_  
Southern New Hampshire University  
College of Online and Continuing Education

3/17/22

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

### Abstract

Latina/Chicana stories in American literature are important to understand contemporary America as a multicultural society. However, Chicana/Latina literature is not considered part of mainstream American literature. Previous papers regarding this topic have brought up challenges that Latina/Chicana literature confronted in the space of American literature. The absence of Latina/Chicana stories in American life has affected the development of immigrants and their children's identity. This paper explores and suggests the importance of Latina/Chicana stories in America from the perspective of Chicana/Latina writers. Looking at the text through Feminist and Marxist lenses highlights the problems that ultimately marginalize Latina/Chicana writers. Their stories are rooted in economic and gender inequalities in America and in their countries of Origin/Heritage. The Autoethnography method provides the narrative of the author's personal experience as a Latina/Chicana developing her identity as a guiding point to display the need of advancing the growth of multicultural American literature.

Keywords: identity, Autoethnography, Chicana/Latina, multicultural America, Feminist theory, Marxist theory

## *Introduction*

I was born in Mexico and I became an American citizen after years of struggle and hard work. I like to tell my children (who were born and raised in America) that I feel like I am more American than them. Because I chose to immigrate to the United States of America, it was my choice to become an American citizen; they were just lucky to be born in America. However, there has always been a disconnection with our Latino heritage. There were no stories from people like us who were either born or raised here with a Latino family, or became American citizens due to their love of this country. We felt isolated and it was hard to feel like we belong to the country that we grew to love. It is possible that what people generally classify as “American Literature,” does not always show the full spectrum of all American voices. Many voices lack recognition in American literature, and some of those voices are Latina.

Furthermore, the Latina voices who tell the stories of the other “America”, such as the stories of migrant workers who harvest the food that overflow American tables. According to Gallego, “One of the most important themes in Chicano/a migrant literature is of course the treatment of migration itself . . .existential displacement. In most cases travel is a matter of life or death, whether in terms of finding work or simply surviving the ordeal of crossing the border” (29). It is important to note that those stories are missing from the mainstream American literature taught in American schools and to American children. I still remember my first year of college; I had the worst experience writing my first paper regarding a story that represented me. I love to read, but none of the stories (English language) in the library represented me. There was no internet at that time, so research took place in the library. The larger the library, the better chance there was to find a variety of books. However, in my case it was a nightmare. I tried to choose from the classics in the Hispanic world: Cervantes, Jose Marti, Gabriela Mistral,

but none of them portrayed my identity. I realized that I was not American, nor Mexican, my identity was a mix of both. In addition to the many cultural traits of other Latin American countries that I had adopted along the way. At that time, while having a rough experience, I made the choice of becoming fully American by reading only English authors and popular American magazines. I even changed my name to the Americanized version, instead of Crista I became Christine. I neglected my heritage because there was nothing to nurture it. I became a whitewashed version of myself.

Then came the day when my daughter arrived home from school and asked me, “Mom what color am I? I have to draw myself, but my skin is not white, pink, black, or brown. There are no crayons with my color” (Camacho). It was at that moment that I realized the importance of Latina/Chicana role models; even in a tray of crayons, we did not have a place in the educational system in America. Latina/o children, teenagers and adults need to have literature that reflects their life’s stories and present role models who are like them. They need to read, write and see stories about people who want to improve their lives and who are successful at it. There is no wonder that some of the Latina stories express, “openly political and economic concerns . . . about the poverty, exploitation, violence, and humiliation inflicted yearly on farmworkers in the United States” (Lopez 2). These stories come from writers who are the daughters of immigrants, which is important to note because a great majority of immigrants are part of that working force. The parents of many Latina writers have experienced those working conditions, thus American literature needs to recognize and promote those stories as a part of America. In the quest for recognition, Latina writers such as Helena Maria Viramontes had to emphasize the social inequalities that minorities confront every day in their lives. They talk about American people who are invisible to society, unless they stir trouble. Then they become

visible and need to be silenced. Latina stories are needed in order to display positive aspects of the Latino/Chicano culture. Chicana/o children need to see themselves in successful, positive role models from the same cultural background. These stories are needed to bring forward social justice for the Latinos who live in America.

Furthermore, it is interesting to note that female, American writers have experienced a great deal of discrimination and ostracizing. When it came to their narratives and their place in American literature, Latina writers experienced these effects even more. Many Latina voices represent a hidden part of America. Such as the immigrant woman and her daughters who are American by birth or by choice, yet they are rarely acknowledged as part of mainstream America. Their stories are not considered an important part of the narrative that compiles American literature. If they are not considered American enough, then it leads to being discounted as “exotic” and trivial. However, their stories are a big part of American culture. They are the stories of the Latinas/Chicanas who take care of children, cook, clean, work in the fields, work in the factories, and work as babysitters and maids to the white hegemony of America. Their stories are necessary to inspire other Latina women to reach their full potential, and to help American society see them as important contributors to their cultural backgrounds. These stories need to be shared with the rest of the country to show a different part of America. The part full of minorities who are also an important part of the country because they are also living and working Americans.

Latina writers expound on universal themes of love, suffering, growing up, endurance, and resilience in their narratives. Themes that are relatable and show different aspects of the American experience from their unique Latina perspectives. However, there is a history of discrimination and discouragement of Latinas writing about their own personal experiences. An

article published by the scholarly journal *Mujeres Activas en Letras y Cambio Social* (MALCS) addressed the issue as follows, “Many women were warned against writing and publishing essays based on their personal experiences because it would not be marked as intellectual scholarship” (Chang et al. 125). This could be the reason why I struggled to find Latina writers who were easy to identify as American writers in the early 1990’s. It could have been that their manuscripts were rejected and edited to the point that they lost their Latina essence, which shows the reality of the female Latino/Chicano community. The Latina/Chicana writer who is a part of an exploited community is battling an uphill battle to get her manuscripts published. Could this be the reason for the lack of Latina stories in American literature?

### ***Defining Latina and Chicana***

Defining the concept of Latina/Chicana is a priority to understand the context for the need of these stories in mainstream American literature. Primarily, who or what is a Latina/o? What is the difference between Chicana/o and Latina/o? According to Exploratorium.edu a document in the Embracing Diversity.us website,

Chicano/Chicana someone who is native of, or descends from, Mexico and who lives in the United States . . . Latino/Latina someone who is native of, or descends from, a Latin American country . . . Latinx a gender-neutral term to refer to a Latino/Latina person. This term comes from American-born Latinos/Latinas who want to be more inclusive and gender neutral (2).

Thus, the terms vary according to the group of people who uses the terms and their perception of each term. Some people will embrace the term Chicano/a as their cultural identity aligns closer to the Mexican culture. While others will embrace the term Latino/a as part of a larger cultural community.



However, the term Latino/Latina/Latinx best represents the group of people this paper will explore. Mexico is a Latin American country and the term covers a larger number of countries besides Mexico. Furthermore, a larger number of people favor the term Latino/a/x when it comes to their identity. Professor Emerita of Spanish and award winner writer Nina M. Scott writes, “The cultural, linguistic and racial heritage of Latinos differs greatly. In the multiple forms of marginalization [including] sexual discrimination” (58). In many cases, being a Latina decreases the chance of getting a job, a promotion or just a fair hearing at courts. All of those things had happened to me. I was teaching at a predominantly Latino/Chicano school at one of the lowest income communities in Los Angeles. The percentage of Latino students was 95%. However, the percentage of Latino teachers was less than 5%. There was a constant change of teachers who would work there for a couple of years and then move to other schools. Few teachers lasted more than five years and most were white teachers who were part of programs such as teaching for America or similar. The students were not able to relate to them or to see them as role models because there was a cultural disconnect. They needed teachers who were able to provide them with stories that reflected their own lives and their parents’ lives. However, that was not the case at that school. The principal spoke Spanish but did not understand the culture. The moment a White teacher from Texas asked for my teaching position as English teacher, the principal gave my job to him. The children stopped reading Helena Viramontes and other Chicano writers because according to the new teacher “those writers were not American.” When I refuted that falsehood saying that they were American born and their writings were in English, his answer was “No, they are not American, they are just immigrants.” It is at this point that I began to understand the value of Latina/o/Chicana/o writers and their stories as part of American literature, because we are American and not “just immigrants.”

### *Latina Writers Diversifying America*

Latina writers portray the American experience in their literary works and those works are important to understand contemporary America as a multicultural society. They need to be explored in-depth in order to achieve a society who seeks moving towards adopting perspectives that are more equitable. Latina writers provide a rich and complex narrative that deals with a segment of the American population that is often dismissed as foreign. However, they are also American and their experiences are part of what makes America a strong multicultural place. Latina writers have often been criticized for expressing their ideas with political undercurrents. According to critics, stories like Helena Viramontes novel *Under the Feet of Jesus* discuss, “more openly political and economic concerns in telling a story about the poverty, exploitation, violence, and humiliation inflicted yearly on farmworkers in the United States by capitalistic agribusiness” (Lopez 2). This is not surprising. The Latina writer’s narrative forms into the shape of political/economic concerns because there are so many cases of this story occurring with immigrants in the real world.

Furthermore, Latina writers are able to create literary works that depict realistic characters who are an important part of the Latino/Chicano/American culture. These characters portray the other part of American society. The people who enhance the multicultural identity of America. However, the hegemony that controls America do not understand how important those stories are for America. There is fear of those characters and the important roles they play in making America a great country. It is possible that those writers are exposing the exploitation that takes place in America by the capitalistic greed of very few, but very powerful billionaires. Latina writers expose the way American born Latina/o children grew up doubting their American birthright. Manzella writes alluding to Viramontes characters,

Unable to determine if she [Estrella] 'safe' she runs away even though she is a U.S. citizen; she knows her raced body is seen as criminal and therefore must be kept moving . . . all of Viramontes's Chicana/o characters . . . feel the ongoing pressure to repeatedly prove their legal identity . . . traveling is less about destination and more about a sense of belonging, legality, and identity (166).

It is a fact that Latina writers' characters are portraying the reality of what is life as an American born minority. The hegemony influence keeps them away from their rights as American citizens. In their minds, they are not American; in their hearts, they feel the rejection of a society that exploits and uses them to complete the hardest jobs until they are no longer useful. If they dare to protest, they become criminals and the number of obstacles that they have to overcome in order to survive drives them and their children to the sidelines of American society. They do not have a choice. Either they renounce their Latina/Chicana identity to try to be "fully" American or they become outsiders and lose privileges such as higher education, better job promotions and living spaces. This happened to me when I tried to rent an apartment at a predominantly White neighborhood that was close to the college that I wanted to attend. I saw the "Now Renting" sign and I went to ask for a renter's application. After talking to me, the manager told me, "I will give you the application, but don't bother to bring it back because we don't want your kind here. You will only bring crime to our complex." Needless to say that on that day, I had my experience in American discrimination. A few months later, I was back at that apartment complex and I was welcomed because I was cleaning two of the units there. So working for the people there was fine, but trying to live there was not. At that moment, I felt just like Estrella, Viramontes' Character in the Novel *Under the Feet of Jesus*, rejected, fearful and like a criminal. I thought that there was something seriously wrong with me and I wanted to change it. Too bad that my

cultural heritage, my physical features and my lovely accent are not easy to change. Years later, I became glad that I could not change them. There is nothing wrong with me, but there is a lot of misunderstanding regarding diverse and multicultural America. Latina/Chicana writers need to pave the way to integrate our stories into mainstream American literature. The more our stories are read; the better our cultural heritage will be understood. It is a fact that fear arises from the lack of knowledge and understanding of other ideas and perspectives. Thus, the more Latina/Chicana stories published and explored will lead to more acceptance America will have for multiculturalism.

### ***The “Other” Latina Experience in America-Mi Historia***

As a young teenage Latina woman, who arrived to the United States speaking very little English, the only jobs that I could get were in factories or in the domestic field. Just like the character of Estrella in Viramontes’ story, I was feeling wonder and fear at the same time. Growing up, my barn was the city. I found a job at a factory where I was embroidering emblems for big brands of sports and fashion merchandise. My salary was below minimum wage and the working conditions were not great. I was aware of my circumstances as an immigrant and I was happy to have a job to pay rent and food. However, I wanted to improve myself to find better opportunities than what the factory had to offer. While working at night in the factory, I was taking English classes at the local high school during the day. I wanted to go to college in order to get a better life. However, once the manager discovered that I was taking classes, he transferred me to the morning shift. I told him that I wanted to stay in the night shift so I could keep working and studying, but he just told me, “You have to choose work or school. Besides, how many women like you (meaning Latina immigrant) do you know that go to college?” At that time, I was given a choice to either continue my education or to keep my job and give up my

dream. I had decided to look for another job that allowed me to keep going to school. It was hard labor. I used to see some of the emblems that I had embroidered at the factory, displayed at the stores, costing more than what I made in two weeks at that job. So effectively, I was poor, exploited and humiliated by the Capitalistic, textile business. Still, to this day, there are no stories that tell my experience in the factories. There was no Viramontes writing my story for my children to read at school. My story could have helped shape the identity of many Chicanas who fail to see that there is more to being a Latina woman in America.

Even though Viramontes' story talks about the life of Chicanas in the agricultural business, the experiences with any other business that exploit Latinas are the same. Viramontes writes, "Estrella was no more than four when she first accompanied the mother to the fields" (51). It is common to see immigrant Latinas taking their children to work with them or leaving them under the care of other Latinas. That was my case as a young mother. My daughter was a few months old when I was forced to look for a job in order to provide for my new family. Since I did not have anyone that could take care of my baby, I looked for a job as a baby sitter. I was lucky enough to find a job taking care of two White children and cleaning their home. I loved that job because I was able to take care of my child while I was earning a living. Once again, my new boss discovered that I was studying and questioned the futility of doing that. She told me that I was not paying enough attention to her children, that the house was not clean enough and the food lacked flavor. However, she was afraid of losing me once I had completed my degree. She was exploiting me by forcing me to do the job of three people with the salary of half a person. I felt like I was just an object to be bought, used and discarded. Once again, I was forced to choose between a job and an education. I was able to finish my certification as a cosmetologist and I left babysitting to start cutting hair at a small shop that allowed me to take my daughter

with me. However, the pay was bad as I only got paid 40% of each service that I provided. A haircut cost 7 dollars and I only got 2.8 dollars per haircut. Some days there were no customers, and other days I was so depressed when I recognize that my toddler was playing amongst the freshly cut hair that supported my family. I cried so much during that time, the humiliation that I was suffering was painful. The way my child was growing up was not healthy, but I felt that I did not have other options at that time. I was not working at a farm, but the capitalistic beauty business was taking advantage of my hunger and my need to survive.

Moreover, I could ask the question again: where was the story of my American journey in the books that the library had available to read? Where is the story of Chicanas/Latinas who survive, thrive and succeed? Gallego writes:

One of the most important themes in Chicano/a migrant literature is of course the treatment of migration itself . . . Chicano/a migrant narratives . . . are more preoccupied with the adversities associated with geographic and existential displacement. In most cases, travel is a matter of life or death, whether in terms of finding work or simply surviving (29).

It should not come as a surprise that Capitalistic greed takes advantage of the delicate condition of Latina immigrants; they exploit them while fattening their purses at the cost of the immigrants' toil. In addition, their behavior of abusing the immigrant workers adds salt into an open wound. The Latina/Chicana story is never told and her existence and valuable additions to society are not acknowledged by society or history, much less in American literature. It is important to recognize the fact that as a Chicana/Latina/immigrant, I am appreciated and welcomed by the American hegemony as long as I am working the jobs that benefit them. Such as, cleaning their houses, taking care of their children, cooking for them, serving them, slaving at

their factories and having children that will perform the same jobs. Many times, I was too tired from working and studying, but I still had to take the time to make sure my children were doing their homework and to give them quality time. I did that because I was educating myself and I was educating them too. I was reading about childhood development and I was taking classes and doing research to help my second child who was diagnosed with autism. I was told not to talk to him in Spanish because the therapy that he needed to help him was only provided in English. As a result, he began to lose part of his heritage at a young age. In Viramontes' story, when Alejo needs to go to the hospital, Estrella decides to take matters into her own hands and fight back the abuse by other people who saw them as less than human and who only wanted to take advantage of them. (144-150) I wish I had read a book with a story of a strong Latina woman who knew how to fight back and successfully raise her children. I did not have those role models, not even in a fictional world. The literature that I was exposed to was not something that I could picture myself as being part of the story. All the stories were of white Americans or Europeans, their cultural traits did not exist in my heritage. I felt that I did not belong in those stories. As a reader, I visualized the images that the stories were portraying and many times, I was not able to picture them. I tried to read Spanish books, but there were few and the cultural traits portrayed in them were already foreign to me. I was not White American enough, but I was no longer Mexican either. I had become a Chicana with experiences that were not portrayed in any book. I read the story of Cesar Chavez, but it did not resonate with me because I never worked in the farms. I felt empathy for the migrant workers suffering and I even stopped buying produce from big corporations, but there was not a single story that portrayed me.

However, after reflecting many times under the stars while working a graveyard shift at a hamburger place, I realized many important things about who I was and where I was going. As a

Chicana/Latina, the moment I decided to educate myself to provide my children with a better life and better opportunities, I am no longer appreciated or welcomed by the white hegemony. The moment I try to grab my agency, I am forced to choose between surviving or thriving. I am accused of not being American enough. I am denied promotions and robbed of opportunities and progress. Then at the end of the day, I had just become a “job-stealing immigrant” in the eyes of the hegemony. Stealing jobs that nobody wants and that few people are willing to perform. The irony is not lost on me.

Furthermore, the characters of Viramontes story *Under the Feet of Jesus* offer a perspective on the working climate of America, as they narrate their experiences that could be reflected in the life of any Latina/o immigrant. Freitas writes, “[Estrella] Jesu Crista does not offer herself as a symbol of sacrifice but of justice . . . Estrella is transformed into an icon . . . witnessing beyond the text into the human struggle for justice on Earth” (361). Estrella, the American daughter of immigrants, the Chicana, the Latina who has experienced the struggle of being treated as less than human. The young woman, to whom the opportunities of progress had been denied, speaks to me and others like me. The Latinas/Chicanas who keep trying to better themselves and keep fighting to have their stories printed in the books that their children read. They need to be recognized as trailblazers in the creation of American multicultural society. Thus bringing justice to all the people who have enhanced American society with their sweat and toil.

### ***The Latina/Chicana Teacher and I***

I have an accent and many times I have been either insulted or had my intelligence questioned because of it. During the early years of my teaching career, I was teaching AP English Literature. A parent complained to the principal that I was not a good teacher for her son



because of my accent. She was insistent that my accent was the reason her son was failing my class. He was failing because he did not do his work, nor did he complete his readings and he was often absent from class. She came to a parent conference that I requested to advise her about the possibility of her son failing my class and to offer tutoring and support. She insulted me and complained that I was not a good teacher just after asking me where I came from. Once again, I ask where is that story in the books my children read that help shape the identity of American people. Those stories are not only mine. There are many other Latinas/Chicanas living those stories doubting themselves and their identities because they feel alone and rejected by American society.

It has become evidently clear that the stories Latina/Chicana writers share possess political undercurrents. They protest the failure of American literature to nurture and provide incentives to highlight the Latina/Chicana American stories. The stories that are happening to the newest generation of immigrants. Freitas writes:

Depicting Estrella as an agent of change reflects the historical reality that women are usually leaders in the struggle for environmental justice. While environmental movements have often focused on wilderness and wildlife preservation and conservation, and have been dominated by upper-class white men, environmental justice activists are predominantly poor women of color who possess first-hand experiential knowledge of racist toxicity, and therefore understand the profound connectedness between human beings and the spaces we inhabit (362).

It is possible that women, like myself, are becoming the agents of change who will help bring equality into American society by acting as conduits of multicultural knowledge. As a teacher, I am able to share my story even if it is not written anywhere. By sharing it, I offer my students

the opportunity to compare, contrast and question other stories that highlight the Latina/Chicana experience in America.

### ***Female Icons in Chicana/Latina Literature***

It is important to note that Latina stories are not only for the significance in describing the immigrant experience as part of American history and literature. They are important to share the lore, icons and mythology that infuse the inspiration behind those stories. Icons such as La Virgen de Guadalupe, who represents motherhood and love. La Malinche, who represents feminist traits and leadership. La Llorona, who represents independence and stubbornness. These icons display a heavy influence in Latina writers. Schroff writes,

Because of the expectations for their sex, Mexican women writers lacked access to the institutions and social groups that produced (male) intellectuals . . . women's confinement to certain roles . . . that correspond to mythologies surround the Virgin of Guadalupe, la Llorona, and la Malinche. In order to 'provide a methodology to read women's textual production within their cultural context' . . . in order to claim single motherhood as a proper and desirable way to parent, as well as constructing the mother figure as a historian (187).

This is an interesting and important perspective from the icons that inspire the Latina writers, beginning with the Mexican women who have pioneered the feminist literature. As part of their contribution to Global literature, they serve as inspiration to Latina/Chicana writers when the time comes for them to tell their stories. The Chicana writer infuses her stories with a heavy dose of lore that creates a connection between the American experience, their Mexican heritage and their Chicana/Latina identity. There is no surprise that every morning I bless my children and I ask La Virgen de Guadalupe to watch over them. I had several images of her at home. I

see her as the sole savior of the indigenous people of Mexico, because the Spaniards were very close to eliminating all of them. Until the Virgen de Guadalupe's appearance to an indigenous man brought peace amongst both cultures. It was an easy deal; the virgin looked like the indigenous person who witnessed the miracle. She was dark skinned with dark eyes and brimming with indigenous symbolism such as the mantle. According to Johann Rotten, "The predominant color in the image's mantle is turquoise, the blue-green color reserved for the great god Omecihuatl . . . a mother –father god" (1). Such an important icon that has a large historical influence in the Latin American culture was bound to have a great influence in the Chicana/Latina writers' stories.

Furthermore, I tell my children the scary story of La Llorona, "The wailing woman, is a Mexican folktale that has haunted children for centuries . . . Chicana writers have revised the myth of La Llorona with a feminist perspective" (Barret 1). I use it as a cautionary tale, but also as a reminder that actions bring consequences. I feel inspired by her tale of desperation to seek emotional and economic freedom and never depend on a man for my happiness. I also feel a connection with La Malinche, the indigenous woman who was a translator for Hernan Cortez the Conquistador. She was strong enough to defy her own people and her heritage to find a better life and to see her own progress and happiness. Even at the cost of some people calling her a traitor for consorting with the Spanish conquistadores. It is important to notice the similarities that, as a writer, I see with these icons. The result of cultivating my heritage thru the reading of stories by Latina/Chicana writers as well as researching on the topic of Latina/Chicana literature. However, all that acquisition of pride in my heritage happened as an adult already attending graduate school for the first time.

### ***Becoming a Chicana/Latina Teacher***

At the time, I was just happy to feel a sense of belonging to a group and a sense of pride in my heritage. Then, I realized that young Latina/Chicana students needed to experience the same exhilaration that I had found. That there are role models to follow and icons that look like them, and most importantly, they validate their identities in their stories. It was at this point in my life that getting my teaching credential became my priority. I was already a mother and my children were already learning the value of the Chicana/Latina heritage as part of becoming Americans in our own terms. Seltzer and De Los Rios write,

In 2014, our nation's public school-aged population became composed of a majority students of color . . . Amid these demographic shifts, fervent white nationalism, religious and linguistic intolerance, xenophobia, racism, and heterosexist discourses characterize our current sociopolitical environment. These forces are, without a doubt, shaping the landscape of learning, and literacy learning in particular. Ironically . . . the 'white listening subject' that continues to shape the educational experiences and identities of students of color in the United States (49).

It was studies like this that made me see the importance of achieving a teaching career. When I was fighting to get a teaching credential, the information that eventually shaped studies like this, was the experience that I had to live. I still remember the day of my interview to get my acceptance in the credentialing program at a state University in California. It was the late 1990's and the panel was mainly composed of old White men. It was such an intimidating experience. I still remember that a few days later, I got a letter telling me that I was rejected entry to the credentialing program. It did not say the reason and I was very sad and upset. However, I wanted to know the reason behind the rejection, as my grades and portfolios were great. It did not make sense to me that I was rejected. I went to the director of the program and after a few

hours waiting to speak to her, she received me and took out my file with the results of the interview. Her answer to my question was, “You have been denied entrance to the teaching credentialing program because according to the panel, your accent is too thick and might impede your teaching of young students.” I was totally incensed and furious, but at the time, I was afraid of calling this insult “discrimination.” Since there was so much at stake, I decided to fight with facts. I registered myself in Spring classes of accent reduction at the community college. I talked to the professor about my problem and she was mad on my behalf. She wrote a letter to the director of the teaching credentialing program explaining how my “accent” will not be a problem for teaching. I finished my classes and I went back for a second interview. This time, with my grades from the accent reduction classes and letters of recommendation from a couple of female teachers (one with Greek heritage and the other one who was born and raised in Puerto Rico). Needless to say, I was accepted into the program. A year later, I became a teacher with a preliminary teaching credential that quickly became a clear credential and then three more additional subject credentials. Soon, I noticed the need for more Chicana/Latina teachers; many times, I was the only Latina/Chicana teacher in a school with 95% Latino population. Where were those kids supposed to find their identity? Unless those kids were taking AP Literature, their exposure to Latina writers was very limited and even worse; their access to role models who looked like them or were familiar with their culture was severely limited. As a teacher, I began to include Chicana/Latina literature in my lessons. However, many times, I was told not to teach Chicana/Latina stories unless they were part of the prescribed curriculum. I kept on going and the result was a group of well-rounded individuals who are proud of their heritage and making a difference in their communities. However, I was only able to reach a small group of kids. I kept wondering about all the other Latina/o/Chicana/o kids who did not have literary role

models. Writers who wrote the stories of their families, the farm, the factory, the discrimination, the journey crossing the border, and the living conditions of several families sharing a two-bedroom apartment. So many stories that the mainstream population does not get to experience.

My career as a teacher has been full of difficulties. However, one thing is for certain, I will never get pay enough for the job that I love. I work a great deal of extra hours. I use a lot of my own money buying things for my classroom. Nevertheless, I do it because I love my students. They make my days better and full of purpose. I had a great rapport with all of them, even the occasional “trouble maker.” I tend to be a popular teacher with the students, but not because I am the best teacher. It is because I understand their culture, their struggles, their families, and their immigration status. Most of the time, I understand their language. Seltzer and De Los Rios write, “Teachers must be prepared to interrogate the ideologies that shape their beliefs about language . . . language must be understood as social practice that shapes and is shaped by interaction” (53). That is the reason that students enjoy working with teachers who understand their culture and read the writers who write about stories that reflect their own lives. They can put into words their own feelings and communicate with the same ideas. The first time I shared a short story by Helena Viramontes with my senior students, they were deeply engaged by the use of words that they knew and the events in the story were similar to events that happened in their lives, or to people who they knew. Therefore, they began to identify with the story and the writer. The girls were in awe of the fact that the writer was Latina/Chicana and I noticed that the first story spark interest in other stories, until we began reading *Under the Feet of Jesus*. It was in this story that many of the girls identified with Estrella, one of the main characters in the story. The traits that they admired were not that she was living in a farm or that she was a migrant worker, but they admired the idea that she was much like them. Estrella spoke

like them, fell in love with a guy who looks like the guys in their neighborhood, and she got in trouble like them. Estrella shares the same cultural traits as the students who were reading her story.

***Being an American Citizen vs Feeling as an American Citizen***

One of the many issues that I notice with my students is that even though a large number of them are American born, they do not feel American. They still feel foreign and undeserving of being treated with the same respect as their White counterparts. According to Dennis Lopez, “Viramontes makes explicit early allusions to the fenced ‘boundaries’ of the US-Mexico border and its militarized state violence . . . Although Estrella is by birth a US citizen . . . her racialized social class position attenuates her relative privilege of citizenship” (9). Here is one of the reasons Chicana/Latina students feel an affinity to this story because Estrella experiences similar feelings as they do. They are American citizens by birth, yet raised in Latino households. Neither nationality accurately reflects their identity or bicultural traits. Thus making them cultural pariahs who lack guidance, role models and who are at high risk for failure. There is no doubt that the greed that permeates American society also has a big responsibility on the development of this problem. The Latina/Chicana is expected to work at factories, cleaning, serving, and doing jobs that are low paying and without benefits. Therefore, even though they are American citizens, they are still wearing a badge of second-class citizens. They can become bright professionals, but they are denied jobs because of their skin color, last name and even their home address. A Chicana/Latina Engineer will have a hard time getting a job, even if she is well qualified due to her last name or color of her skin and if she gets the job, she will be paid less and given more assignments because she already has two strikes against her; she is Chicana/Latina and she is a female. (Camacho). Then what happens to the Latina/Chicana who

is trying to find her identity along with a job and social-economic equality? Many times, she will try to whitewash herself by adopting traits from the mainstream white culture, but other times she will become a “*hocicona*.” Amanda Ellis writes,

A *hocicona* is a woman who speaks without restraints when challenging the exploitation of her people . . . often risks censorship and even physical violence when her words are considered offensive or distasteful in nature. Estrella’s discontent eventually propels her to use noise and her loud mouth to amplify her objections to her exploitation within a racialized labor force and to voice her righteous anger . . . such a practice, which Viramontes illuminates in her novel, often develops into strategies for social change and political mobilization (94).

It is interesting to note that the reading of *Under the Feet of Jesus* often brings the outrage of the reader over the plight of the novel’s characters and at the same time, it brings a sense of belonging. The Chicana/Latina students tend to identify with the characters’ struggles and traits. They are inspired by them and challenged by them too. Thus, it makes sense to expose Chicana/Latina students to this type of reading that they can relate to and that it will eventually lead them to strongly embrace their identity. Once their identity is evident, then they will be able to change the conversation and become more politically involved to bring positive changes into their communities. They will feel fully American because they will acknowledge their identity as part of a diverse America that belongs to all American citizens, regardless of their skin color, sexual orientation, country of origin, cultural heritage or religion. It is also a great idea to expose all students to this type of stories because it will also empower them to improve their understanding of other cultural traits and identities. Thus allowing for a respectful exchange of ideas and sharing of America as a multicultural country and diverse society.



*Helena Maria Viramontes A Latina/Chicana Writer*

Viramontes's literary works are full of political innuendo that criticizes, challenges and exposes the struggles that Chicano/Latina people have to overcome in order to survive.

Regardless of the setting of her stories, Viramontes portrays characters that represent the Latina/Chicana experience in a universal manner. However, they cannot thrive in an environment where there is no justice, equality and freedom. Freitas writes,

The characters (Under The Feet of Jesus) themselves are intimately aware of the environmental racism that affects every aspect of their lives . . . racist labor laws that privilege and protect white corporate farmers while sacrificing and leaving vulnerable the Latina/o migrant labors who work the land (361).

It is important to observe that politics are heavily involved in the development of laws that are supposed to protect the farm workers, their families and their incomes. However, politics tend to ignore the poor and needy. They worship the rich who are able to support their campaigns and luxurious life style. These traits make American politics a distasteful show of aggressive behavior and discriminatory practices against the people who perform the elemental jobs that sustain America's labor force. However, it is important not only for the Chicano/Latino community to have their stories shared with America. It is also a high priority for everybody else to get to know those stories in order to establish understanding, appreciation and tolerance towards other minorities in America. Freitas writes, "Depicting Estrella as an agent of change reflects the historical reality that women are usually leaders in the struggle for environmental justice. . . environmental justice activists are predominantly poor women of color" (361). It is a fact that many women of color are unsung heroes of environmental justice. They have a heavy influence on the other members of their households and communities. As a Chicana/Latina, I

witness this activism every day in my classroom from the stories my students share about the women in their lives. Mothers who encourage the use of recycling as a norm. Sisters, Aunts and ‘Comadres’ who know the dangers of working at factories with chemical products and their ‘consejos’ to avoid getting sick. As a teacher, I try to bring awareness to the multiculturalism that exist in America. In addition, I try to bring awareness regarding people from around the world and their stories as immigrants living in America. The logic behind this strategy is that the more students know about other immigrants, the more they will have the opportunity to identify themselves with other cultures and develop their identity as well-rounded, empathetic people.

Nothing is as frustrating as trying to embrace an identity that is as beautiful and elusive as a unicorn. Chicana/o identity is a strange area between being Latino and being American. They are not accepted by either culture, yet they exist as the culmination of both cultures. I have found support in the writings of Latina/Chicana writers such as Helena Viramontes. It is easier to encourage pride in something that exist as part of a writer’s narrative. It is easier to read a story that portrays main characters with the same cultural traits as the children who are reading along. It is easier to begin a discussion about characters that portray the same household rules as the students who are visualizing the story. Viramontes, by sharing her narrative, is making a difference in not only how the Latino/a children see themselves, but also making a difference in the classroom by starting a conversation about diverse backgrounds. I see students from different cultural backgrounds embracing Viramontes’ stories and engaging in the task of learning about the Latino/Chicano culture. Thus making them more tolerant and less xenophobic. It is beautiful to see them working as a team and helping each other despite the color of their skin, nationality, sexual orientation or economic status. However, the journey has not been easy. The need for finding a cultural identity that feels authentic and belonging to a proud cultural

group still persists today. This group has earned their place in American society by hard work, skills and talents under the constant exploitation of the capitalistic greed that takes advantage of their dreams of freedom and justice in the biggest democracy of the world.

### ***Conclusion***

The need for more inclusive American literature is great and of the upmost importance to enhance the constantly evolving multicultural society that is becoming America. However, it is a monumental task that is hard to achieve by only a handful of people. There is little recognition for the Latina/Chicanas who are trying to make a difference with their writings. It is significant to acknowledge that one of the hardest parts of being a Latina/Chicana American citizen is being strong enough to stand up for herself and her cultural traits. This part also becomes harder when there are no literary works that portray her heritage and pride in her ancestry to support her. It is as if she is fighting a lost battle before it had the chance to begin. It is of the upmost importance that Latina/Chicana writers' literary works are included as part of mainstream American literature. This is necessary in order to bring awareness that America is a diverse country, but it fails to embrace the rich diversity of its population. It is also important to have Latina/Chicana children engage with literature that displays a wide variety of characters reflecting their cultural traits and history as American citizens. They deserve to feel proud of the contributions that Latina culture has provided to the mainstream American society. There is a need for more stories that portray characters that are inspired by the Latino reality of our society. There is a need for more books that talk about the immigrant children who arrive alone to the U.S.A. There is a need for the stories that span their whole journey across three countries until finally arriving to their destination and needing to work in order to pay back the money they borrowed for their journey. There is a need for books about the young woman who was abused while in search of

her American dream. These stories might not seem important because they are not written by or told by the hegemony. However, these stories are the ones that need to be told in order to help students develop a strong identity and a strong sense of being American. They should not feel like they do not belong to the American community because their stories are not included in the American literature they read at school or that they have access to at the libraries.

There is no doubt that things have changed since the day I arrive to the United States of America. Now, there is a better understanding of cultural heritage and America as a diverse country. There is more recognition of the different skin colors, even with multicultural color crayons manufactured by Crayola. There seems to be more interest in recruiting Latina/Chicana teachers as part of diversification in the teaching profession. All those changes taking place encourage people like me, who have been pioneers of the movements, to achieve them. However, there is still a long way to go when it comes to include Latina/Chicana stories as part of American literature. I still want to see the stories of the women who nanny, clean houses, and work at the fast food industry. The women who raise above their circumstances and successfully complete college careers. The stories of women who teach and write. Those stories are as important as any other story. They have to be told because they are the stories of the Latinas/Chicanas who have struggled and fought for the civil rights of generations to come.

When I was in college, we did not have a D.R.E.A.M act, so the struggle was harder. However, the “lucha” was worth our time because we opened the way for other younger immigrants to have the opportunity to succeed with a college degree. The houses that I cleaned and the babies that I took care of. The hamburgers that I served and the embroidery that I completed. The children that I teach and the minds that I change will be my legacy for my community and for my beloved America. My hope is that there will be more stories about

women like me. I am sure that there is still a great need for more stories that tell our journey. There is still a great need for writers like Helena Maria Viramontes, who are able to share our Latina/Chicana culture. At the end of the day when everything has been said and done, we Latinas/Chicanas are here to make history. We are here to stay and share our stories as part of a diverse America. We are here to contribute and enhance the multiculturalism of “America the beautiful.” Our stories deserve to be told to everybody regardless of their skin color, place of origin, sexual orientation, gender or educational level. Our culture is American, but not the hegemony. We are Americans from the diverse multicultural America, the one that many people still refuse to acknowledge, but that exist with multiple stories to prove it. We just need to keep on writing them, sharing them and talking about them with everybody else.

## Works Cited

- Aldama, Frederick Luis, and Christopher González. "Reel Markers of Latinidad." *Reel Latinxs: Representation in U.S. Film and TV*, University of Arizona Press, 2019, pp. 29–56, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctvnwbz29.5>.
- Barrett, Sarah Hayley. "La Llorona as Feminist Icon." *Latino USA*, 30 Oct. 2015, <https://www.latinousa.org/2015/10/30/la-llorona-as-feminist-icon/>.
- Camacho, Itzel. *A Chicana/Latina Daughter and Engineer*. Personal Interview, 15 Jan. 2022.
- Del Río, Carmen M. "The Virgin Of Guadalupe Revisited: Religion, Culture And Sexuality In The Works Of Chicana/Latina Writers." *CLA Journal*, vol. 51, no. 1, 2007, pp. 14–25. *JSTOR*, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/44325403>.
- Ellis, Amanda. "Radical Hunger ." *Aztlan University of California, Los Angeles*, vol. 44, no. 1, 01 2019, pp. 83–110.
- Freitas, Molly J. "Jesu Crista: Symbol for a Just Future in Helena María Viramontes's Under the Feet of Jesus." *Soundings: An Interdisciplinary Journal*, vol. 101, no. 4, 2018, pp. 360–83. *JSTOR*, <https://doi.org/10.5325/soundings.101.4.0360>.
- Gray, Margaret, et al. "Immigrant Labor, Food Politics: A Dialogue between the Authors of Four Recent Books about the Food System." *Gastronomica*, vol. 17, no. 1, University of California Press, 2017, pp. 1–14, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/26362414>.
- Harris, Sharon M. "Whose Past Is It? Women Writers in Early America." *Early American Literature*, vol. 30, no. 2, 1995, pp. 175–81. *JSTOR*, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/25057016>.
- Manzella, Abigail G. H. "The Economic Displacement of Mexican American Migrant Labor: Disembodied Criminality to Embodied Spirituality and Viramontes's Under the Feet of

Jesus.” *Migrating Fictions*, Ohio State University Press, 2018, pp. 154–87. *JSTOR*, <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctt2204rsp.8>.

Lim, Jeehyun. “Reimagining Citizenship through Bilingualism: The Migrant Bilingual Child in Helena María Viramontes’ *Under the Feet of Jesus*.” *Women’s Studies Quarterly*, vol. 38, no. 1/2, 2010, pp. 221–42. *JSTOR*, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/25679839>.

López, Dennis. “Ghosts in the Barn: Dead Labor and Capital Accumulation in Helena María Viramontes’s *Under the Feet of Jesus*.” *Twentieth-Century Literature*, vol. 65, no. 4, Dec. 2019, pp. 307–42. *DOI.org (Crossref)*, <https://doi.org/10.1215/0041462X-7995579>.

*Rebozos de Palabras: An Helena María Viramontes Critical Reader*. University of Arizona Press, 2013. *JSTOR*, <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctv1fcf818>.

Roten, Johann. *Guadalupe Symbols : University of Dayton, Ohio*. University of Dayton, <https://udayton.edu/imri/mary/g/guadalupe-symbols.php>. Accessed 18 Feb. 2022.

Schroff, Alysa. “Review of Mythological Constructs of Mexican Femininity.” *Chiricú Journal: Latina/o Literatures, Arts, and Cultures*, vol. 2, no. 1, 2017, pp. 186–88. *JSTOR*, <https://doi.org/10.2979/chiricu.2.1.19>.

Scott, Nina M. “The Politics of Language: Latina Writers in United States Literature and Curricula.” *MELUS*, vol. 19, no. 1, 1994, pp. 57–71. *JSTOR*, <https://doi.org/10.2307/467788>.

Seltzer, Kate, and Cati V. de los Ríos. “Translating Theory to Practice: Exploring Teachers’ Raciolinguistic Literacies in Secondary English Classrooms.” *English Education*, vol. 51, no. 1, 2018, pp. 49–79. *JSTOR*, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/26797019>.

Viramontes, Helena María, and Carmen Flys-Junquera. “Helena María Viramontes: Social and Political Perspectives of a Chicana Writer.” *Arizona Journal of Hispanic Cultural Studies*, vol. 5, 2001, pp. 223–38. *JSTOR*, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/20641560>.

W. Lawrence Hogue. "The Emergence, Renaissance, and Transformation of Multicultural American Literature from the 1960s to the Early 2000s." *Symploke*, vol. 26, no. 1–2, University of Nebraska Press, 2018, pp. 173–90, <https://doi.org/10.5250/symploke.26.1-2.0173>.

"What Makes A Latino, Hispanic Or Latinx?" *Embracing Diversity*, 5 June 2017, <https://embracingdiversity.us/what-makes-a-latino-hispanic-latinx/>.

Viramontes, Helena María. *Under the Feet of Jesus*. Dutton, 1995.