Navigating Borders: Identity Formation and Latina Representation in Young Adult Literature

Thesis

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Abstract

According to the U.S. Census Bureau, the Latinx population has become the largest minority group in the United States, at seventeen percent of the population in 2014. While young adult literature featuring Latinx young adult has grown in the past couple of years, there is still a need for representation, especially young adult Latina protagonists. The representation of Latinas in young adult literature has begun to grow, portraying the multiple layers and challenges Latina young women face in their formation of identities encased by the ruptures created by their surrounding environments in their cultural identity, gender and sexual identity, and social identities. Furthermore, the exploration and formation of identity in young adults is not only influenced by their exposure to media and books, but also, their understanding of current discourses and stereotypes and the ways that these are problematic. This research seeks to open conversations about Latina representation in young adult literature, as well as analyze the way these representations can be explored through the lens of Gloria Anzaldúa’s borderlands.

The lack of focus on young adult Latinas in both young adult publishing trends as well as scholarship calls attention as to why most of these discourses go unnoticed or unmoved. As the representation of Latina young adult literature grows, so should the scholarship aiding upcoming authors in the way that these representations can be
improved and promoted to empower young adult Latinas in identifying themselves in these texts. With these representations comes the responsibility of ensuring that they are accurate and authentic in order to challenge and break through stereotypes in mainstream discourses.
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Introduction

Latinx Population in the United States

Written in 1998, the article titled “Hispanic Representation in Literature for Children and Young Adults by Arlene L. Barry, noted that there was a significant lack of representation of Hispanic and Latinx characters in children’s and young adult literature. The article takes upon itself to point out that students of all groups need to see themselves in the literature they read; multicultural literature increases minority children’s self-esteem and encourages the development of respect across cultures. With the Latinx population growing to seventeen percent in 2014 (U.S. Census Bureau), making it the largest minority group in the United States, the need for literature that provides what Rudime Sims Bishop coined as mirrors and windows through which children and young adults can identify with, is greater than ever. While the Latinx population grows at an alarmingly fast rate, the young adult literature published for this cultural group reflects the opposite. While there is evidence that there is a stark contrast in the growing children and young adult Latinx population, which stands at roughly 16 million of all children under the age of eighteen or twenty-two percent, it is noted that “the omission of Latino people in children’s books is especially egregious” (Winkler 19). Despite the ever growing population, the amount of new children’s books published in 2016 by Black,
Latinx and Native authors combined was still at six percent of all children’s books publications at 215 of 3400 (Lee and Low 2017). While this is considered a substantial growth in the presence of Latinx literature in children’s and young adult publishing, it means that there are voices looking to be heard by Latinx young adult readers. The question is: is the literature portraying authentic adolescent experiences that Latinx students can see themselves in? This research looks to explore the way this new wave of young adult literature featuring Latina characters is portraying Latina young adults in their identity formation while they navigate the borders of pertaining to multiple cultures, the cultures they have been born into and the cultures they have grown in.

In recent times, the term Latinx has emerged, which refers to the “gender-neutral alternative to Latinx, Latina, and even Latin@ (Ramirez and Blay 2017). Anzaldúa states that her native tongue is male dominated, “Chicanas use nosotros whether we’re male or female. We are robbed of our female being by the masculine plural. Language is a male discourse” (76). In her article, Barry asserts that she uses the term Hispanic as an ethnic label to avoid the gender-loaded connotations of the word Latino, but for purposes of this work, it is important to highlight that I will be using Latina to address female gender Latinas as part of the arguments I make throughout this research. Furthermore, I will be using Latinx as the gender-neutral term to encase multiplicities of gender as well as gender and sexually fluid identities.

Beyond the slow emergence and growth of young adult literature, the books featuring Latinx characters have established a presence in the last decade, albeit its
narrow range of topics covered. In young adult literature, the presence of books featuring topics about immigration and cultural displacement are abundant. Canonic titles mentioned on online book lists such as: the middle grade novel, *Esperanza Rising* by Pam Muñoz Ryan, *The House on Mango Street* by Sandra Cisneros, *The Red Umbrella* by Lucía Álvarez, and *The Book of Unknown Americans* by Cristina Henríquez represent a young adult population battling with daily struggles as immigrants. While the cultural disenfranchisement of many of these characters is important, aspects of identity formation such as cultural identity, sexuality and social identities have taken a second plane in the development of characters, aspects of identity that are just as important for young adults. In the past years, multiple books featuring female characters not only embracing a Latinx culture, but also exploring and forming their identities as young adults have emerged and grace the pages of the books that will be read for this thesis. Focusing on cultural identity, gender and sexual identity and social identities portrayed in young adult literature featuring Latina characters will be analyzed. Throughout the following chapters I will analyze the way these different aspects of identity formation are represented in relationship with the overarching identity as Latina.

This study focuses on the representation of Latinas in young adult literature and the representation of their processes of identity formation as they navigate multiple borders, multiple selves and lives in lands they make them feel like strangers. The topic of this research arose from a recreational reading of *Gabi, A Girl in Pieces*, by Isabel Quintero. As I read, I could only think about how much I could relate to the hardships of
Gabi, her torn identity between the mother that gave her life and the country she grew up in. I could see where her identity was torn, in her culture, in her social and sexual identities as she attempted to maneuver multiple spaces as a Mexican young adult in the United States. Upon reading *Yaqui Delgado Wants to Kick Your Ass* by Meg Medina, I noticed patterns starting to form. Thinking of Anzaldúa’s feminist theory, the formation of identity processes presented in the Latina young adult literature studied embark on a journey often defined by *la frontera, los intersticios* and Anzaldúa’s rebellious Shadow-Beast. This study stems from the need to attribute a name to those processes of identity formation of Latinas in young adult literature, but also from the need to explore the ways in which this representation truly reflects the borderland navigation within Latina women.

**Literature Review**

This study is framed by Gloria Anzaldúa’s theoretical framework in *Borderlands/La Frontera*, in which she explains that a Latina woman navigates multiple identities, called borderlands where she has to exist in both her culture of origin and her dominant culture. Anzaldúa’s feminist theory is rooted in the metaphor of women’s multiple identities as an open wound grating their culture of origin with the dominant culture, sore and unable to heal. Anzaldúa defines a borderland as “a vague and undetermined place created by the emotional residue of an unnatural boundary. It is a constant state of transition. The prohibited and forbidden are its inhabitants” (25). The main characters of the texts that I analyze find themselves in the borderlands as they try
to form an identity that conforms with multiple spaces, but they also endure wounds in their journeys and this analysis seeks to find a way for them to heal. Additionally, the research utilizes Anzaldúa’s framework through a new lens, that of young adult literature and the cultural displacement experienced as young adults navigate not just their multiple identities as borderlands, but also considering the multiple factors of their identity formation towards adulthood.

Adolescence is explored by scholars as a pivotal moment in the development of one’s formation of identity. Michael Cart explores the ascent of young adulthood, as it became apparent in the 1900s that there was a plane of existence between childhood and adulthood. Cart states, “as opinions began coalescing around the viability of recognizing a new category of human being with its own distinct life needs, books aimed at these “new” humans began to emerge” (8). While the recognition of the need of these new humans has existed for at least half a century, the rise of young adult literature featuring Latinx characters has only had its jumpstart, signaling that while there has been a need for literature reflecting the experiences of young adults, the work reflecting them has had a very narrow scope. As this sphere expands, so should the explorations of the representations of the intersections in the formation of identity, to include Latina young adults who are, not only forming their identity in relation to the world around them, but also, by the internalized beliefs of their own cultures.

Scholarship focusing on feminist Latinx literature is thorough and intricate, looking at the ways women navigate their physical and metaphorical borders within and
outside of the ways their identities are defined by the translations of their pronouns or their worth measured in their inferiority to the men of their cultures. Regardless, scholarship focusing on feminist Latinx young adult literature narrows and the conversations about the new wave of young adult novels presenting Latina characters, daughters of immigrants are much more quiet. Jacqueline Stefanko looks at the way Latinx literature pioneers Julia Alvarez, Sandra Cisneros and mother and daughter duo Rosario and Aurora Levins Morales tell stories of “hybrid selves who cross and recross borders of language and culture” in order to “survive in diaspora and seeking to heal the fractures and ruptures resulting from exile and dispersal” (50). For the Latinas of young adult literature, as well as their readers, a new generation surviving an exile that leaves them in the in between identities while their fragmented selves seek to find solace in multiple public and private spaces motivates this research study. As the young adult literature featuring Latinx characters grows, so should the scholarship that looks into the ways the literature represents the cultures.

Melanie Koss and William Teale conducted a study in 2005, in which they searched for the current trends of published young adult literature in accordance to the growing adolescent population of the United States. As they looked at 370 young adult titles which featured Printz Award and Honor books, young adult favorites and bestsellers, they found 0 characters to be representing Latinx young adults. It has been widely recognized that young adult literature plays a key component in the development of young adults, in its subject matter touching on family relationships, finding one’s
identity and hiding a true self. This can only touch on a number of adolescent’s lives, as the growing population of diverse cultural groups such as Latinx, require a larger coverage of the young adult literature being published for this group. An article written by the New York Times in 2012 states that despite its fast growing population, young Latinx readers have yet been able to see themselves in the literature they read: “Hispanic students now make up nearly a quarter of the nation’s public school enrollment, according to an analysis of census data by the Pew Hispanic Center, and are the fastest-growing segment of the school population” (Rich 2012). While some argue for the lack of diverse young adult literature that highlights Latinx characters, there are others who instead, argue that it exists, though with a lack of attention or consciousness.

In the concern for authenticity in the representation of Latinx children and young adults, there have been many gaps that also challenge the way its readers are able to connect with the books, therefore not being able to see themselves in the literature. In The Américas Award: Honoring Latino/a Children’s and Young Adult Literature of the Americas, Winkler emphasizes that the representation of people of color present in children’s literature tend to reflect a narrow range of images - often based on racial stereotypes - similar to those present in adult literature and other forms of media and the stories that are told about people of color are “fragmented and incomplete,” “most useful to the dominant group,” and “told repeatedly as if there were no other stories to tell. (Winkler 19)
It is also pointed out that Latinx children and young adult literature “has been found to disproportionately emphasize assimilation (Chappell & Faltis, 2007). Also that only infrequently does “children’s media actually take on issues of racialized identities and racialized inequalities” (Winkler 19). Along with the misconstrued perceptions that children are “color blind” and that raising issues of race and racism, along with the idea of multicultural literature “puts ideas into children’s heads” and “makes the problem worse”, conceptions that encapsulate the idea of assimilating Latinx characters in children’s and young adult literature erases the possibilities of readers being able to identify themselves with the characters they read.

For many, multicultural texts should be about the cultural experience they portray, only meant to display one aspect of the multiple facets that define an entire identity. Furthermore, it is pointed out that “many of today’s well-known Latinx literary artists explicitly locate their aesthetic and roots in los movimientos of the 1960s” (Enciso and Medina 2009). For the readers of the multicultural young adult literature, the formation of identity is not just about the immigrant experience, but also about every other contributing factor of identity formation. Barry explains that one of the many reasons for the lack of Hispanic representation in young adult literature, “traditional U.S. children’s literature focuses on childhood and adolescent experiences, whereas Hispanic children’s literature focuses on folklore, legends, riddles, games, poetry, and stories in the oral tradition” (633). While the emphasis on adolescent experiences is a prominent and indispensable aspect of young adult literature, tropes such as folklore, riddles and legends
should not be deciding factors for the presence of Latinx characters in young adult literature, but rather, should be an equal representation in the literature. Barry points out that another reason for the lack of Latinx young adult literature is that language is an issue, as many authors only write in Spanish. The novels analyzed in this thesis work to break down the barriers that keep them from falling into readers’ hands who need them; many of these books have received almost silent critical acclaims or have been challenged due to their content.

Scholars of Latinx literature have embraced the literal and metaphorical value of the border, as a way of representing the Latinx immigration experience as well as the acculturation many Latinx authors write in reference to the physical and metaphorical borders, “a real, guarded, and political barrier, while it also serves literally and metaphorically as a place of cultural movement and transformation” (Enciso and Medina 95). For the Latinas in the young adult literature that will be analyzed there is a dividing line between the culture they have been born with and the culture that they are growing up in outside of their homes, lines that are defined as, “borders are set up to define the places that are safe and unsafe, to distinguish us from them” by Gloria Anzaldúa (25). Furthermore, this metaphorical presence of the border is present in the characters who, when they live on the other side, they inhabit a space in which they are visible and invisible, hopeful and afraid, necessary and expedient, self-determining and dependent, willing and exhausted. And they are in the midst of
remaking and redefining the border in their own lives. (Enciso and Medina 95)

Similarly, Maria Root explains that “border crossing is part of the process of connecting to ourselves and to others in a way perhaps both more apparent and more accessible to multiracial people than to their monoracial counterparts” (Root xxii). As well as navigating the two lands they exist in, the Latina characters of this work are forming their identities based on their ability to shift from one land to the other. Maria Root, in The Multiracial Experience: Racial Borders as the New Frontier coins four different ways to conceptualize the idea of “crossing borders”. In these multiple ways that the borders can be crossed, which include keeping both feet in both lands at the same time, as well as shifting from one land to the other, Root explores the way multiculturality and identity formation are closely connected. For the Latinas of the young adult literature studied, this is the case of their identity, as they struggle to place themselves within different cultural environments.

**Ongoing Research**

Sandra Hughes-Hassell looks at the way young adults of color and different racial backgrounds develop their identities differently than white young adults:

Although identity formation is a critical task for all, adolescence researchers have found that adolescents of color and indigenous teens are more likely to be actively engaged in exploring their racial and ethnic identity than are white adolescents (Tatum 1997). As Beverly Tatum explains, teens of color, indigenous teens and
biracial teens think of themselves in terms of race or ethnicity because that is how the rest of the world sees them. (Hassell-Hughes 218)

For many young adults, the experience of reading about themselves is a lonely one, as Sandra Hughes-Hassell points out that “culturally relevant literature allows teens to establish personal connections with characters” (214). With the slim selection of young adult literature with diverse characters, the stories told are equally slim and the homogeneous discourses that surround identity formation, persist. Due to this lack of diversity in young adult literature, Hughes-Hassell looks at counter-storytelling as a way of deconstructing these mainstream discourses held by majorities; “counter-stories can show us that what we believe is inaccurate or false; they can highlight exclusionary practices and policies” (215). Hughes-Hassell proposes counter-storytelling in multicultural young adult literature as a benefit to young adults who belong to marginalized groups in order to gain healing from becoming familiar with their own historic oppression and victimization, to realize that they are not alone; that others have the same thoughts and experiences; to stop blaming themselves for their marginal position; and construct additional counter-stories to challenge the dominant story (Hughes-Hassell 215).

There is also benefit from exposure to counter-storytelling for the majority groups as well, to help them overcome their “ethnocentrism and the unthinking conviction that [their] way of seeing the world is the only one” (Delgado 1989). In mainstream texts
depicting Latinx characters, Hughes-Hassell asserts that they are routinely presented as “low-achievers, high school dropouts, teen parents, or violent gang members, all stereotypes that paint a picture of an unassimilated population marked primarily by exclusion and difference” (216). Furthermore, the purpose of this research is to propose and encourage the necessity of counter-stories in Latinx young adult literature. With the texts identified, this research will explore the way these discourses are prolonged or the way they are challenged with the narratives of the Latinas in the stories. I argue that while there are still problematic and stereotypical portrayals of Latinx characters in young adult literature, many of these books explore counter-storytelling in the way the narratives challenge stereotypes and mainstream discourses.

**Identification of Texts**

For this research, the identification of the young adult texts chosen was based on the year of publication (late 2000s), and the portrayal of Latinas main characters in relationships with family and peers through the context of a multicultural lens. The works of literature chosen were categorized into three different aspects of identity formation identified: cultural identity, gender and sexual identity, and social identity.

Though young adult literature featuring Latinx characters has grown exponentially in recent years, the identification of texts for this research was challenging. With an already limited number of texts with Latinx characters, the number of texts featuring female characters who were also Latina were by far, fewer. The texts identified were found through a series of diverse searching methods. Goodreads’ Listopia features a
wide range of lists with titles such as “Books with a Non-Caucasian person as the/one of the lead characters” and “Hispanic Characters and Themes in YA” featured some of the most titles currently present, but very few featuring my research criteria. Most lists feature literature that is not catalogued as young adult, but can be considered to be read by young adults, such as Sandra Cisneros’ *The House on Mango Street* or Julia Alvarez’s *How the García Girls Lost their Accents*. The Goodreads list proving to be most helpful is titled “Great YA Novels About Latinas!,” which features many of the novels studied in this research. Another research criteria determining the identification of texts was that the novels featured Latinas exploring multiple aspects of their identities, not just their cultural identity. This was a key factor in text identification, because most novels on Goodreads lists, feature characters that are in cultural displacement due to their immigration status, while other aspects of their identity are left behind. With immigration and cultural displacement as the sole focus of many of a lot of the books presented in this list, the works available for study went from a wide range to slim, quickly. Other sites such as latina.com’s book list “Nine Books By Latinx Authors You Should Know About” and Huffington Post’s “Twenty Three Books by Latinx That Might Just Change Your Life” also aided in identifying the right texts. Because of their recent publications, the books are still in print, but this did not make acquiring them easier. Most books were not present in brick and mortar bookstores such as Barnes and Noble, or available for immediate check-out at the local public library systems. The access of most of these books happened through third-party sellers on Amazon or the Half Price Books.
marketplace. Finding books about Latina’s gender and sexual identity was the most
difficult. The texts identified for this research are:

- *Down to the Bone* by Mayra Lazara Dole (2009)
- *Dreams of Significant Girls* by Cristina Garcia (2011)
- *Yaqui Delgado Wants to Kick Your Ass* by Meg Medina (2013)
- *The Secret Side of Empty* by Maria E. Andreu (2014)
- *Gabi, A Girl in Pieces* by Isabel Quintero (2014)
- *Shadowshaper* by Daniel José Older (2015)
- *When the Moon was Ours* by Anne-Marie McLemore (2016)
- *Labyrinth Lost (Brooklyn Brujas #1)* by Zoraida Córdova (2016)
- *We Are Okay* by Nina LaCour (2017)

**Research Design and Methods**

This work of research seeks to add to the conversations of multiculturality the
aspects of feminist theory in relationship with multiculturalism; often, minorities are
vacuumed into a group without consideration of intersectionality, and the purpose of this
research is to point that out. The voiced need for multicultural young adult literature has
been heard and answered, yet there is still a lack of multicultural young adult literature portraying female protagonists, battling with multiple facets of their identity formation, rather than just one, their cultural displacement among the society they live in. The aforementioned need for closer analysis of young adult literature in order to create more diverse accounts and stories of Latina characters aims to breakthrough the mainstream discourses. While there is need for young adults to be able to see themselves in the literature they read, it is also important to point out the young adult literature of quality that portrays the culture authentically, accurately and away from stereotypes. While some of these novels consciously and unconsciously adhere to those stereotypes, with this analysis I will be able to contribute to the multicultural voices that work to eliminate these stereotypes from mainstream discourses and eventually, from the young adult readers themselves.

Chapter One focuses on aspects of cultural identity of Latinas in young adult literature. With Anzaldúa’s theoretical framework, I explore the way the protagonists are able to navigate their borderlands and negotiate their cultures as they are torn between two different cultural identities. In this chapter, *Flowers in the Sky, The Education of Margot Sanchez, Labyrinth Lost, Gabi a Girl in Pieces* and *Yaqui Delgado Wants to Kick Your Ass* introduce Latinas that find their cultural identities torn by the fact that they inhabit two different worlds. The characters are torn in between cultures by their beliefs, traditional values and their own search for belonging, and families who insist they must grow within the realms of their culture and discard the dominant culture outside of their
home. Written by Latina women themselves living in the United States, these works of young adult literature aim to break down the idea that a woman must choose between one cultural identity and the other, but rather, it is indeed possible for Latinas to live in both. Moreover, the authors of these novels have experienced similar cultural displacements as the protagonists they are writing about. Lilliam Rivera, writer of *The Education of Margot Sanchez* was raised in the South Bronx in a Puerto Rican family of five, similar to Margot Sanchez’s own living arrangements. Lynn Joseph, author of *Flowers in the Sky*, was born in Trinidad and Tobago, but her family moved out of the island and to Maryland when she was fourteen. *Gabi, A Girl In Pieces*’ Isabel Quintero is the daughter of Mexican immigrants and was raised in Southern California. Meg Medina is a Cuban American writer who was raised in Queens, New York. Finally, Zoraida Córdova, writer of *Labyrinth Lost* was born in Ecuador and raised in Queens, New York. These connections of the authors’ experiences reflected in their writing further evolves the idea of the process of identity formation as one that is always shifting and never ending.

Chapter Two will be looking at another equally intricate and complicated aspect of young adult identity formation: gender and sexual identities in Latina characters of young adult literature. As mentioned previously, young adult literature has encouraged the growth of intersectional characters that are simultaneously Latinx and queer. Yet, this portrayal has a lack of queer Latinas. With the limited books identified, that are specifically written for young adults featuring queer or questioning Latinas, I will look at the ways these portrayals intersect with their protagonists’ identities as Latinas, but also
how their portrayals might be problematic for the young adults who seek to read similarities of their own identities in these texts or lacking in authenticity. This chapter is in conversation with feminist theorist, Gloria Anzaldúa as a queer Chicana and her strong theoretical frameworks on Latinas’ sexual identities in a culture that strongly rejects them, while looking into the ways the dominant discourse surrounding feminism interjects with the formation of gender and sexual identity of young adult Latinas.

In Chapter Three, I look at the way individual and collective social identities are formed in relationship to cultural and racial identities. The protagonists of these texts work hard to be able to maintain their cultural and social identities separate, or to entirely erase their cultural identities to make room for their social identities. For example, *When Reason Breaks*, *Dreams of Significant Girls* and *The Secret Side of Empty* all portray protagonists looking to separate themselves from their cultural identities in order to construct their social identities freely. Additionally, I look at the way social identities are formed in social settings and how these affect the way social identities are formed in the Latina protagonists.

The conclusion of this research will focus on the texts analyzed and the way they affect current and future readers of young adult literature. Although diverse books are growing exponentially in the world of children’s and young adult literature, the expansive growth may not necessarily mean the portrayals are equitable to the real life experiences of the readers or written with the purpose to create windows and mirrors, but with the purpose of fulfilling a quota. The conclusion of this work seeks to contribute to the voices
of multicultural children’s and young adult literature in hopes of improving the portrayals of Latinx characters, providing understanding and resilience for both marginalized and minority groups as well as majority groups seeking to change the mainstream.
Chapter One: Cultural Identity

For Latinx authors of young adult literature, there are multiple challenges in writing works of young adult literature representing Latinx characters: establishing the many facets of identity formation of an adolescent, but also being able to narrate the hardships of identity formation within the cultural contexts they live in. Suzanne Oboler supports the claim that minority literature expresses a search for identity rather than a “paradigm of self-affirmation in the Latina writer, a self-perception and self-definition” (3). For the Latinas portrayed in the young adult literature of this chapter, the self and other are established based on a series of multicultural factors that for them, is both their home and their border. Their identity formation revolves around the “representation of stereotypes of her self, constructed, framed, and projected by the dominant ideology” (Ortega and Saporta-Sternbach 14). As readers find more and more representations of themselves in the books they read, the portrayals of self and identity formation should reflect those of real life experiences. This research seeks to understand whether these representations allow readers to understand, challenge and break through the many problematic discourses they face or whether these remain unchallenged in young adult literature.

Consequently, the books that will be analyzed in this chapter, will look at the way the main Latina protagonists form their identities based on their family traditions,
religion, family dynamics and culture, but also, outside of them. Wendy Richmond
defines cultural identity as “how one identifies oneself in terms of belonging to a group,
whether that group is based on race, ethnicity, sexuality, religion, education, and
lifestyle” (184). Oboler affirms that “characterizations of the self necessarily evoke those
of the other, and there are many “others” to be portrayed, recreated, and redefined in the
process of constructing and affirming the Latina self” (19). The Latinas portrayed in these
novels all have in common that they are children of immigrants or immigrants themselves
in the United States. They have been raised with a set of values and traditions and are
simultaneously exploring the way they interact with the American culture while
pertaining to their home culture. Their biculturalism, which is defined by Antonia Darder
as

the process wherein individuals learn to function in two distinct sociocultural
environments: their primary culture, and that of the dominant mainstream culture
of the society in which they live. It represents the process by which bicultural
human beings mediate between the dominant discourse of educational institutions
and the realities they must face as members of subordinate cultures (20).

Along with the ideas of biculturalism, the Latinas analyzed in this chapter navigate
multiple borders instilled by their families. The identities under construction must also
grapple with the ideas of marriage, femininity and the role of women in society and their
own households, as well as their hierarchical standing, directly below the men of their
families.
While the presence of books with Latinx or Hispanic characters is bigger than ever in young adult literature, it must be noted, that not without paying a price. In analyzing the books in this chapter, I will look at the way the Latina protagonists navigate the borders in their life as Latinas in the United States living in households that adhere to the cultures of their homelands. While these representations are important, it is also important that they are accurate, as well as that their portrayals are authentic to their multicultural readers. In all five of the books that will be analyzed, the protagonists are openly struggling with the presence of their homeland cultures, instilled by their parents and the American culture they are trying to engage with. The young adult novels categorized in this chapter will specifically look at the way the Latina protagonists shape and construct their cultural identities.

1.1 Cultural Identities

Representations of Latinx young adult literature reflect, “views and assumptions about social organization and norms of behavior, moral principles, questions of good or evil, right and wrong, and what is important in life,” that are experienced by the Latinx young adult readers who consume the literature (Chappell and Faltis 264). To that end, it is important that these representations reflect the experiences lived by those young adults, which will reinforce or debilitating their perceptions of the values of their culture. Simultaneously, the focus on young adult Latinas of this study is centered on the lack of young adult literature representing this group, but also in expansion of Anzaldúa’s
Borderlands theory in inclusion of the critical moments of identity formation that lie in Latinas’ adolescence.

*Flowers in the Sky*, written by Lynn Joseph, who was born and grew up in the island of Trinidad, but moved to Maryland when she was fourteen, presents Nina Pérez who lives in the Dominican Republic with her single mother. In Samana, Dominican Republic, Nina helps out at her mother’s store and sells the flowers she gardens to tourists. Her brother left ten years ago for New York (Neuva York, as her mother calls it) and has been sending them money every week. Nina’s mother’s dream is for Nina to fly to New York to find a Yankee baseball player to marry who can support her and have his babies. Simultaneously, her mother’s religious views are interposed, she insists on going to church every weekend and is against Nina spending time alone with a young man. When Nina’s mom sees her sitting next to a man, she becomes afraid and decides to send her to New York to live with her brother, where he will make sure she finds a suitable husband. In New York, Nina is forced to face the different layers under her cultural identity as she tries to assimilate to New York while keeping her mother’s voice in the back of her head.

Lilliam Rivera’s *The Education of Margot Sanchez*, tells a different narrative and a different negotiation of borders. Published in March 2017, *The Education of Margot Sanchez* has received mixed critical reviews due to its portrayal of the spoiled, unlikeable Puerto Rican, Margot Sanchez. The story begins with Margot Sanchez’s first day of summer working at her father’s store, Sanchez & Sons. Margot is nicknamed Princesa,
and working in her father’s supermarket is anything but royalty. The reason behind her working at her father’s store is that she stole his credit card and charged $600, in order to fit in with her upper class friends at the prestigious boarding school she attends, Somerset High School. Margot’s aspirations are upper class, but her family can barely manage a lower middle class status. This is apparent in the first mention of her home, which she calls Riverdale, an extension of the South Bronx, but also an extension she refuses to acknowledge, proclaiming that Riverdale is instead, Rich Adjacent. Margot’s lessons do not stop there, she is working the whole summer to pay for both the stolen money and her tuition for the next year. Working at the supermarket, Margot meets Moises, a community activist who is working to help save a building that will be torn down and rebuilt in the Bronx, to bring new tenants and remove the old ones. Even though there is debate on the gentrification of the neighborhood her father’s supermarket is in, Margot refuses to accept that her father’s supermarket will be at a loss or that it is helping this gentrification. While this portion of the novel is not a dominating part of the plot, it revolves around a lot of Margot’s actions, as she comes to realize that her family is as corrupted as the developers who are taking over the Bronx.

Daughter of Mexican immigrants Isabel Quintero, writes the semi-autobiographical *Gabi, A Girl in Pieces*, which was published in 2014 and since then, has received the award for Best Books of 2014 by School Library Journal. Combining prose, verse and illustrations, *Gabi, A Girl in Pieces* centers on the story of Gabi, a high school senior who is trying to navigate hardships in her relationships with peers. These hardships
include a pregnant best friend, and another exiled gay best friend, romantic relationships with popular and unpopular boys, an addict father, and the overbearing but not exaggerated voice of a traditional Mexican mother. Gabi’s life cannot become more complicated, but it does, as she battles obesity and being a light-skinned Mexican, constantly leaving her in perpetual states of disenfranchisement that make her question her identity as a woman and as a Latina. Gabi is also struggling with her ideas and conceptions of the future as a writer, conflicting with her mother’s conception of a woman’s future, which oftentimes clash and stumble over each other. Because of her father’s absence and struggle with meth addiction, Gabi’s mother plays two roles, the role of mother and father, which also oftentimes distort her own ideas with the duties that she is supposed to teach her daughter.

*Yaqui Delgado Wants to Kick Your Ass* is written by Cuban American, Meg Medina. Published in 2013, *Yaqui Delgado* has received similar critical acclaim and received the Pura Belpre Award for Writing. A challenged book, *Yaqui Delgado* has been questioned for the very language that makes it real and exceptional in its portrayal of the stripping and gaining of one’s identity as a Latina. Piddy, *Yaqui Delgado’s* protagonist, receives news there is trouble coming her way; the book’s first sentence is “Yaqui Delgado wants to kick your ass” (Medina 3). This begins a difficult journey of the persecution of Piddy as she tries to understand why a stranger she has never met hates her so much, as well as her own demise into alienation and despair. Interlaced in the story are her mother’s ideas about the female body, gender norms and roles in a relationship to the
outside world as well as Piddy’s own internal one. Much like Gabi, Piddy has a complicated relationship with her mother and their relationship oftentimes gets in the way of Piddy’s journey with her peer relationships. Piddy’s romantic life is furthermore complicated by her relationship with her mother and the traditional views of her mother towards gender roles and norms, as she tries to develop a relationship with her lifelong neighbor, Joey Halper. As a counter narrative, the honorary tía and her mother’s best friend, Lila, helps Piddy navigate and understand her mother as she tries to make peace with their differences. Piddy’s borderlands in *Yaqui Delgado Wants to Kick Your Ass* by Meg Medina, which she maneuvers within the conflicts between her mother’s beliefs and her own are very similar to Gabi’s. Piddy manages her life inside her home and outside with conflict because of her mother’s overwhelming beliefs about femininity. Piddy explains that when her body bloomed, her mother made her put on a bra because “a man on the bus [was] gawking at my chest one day. “You can’t go around with two loose onions in your shirt for all the boys to stare at,” she snapped” (Medina 3). As Piddy finds her body growing and her curiosity blooming, her mother’s presence becomes more and more overwhelming, as she is always inventing “endless things that are “good for a young girl”” (Medina 17).

Ecuadorian author Zoraida Córdova’s *Labyrinth Lost* is a fantasy novel which connects the complicated ties of the religious and folkloric aspects of Latinx cultures with the cultural identity of the main character Alejandra Mortiz. Ale comes from a long
lineage of *brujas*¹, Latina witches, of Puerto Rican and Mexican descent. Ale, at close to sixteen, has not received her bruja powers yet, but she would rather not have them at all. She hides her true identity of bruja along with her family’s descent to everyone around her, including her best friend Rishi, and opts for becoming an overachieving student in order to leave her family as soon as she finishes high school. When an altercation with a bullying boy makes her release a snake out of the boy’s mouth, Ale’s powers finally awaken and she decides that she will do anything get rid of them. On the night of the ceremony where she will accept her powers from her dead ancestors, Ale takes matters into her own hands and attempts to get rid of her powers with a *canto*² of her own. Instead, she opens a portal to Los Lagos, a realm where the dead go to await their soul’s final destinations and a creature named The Devourer takes her entire family through the portal. Ale must enter Los Lagos herself and rescue her entire family.

1.2 Immigrants, Children of Immigrants, and Belonging: Constructing a Cultural Identity

The Latinas represented in these young adult novels portray the different complexities of the construction of cultural identity in multiple social and cultural contexts, but more importantly, the presence of a dominant culture that creates dissonance and pressure on the Latina young adult to comply. To exemplify the complexities of these constructions of cultural identities, the Latina authors of these novels create dissonant and burdening settings that consume the Latinas and force them

¹ Witch.
² Spell.
to decide where their cultural identities lie. Furthermore, the explorations of these identities will look at culture, traditional values, religion and religious practices, and gendered practices of family dynamics.

In *Flowers in the Sky*, Nina is sent to New York on a false visa her brother bought. She lives in Washington Heights with her brother, where she quickly finds out he is selling stolen electronic equipment out of their apartment building. Washington Heights is a cultural shock for Nina, the openness and dominance of nature and ocean views of the Dominican Republic are replaced with buildings and steaming sidewalks, thugs, and girls in tight clothes and colorful hairdos. Nina is confronted with the conflicts of following her mother’s inflicted ideas and her own. Darder establishes biculturalism as a form of survival for bicultural populations living in the dominant culture, determined by what social theorist Charles Valentine establishes as a *bicultural model of human development*, in which he establishes that “bicultural groups undergo a dual socialization process that consists primarily of enculturation experiences within one’s culture of origin (subordinate culture), in addition to less comprehensive but significant exposure to the socialization forces within the dominant culture” (Darder 21).

Nina is quickly overwhelmed by the tugs and pulls of her identity construction; as soon as she is sent to New York, she wonders, “And who would I become now that I was not the flower girl?” (Joseph 96). Referring to her work as a flower girl in the Dominican Republic, this question for Nina expresses much more than just her job, but also her changing position as she goes from a girl following in her mother’s beliefs to a girl in
New York who, not only cannot work with her flowers but also has to deal with the changing expectations of her as she is expected to follow an education rather than get married. Her brother, Darrio, lets her know that she will be enrolled in high school so she can finish out the school year, “Oh, I thought I was supposed to get a job and work to make money. Mami said I had to earn my way and pay back for my visa” (Joseph 101). Back home, Nina’s friends had left school to start a business of selling jewelry to tourists, “at least until they found young men to marry and have babies” (39).

Nina attempts to negotiate with the traditions she grew up with in Dominican Republic and the ones she is starting to become acclimated with. This is demonstrated in the way she tries to make plans for attending college while maintaining her mother’s idea of getting married and having children. She finds a middle ground when her potential suitor, Luis, decides to attend college as well while in a relationship with her at the end of the novel. Darder explains that based on his work with Chicano populations, indigenous psychologist Arnoldo Solis described biculturality in terms of dissimilarity: “the dynamics of biculturation are considered to begin when the dominant culture exerts increasing influence on the subordinate culture to accommodate and assimilate to the dominant culture’s value, language, and cognitive style” (Darder 24). As Nina begins to assimilate to the new culture she is immersed in, she begins a process of negotiation with herself in which she determines her position with the American culture and her own. Because the dominant culture tells her to attend college and follow a career, she finds a middle ground in which she believes she can both fulfill the dominant culture’s demands
of continuing her education and her mother’s desires for her to find a young man to marry. Nina fulfills the process of *bicultration* with cultural negotiation, a response pattern which “attempts to mediate, reconcile, and integrate the reality of lived experiences in an effort to retain the primary cultural identity and orientation while functioning toward social transformation within the society at large” (Darder 26). Consequently, Nina is bartering her position, her in-betweenness is most highlighted when she decides between the two things that her mother has most strongly enforced her ideas of, the reason she was sent to New York.

*The Education of Margot Sanchez* portrays a side of Latina identity formation that is often present, but not always acknowledged. The Latino population battle with statements of stereotypes and encased identities that they feel forced to adhere to and *The Education of Margot Sanchez* seems to be both challenging and conforming to these demands simultaneously. Margot lives for the approval of her two Somerset High School friends, Serena and Camille, “when Serena asked me what my father did for a living I couldn’t admit that he owned a chain of grocery stores upstate. The chances of them ever finding out the truth are so slim, it’s worth the social currency” (Rivera 19). While Margot attempts to maintain her “us versus them” dichotomy established by the dominant culture she lives in, she feels the tug of the falsity of her act. Margot is torn between the feelings of colonial ideologies, “of categorization and separation based on ‘pure blood’ criteria - a system constructed for the white colonists to maintain power” (Kime Scott 56). Furthermore, Margot’s cultural identity is tied to her social group with Serena and
Camille created at Somerset High School, but her persistent childhood friend, Elizabeth keeps making her question the reality of her constructed identity.

By denying her culture behind straightened hair that denies her curls and clothes that disguise her Puerto Rican curves, Margot establishes an alienation affirming that she belongs to the dominant culture rather than the subordinate one. In the case of Margot, her response pattern to her biculturalism can be understood as what Darder calls a *cultural alienation*, which “suggests an internalized identification with the dominant culture and a rejection of the primary culture” (26). There are many instances where Margot’s response pattern resorts to cultural alienation; she refuses to speak in Spanish, she refuses to accept that she lives in a neighborhood where the dominating population is Latinx and she refuses to establish and maintain positive relationships with people who bind her to her culture.

While Margot’s stubbornness to deny her culture in the way she talks and acts and the clothes she wears, her battle in belonging to both cultures speaks louder than her alienation. Her actions portray a cultural alienation that state she wants to acclimate herself to the dominant culture over the culture she was born into. Simultaneously, she expresses her desire to belong to her own culture freely without having to worry about what her Somerset High School friends think of her or how her reputation is hurt. At the climax of the novel, where she finds out her brother deals drugs and steals from her father’s store, her father is cheating on Margot’s mother and her childhood friend rejects her cry for help, Margot finds herself in an in-betweenness. Margot’s “insterticios” or in
between are the point where she admits that she no longer wants to put on a mask or separate herself from her culture in order to fulfill her identity formation. Evelyn Alsultany looks at insterticios in terms of belonging,

   To ‘belong,’ we must fragment and exclude particular parts of our identity. Dislocation results from the narrow ways in which the body is read, the rigid frameworks imposed on the body in public space. At the end of the day, I’m tired of wearing masks, being misunderstood, projected upon, otherized, erased. (66)

Consequently, Alsultany affirms that “identity must be reconceptualized so that we can speak our own identities as we live and interpret them in multiple contexts” (66). In Margot’s case, her narrative is based on the contradicting values her family has created around her, where it is only beneficial for the family, should she adhere to her cultural values as a Puerto Rican woman, but erase the parts that are not.

   In *Gabi, A Girl in Pieces*, Gabi is living in between worlds as a proud Mexican American, who is also White – her navigation between one space and the other, her home and her spaces away from home, determine her identity formation. Whether it is her own femininity, her cultural identity as a Mexican American young adult or her sexuality, she experiences ambivalence in her identity, as she has to decide between her Mexican roots tied to her mother and the ones she is establishing as a Mexican American in the twenty first century and “not Mexico a hundred years ago” (Quintero 7). Anzaldúa affirms that, “alienated from her mother culture, “alien” in the dominant culture, the woman of color
does not feel safe within the inner life of her Self. Petrified, she can’t respond, her face caught between *los intersticios*, the spaces between the different worlds she inhabits” (42). Gabi’s self-awareness makes her not only doubt her cultural identity, but also forces her to work harder at adhering to one space or the other, “I am not technically Mexican, there is still a sense of pride that swells in my chest during this day. Being Mexican-American is tough sometimes. Your allegiance is always questioned. My mom constantly worries that I will be too Americana” (34). Gabi’s mother feeds Gabi’s doubts about her identity by saying, “‘Oh, que te crees? Americana?’” (107). Gabi acknowledges that her mother’s expectations of being Mexican enough and her own to be both Mexican and American are rupturing and tyrannical.

Piddy Sánchez’s cultural identity is deeply rooted in her mother and the traditions her mother has established in her. Piddy is often torn between these two; she wishes to remain in a space where she is able to exist in the blissful ignorance of not having to choose between cultural identities. Piddy’s cultural identity construction is complex, she hopes to be able to follow her dreams without having to completely confront her mother about them, though she is still ruptured by the cultural identity of her mother and the one where she is able to escape her mother’s expectations and follow a career, “too bad I have other plans in mind. Ma doesn’t know it, but I’m going to be a scientist. If I told this to Ma, her screams would touch the sky. She’d ask what kind of decent girl is interested in elephants. (Medina 18). Smokowski, Rose, and Bacallao define the dissonance between

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3 Roughly translates to: “What do you think you are? American?”
an adolescent and their parents’ beliefs as acculturation gaps, which are, “the result of
differences between adolescent and parent levels of culture-of-origin and host culture
involvement” (295). Yaqui Delgado’s sudden interruption of Piddy’s pseudo-peaceful
existence where she handled her ruptures in cultural identity silently comes to a halt,
“Weak. Weakness means that you deserve to be hated, that you deserve everything you
get. My fists are clenched; I want to punch someone” (Medina 42). Piddy becomes more
aware of the differences between her and Yaqui Delgado. More specifically, she becomes
aware of Yaqui’s freedom,

if I could be anything right now, I’d be just like one of them. Yaqui and
me, we should be two hermanas, a sisterhood of Latinas. We eat the same
food. We talk the same way. We come from countries that are like rooms
in one big house, but, instead, we’re worlds apart. (56)

Yaqui’s presence in Piddy’s life deepens the rupture between Piddy and her mother. The
sudden threat of Yaqui beating up Piddy takes control of Piddy’s life and she becomes
erratic in her search for a cultural identity that is not linked to her mother in order to
survive.

In Labyrinth Lost, the portrayals of cultural identity are identified in the religious
practices of Ale’s family and her rejection of them. Alejandra is an academic
overachiever, who hopes to leave for college in order to leave her cultural identity
behind. The sudden appearance of her powers complicates a journey of identity formation
for Alejandra within her cultural contexts. Before her powers had awakened, she felt she
had the choice to release herself from her identity as a bruja, but once her powers appeared, she found that she would have to do more than run away in order to escape this side of her identity. As she tries to find ways to rid herself of her magic, her family puts together Alejandra’s Deathday, a ceremony where Alejandra will be channeling her magic through her dead ancestors’ ghost. Enciso and Medina explain that “spirituality then is a space of reaffirmation where past heritage and present influences are both honored and disrupted” (119). The act of rejecting her powers and therefore rejecting her ancestor’s blessings of her magic in presence of her family is perceived as an act of defiance to both her family and her culture, but also of her cultural availability to disrupt the oppression and injustice experienced by members of her culture to exercise their right in their cultural identity. While a part of the novel, the Deathday is another fabrication of Córdova’s, she explains that it is based on the coming-of-age ceremony of the Quinceañera, a ceremony that celebrates a girl’s rite of passage as a woman. Córdova’s use of the Deathday ceremony as a symbolism of the Quinceañera also portrays her focal point on Ale’s torn cultural identity.

Alejandra’s act of defying her ceremonial Deathday by rejecting her powers to her ancestors leaves her alone and without her family, when they are taken away by The Devourer. Rescuing her family from Los Lagos forces Ale to use her magic in order to survive in the other realm. The novel portrays a literal representation of the borderlands Ale inhabits, by having to navigate multiple spaces in which she has to choose how to portray her cultural identity in order to survive. By pushing Ale between the dominant
culture she inhabits and her culture of origin in Los Lagos, Ale is forced to explore both aspects of her cultural identity, but also to create understanding for her in her formation of identity.

1.3 Portrayals of Family Dynamics and Construction of Cultural Identity

Smokowsky, Rose, and Bacallao theorize that the processes of acculturation in adolescents severely affect the dynamics of family in Latinx families due to the strong bindings of familial practices and the interposition of individualism of American culture. As this is presented in the portrayals inside the homes of the Latinas, it is also interceded by the fact that they are growing up in the American culture and their binds to the traditional values inculcated by family members are slowly dissolving and being overtaken by the dominant culture.

Even before she lands in Washington Heights in New York, Nina wonders about her identity formation and challenges her mother’s traditions in the Dominican Republic. Nina points out that her friends have stopped going to school in hopes that they will find a young man to marry and start families with. Nina frequently talks about her friends, and the rumors she hears around town that they are prostitutes, which she refuses to believe. On one day, she finds herself sitting down with her friends, and they give her a small ring to put on her toe. Nina hesitantly accepts, but quickly admires the change in her and the sudden, but small feeling of freedom, “I looked down at my plain brown legs and feet, and that tiny, perfect flower on my toe was like a flag of womanhood staring me in the face. It was the true essence of me. For the first time ever, I felt a shiver of excitement.
about what was coming in life” (Joseph 35). The flag of womanhood gives Nina immediate confidence to explore, as two men approach the table where the girls are sitting and decide to sit next to them. When her mother sees her, she immediately yells, “You are not a puta," as if the sole act of sitting next to a man will guarantee the title. Despite being afraid of her mother, Nina recounts other times when walking along the malecón and smiling shyly at the men who wink at her without her mother’s noticing. This very curiosity is what leads Nina to question the base of her identity formation when she arrives at New York.

Despite this cultural wave of shock, Nina still adheres to many of the cultural traditions she has been injected with in the Dominican Republic. As she enters her brother’s apartment for the first time, she notices it lacks furniture and homeliness, until she enters the kitchen, “Darrio showed me the kitchen, which, unlike the living room had signs of life. He grinned at me. ‘My girlfriend, Marla, bought new pots for you. Mami said you were a good cook.’ Mami had obviously said a lot of things to convince Darrio to send me a visa.” (Joseph 89). Darder asserts that Latin American societies have not been exempted from the gender ideologies that have traditionally privileged men. Nina finds herself simultaneously “challenging the stereotyped gendered other within,” but also adhering to it (Darder 21). Although Darder frames in her theory a Latina woman who immigrates to the United States with a family of her own, Nina’s identity formation is based on the fact that she will eventually be one of these women and will have to

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4 Slut.
5 Boardwalk.
decide whether to adhere to the traditions of being a wife who doesn’t have to work or a woman who follows a career instead. Her negotiation with her identity is also highlighted when she makes a new friend, Bunny, and admires the fact that Bunny is a dancer and is able to pursue this dream, without the reign of her mother bearing down on her. Nina makes a remark in their difference, “Chica, you got to decide whose life you want to live, your own or your mother’s.’ That was easy for Bunny to say. Her mother supported her dream of being a dancer and wasn’t trying to marry her off” (96).

Margot’s family, contrary to Nina’s mother in Flowers in the Sky, portrays a similarly problematic alienation that encourages Margot’s. Margot points out that despite the fact that most people’s cars in the neighborhood carry a flag from their native country on their front mirror, her father refuses to do so, “Papi doesn’t believe in flags, boxing gloves, or bumper stickers that proclaim patriotic love. He considers such displays low class” (Rivera 98). Along similar lines, Margot describes her mother’s physical appearance as far away from her own, wearing high-heels, designer jeans and blond highlights that emphasize her brown skin. Despite the apparent separation from their culture, the family lives by the values instilled in them from their homeland, as they try to imprint on Margot and force her to live by the same values. Smokowski et. al explain, “parent-adolescent acculturation gaps may increase family conflict, fuel adolescent rebellion alienate parents and adolescents, and contribute to adolescent behavioral problems” (297). Margot’s constant dissonance with her parents, where they simultaneously force her to adhere to certain aspects of their culture causes for their
family dynamics to be ruptured and ultimately create a disparity that ends in the dissolution of the family as a whole.

Being the youngest daughter, Margot points out that there are many instances where her family gives more leniency to her older brother Junior over her. There are also moments in the novel where Margot is partially or completely removed from conversations due to her “being a girl,” at one point, her father states that a fight happening between Junior and Moises is “men’s business” and Margot does not need to be involved. On multiple occasions, it is pointed out to Margot that she needs to respect her brother, regardless of how little respect he shows her in return. As she is increasingly shunned from being a part of her family, Margot also tears away from them, recognizing that the acculturation gaps are creating a dissonance in their cultural identity as a family, and the “increased autonomy of Latino adolescents within a system favoring individualism often clashes with Latino parents’ adherence to traditional values emphasizing family cohesion, familism and parental control” (Smokowski et. al 297). Throughout the novel, there is the suspicion that Junior is using and selling drugs, and this is emphasized during moments where he has mood swings and becomes aggressive with Margot: “If I find out that you went out with that asshole out front, I’m going to kick your ass.’ His breath reeks of alcohol” (Rivera 93). During the scenes where Junior becomes physically aggressive with Margot, her parents are completely unaware and compellingly absent from these scenes, despite Margot’s calls for help.
These scenes portray the family’s destruction as part of their acculturation process and alienation.

Margot catches her father cheating on her mother with a girl from his store. Her mother refuses to talk about the subject, much less talk about leaving Margot’s father. Along with the preferences towards the men in Margot’s life, the idea that an innocent man cannot be blamed for his actions when seduced by a woman, is also strongly present in the novel. When Margot confronts her mother about her father’s actions her mother replies “‘Leave?’ she says with anger. ‘This is my house. I’ll never give this up just because stupid girls put out for your father. Margot, men are different. They view sex differently’” (252-253). Margot fiercely stands up for her beliefs, “‘Don’t give me that Latino macho bullshit. You don’t believe that’” (253). Margot’s mother refuses to divorce her father, complying with the idea that, “women may seek refuge as a way to cope with the fear and anxiety of acclimating to the new culture,” (Hussain et. al 75). With this confrontation, Margot begins to understand her own battles of her identity formation and the dividing lines her family has reinforced in her by juxtaposing certain aspects of their culture over others.

In the case of *Labyrinth Lost*, Alejandra is not being influenced to maintain her cultural identity by her mother, but by her sisters, “This is Lula’s fourth attempt to “wake” my power. Ambrosia is food of the Deos, and Lula seems to think it’ll be nice incentive to get them to give us answers. Lula believes in ways that I don’t” (Córdova 11). Ale finds different ways to separate herself from her native culture and above all, the
magic that defines her family’s identity. In the opening pages of the novel, she states that she is to be called Alex, not Alejandra or Ale (*All-eh*), to emphasize that she wants to adhere to the culture she lives in outside of her home. While this is presented in fantastic terms, Ale’s refusal to accept her family’s traditions and rituals are a way of refusing her own culture. Early on in the book, Ale wonders what it would be like to be someone else: “I wonder what it’s like in other households during breakfast. Do their condiment shelves share space with jars of consecrated cemetery dirt and blue chicken feet? Do their mothers pray to ancient gods before they leave for work in the morning?” (Córdova 10). At the same time, she finds herself wanting a “normal” life in which she doesn’t deal with magic and therefore is not in danger; Alejandra asserts to herself that: “You are not a bruja. You are a girl who needs to get far, far away, where the blood dreams can’t follow” (Córdova 33). Furthermore, in her author’s note, Córdova explains, “Alex struggles with who she is, who she should be and who she wants to be” (317). This demonstrates that the novel more than being about the fantastical aspects within Latinx culture and folklore, is also about the formation of a cultural identity that is able to exist in both realms.

1.4 Following in her Mother’s Footsteps: The Cultural Identity Imposed by the Mother

The portrayals of mother/daughter relationships in the Latina protagonists go beyond the representation of positive or negative aspects of their interactions. The influence of the mother in each of these Latinas’ lives furthers the complication of their
young adulthood as their femininity and views on sexualities are pushed against a wall by their own mothers. Similarly, these interactions explore the relationships and family dynamics that influence the construction of identity. Exploring the way Simone de Beauvoir looks at the influence of mothers’ values on their children’s pathways to adulthood, I look at the way the Latinas seek freedom for their cultural identities and away from their mothers’ traditional values.

Gabi’s first affirmation in her diary entry format says:

My mother named me Gabriela after my grandmother who – coincidentally – didn’t want to meet me when I was born because my mother was not married and was therefore living in sin. That story forms the basis of my sexual education. (Quinteros 7)

As Gabi expresses her life in her diary, it can be seen many times that there is a disruption in her belief system between the one created outside of her home and the one that is being determined by her mother, inside her home. Gabi has conflicting feelings towards her mother, she is torn between her mother’s ideals of womanness and Gabi’s own growing ones, “on and off. Like light itself – bright and dark. Mother and daughter” (Quintero 26). Gabi exerts control through her narrative, in fact, poetry is her creative outlet for gaining control over the aspects of her life that are still being determined by something other than herself. For Gabi, her Mexican American identity is imposed by the Mexican identity of her mother but also, the American identity she has formed (or tries to form) in the United States. Smokowski et. al explains, “U.S. cultural involvement and
family conflict as a sign that adolescents are turning away from their cultures of origin as they integrate into the host culture and that their parents are resisting this change” (296). The more Gabi attempts to explore her identity as a member of the dominant culture, the more she encounters frictions with her mom.

Simone De Beauvoir explains in *The Second Sex* that “the little girl is more wholly under the control of her mother; her claims on her daughter are greater. Their relations assume a much more dramatic character. The mother does not greet a daughter as a member of the chosen caste: she seeks a double in her.” (561). Gabi’s mother demonstrates such behavior towards Gabi. Gabi constantly battles in her woes of femininity determined by her mother, versus her own. Her mother hopes for Gabi to follow in her footsteps of becoming a mother, by establishing gender roles in sexuality for Gabi, which Gabi frequently battles through consciously and unconsciously in her own actions. For Gabi’s mother, the female body is ruled by the steps taken to become a mother and wife, what Judith Halberstram denominates as a “time of reproduction [that] is ruled by a biological clock for women and by strict bourgeois rules of respectability and scheduling for married couple” (Halberstram 5). At the beginning of the book, Gabi states that her mother says

Ojos abiertos, piernas cerradas” Eyes open, legs closed. That’s as far as the birds and the bees talk has gone. I don’t necessarily agree with that whole wait-until-you’re-married crap though. I mean, this is America and the twenty-first century, not Mexico. But, of course, I can’t tell my mom
that because she’ll think I’m bad. Or worse: trying to be White. (Quinteros 7)

Gabi expresses that she is against her mother’s ideas about sexuality outside of marriage or before marriage, yet when she finds herself exploring her sexuality with a boy, taking the first step instead of waiting for him to take it, she expresses mortification, “I had done something I had been thinking about doing, but knew I shouldn’t. Things were out of order— I was supposed to wait for him” (Quintero 54). While Gabi insists that she does not follow in her mother’s beliefs, she finds herself rethinking her actions when her beliefs are actually tested. This conflict that she is in even further complicated when the boy she kisses expresses equal mortification, placing Gabi in a position of oppression, as her actions can only be determined by two people: her mother or a man. Anzaldúa often references the culture as being dictated by man and a woman’s behavior by her mother and her culture, which are often the same thing. Gabi’s mother’s influence does not end there.

In the throes of Gabi’s crossroads, as she tries to decide her future and where she aspires to attend college to, her mother announces a pregnancy herself. Gabi begins to doubt whether her new brother is a product of her mother and meth addict father or the man her father sold her mother to in case he couldn’t pay money he owed. As Gabi finds her future trivialized and in danger, her own mother’s ideas once again get in the way, “She said that what I should be doing is losing weight and learning how to cook and clean so I can catch a good husband” leaving Gabi with the doubt of following her beliefs
or her mother’s (Quinteros 132). Gabi suddenly finds herself pinched between her mother’s beliefs of women’s duties and Gabi’s dreams of attending college. The tug and pull that Gabi experiences in her relationship with her mother is not a unique one, but rather, strongly reflects Latina women’s real-life experiences of cultural dislocation exacerbated by their mothers’ demands.

In *Yaqui Delgado Wants to Kick Your Ass*, all trouble begins for Piddy when Yaqui’s boyfriend expresses interest in Piddy’s blooming female body, which is a signal of trouble to Yaqui as much as it is to her mother. Piddy’s troubles with Yaqui Delgado are not limited to the school setting, but rather, causes a sense of persecution in her where she is constantly being followed. Piddy’s conflicts lie in the condemnation owning her sexuality, the root of trouble for a lot of women. Piddy’s mother, who it is later revealed in the novel, was “the other woman” of Piddy’s father, is marginalized by the women of the beauty shop where Piddy works, proving that the shaming of a woman’s sexuality and femininity can not just be found in Piddy’s home, but in most Latina women who are expected to shame sexuality, “the culture expects women to show greater acceptance of, and commitment to, the value system than men. The culture and the Church insist that women are subservient to males” (Anzaldúa 39). As Piddy explores more of herself and her femininity, her mother scolds her and shames her for it; when her mother discovers a hickey on her neck, she calls her a tramp. Later, on Piddy’s sixteenth birthday, she dresses up for dinner in a dress and heels and, “Ma scowls. She’s still cranky about my hickey, and now this dress just adds to her ever-lowering opinion of me” (Medina 124).
Just like Gabi’s mother, for Piddy’s mother, what Piddy does to be “a good young girl,” is everything. From hemming pants to washing out underwear by hand, because “what decent woman puts her private things in a public washer?,” to cross-stitching pillows, so that she’ll know how to stitch her baby’s initials into its bibs one day, Piddy is supposed to prepare for a future where, much like Gabi, will make her a model housewife (Medina 17). Piddy has plans for her future that do not align with her mother’s. She wants to become a scientist who works with elephants, a career that goes against what is being expected from her mother as well as from the culture that she is growing up in. Piddy is not only trying to not conform to her mother’s demands of femininity, she is trying to break away from them, as if they were a prison. In this case, they are, as her mother attempts to encase Piddy in a shrine that will protect her from the budding sexuality of other young men or for Piddy to derail from the ideals of a woman imprinted in her mother, therefore imprinted in Piddy herself. Simone de Beauvoir implores that “all oppression creates a state of war” (754) and Piddy’s internal war is no different.

Because of her mother’s strong influence, Piddy is confused about her femininity – for her mother, Piddy’s femininity lies in her conservative decency, while for Piddy, it lies in her strength and her assimilation to the other Latina girls like her. Piddy’s mother spots Yaqui and her friends at the school yard while walking home and says: “No one decent hangs out in a school yard, oíste⁶?” (Medina 54). Yet, for Piddy, all she wants is to share in their “big hoop earrings and plucked eyebrows, their dark lips like those stars

⁶ Loosely translates to: “Did you hear me?”
in the old black-and-white movies, their tight T-shirts that show too much curve and invite boys’ touches. The funny thing is, if I could be anything right now, I’d be just like one of them” (Medina 56). Between their strength and their freedom, Yaqui and her friends present an ideal image of what it means to be a Latina for Piddy, an ideal image that does not conform to her mother’s. Judith Butler explains that,

“the body becomes its gender through a series of acts which are renewed, revised, and consolidated through time. From a feminist point of view one might try to conceive the gendered body as the legacy of sedimented acts rather than a predetermined or foreclosed structure, essence of fact, whether natural, cultural, or linguistic” (Butler 523).

Piddy’s body and its use is determined by the culture of her mother. Consequently, Piddy transforms the identity created by her mother, to an identity that falls in line with Yaqui’s, with plucked eyebrows, burgundy lipstick and pulled back hair, an image also stereotypically attributed to Latinas. Piddy believes that her new identity will help her face Yaqui, but also, will help her run away from the feminine identity that her mother has created. While Piddy and her mother are at odds, Lila finds herself torn between them. She tries to help Piddy embrace the femininity she desires, the one that falls in line with Lila’s herself, but also with Piddy’s mother’s. For Piddy, her femininity is a performance of her gender constructed by the culture that is surrounding her, both her mother’s as well as Yaqui’s discourses of femininity that she wants to appropriate as her own.

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Both Piddy and Gabi are pressured to follow their mothers’ footsteps of marrying and starting families. This pressure is explained by de Beauvoir as an unconscious attempt from the mother to “tame” her daughter,

It is when the girl grows up that real conflicts arise; we have seen that she wishes to affirm her autonomy from her mother: this is, in her mother’s eyes, a mark of detestable ingratitude; she obstinately tries to “tame” this determination that is lurking; she cannot accept that her double becomes an other. (563)

Both Gabi and Piddy at some point of the novel confront their mothers about their forming identities as other of their mothers, causing a disruption not only in what their mothers are trying to inflict on them but also, in how they conform to it.

1.5 Representations of Religious Practices

Enciso and Medina theorize that the representation of spirituality in young adult literature featuring Latinx characters portrays narratives of resistance and resilience against oppression and colonialism, “Latino/a writers have creatively transformed local and indigenous images of spirituality to disrupt Western notions of religion and colonialism” (119). Furthermore, the portrayals of spirituality represented also come along with the incongruity young adult Latinas feel when interacting with these spiritual and religious practices in terms of their own cultural identities. In the sample of Latina young adult literature studied, only one book portrayed religion as a contributing factor to the construction of a cultural identity, Zoraida Córdova’s Labyrinth Lost.
Although Córdova explained in an interview that the folkloric and fantastic elements of her novel are all fictitious, she admits that they are all based on Latinx folklore and rituals, “fantasy often borrows from other cultures to make something “new,” and the cultural appropriation line is blurred,” yet at the same time she found it hard not to incorporate fantastic elements that oftentimes both surround and characterize Latinos (2016). She acknowledges that while writing what you know is important, it is too personal and too unrelatable, but that she wanted to write about “witches with a Latin American background” (2016). With this authorial intent on hand, the superstitious and religious elements of the novel can be deconstructed, while fictional, also reflecting important aspects of Latino culture. Alejandra’s fellow brujos and brujas wear what she calls a “prex” which she describes as “beads like a long rosary” (Córdova 43). The brujos and brujas of the book pray to deities called Deos, which Córdova explains that “represent all aspects of nature, creation, and everyday life, similar to the Orishas of Santeria and the gods of Greek mythology. Brujas and brujos often choose a Deo the way Catholics choose a patron saint to pray to” (320). These religious symbols presented in the novel, are the basis for most of the rituals and ceremonies of the brujos and brujas in the novel and for Alejandra, denying her use of these is a denial and alienation from her culture. Furthermore, Enciso and Medina argue that the representation of Latina spirituality goes beyond cultural identities, but is also,

A way to disrupt the patriarchy and Eurocentrism of the church. Second, spirituality is a form of decolonization of the spirit, enabling women to
heal and be healed. Third, it is a form of liberation and self-determination that has a direct effect on political action. And lastly, it is a way to find a connection within one’s sense of being and becoming a more complete person. (Enciso and Medina 119)

This demonstrates that behind the awakening of Ale’s powers is more than a plot device. It is no coincidence that Ale has to use her powers to get rid of her powers in her Deathday ceremony. By slowly embracing her magic in the spiritual space that is Los Lagos, Ale accesses an aspect of her cultural identity that she shunned.

1.6 Conclusion

The cultural identities of the Latinas in this chapter are complex beyond the idea of cultural displacement. Unanimously, all protagonists are grappling one way or another to balance the cultural identity of their families with the ones they are existing in outside of their homes, making their construction of identity as a whole a tearful process. Some of these portrayals of cultural identities in young adult novels are more complex than others. For example, in Labyrinth Lost, the idea that she is a bruja settles with Alejandra quickly after she finds herself in Los Lagos having to rescue her family and she is able to accept this part of her identity much easier than other characters of the novels analyzed. On the other hand, Piddy’s overwhelming mother, along with the stereotypical portrayals of Latina femininity she is brought to a breaking point where she is torn between the two and regrets making the decision of changing her appearance to look like Yaqui and her friends, a look she assimilates with toughness and a spectrum far away from her mother’s
values. Furthermore, Meg Medina’s bold portrayal of a Latina character’s oppressed position in the scene where Piddy is finally confronted by Yaqui and is beat up, she tries to get help from her neighbor, Mrs. Boika. This scene presents a real and unabashed discussion of the many real experiences adolescent minorities live. For the future of Latina young adult literature, this scene could be a pivotal moment that changes the way Latina characters in young adult literature endure social and cultural struggles. Meg Medina’s depiction of Piddy in a painful position of oppression and privilege in this young adult novel demonstrates that the Latina characters in the books published do not have to be shallow, stereotypical Latinas, but Latinas who are torn by multiple facets of their identities.

Latina portrayals in young adult novels are important, but the quality and accuracy of their portrayals is equally important. The representation of Margot Sanchez as a Latina with little regards of her culture and a privileged standing point over other Latinas weakens the portrayal of her identity. Contrary to Nina, in Flowers in the Sky, who is innocent and oftentimes scared, Margot Sanchez’s attitude reflects one of a privileged child whose identity relies heavily on the dominant culture. Margot Sanchez’s depiction of the spoiled daughter of a business owner is highly contrasted with Nina and Darrio, who arrived to the United States on false visas. Margot is selfish and oftentimes rude to the workers of her father’s store, which is interpreted as her display of the privilege of being Puerto Rican with US citizenship, versus other Latinx who arrive to the United States illegally, like Nina and Darrio. These contrasting portrayals can also be
problematic for readers, as they grapple with their own immigration status or their own families’ struggles.

Even though the female protagonists of these novels do not adhere to the stereotypes of female Latinas, the secondary female characters do. In *Yaqui Delgado*, Piddy aspires to look like Yaqui and her friends, who are described as girls with revealing clothing, dark lipstick, over-plucked eyebrows and tough, fearless demeanors, images that are often associated with Latina girls in urban neighborhoods. Nina has troublesome interactions with girls her age who bully her for looking too innocent; the girls all wear tight shiny clothes and stand in front of a local restaurant all day, giving the feeling that they are prostitutes. Margot Sanchez’s co-workers all wear tight clothes, too much makeup, long colorful nails, and are involved with multiple men who constantly reject them. Margot finds out that her co-worker Jasmine, who is only a couple of years older than Margot, is pregnant and will not be developing a relationship with the father (who later turns out to be Margot’s dad, having an affair). Similarly, Gabi’s friends, Cindy and Georgia, both get pregnant in the novel, complying to the stereotype that young adult Latinas often get pregnant in high school.

Overall, the novels open thoughtful and complex conversations about the young adult Latina experiences in the United States, but demonstrate that there is a lot of work to do. While these books have been praised for their unapologetic portrayal of their strong Latina characters, even the daring and unlikeable Margot Sanchez, they also demonstrate where many of the gaps in young adult literature are. That the books are
praised for the main characters, but their secondary characters still demonstrate characteristics of Latino stereotypes and are not acknowledged reflects the problem that portrayals of Latinx characters are still a work in progress. Regardless of the presence of these stereotypes, the novels provide evidence that young adult Latinx literature is fast growing phenomenon that is not only representing Latina young adults in relatable cultural contexts, it is also being written by authors who are strongly tied to these stories by their own personal experiences, ensuring that the representations are authentic as they need to be.
Chapter Two: Gender and Sexual Identity

The development of sexual identity is defined as a process that “begins at birth when individuals are defined by their biological sex,” while gender identity “serves as the first psychological aspect of sexual identity development and is the phenomenon by which individuals identify as male or female” (Hussain, Leija, Lewis, Sanchez 76). Gregory Pappas states “Latina lesbians are only one of many marginalized groups in U.S. society...to have a multiple identity or to be in between cultures, genders or races is to be ambiguous, impure, and therefore inauthentic or anomalous” (Pappas 152). In addition, Katie L. Acosta extends Gloria Anzaldúa’s theoretical framework in her exploration of women’s borderlands as lesbians. In her article “Lesbianas in the Borderlands: Shifting Identities and Imagined Communities” she highlights Anzaldúa’s “Shadow-Beast,” the rebellious denomination of the mestiza’s Self that refuses to accept cultural normativities. While Acosta’s focus of study is adult Latina immigrants, the Latinas of this research enter and navigate multiple borderlands in homophobia and social inequities that limit and reject their sexual identities similarly to those of Acosta’s study. Acosta introduces “imagined communities,” which are, romanticized spaces as intertwined networks of protection and sisterhood without interrogating their hierarchical social and structural features. In

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7 A woman of mixed blood of Indigenous, Spaniard and African roots; also a term used by Gloria Anzaldúa in which a woman navigates multiple identities.
the borderlands, Latina lesbians strive to give voice to the rebel-within a struggle complicated by the U.S. racialization and gender systems. (Acosta 640)

Acosta showcases the personal experiences of many immigrant women who surrender or erase aspects of their cultural identities in order to be able to openly acknowledge their sexual identities. For many of the young adults in this chapter, their struggles lie in the way their sexual identities are unavoidably tied to their cultural identities, but are yet forced to choose between them.

Wickens discusses gender identity as, “having learned cultural and social mores regarding sexed and gendered bodies, individuals then perform in that manner...because that is what they learn is appropriate for their gender. Nevertheless, through language and discourse, culture constructs the boundaries that define properly manifested expressions of gender” (Wickens 150). Transgender studies scholar Susan Stryker explains that transgender people, “do not seek surgical alteration of their bodies but do habitually wear clothing that represents a gender other than the one to which they were assigned at birth” (251, Note 1). She also uses transgender as an umbrella term referring to “all identities or practices that cross over, cut across, move between, or otherwise queer socially constructed sex/gender boundaries” (251, Note 1). The definition of these terms will aid in the exploration of the representations of sexuality and queer Latina identities in the sample of young adult literature that will be explored.

In the close reading of the texts in this chapter, I will be looking at the multiple
layers of sexual and gender identity through the lens of intersectionality. Coined by Black feminist legal scholar Kimberlé Crenshaw, the term of intersectionality is a debate as a consequence of “the tendency to treat race and gender as mutually exclusive categories of experience and analysis” (139). Jennifer C. Nash defines intersectionality as “the notion that subjectivity is constituted by mutually reinforcing vectors of race, gender, class, and sexuality” (2). Within this defining realm of intersectionality, this research will look at the way race, culture, class, and religion intersect with gender and sexual identity in the young adult texts. Furthermore, the term of intersectionality is employed as the “predominant way in feminist theory to reference the relationship among multiple forms of oppression, discrimination, or identity” (Carastathis 70). The close reading of the following young adult texts will explore the representations of oppression and discrimination in the spaces the Latina protagonists of these texts attempt to inhabit.

Along similar lines of criticism, Anzaldúa’s *Borderlands/La Frontera* also looks at the intersections of a Latina woman’s mestiza consciousness in the consolidation of the facets of her identity. Anzaldúa argues that “for the lesbian of color, the ultimate rebellion she can make against her native culture is through her sexual behavior” (41). Anzaldúa explores the multiple facets of gender identity in its intersections with race and nationality,

Half and halves are not suffering from a confusion of sexual identity, or even from a confusion of gender. What we are suffering from is an absolute despot duality that says we are able to be only one or the other. It
claims that human nature is limited and cannot evolve into something better. (41)

Furthermore, the characters in the explored texts of this chapter disrupt the normative structure of the binary while existing in the tyrannies of their culture. Anzaldúa’s exploration of intersectionality inquires on the tearing the queer Latina endures in which her sexuality, if revealed is, “this unacceptable aspect of the self our mother/culture/race will totally reject us. To avoid rejection, some of us conform to the values of the culture, push the unacceptable parts into the shadows” (42). This fear of the rejection of the mother, the culture, and the race is called by Anzaldúa, homophobia, the fear of going home (41). The representation of the fear, the rejection, and the disruption of the binary occurs most prominently in *What the Night Brings* by Carla Trujillo, *Down To the Bone* by Mayra Lazara Dole, and *Juliet Takes a Breath* by Gabby Rivera.

In a ten-page introductory chapter about LGBTQ young adult literature, Michael Cart mentions multicultural LGBTQ literature once,

> It should also be mentioned that virtually every one of the central characters in these books was white and middle-class. Yes, the first black character, Rosa Guy’s eponymous Ruby, had appeared as early as 1976, but no other African Americans would appear until the 1991 publication of Jacqueline Woodson’s *The Dear One*, and no Latinos until 1995. (Cart 187)

While it is not Cart’s fault that representation of Latino LGBTQ characters is so dismal
that it only guarantees a line in the entire chapter, it does call attention as to why the few books actually representing LGBTQ Latinas should be accurate representations and not fetishizations of female sexuality and intersectionality. To implore further into this phenomenon, I briefly look at the way discourses outside of young adult literature affect these publishing trends.

Lorena García explores the sexual education of Latina youth and heteronormativity in “‘Now Why Do You Want To Know About That?’: Heteronormativity, Sexism, and Racism in the Sexual (Mis)education of Latina Youth”. Her exploration looks at the way feminist scholars have discovered the heteronormativity is implemented in sexual education, but also the racialized and sexist discourses displayed and how these affect the way Latinas construct their own sexual identities. Garcia states, “the intertwined relationship between heterosexuality and gender, is useful for grasping how the maintenance of the good girl/bad girl dichotomy supports compulsory heterosexuality and relies on interdependent social constructions of heterosexuality and gender” (521-522). In her study, Garcia affirms that the discourses surrounding sex education were often discussed within parameters of incorporation of racialized gender stereotypes and “non-heterosexual identities of Latinas were unacknowledged and/or silenced in this space” (528). Factoring in the power exerted by the cultural tyrannies surrounding Latinas, along with the educational system’s heteronormative discourses in sexual education of Latina young adults, it can be understood that multiple institutions determine and push Latina young adults to silence a
non-conforming sexual identity, thus reflecting these and limiting publishing trends to the same discourses.

The representation of Latinas displaying non-conforming sexual and gender identities in young adult literature attempts to disrupt and break through the spectrum of heteronormative ideas to reflect the conversations about equality happening in the real world. On that note, the use of the term Latinas implies the portrayals of female protagonists adhering to non-conforming sexual identities. However, the presence of gender non-conforming characters in these texts who are equally disruptive of the male and female binaries demands LGBTQ is used instead of LBTQ to refer to these characters. The aforementioned multiple visions of the theoretical frameworks encase this research, as I attempt to understand whether these representations in young adult literature are problematic for the construction of discourses on sexual identities in Latinas.

2.1 Stories of Four Queer Latinas

In the past few years, LGBTQ literature featuring Latinx characters has soared. Celebrated young adult literature author Benjamín Alire Sáenz’s *Aristotle and Dante Discover the Secrets of the Universe*, published in 2012, is a Printz Honor Book. Among others, Alire’s *Aristotle and Dante* and more recently published *The Inexplicable Logic of My Life* have opened the doors to many more LGBTQ young adult novels featuring Latinx characters. Unfortunately, in 2017, there has only been one young adult novel featuring a Latina LGBTQ character published. Nina Lacour’s *We Are Okay*, published in
February 2017 does not feature a Latina main character, but rather, as a secondary character who is the love interest and best friend of the main character. Similarly, there is only one other book featuring an LGBTQ Latina as the main character to be published on July 25, 2017, *The Gallery of Unfinished Girls* by Lauren Karcz. Because of the scant representation of LGBTQ Latinas in young adult literature, it is important to make note of the ones that do currently exist and advocate for accurate portrayals of their sexual identities.

*What the Night Brings* by Carla Trujillo was published as a young adult novel in 2003\(^8\) and was nominated for the Lambda Literary Award for Lesbian Fiction. This novel revolves around eleven-year old Marcia Cruz in 1960s San Lorenzo, California. Marcia prays every night to God for two things: for her abusive father to leave their home and to be changed into a boy. Every morning when she wakes up, she checks under her pajama pants, only to be sorely disappointed by what she finds (and doesn’t find). Throughout the novel, Marcia expresses love for a fifteen-year-old girl named Raquel, who lives a couple of houses down in her neighborhood. As the novel progresses, Marcia’s father becomes increasingly abusive to Marcia and her younger sister, Corin, which leads the sisters to look for ways to escape their home life.

*When the Moon was Ours* by Anna-Marie McLemore (2016), is a magical realism novel with realistic depictions of young adult sexuality. Narrating the love story of Mie1\(^9\) and Sam, *When the Moon Was Ours* explores secrets, marginalization, and non-

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\(^8\) While the novel features an eleven-year-old protagonist, it is categorized as young adult literature.

\(^9\) Spanish for Honey.
conforming sexual identities. Miel is a girl whose origins are unknown in their nameless town, except that she spilled out of a water tower and she has roses growing out of her wrist. Sam is a transgender Pakistani boy who helps harvest pumpkins and paints moons all over town. The story revolves around the secrets kept by the people around them: Aracely is Miel’s caregiver, the town’s curandera of lovesickness. Aracely takes Miel as her own after she spills out of the water tower, but their bonds dwell deeper than Miel knows. While this novel is both about a queer Latina and a transgender Pakistani boy, the narrative shares both characters’ struggles as they try to come to terms with their bodies and identities in relationship with their families, their town and their surrounding environments.

Mayra Lazara Dole’s Down to the Bone is a completely different, yet equally complicated narrative. Published in 2009 and then again, in 2012, Down to the Bone presents Cuban in Miami Latina, seventeen-year-old Shai. Shai’s story begins when her teacher catches her reading steamy texts from her Puerto Rican girlfriend, Marlena. After reading the X-rated texts to the entire classroom, the teacher takes Shai to the principal’s office, calls her mother and reads the texts to her. In exchange for letting her stay in school, the principal asks Shai to give the name of the other “offender”. Shai refuses to reveal her lover’s identity and her mother kicks her out of the house and tells her to come back when she can reveal her girlfriend’s identity, breaks up with her, and reconsiders her entire sexual identity. Shai quickly drops out of school and tends to her education on her

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10 Healer.
own terms, while staying at her best friend, Soli’s home and working full time as a landscaper.

Gabby Rivera, writer of *America*, Marvel Studio’s first queer Latina superhero, is also the author of *Juliet Takes a Breath* (2016). *Juliet Takes a Breath* is the story of Juliet Milagros Palante\(^{11}\), a self-proclaimed “closeted Puerto Rican baby dyke”. Juliet’s story is, aside from the coming out story of a Puerto Rican girl, an ongoing conversation about feminism and whiteness, representation and inclusion, but also the right to feminism for all. The story opens with a letter from Juliet to Harlowe Brisbaine, fictional writer of *Raging Flower: Empowering Your Pussy by Empowering Your Mind*, a “magical labia manifesto” in which Harlowe describes feminism and the power between a woman’s thighs. Juliet’s letter requests representation and room to breathe the same feminist air as Harlowe does,

> It’s definitely a reading from the book of white lady feminism and yet, there are moments where I wanted more of that round, brown ass\(^{12}\) in your words. I wanted more of that, Harlowe more representation, more acknowledgement, more room to breathe the same air as you. Can a badass white lady like you make room for me? Should I stand next to you and take that space? (Rivera 2)

Juliet’s honest letter lands her an internship with Harlowe Brisbaine herself in Portland, Oregon, where she will learn the truth about feminism, her own sexual identity and

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\(^{11}\) Contraction of “para adelante” meaning to move forward.

\(^{12}\) Referring to her own round, brown ass.
intersectionality with her own eyes.

2.2 LGBTQ Latinas: Portrayals of Intersectional Protagonists

While some of the representations of the Latina characters in the novels analyzed are transcendental in their own way, groundbreaking and important to be recognized, others are problematic. When considering LGBTQ characters, portrayals of characters that fit stereotypes is always dubious, but it is also problematic for the portrayals to reaffirm these stereotypes by leaving them unquestioned and unchallenged.

*What The Night Brings’* (2003) tone is comedic, yet Marcía’s experience as a questioning Latina cause her frequent apprehension. Marcía’s focus outside of surviving her home life is to be transformed into a boy, begging the divine forces of God at every moment, including in church. Her sexual identity is strongly bound to her religion, as a Catholic raised Latina, her first and only instinct is to pray to God for her sex to change. By praying for a gender transformation, Marcía experiences a dissonance of her two cultures as a Mexican-American girl, in her acclimation of the dominant culture she lives in and the traditional values in her culture of origin.

Marcía tries to understand it and define her sexual identity as something that cannot happen unless she is turned into a boy:

I have to tell you what I need from you, God. I have to change into a boy. This is what I want and it’s not an easy thing to ask for. Not like wanting a new bike or a football. This takes special powers, and let me tell you, I’ve been wanting it a long time. It’s not because I think I’m a boy, though
sometimes it sure seems like I am. It’s because I like girls. I don’t know how or when it happened. Maybe I was born this way, but the second I saw chiches\(^ {13}\), I wanted them. Now. I know you can’t be with a girl if you are a girl. So that’s why I have to change into a boy. (Trujillo, location 176).

Marcia comes back to her wish, time and time again throughout the novel, especially when she thinks of Raquel and the fact that Raquel may never love her; not because Raquel she is too young for Raquel at a four-year difference, but because Marcia recognizes her disadvantages at being a girl, while Raquel desires a boy.

Marcia’s narrative voice is progressive and innovative, except for her views on masculinity and femininity, which deter her from abandoning the idea that she must become a boy and that she is simply not allowed to like girls, as long as she is a girl. She constantly questions her gender assignment, which she often wonders if it was personally selected by someone to her. She narrates, “I felt really mad when I looked at Randy Torres. He was a big sissy kid who lived down the street. He didn’t like baseball or football, even though he would have been good as a tackle. How did Randy end up a boy and me a girl? I wondered who got to make the choice of what you were when you were born” (Trujillo, location 531). Marcia battles with her sexuality within her home life and outside, but she also attempts to understand her culture’s ideas of masculinity and femininity, and why she doesn’t fit these ideas.

\(^ {13}\) Boobs.
Judith Butler asserts that gender is “a set of repeated acts within a highly rigid regulatory frame that congeal over time, to produce the appearance of substance, of a natural sort of being” (44). In her desire to be a boy, Marcía displays culturally constructed behaviors of gender by acting like a boy. She attributes all her failures of being a boy to her lack of a penis, calling it the “birdy” she doesn’t have. With her Uncle Tommy as her masculine role model, she believes she needs to be strong in order to be a man. Marcía also practices shaving with her dad’s shaving cream and a bobby pin she uses to scrape the shaving cream off, which she believes is the rational next step in becoming a boy; shaving makes her feel “fresh and handsome.” While she fears that she will be discovered due to the strong smell of Old Spice, her father never acknowledges her attempts to practice being a boy.

In the raw and less sentimental narrative, *Down To The Bone* (2009), reinforces a problematic discourse where lesbians are referred to as “butch dykes,” “homos,” and “lezzies” in derogatory ways, despite the fact that the novel is about lesbian Latina, Shai. Throughout the novel, there is constant debate about what masculinity and femininity look like, as well as the performance of gender in relationship to one’s sexuality. Shai explains that her attraction to women lies heavily in the fact that women are soft and feminine. She expresses attraction for girls over boys, but oftentimes calls attention to boys’ physical attributes she finds attractive. Surrounded by an LGBTQ dominated community, she is constantly surrounded by girls who she calls “lezzies, lesbos and homos,” without making distinction to when she is or isn’t using the terms degradingly.
While she is confused about her sexual identity, Shai abstains from using labels that might determine who she is, she uses them freely on other people.

In *Down to the Bone*, Lazara Dole creates a complicated narrative that simultaneously challenges stereotypes while prolonging them. Shai is described as an expert in all trades: she is an artist, an athlete, a cook, an architect, speaking multiple languages. Despite her dropping out of school, Shai finds a way to exchange her services as an artist for access to online classes at Yale or expensive textbooks to maintain her education. She is also an environmentalist and manages to make every product she uses organic. Shai makes sure to note that even though she is attracted to girls, she is also feminine. She has long cascading brown hair and the figure of a dancer. These highlighted features, along with her partners, who are described as soft and curvy create a distinction between the “butch lesbians” and “feminine lesbians” that are constantly stereotyped. Furthermore, the same is highlighted in the gay men of the novel. They are all described as loud and effeminate, usually in positions of hairdressers when Shai interacts with them, “Everywhere we look we see people skating, bicycling, or just walking. There are plenty of muscular pretty gay boys in sleeveless white shirts, cut-off jeans and work boots, and lots of butch and feminine girls walking and talking” (Dole 122). When her mother tries to set her up with a young man, he makes note that she is not butch like he expected: “‘Hell, Shai, you don’t look gay at all. You aren’t like those plastic gay girls trying to look straight. You’re beautiful. I imagined a butch dyke with buzzed hair and a mustache.’ He moves even closer. I can smell his sweet lemonade
breath. ‘I would have never guessed.’ He grins. ‘We’d make a gorgeous couple.’ (Dole 242). Instead of dismantling his beliefs, Shai asserts the same for him, saying that she is surprised he is not a “macho” trying to win her over. These conversations, while trying to disrupt a mainstream discourse of homophobia, also prolong it by adhering to a lot of those ideals.

On the other hand, *When The Moon Was Ours* (2016), does not represent Miel’s sexuality in physical forms or specific manifestations. There is little mentioned about Miel’s physical traits, except that she has dark brown hair that always appears wet and she wears skirts at her knees that are always damp, symbols of her close connection to the water she spilled out of. Instead, Miel’s origin story is slowly revealed, and provides a metaphor for her own sexual identity. Making reference to the Latin American urban legend of *la llorona*\(^\text{14}\), Miel’s mother tries to drown her in order to get rid of the curse of roses growing out of her. Her older brother, Leandro jumps in to save her and their mother jumps into the river after them to save them both. The current of the river takes them away, eventually taking Miel to her final destination in the water tower, returned to safety by the current itself. Miel’s representation of sexual identity is within a realm of magical realism, yet it is not lost that the river that saves Miel and places her in the water tower to be spilled out of represents Miel’s sexual fluidity. It is never openly stated that Miel is a lesbian character, but that her fluid sexuality to love Sam as he is, who he decides to be and how he sees himself rather than how she sees him further demonstrates

\(^{14}\) Varying in names and manifestations, the Weeping Woman, is the story of Maria, a woman who becomes angry with her cheating husband and pushes her children into the river.
that her sexual identity is not static. Anna-Marie McLemore is a queer Latina herself, whose husband is transgender, and while she argues that her story is deeply rooted in the need to tell the story of those who can’t, she expresses the personal ties to the novel are, for the boys who get called girls, the girls who get called boys, and those who live outside these words. To those called names, and those searching for names of their own. To those who live on the edges, and in the spaces in between (McLemore).

Miel does everything she can to hide the fact that she loves Sam, not because of shame, but in order to deflect the Bonner sisters from trying to steal him away from her. She is insecure about the Bonner sisters’ beauty, which fall within society’s beauty standards, while Miel believes that hers do not: “Miel had never understood why, with the four of them around, Sam would ever choose her. Miel was a handful of foil stars, but they were the fire that made the constellations. Her hair was the dark, damp earth under their family’s farm, and they were curling vines and scrolled pumpkins” (McLemore 12). The Bonner sisters are described as thin and pale with flowing red hair, filling part of their blouses and pants that Miel cannot, causing insecurity in her and her relationship with Sam. When the Bonner girls decide to start taking Miel’s roses, they also threaten to release her and Sam’s secrets to their conservative town, which they expect to marginalize the couple.

2.3 Secrets and Coming Out: Family and Social Acceptance

Katie Acosta argues that “sexually nonconforming Latinas engage in strategies to
help them minimize the risk of familial rejection. They are complicit in erasing, silencing, and avoiding their sexual identities as they attempt to maintain familial bonds” (Acosta 64). The protagonists presented in these novels all grapple one way or another with their family’s reactions to their queerness, though not always openly or directly. The authors of the novels understand that Latinx culture binds women to strict rules of sexuality deeply rooted in marianismo and machismo; complementing concepts in which machismo posits men’s duty to “protect and exert dominance, aggression, and oppression on women,” while marianismo, often referred to as “the other face of machismo,” implores “women’s obedience, submission to men, and selfless devotion to family as a way to emulate the Virgin Mary” (Hussain et. al 75). Specifically, the role of marianismo “advocates monogamy, sexual desire in long-term committed relationships, and limited exploration of sexual identity in heterosexual relationships” (76). Proposing a counter narrative, Anzaldúa states, “for the lesbian of color, the ultimate rebellion she can make against her native culture is through her sexual behavior. She goes against two moral prohibitions: sexuality and homosexuality” (41). The so-called animalistic act committed by a lesbian Latina against heteronormative and monogamist traditions of the Latino culture are challenged and feared in the works analyzed.

Anna-Marie McLemore challenges these traditions in *When the Moon Was Ours* (2016) by portraying a positive relationship between the queer young adults and their parents. Sam and Miel’s relationship is openly accepted by his mother and Aracely. Both grown ups in Sam and Miel’s lives are supportive of their relationship. Sam’s mother
unconditionally loves him and encourages him to accept his identity and Aracely is open about Miel’s sexual relationship with Sam. The complication of Sam and Miel’s relationship starts and ends with the Bonner sisters. Rumored to be brujas, the town calls the Bonner sisters, las gringas bonitas, because they make all the boys of the town fall for them and suffer from their heartbeat. The oldest Bonner girl, Chloe, is sent away the previous year for a pregnancy, but she comes back without a baby or a belly to evidence the birth she has given. By hiding and denying Chloe’s pregnancy, the novel demonstrates the town’s conservativeness in light of controversial topics such as homosexuality or teen pregnancy. The girls are rumored to have lost their powers to induce heartbreak in men due to Chloe’s pregnancy. When they find out that Miel’s roses are rumored to make someone fall in love when they are put under their pillow, the Bonner sisters set out to take them from Miel.

Miel most strongly embodies Anzaldúa’s borderlands, especially as she is torn by the Bonner sisters’ demands for her to conform to the identity of their choosing, “alien” in the dominant culture, the woman of color does not feel safe within the inner life of her Self. Petrified, she can’t respond, her face caught between los intersticios, the spaces between the different worlds she inhabits. (42)

The white witches exercise their power over Miel and her sexuality, making her decide between the secrets she wishes to keep and her protective feelings over Sam. The sisters

15 The pretty White girls.
threaten to reveal Miel’s own sexual identity as someone who “likes girls”. While Miel does not see a threat to herself in those words, she does in those towards Sam and she understands why revealing their secret is an act of aggression towards him. The Bonner sisters try to shame Miel for her sexuality, and for choosing to like Sam, “She wanted Sam, both what he was with his clothes on and what he was naked. She didn’t care what that made her” (McLemore 228). Miel’s encounters with the Bonner sisters and their consistent threats about revealing her sexuality present another conflict queer people of color encounter, and that is having to choose between their ethnicity and their sexuality, not being able to have both. As the white witches find ways to make Miel succumb to their demands, they threaten to reveal to the town Miel’s secret of how she ended up in their town; how she was drowned by her mother in order to get rid of her curse. Anzaldúa proves this to be one of the biggest challenges of the queer Latina, as she attempts to navigate her borderlands of having to choose between her culture and her sexual identity, “being lesbian and Catholic, indoctrinated as straight, I made the choice to be queer (for some it is genetically inherent)” (41). Furthermore, she expresses the rebellion her queerness has made for her as the Shadow-Beast, an embodiment that “refuses to take orders from outside authorities” (40). Anzaldúa’s Shadow-Beast is simultaneously a rebellion, but also marginalized, much like Miel’s complex back story, which is yet another metaphor for the cultural identity she has to hide in order to defend her sexual identity.

Katie Acosta explores the three interaction strategies that occur when sexually
nonconforming Latinas disclose their sexualities to family: “erasure of nonconformity, sexual silencing, and avoidance after disclosure (Acosta 64). In *Down to The Bone*, Shai and Marlena’s parents, are described as homophobic. Marlena’s parents are not present in the novel, but she is forced to date and later marry Rick in order to keep her away from girls. On the other hand, Shai’s mother openly despises Shai’s sexuality, “My mother breathes fast and heavy. ‘My friends’ daughters are all normal. It’s humiliating to be the only person I know whose child was thrown out of private school…’ – she clears her throat – ‘because of explicit texts with another girl, that will go down in your records for life’” (Dole 25). Throughout the novel, Shai struggles with her desire for girls versus her desire to come back home to her mother and little brother. As she is forced to decide between her culture and her sexuality, Shai opts for her ability to come back home. She decides to date a boy named London, despite her strong desire for girls. Acosta establishes further that the erasure of nonconformity strategy occurs when the Latina discloses her sexual nonconformity and her family “in turn try to erase it by using control and manipulation tactics” (Acosta 64). Shai is willing to let her mother think she has “changed” in order to be allowed back home, but she can’t go home without proving that her changes, as her mother calls it, are permanent,

She just cares about my being with a male, and that he’s good looking so our kids will be beautiful. She still hasn’t even asked me a thing about my life. She might not even care that I dropped out of school as long as I’m on the “decent” road to one day in the future getting married and having kids.
Even after Shai has told her mother about London, she will not let her come back home, which ultimately leads Shai to decide that she will follow her heart and sexual identity instead of trying to follow her mother’s dreams.

In Juliet Takes a Breath, Juliet’s opening letter to Harlowe is also a quest for courage, as she searches for a way to come out to her family before she leaves for Portland, Oregon for the summer. The night of her departure, during a family dinner, Juliet tells her family, abuelita included, that she is a lesbian, which they did not take seriously the first time, “I am gay. Gay gay gay. I’ve been dating Lainie for the past year. This isn’t a joke. I’ve been wondering for weeks how to tell you all and this is the best I’ve got. I’m definitely a lesbian” (Rivera 25). Her declaration wins Juliet mixed reactions, her tías support her, as do her grandmother and her father. Her mother, tells Juliet that her sexual identity is just a phase because she’s never had a boyfriend before, gets up from the table and locks herself in her room. Juliet’s hiding of her relationship with Lainie before coming out to her family can be categorized as sexual silencing, though her initial reaction slowly turns into acceptance as Juliet attempts to mend their relationship.

In the time where she is trying to heal her relationship with her mother, Juliet receives support from her cousin Ava in Florida, who is also questioning her sexuality. Ava helps her come to terms with her identity by informing her, rather than questioning Juliet or scrutinizing her identity. In a conversation with her aunt, Ava’s mother, Juliet inquires about lesbian relationship she had previous to her husband, to which she responds openly. Juliet asks her mirroring her own mother’s words: “So it was just a
phase?’ I asked. ‘I don’t know. Things were different then. I didn’t judge myself for loving her, ever. I didn’t have a name for it, so I just let myself feel it’” (Rivera 200). In this reflection, Juliet feels stronger about her own sexual identity as a Latina, but also about her identity in relationship to her family’s acceptance and her future.

Unlike the other novels, *What the Night Brings* (2003), lacks parental and social support for Marci. She is often lonely in her dreams of becoming a boy; she finds consolation in being able to dream and pray to God every night that she is transformed into a boy. Marci gets little space to converse with adults about her confusion; she tries to talk to her catechism teacher, a nun called Miss Beauchamp, to little avail. Her only source of support is the librarian of her small town library, who helps her find a book about a trans woman, cautious of showing her something so forbidden: “‘I don’t think I should be showing you this book, because it’s more for adults, but we do have this story of a man who decided he was living in the wrong body and got an operation to become a woman. It’s called *The Christine Jorgensen Story*’” (Trujillo, location 490). Marci cannot take the book home because of her parents, but it is in this moment that Marci realizes that the only way she will undergo this transformation is if she gets an operation. She decides she doesn’t want to be turned into a boy, she really just wants to be able to like girls.

It is not until towards the end of the novel, when Marcía begins to stand up for herself and her sister against her father’s hits, that her father mentions Marcía’s masculinity. When she tells her father that she will not be cooking for him, he responds:
“‘Hijo, Marci, what a big little man you are now. Qué hombre! I didn’t know I had me un 
hombrecito. Here I was thinking you was my little girl. And goddamn if my dick didn’t 
squirt out a boy.’” (Trujillo, location 1745). The girls run away from their abusive father 
when Corin accidentally shoots him with his rifle, and end up living with Grandma Flor. 
It is here where Marcía meets for the first time, a girl who also likes girls. While Marci’s 
encounter with another lesbian is the final scene of the movie, it also provides a window 
of opportunity for change in traditional values and the possibility of existing in a realm 
where Latinas don’t have to choose between multiple identities.

2.4 Sexual Identity and Intersectionality: Issues of Race and Feminism

When grappling with issues of feminism, many works of literature have only 
focused on one aspect of it, encasing all women in one group while failing to represent 
the multiple voices of multiculturality. Judith Butler asserts, “for feminist theory, the 
development of a language that fully or adequately represents women has seemed 
necessary to foster the political visibility of women. This has seemed important 
considering the pervasive cultural condition in which women’s lives were either 
 misrepresented or not represented at all” (1). Legal scholar Kimberlé Crenshaw 
approaches the topic of intersectionality as a call for social justice in a space of color-
blindness in feminism. Carasthatis argues that feminist theory has “settled down” with 
intersectionality in sum as,

it demonstrates a consensus that homogenizes, essentialist, and 

exclusionary models of identity that falsely universalize relatively
privileged experiences and identities to all “women,” models that marginalize some (indeed, most) women while centering others, are unjust and inadequate to building truly emancipatory theories and political movements (2).

In the recognition of intersectional identities, women of color acknowledge that race and gender cannot be separated in the creation of womanism, “feminists of all colors, as well as women of color and others who question or reject feminism, have been debating the uniqueness and viability of womanism as a freestanding concept” (Phillips xix). Alice Walker coined the term in 1983’s *In Search of Our Mothers’ Garden: Womanist Prose* and consequently, bearing the weight of the women of color excluded from the feminist movements led by middle class white women. In this section, I explore the ways in which the young adult novels treat issues of race and feminism, whether it be in acknowledging intersectionality or stepping out of patriarchal traditions established in protagonists’ households.

Trujillo’s *What the Night Brings* intersects issues of religion with Marci’s sexual identity while *Juliet Takes a Breath* tackles on the issues of race in feminism straight on through a Womanist Black woman and a feminist White woman. Marcia’s home life and family dynamics are encased in strong sexist traditions in *What the Night Brings* (2003), where her mother is not allowed to do anything other than cook and clean for her husband and her father is allowed to hit them when they do not comply. Acosta briefly explores the way Latina sexuality and silencing within households, “silencing does more than just
repress Mexican female sexuality; silencing and hypervigilance of Mexicanas and other Latinas may drive them to rebellion and lead to the disempowerment through disparate consequences such as single parenthood, sexually transmitted diseases, or lack of preparation for the labor market” (Acosta 642). Their grandmother’s story of survival against abuse creates a ripple in both the sisters and their mother’s belief system. Marcía’s grandmother breaks the tradition of her culture within her own marriage after enduring abuse from her husband. She expects Marcía’s mother to do the same, by scaring Marcía’s father into running away from their home.

During these months of their father’s absence, the girls’ mother leaves the home for the first time to get her driver’s license and find a job, disrupting the tradition of being a housewife, out of necessity for survival. This victorious independence of the sisters and their mother lures their father back home and transforms him into an even more abusive beast. As he whips the sisters with belts, kicks and punches them, Marcía becomes more and more resistant to his abuse in order to get him out of the house. Marcía’s mother portrays rigid cultural norms in her insistence to stay with her husband, “enduring pain and suffering can be internalized as a strength,” (Hussain, et. al 74). Marcía refuses to accept her mother’s suffering for her father, but also her own and her sister’s, “she never does anything about him hitting us or treating her like dogshit, but she sure gets mad if she knows some other girl’s got her hands on him” (location 2960). Simultaneously, Calvo and Esquibel state the prevalence of violence in queer Latinas as violence and abuse in families, as well as state and street violence,
the cultural scripts of sexuality...finds violence and silence as themes that cross national borders: by historicizing these women’s experiences, we see the transnational nature of discourse and practice that links second-generation Chicanas and Mexicana immigrants regarding sexuality. (225)

Anzaldúa makes a clear distinction of the tear in the lesbian woman’s identity to be cast aside, but also of her shame for not subverting to the Church’s beliefs, “for a woman of my culture, there used to be only three directions she could turn: to the Church as a nun, to the streets as a prostitute or to the home as a mother” (39). With Marci’s every prayer to God asking for a change of sex, Trujillo also explores Marci’s relationship with religion in the context of her sexuality, a frequent issue in sexual and gender identity, though not always explored. Marci has complicated relationships with the matrons of the church, the nuns both nurture and scrutinize her for her mischievous behavior. Most scholarship of LGBTQ Latinas and religion focuses on machismo and marianismo, and 2010’s Latina/o Sexualities: Probing Powers, Passions, Practices, and Policies by Marysol Asencio recognizes the lack of scholarship linking Latina’s non-conforming sexualities with religion.

Juliet arrives at Portland to meet “The Pussy Lady,” the name she calls Harlowe Brisbane. Harlowe is described as a White woman with a flaming red short haircut, who says “oh my Goddesses” and can smell people’s auras. She tells Juliet that her assignment for her internship is to research a box full of scraps of papers with women’s names for Harlowe’s next book. On her first day in Harlowe’s home, where she will be
staying, Juliet meets a young, Asian man, named Phen, who helps her explore the city. In exploring the city, Phen also makes Juliet explore her own identity, as he asks Juliet her PGPs and questions her sexuality, “I bet you’re not even really gay. You’re just feeling trendy because you go to a liberal arts college” (Rivera 65). This accusation startles Juliet and makes her tearful, but also makes her assert her own sexual identity to herself, while simultaneously realizing how much she still has to learn. Juliet notes to herself a list of questions she has to answer:

- Ask Ava about Ze, Trans, PGPs, non-queers and use of dyke by non-dykes
- Cry a little to Ava. Ask if Mom’s talked to Tití Penny
- How do I identify? As in myself? Identify self. Is that possible beyond “hello my name is”? 
- Be better with comebacks. Dude questioned your gayness. He doesn’t even know you.

This interaction with Phen also sparked a curiosity in Juliet. She wonders why the terms and ideas Phen mentions to her were not present in Harlowe’s book, “Maybe I’d missed all the radical pronoun terms amidst all the discussion about vaginas, and feminism, and the dismantling of the patriarchy forever. If Harlowe didn’t write about it then maybe Phen was just some weirdo giving me a hard time” (Rivera 83). The assumption Juliet makes that if Harlowe didn’t write about it in her book, then it’s not a real idea,

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16 Preferred Gender Pronouns.
demonstrates Rivera’s showcasing the White privilege that Harlowe possesses and the discourse of feminism she establishes based on her position, but also Juliet’s disadvantage in her lack of knowledge and vulnerability as an LGBTQ narrator of color.

During her time in Portland, Juliet meets different multicultural people who raise questions about her sexuality as a woman of color. She meets Maxine, a Black woman with a Masters of Divinity who teaches theology with a focus on Black Womanist Liberation Theology and Harlowe’s primary partner. Harlowe also introduces Juliet to Zaira, a woman leading a workshop based on Octavia Butler’s science fiction literature and the representation of women of color in the genre. Juliet expresses discomfort in this workshop, wondering about her ability to write a science fiction short story, but ends up writing a short story titled *Starlight Mamitas: Three Chords of Rebellion*. Zaira’s workshop is closed to non-Black and non-POC individuals, yet another moment in the novel where Juliet finds herself confused,

Since I’d arrived in Portland, all I’d amassed was questions. Questions about words and phrases, queerness, POC spaces, whiteness, the world of women, privileges, and the women I still had to research. All of it swirled in my head and I didn’t know what do with it. (Rivera 101)

Juliet’s questions only become persistent and elaborate as the relationships of the people

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17 Harlowe Brisbaine is polyamorous. This complication of sexuality is explored in the novel as the interracial relationship crumbles as the presence of politics and race in the two characters’ oppositional views of feminism arises.
around her complicate.

Juliet, Harlowe, and Maxine overhear a couple of white women complaining about Zaira’s workshop and her request for White allies in the space to be respectful of the voices of the people of color, arguing that in *their* feminism, all are equal. Despite being with two women of color herself, Harlowe retaliates the girls’ arguments in defense,

It’s not about a ‘dominant voice’. It’s about women of color owning their own space and their voices being treated with dignity and respect. It’s about women of color not having to shout over white people’s voices to be heard. We’re the ones that need to give women of color space for their voices. (99-100)

This defensive statement angers Maxine and leaves Juliet confused, not understanding why Harlowe’s white savior response angers Maxine and Juliet uncomfortable. Rivera argues that “Harlowe shouldn’t be concerned about Maxine’s Blackness and that in essence Harlowe was committing microaggressions against Maxine. Maxine felt that Harlowe should be focused on fusing anti-racist beliefs into her particular brand of white feminism and vagina empowerment” (157). As a womanist, Maxine positions the reader in the midst of a debate on race and representation, “by maintaining its autonomy outside established intellectual and political structures, womanism has preserved its accessibility to a broad spectrum of people from diverse walks of life and retained its ability to flourish “beneath the radar” (Phillips xxi). Rivera’s voicing of the concern that many
women of color have is reflected in Juliet, as she tries to ignore feelings as an outsider in Harlowe’s feminism.

As the topic of white feminism is discussed in Juliet, Jeanne Drysdale Weiler reflects, “feminists of color have taken white women to task not only for privileging patriarchy over issues of race, class, sexual preference, and other forms of oppression, but also for defining patriarchy and the construction of women’s experiences in terms that ignore or marginalize the experiences of women of color” (22). As the conversations about people of color, intersectionality and representation intensify in the novel, the women of color surrounding Harlowe begin to question her feminism, creating an existential crisis in Juliet. During a reading of Harlowe’s book at a bookstore, Zaira asks,

Harlowe, do you really think that tacking on a message of unity and solidarity for queer and trans women of color at the end of Raging Flower was powerful enough to make a difference? As if a few sentences were enough to bridge the disparity among women who experience oppression due to their multiple intersectionalities and women who don’t have to navigate those intersectionalities? Do you think that this message is enough to rally non-white women to your particular brand of feminism?

To be your blood sisters? (Rivera 179)

Instead of admitting to the very white privilege she has and criticizes, Harlowe points to Juliet and showcases her as the girl from the Bronx who survived shootings and crackheads, living in poverty and without family support. Harlowe lets her audience
know that Juliet survived the Bronx because of Raging Flower. In this moment, Juliet understands all the conversations around her until that moment, asking herself, “What did it mean for me as a person and a wannabe feminist that I looked up to Harlowe? Was I proof that her feminism was for everyone?” (Rivera 182). Phillips recognizes that “to be a womanist, one must identify one’s cultural roots and experience oneself as a cultural or ethnic being rather than a racial being, but one must also be able to see oneself and one’s people as part of a larger global body defined by common humanness” (xxxvi). By marginalizing and trivializing Juliet’s racial and cultural identities, Harlowe fails to see the double edged sword that is her feminism.

2.5 Additional Portrayals of Sexual and Gender Identities

When the Moon Was Ours (2016) presents an elaborate array of queer characters aside from Miel. Although the town where Miel and Sam live is unnamed, there are clues as to what kind of town it is. Dominated by White people, Miel and Sam’s small families are considered outsiders because of the color of their skins. Their town whispers behind Aracely’s back for being a curandera during the day, but seek her lovesickness cures at night. Living in a conservative town, the Bonner sisters find that Sam and Miel’s romance can be threatened with the secrets they hold. Sam is short for Samira, and because he was born a girl when his mother needed a boy, Samira decides to become Samir, following the cultural practice of Afghani and Pakistani families bacha posh, “in which families who have daughters but no sons dress a daughter as a boy” to fulfill the duties of the son (McLemore 272). Once sons grow up, they return to being women who
marry and have their own children, fulfilling their duties as women. Sam’s struggles begin when he admits to himself that he does not want to stop being a boy when his duty as a son to his mother is done. When the Bonner girls threaten to tell Sam’s secret they insist on using female pronouns: “‘Stop,’ she said, the word hot in Miel’s ear. ‘Or I’m telling everyone about her’ Her. That one word, that word that did not belong to Sam, worked better than all the threats the Bonner girls could have made” (McLemore 144).

Kessler and McKenna explain “where there are dichotomies it is difficult to avoid evaluating one in relation to the other, a firm foundation for discrimination and oppression. Unless and until gender, in all of its manifestations including the physical, is seen as a social construction, action that will radically change our incorrigible propositions cannot occur” (180). The use of a feminine pronoun towards Sam, is an act of oppression and aggression towards him from the Bonner sisters. Sonny Normardken further states, that “misgendering” takes place because “microaggressors assume that they have the ability to know a trans person’s “true” identity and that their perception of a trans person is more valid than the trans person’s own self-knowledge” (131). By refusing to use his masculine pronouns, the Bonner sisters act on transphobic ideals that permeate throughout their town but is never confronted or acted upon.

Much like Miel, Aracely’s origins are a mystery, it is said that she “had appeared one summer along with a hundred thousand butterflies” (McLemore 16). It is later revealed in a conversation between Sam and Aracely that she was once Miel’s brother, Leandro and when the river took him, it brought her back to that town as a grown
woman. While her transformation is more magical than Sam’s, Aracely understands Sam’s reasons for identifying as a boy and how his true identity lies in who he feels he is and not the body parts under his clothes. Her transformation in the river, symbolizes the same process that Sam goes through as a transgender boy.

Even though the Bonner sisters torture Miel about her relationship with Sam, the second youngest sister also keeps a secret, which is that she also dates girls. While the novel does not use any labels such as homosexual, lesbian or transgender, it is clear that these labels are not needed in order to exercise oppression. The town’s lack of interception of the white witches’ violent acts serves as a metaphor for bigger denigrations such as “unacknowledged injustices” which maintains an “institution of cis-sexism and a cis-normative culture that privileges and normalizes cisgender experiences” (Nordmarken 132). This is also shown in the way the Bonner sisters’ parents are aware of what they do; of the fact that the Bonner sisters have uncovered a glass coffin owned by the family where they lock Miel in order to torture her into giving them her roses, yet decide to turn their heads. The townspeople of the novel are aware of what transpires between the Bonner sisters and Miel, as the Bonner sisters torture Miel, but never seem to face any consequences, much less are interfered by the parents themselves.

In *Down to the Bone* (2009), Shai also meets Tazer, who identifies as genderqueer. Tazer tries to provide support for Shai as a friend. Shai refers to Tazer using female pronouns based on appearance. Tazer reveals his preference for masculine gender pronouns, which drives Shai to automatically assume Tazer is vying for her feelings,
“He’s too handsome. I can’t accept invitations from a guy who might be trying to rescue me and take me home” (Dole 23). The asterisk often used in trans* refers to the inclusion of identities such as “transgender, transsexual, trans man, and trans woman that are prefized by trans- but also identities such as genderqueer, neutrios, intersex, agender, two-spirit, cross-dresser, and gender-fluid” (Tompkins 27). Tazer represents a fluidity of gender that disrupts Shai’s dichotomist views of gender, as he often transcends and shifts genders throughout the novel. Shai’s assumption that a boi\(^{18}\) will automatically be attracted to her as a feminine woman, only confirms the heteronormative thoughts that Shai and her friends are fighting against. The use of labels is also employed throughout the novel as a way of identifying characters and to highlight how each one is in some way fighting against heteronormative ideas, but the labels themselves only reinforce these ideas. Shai lists the crew she is working in the landscaping company with as:

> The andro, a snoring girl, a wacked-out sicko perv, the roaring tiger and his intense workaholic brother, We’re missing the homophobic nun to wipe the smile off the lesbian, a coffee distributor guy to wake up the snoozer, and a priest (or rabbi) to “cure” the perv (Dole 62).

The problematic and derogatory use of labels by both the protagonist as well as her friends, though often in a joking manner does not translate as a positive label to adhere to for the reader and prolongs negative connotations about LGBTQ characters overall, not just LGBTQ Latinas.

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\(^{18}\) Term used in the lesbian and femme community: genderqueer; person who is biologically female, but presents themselves in a boyish way.
2.6 LGBTQ Latinas Described from a White Narrator’s Perspective

The previously mentioned analyses are based on the main characters of the novels, but I felt compelled to point out Nina Lacour’s *We Are Okay*. Scottish Marin narrates the story as she recounts the birth, evolution, disintegration and rebirth of her friendship turned romantic relationship with Mexican born Mabel. The novel is written from Marin’s perspective, who runs away from her home in California to attend school in New York after her grandfather mysteriously disappears in the ocean. The story revolves around Marin’s anxiety over Mabel’s visit to her at NYU after Marin abandons her and cuts off all communication with her. Written in alternate timelines, Marin narrates her relationship with Mabel along with glimpses of Mabel’s identity.

It is not explicitly stated that Marin and Mabel are in love until two thirds of the novel. Because Marin narrates *We Are Okay*, the representation of Mabel occurs through the perspective of a white character and it is up to the reader to accept or reject Marin’s vocalizations of Mabel and her culture. The first appearance of Mabel is in Marin’s grandfather’s bakery, where he asks Mabel to say something in Spanish and after Mabel complies with his request, Marin says, “‘Gramps,’ I said. ‘You’re exoticizing her again’ (Lacour 26). While Marin’s grandfather means well, Mabel’s language is treated as a form of entertainment, and when exploited, as a part of her that needs to be defended by Marin.

The descriptions of Mabel are scant, but still present in the novel. The small presence of Mabel’s race and culture are only visible through Marin’s narrative. Marin’s
mother dies when she is a three-year-old baby, and her father is absent since before she is born. She becomes attached to Mabel’s parents, Ana and Javier, in the hopes of emotionally replacing her own. In a flashback, Marin remembers a party she and Mabel were preparing for, to which they wore the same dress in different colors. When Ana and Javier object to Mabel wearing the dress, Marin expresses disdain for the lack of objections the parental figures had over hers, “I felt the heat rise in my face, too, but from embarrassment, not indignation. I wanted to know what it felt like. I wanted them to tell me no” (Lacour 80). She also makes note of Mabel’s mother Ana, that she is a famous collage artist in South America or Mabel’s father Javier and his cooking. The book barely mentions Mabel’s cultural identity, in fact, the only evidence provided is in the conversation in Spanish Mabel holds with Marin’s grandfather in the opening pages of the book. In an intimate conversation between Ana and Marina, Ana says, “Mabel told us everything. About the two of you. About Gramps and how he died. About what you discovered after he was gone” (Lacour 232). Though Ana expresses knowledge of the girls’ relationship, she does not express objection, but rather, welcomes Marin to her family as a mother, “And I still want to be your mother” (232).

While *We Are Okay* does not speak for all books with secondary Latina characters, it does make a statement by only vocalizing the parts of Mabel that Marin deems important, her identity as a Mexican female, is not the most important. Issues of representation lay in the fact that there are few young adult novels featuring Latina characters as protagonists, the issue is also rooted to their representation as minor
character. The issue also lies in the fact that a white character narrating the story
determines how much can be learned about minor characters and by determining that a
part of their identity can be partially or completely omitted defines the privilege of the
main character.

2.7 Conclusion

Young adult literature still has a lot of work to do regarding the representation of
LGBTQ Latinx characters. In the identification of the text to be analyzed for this chapter,
finding young adult literature containing LGBTQ Latinas proved harder than expected. In
2016, only two books were published with queer Latinas, When The Moon Was Ours by
Anna-Marie McLemore and Juliet Takes A Breath by Gabby Rivera. The quest for the
representation of Latinas is also extended to their authors, as the lack of representation
also lies in the authors of the novels.

The novel Love and Lies: Marisol’s Story, published in 2008 by Ellen Wittlinger
also features a young adult Latina, but was not written by a Latina woman herself. In the
identification of texts, there were no transgender or genderqueer Latina main characters,
limiting the analyses in this chapter to questioning or lesbian female characters.

Furthermore, the novels analyzed challenged multiple issues in young adult
literature that are currently present in multicultural readers. For example, Juliet Takes a
Breath did not ignore the fact that Juliet is an intersectional character and her interaction
with white feminist Harlowe Brisbaine, along with other feminists of color implored
issues of intersectionality and representation that Juliet was not aware of herself. What
*the Night Brings* and *Down to The Bone* explicitly demonstrates Latinas’ struggles with nonconforming sexual identities that disrupt the traditional values of their families, but also, their own struggles in acculturation as they attempt to blend their culture of origin and the dominant culture they live in in order to find peace. *When the Moon Was Ours* also presented a positive portrayal of familial relations, even within their traditional values, as supportive adults in their young adults’ sexual identities. McLemore creates a narrative that seeks to counteract the problematic “acceptance narrative,” in which a cisgender character learns to accept a transgender character. She explains that there is still transphobia and homophobia directed towards the characters of her story, but that “those closest to Sam – his family, his best friend, the girl he’s falling in love with – love him and his authentic self” (McLemore 2016).

Despite their many positive traits, some of the novels also portrayed arguable representations of the Latina main characters that potentially prolong problematic mainstream discourses about the sexual identities of Latinas. For example, *Down to the Bone*’s Shai utilizes derogatory labels to refer to other queer characters who don’t conform to her internal ideas of queerness. She openly rejects and dislikes queer women who appear masculine and often refers to them as “butch” or “dykes”. Multiple characters in the novel portray similar behaviors: heterosexual men believe lesbians are “man-hating feminists” and conversations with LGBTQ characters handle the topic with the same delicacy and decorum, “I bet some butches and guys like you are softies in bed, and some girls who are feminine are crazy wild passionate and assertive.’ ‘You’re right. My
ex looked feminine and took total control in bed. I loved that about her”’ (Dole 129).

These problematic dialogues reaffirm stereotypes associated with LGBTQ people and create disparity between what the novel is trying to do, which is represent multicultural LGBTQ characters and what it is actually doing, which is creating arguable conversations within and outside the book. We Are Okay by Nina Lacour, though representing a Latina as a secondary character, displays how, as long as the perspective of the novel is from a white narrator, the aspects of the Latina character are reduced to a couple of sentences, usually romanticizing the character’s culture through the eyes of the narrator.
Chapter Three: Social Identity

Within the realm of human sciences and psychology, Marilyn B. Brewer explains that the concept of social identity “provides a link between the psychology of the individual – the representation of self – and the structure and process of social groups within which the self is embedded” (Brewer 115). It is important to recognize the many ways the term social identity has been interpreted and defined. Moreover, Brewer analyzes the ways different theorists have defined the term social identity, she highlights Thoits and Virshup’s distinctions of “me” identities (which include role-based identities) and collective or “we” identities (which include group and social category identities), “Individual (“me”) identities are “identifications of the self as a certain kind of person, whereas collective (“we”) identities are “identifications of the self with a group or category as a whole” (Thoits and Virshup 106). Furthermore, Brewer states, “on the basis of this distinction, the various theories can be distinguished according to whether they define social identities in terms of social roles and social types, or in terms of demographic characteristics and organizational or group memberships” (Brewer 116).

Based on these and several other theorists, Brewer formulates her own taxonomy of social identity concepts which include: person-based social identities and relations social identities, which are both “me” identities, the former “within the individual self-concept” and the latter, the identification of the self as a certain kind of person, “which
defines the self in relation to others” (Brewer 118). Finally, *group based identities* frame the self “as an integral or interchangeable part of a larger group or social unit,” while *collective identities* “affect the content of self-representations through the processes of identification and assimilation” (118). These social identity constructions developed by Brewer are a taxonomy of other social theorists such as Thoits and Virshup, Tajfel and Turner and Stryker, and will be used as the primary theoretical framework for this chapter.

Furthermore, the construction of social identity in the protagonists of this chapter will also be explored in relation to their racial identities. Paul Spickard defines racial identity as a socio political construct, which partly corresponds to the biological dimension of an individual’s identity, which includes, “physical features, gene pools and character qualities” (2014). Within these socio political constructs exists the debate of Latinx racial identities. Researches argue that Latinx is not a race, but rather a racial identity that is constructed through determining social contexts, “Latinos are also unique in that according to federal policy, they do not constitute a separate race and can be of any race. In the 2000 Census, nearly half of Latinos self-identified as white. Latinos experiencing social and economic alienation will incorporate as racialized minorities who exist as part of a large community of ‘people of color’”(Stokes-Brown 310). Stokes-Brown theorizes that this social construct is due to the rejection of racial boundaries dictated upon immigrants when they arrive to the United States, “where the dominant racial paradigm exists around black and white identity” (311).
These distinctions are vital for the interpretation of the following texts featuring Latina characters in social settings. As part of their identity formation, the Latinas featured in the sample of young adult literature to be discussed frame their social identities as both self and as part of their cultural groups in respect to their social settings. These social settings include school, friendships, relationships and the social spaces they occupy as young adults. Furthermore, using the framework previously mentioned, I will analyze the way the young adult Latinas construct their social identities both to define themselves as individuals in social settings as well as collectively.

3.1 Corpses, Emily Dickinson, and Friendship: Constructions of Social Identities

Marilyn B. Brewer’s framework of social identification centers on the role of the ingroup, “a set of people who share a common characteristic or social experience. Social identities in this framework represent a process of identification with, or assimilation to, others who share the common group membership” (117). In this chapter, the young adult literature focuses on the Latinas’ social experiences in relationship to their racial identities, specifically, how they construct their social identities. I seek to explore the representation of these Latinas within their social settings and the formation of their individual and collective social identities.

Shadowshaper, was written by Daniel José Older and published in 2015. The novel is the first in an urban fantasy series set in Brooklyn, New York. Sierra María Santiago is an artist, commissioned to paint the walls of The Tower, a building that sprang up in the middle of Brooklyn but was abandoned and never completed by its
developers. The inhabitants of Brooklyn hate The Tower, for the developers’ misuse of power over the neighborhood, its lack of functionality, the way that it was built out of spite for the people of the neighborhood and left empty, without a purpose. In the opening pages of the novel, Sierra notices that the murals around her neighborhood are fading, and takes special notice of the mural of the late Papa Acevedo, whose painted face seems to be dropping a tear. After a terrifying encounter with a walking corpse at a party, Sierra finds out about shadowshapers, people deeply connected with the spiritual world that create vessels for wandering dead people’s spirits through art, music and stories. As Sierra begins to investigate the shadowshapers, she realizes that her bedridden grandfather, Lázaro, was a shadowshaper and that this spiritual connection runs in her family, passed down generation after generation. Sierra does not endure her journey alone, but is in fact, strongly supported by her group of friends, in an adventure where their fantastical conflicts are metaphors for their issues of race and social class.

In the realm of realistic fiction, the novel *When Reason Breaks* by Cindy L. Rodríguez, published in 2015, is told in alternating plots by two girls sharing the same initials: Emily Delgado and Elizabeth Davis. The story begins with a suicide note left behind to Ms. Díaz, the girls’ English teacher, without disclosure of whom the note belongs to. The novel later reveals that the writer of the note is one of the two protagonists, Emily Delgado and Elizabeth Davis. Both girls encounter the difficulties of their home lives, declining academic performances and bullying in different forms. The novel presents multiple layers to the girls’ social identities, focusing on how they shift
between their home lives and social lives in order to create balance as their lives increasingly complicate. The novel also touches on an important and often muted topic in multicultural young adult literature: mental health.

Cristina García writes a narrative of female friendship in *Dreams of Significant Girls*, published in 2011. A coming-of-age story set in early 1970s, *Dreams of Significant Girls* centers on Vivien, Shirin, and Ingrid, three girls who meet at a summer camp in Switzerland and become best friends. The elite school where the girls attend summer camp, brings girls from all around the globe. Ingrid Baum is Canadian, from a family of German immigrants after World War II. Shirin is the daughter of an Iranian prince from Tehran, where the Shah is still in Iran. Vivien Wahl, the only Latina in the group, is from Cuba, where she was born after her father, a Jewish man and survivor of the Holocaust runs away to Cuba, but later moves his family to Miami and then New York. The story showcases the way the three girls find common grounds in the bonds of womanhood as they grow up, but also the way they grapple with current events unveiling in the world around them. In a strong narrative resonant to *The Sisterhood of the Traveling Pants* by Ann Brashares, *Dreams of Significant Girls* highlights multicultural friendships and acceptance throughout.

Published in 2014, María E. Andreu’s *The Secret Side of Empty* focuses on a social identity formed strictly by the cultural reigns of Argentine Monserrat Thalia. M.T. is a straight-A senior student, an Honor Society member and highly regarded in her elite group of friends. As conversations about the future and college applications start to arise
around her, M.T. is unable to ignore the secret she keeps, that she is an illegal immigrant who cannot attend college. She lives with her parents and younger brother; the abusive father who works at a restaurant to keep the family afloat indoctrinates their poverty-ridden household. M.T.’s social identity is dominated by the walls created between her illegal immigrant status and her desire to devise a future where she is not working a dead-end job illegally. Her struggle lies in being torn between the life she wants to lead, influenced by her social circle of friends and the life she is being forced to lead due to her father and her family’s expectations of a woman. While her friends and schoolteachers are planning their futures around her, M.T. cannot make herself do anything except to retract from her social circles in order to grapple with her hardships on her own, which start to affect her relationships as well as her own mental health.

### 3.2 Individual Social Identities

The concept of social identity is demonstrated in multiple forms in the works of young adult literature. The protagonists endure cultural appropriation and being othered within the same social spaces and the construction of their social identities strongly rely on their ability to balance these. In these novels, it is no different, though the dynamics of multicultural relationships are portrayed in different ways. In conversations about identity, Juana María Rodríguez delineates Norma Alarcón’s “Conjugating Subjects in the Age of Multiculturalism” that,

> discourses on difference and identity create knowledge about subjects and the ways subjects speak back to create new bodies of knowledge. Identity,
therefore, is not merely a response to culturally defined differences, but is continually engaged in unpacking the stream of “paradoxes and contradictions” that inform the subject’s relationship to other subjects and the discourses that surround them. (6)

The social identities constructed by the Latinas in these young adult novels are a continual process that the characters endure as members of multiple cultures, both within their culture of origin and the dominant culture outside of their homes.

In Shadowshaper (2015), Sierra is Puerto Rican, though it is not specified when her family arrived in New York. Sierra’s romantic interest is a Haitian street artist named Robbie. When he shows her his elaborate tattoos, displaying pieces of the three races of *mestizaje*\(^\text{19}\), Sierra accuses Robbie of cultural appropriation, “‘What? But you’re Haitian. I thought taínos were my peeps.’ ‘Nah, Haiti had ‘em too. Has ‘em. You know…” (Older 126). As the plot moves along, it is clear that Sierra’s knowledge of her culture is limited and her social interactions with her friends usually teach her something new. On a visit to Columbia University’s library, Sierra spots a book titled *Studies in Puerto Rican Literature* and consequently thinks to herself, “It’d never occurred to her there was such a thing as Puerto Rican literature, let alone that it would be worthy of a thick volume in Columbia University Library” (Older 48). In getting to know more about her culture through her social experiences, Sierra undergoes enculturation, “the learning of one’s culture through socialization into and maintenance of specific practices embedded in

\(^{19}\) Mixed blood of African, Spanish and Taíno (Indian).
native values and beliefs. The individual adaptations of these processes have been described as “assimilation, integration, or biculturality, separation or maintenance of traditionality, and marginalization or peripheral status in both cultures” (Gloria and Castellanos 7). Sierra’s assimilation and integration is experienced when she learns about her family’s practice of shadowshaping and becoming a shadowshaper as well.

As Sierra discovers more about the shadowshapers, she finds out that an American anthropologist, Dr. Jonathan Wick became close to the shadowshapers in order to learn more about their spiritual systems, but has mysteriously disappeared. Upon further investigation, Sierra discovers that the shadowshapers are in danger due to Jonathan Wick’s thirst for power to gain control over the shadowshapers. Sierra soon discovers that the gift of shadowshaping has been passed down to her and that she is the forthcoming Lucera, a legacy passed down by the women of her family, a highly sought after power by Jonathan Wick.

At the same time Sierra’s social circle and family is endangered due to the power hungry anthropologist, Sierra is living during the progressing gentrification of her neighborhood. Sierra and her friends refer to their changing neighborhood as The Takeover, “the place Sierra and Bennie used to get their hair done had turned into a fancy bakery of some kind, and yes, the coffee was good, but you couldn’t get a cup for less than three dollars. Plus, every time Sierra went in, the hip, young, white kid behind the counter gave her either the don’t-cause-no-trouble look or the I-want-to-adopt-you look” (Older 81). While Sierra and her friends make connections to find Dr. Wick’s
whereabouts and stop his conquest, the Brooklyn neighborhood is overtaken by boutiques and overpriced coffee shops. Sierra recognizes the danger towards her family parallel to the danger of the neighborhood, “by institutionalizing the consumption practices of more affluent and highly educated men and women in place of stores that serve the poor, it challenges the “right to the city” of low income residents” (Zukin 48). Her individual social identity is strongly bound to the events affecting the people who are related to her construction of individual social identity, “role identities, are usually conceptualized as structured sets of interrelated behaviors, obligations, and orientations toward others that are specific to that social role and differentiated from other role identities that the same individual may hold” (Brewer 121). By complying with her role as a shadowshaper to save her family, Sierra recognizes the required behaviors and obligations bound to that group in relation to her social identities. Furthermore, it is not coincidence that the final battle against Dr. Wick occurs inside the tower, manifesting Sierra and her friends’ literal and metaphorical struggle with the growing gentrification of their neighborhood.

*When Reason Breaks* (2015) displays different aspects of the complications of friendship, but also friendships in unlikely people in relationship to Emily’s own social identity. Emily and Elizabeth’s relationship is complicated throughout the novel; they are less than friends, yet more than acquaintances. While Elizabeth is marginalized for her attitude and demeanor, Emily is popular, yet both share a mutual friend who forces them to spend time together, Emily’s boyfriend, Kevin. The hardships the girls endure lead them to seek support and as they spend more time together, end up seeking more and
more support from each other. As Emily spends more time with Kevin and Elizabeth, her strengthening friendship with Elizabeth causes Abby and Sarah’s to fall apart. As Emily tries to comply with her father’s strict rules, Abby and Sarah both complicate their friendship with Emily by taunting her and making her feel guilty, often for her utter respect to her father and his need to keep their public personas intact. Gloria and Castellanos further implore that “the role of public regard in relation to their family is heightened if Latinas do not maintain and preserve the traditionality of cultural values passed down generationally” (Gloria and Castellanos 8). For Emily, complying with her father’s orders of maintaining an exemplary public persona does not lie in his role as a city councilman only, but rather, in their culture as a whole.

The dynamic of multicultural friendship is explored in *Dreams of Significant Girls* (2011). Kate McInally writes in “Who Wears the Pants? The (Multi)Cultural Politics of *The Sisterhood of the Traveling Pants*, that “the novel overtly signals the power and positivity of girl-girl bonds, this is underpinned by a call for sameness, one that rejects the importance of cultural specifics, and serves in the end, to promote patriarchy” (McInally 188). While McInally writes on a close reading of *The Sisterhood of Traveling Pants*, *Dreams of Significant Girls* establishes a similar discourse due to the concept of female friendship that resonates with *The Sisterhood*. In *Dreams of Significant Girls*, differences in the girls’ cultural backgrounds are “erased” and what is left is the story of three adolescent girls in a Switzerland boarding school over three summers. It can be debated that as McInally points out, “the multicultural agenda of the book is, in
Stanley Fish’s terms, “boutique”, using cultural difference to add some “color” to the narrative” (McInally 189). It can be said that the three girls’ social identities are constructed as “relations social identities,” which are defined in relation to others. This circumstance is often demonstrated in the novel as the girls are in a neutral country where they barely have to access their cultural identities in order to interact, but also in the way they allow each other to influence their actions.

In the opening pages of The Secret Side of Empty, M.T. recounts a car ride with her best friend Chelsea and Chelsea’s cousin Siobhan. Andreu showcases a frequent struggle presented in other novels with Latina characters; others’ lack of awareness in making distinctions between Latina, Hispanic or Spanish. Siobhan is a freshman in college and talking about her roommates, mentions, “Margarita Perez or something. Some Spanish kid, from like, the Bronx. Who will probably be selling drugs right of our of our dorm room” (Andreu, Ch. 1, location 146). This opening statement opens the distinct conversation about M.T.’s construction of her social identity in “relation to others” (Brewer). M.T. reflects on how hard she is trying to disconnect the two by stating, “You can’t judge people by who they’re related to. I am the poster child for that” (Andreu Ch. 1, location 227). Her internal dialogue contradicts her actions, though she knows that the social construct of the incorrect, but often used umbrella term “Spanish” to encase Latinx and Hispanic people, she opts for outwardly accepting Siobhan’s statement in order to deny herself her cultural identity, but construct a social identity on her own terms. In her narration of a younger self, M.T. realizes the complications her full
name will bring for her, changing Monserrat Thalia to M.T. in order to fit in. Susie Jans-
Thomas explores the name changing dynamic, “as long as immigrants have arrived in the
U.S. their names have been changed to ring familiar to the general populace. Changes
might have happened in immigration offices, in workplaces, in neighborhood, and in
school” (Thomas 36). She fails to mention that oftentimes, immigrants like M.T. will
change their own name in social situations within their process of acculturation. The wall
M.T. purposely creates between her social identity and her cultural one is clearly stated as
she navigates her life in poverty by assimilating to her best friend Chelsea’s in an upper
class suburb in New Jersey. She observes the dividing lines between race and class, as
she states, “an army of Central American men with big machines strapped to their backs
are swooshing away every leaf on the unnaturally green lawns that I am biking past.
These Guatemalan and Mexican men – that’s who people around here think of when they
think “Spanish”” (Andreu, Ch. 2, location 254).

Her parents brought M.T. from Argentina as a baby and growing up in the United
States has created conflicts in the ways she constructs her social identity. While she
assimilates to the life she has created within her school and social circles, M.T. still feels
like she doesn’t belong in the United States or her family. The cultural displacement she
feels is brought by the disparity between her culture growing up in the Catholic school
surrounded by American friends and her home life in which her family forces her to
pertain to their tradition,

I will always be a stranger everywhere. With my parents, I am too
American. With Americans, I am a spectator with my nose pressed against the windowpanes, watching their weird rituals and rites of passage, never quite understanding them completely. A little chunk of me will always be a stranger everywhere, different chunks of stranger in different situations. (Andreu, Ch. 9, location 1197).

The cultural displacement as an illegal immigrant that M.T. experiences reverberates in her social experiences as she tries to find steady ground. Elizabeth Clifford and Maya Kalyanpur state that “immigration is not a one-time event that begins and ends with an official stamp of approval at a port of entry into a new country, but a process that continues indefinitely, in some cases, even through the rest of one’s life, punctuated by defining events along the way” (Clifford and Kalyanpur 15). Because M.T. is Argentine, but grew up in the United States she is constantly torn between what she has known all her life in her social life and what she has known all her life in her own home.

3.3 Social Identities within School Settings

Part of the construction of identity for adolescents occurs in school settings. Influenced by relationships with teachers and peer groups, the protagonists of these works of young adult literature face multiple ruptures in their constructions of their social identities within their educational settings. Wakefield and Hudley explore motivations and academic achievements in multicultural adolescents, stating that research has documented that, “adolescents who perceived their racial identity to be central to their self-concept attended school more regularly, achieved high grades, and were more likely
to graduate and go on to college” (152). These intersecting components of the identity formation process of the Latinas discussed in the following analysis establish a complexity in the way Latinas interact socially, but also construct their own self-concepts in relation to surrounding society.

In *When Reason Breaks* (2015), Emily Delgado and Elizabeth Davis’ journeys begin in their English classroom with Ms. Díaz. Because of the controversial topics they often tackle and the issues they endure with classmates, Ms. Díaz’s classroom is also where most of the turning points of the novel occur. On the first day of class, Ms. Díaz introduces the class to Emily Dickinson’s poetry, and both girls find similarities in their lives and Emily Dickinson’s. While Emily Dickinson was an isolated woman, enslaved by ideas of masculinity and patriarchy, the girls express their own feelings of entrapment; mental, emotional and physical.

As soon as the year begins, Ms. Díaz starts receiving anonymous letters, often talking about anxiety and depression. The writer of the letters makes references to Dickinson’s poetry in order to express their anguish, “So, WWEDW? What Would Emily Dickinson Write? Maybe this: ‘I felt a Funeral, in my Brain…And then a Plank in Reason, broke, / And I dropped down, and down, –‘” (Rodríguez 122). These letters raise a flag in Ms. Díaz, and she believes that she can help the writer of the letter without getting fully involved. Despite her intents, the letters keep arriving and become increasingly worrisome,

First, I want to say thanks for letting me write to you and for listening to
me this way. I know it may have been weird, but having you as a silent audience has been helpful and comforting at times. I should have written to you more. Maybe it would have helped. (Rodríguez 239)

These letters to the English teacher also demonstrate the multiple social identities Emily and Elizabeth have constructed. Ms. Díaz represents a model of support outside of the girls’ in-groups for both Elizabeth and Emily in various instances in the novel, despite the fact that she can only interact with them as a teacher. Tajfel and Turner theorize that “when social identity is unsatisfactory, individuals will strive either to leave their existing group and join some more positively distinct group and/or to make their existing group more positively distinct” (16). In this moment, the writer, who it is later revealed that is Emily, attempts to seek help from Ms. Díaz by writing to her anonymously, yet hinting at her identity in order for Ms. Díaz to be able to identify her and help her move outside of the damaging social group she is existing in.

_When Reason Breaks_ (2015) is also the only novel to explore navigation between social in-groups and out-groups by the protagonist. When Emily starts dating Kevin, she is torn between her social identity created through assimilations with Abby and Sarah and the identity she is creating through Kevin. Kevin is friends with Tommy and Elizabeth, who is socially shunned and taunted by Abby and Sarah. Tajfel and Turner examine this as “social mobility,” based on the idea that,

> the society in which the individuals live is a flexible and permeable one, so that if they are not satisfied…with the conditions imposed upon their
lives by membership in social groups or social categories to which they belong, it is possible for them...to move individually into another group that suits them better. (9)

Emily displays social mobility in the rejection of Abby and Sarah, simultaneously becoming a member of the out-group, shunned by what the social constructs of the novel determine is the in-group.

Due to her illegal immigrant status in *The Secret Side of Empty* (2014), M.T.’s school life is also unwillingly controlled. Her narration focuses on her academic achievements and M.T.’s ability to juggle advanced placement classes and extracurricular activities. Later in the novel she reveals that the reason she is able to attend private school is because her mother bribed the Mother Superior to admit her to the school without any citizenship papers. M.T. is aware of her physical appearance in relation to her racial identity, “I guess I don’t look like what most people think of when they think of Spanish, if they think of it at all. I’m pale white and I’ve got blondish hair. Because, yeah, some people who speak Spanish are also white” (Andreu, Ch. 1, location 152). Despite her conflicted views on her immigrant status and her need to fit into the culture she has grown up in, M.T. enters a heated debated about immigration in one of her classrooms, which Brewer explains as an imploration of different identities,

The self is also viewed as an *organized* system that structures the relationships among different identities and determines which identity is invoked at a particular time as a function of the relative salience and
centrality of identities within and across social situations. (Brewer 121)

She questions her teacher’s views as she talks about immigrants during the late nineteenth century and early twentieth century and immigrants today, “‘Well, they don’t want to learn the language, for one,’ she says, ‘And they just don’t have the work ethic. Just waiting for a handout.’” (Andreu, Ch. 11, location 1477). By questioning her teacher’s views on immigration M.T. is unable to fully reject her identity as an illegal immigrant, thus invoking this aspect of her identity in the context of the social situation.

Soon, M.T. finds out that her parents are no longer making payments for her tuition at the Catholic school. Her father is convinced that it doesn’t make a difference whether she finishes school or not, “‘High school? What good is it going to do to you? What do you care if you stop going to school now or six months from now? School is over for you. You’re done’” (Andreu, Ch. 12, location 1585). This circumstance is a reality for a lot of young adults who are children of immigrants; Roberto G. Gonzales writes in “Learning to Be Illegal: Undocumented Youth and Shifting Legal Contexts in the Transition to Adulthood”,

Many youngsters from less-advantaged immigrant households put off postsecondary schooling because their parents are not able to provide financial assistance or because they carry considerable financial responsibilities in their households that make it impossible for them to make tuition payments. Coupled with family poverty, illegal status places undocumented youth in a developmental limbo. (Gonzales 604-605)
Her father’s expectation that she will drop out of school because there is no hope for her to achieve more, causes a disrupt in M.T.’s expectations about her future and ultimately causes her to retract even further from her social circles.

3.4 Social Identities and Social Issues

There are multiple intersections in the books discussed of racial and cultural identities as contributing factors to the constructions of social identities for the protagonists. The construction of racial identity of Latinx populations in the United States is often explored by scholars, though reaching the conclusion that racial identity constructions for Latinx lies in their self concept. Atiya Kai Stokes-Brown explores this phenomenon stating that “racial identification is a dynamic construct influenced by individual, political, and social conceptions of race in the United States” (310). For Latinx racial identity construction, “some Latinas/os possess a racial identity intertwined with their cultural identity” (Trucios Haynes 5). Because Latinx is not officially considered a race, but a term encasing multiple continents,

Latinos’ racial choices are in part a reaction to existing categorical boundaries dictated by the state and those choices include rejecting existing racial boundaries by refusing to respond race questions.

Institutionalized ideas in the United States are determinant of race, Latinos self-identify within these parameters to avoid racial alienation. This plays part in the formation of the social identity of the Latino and their collective selves, which is deeply rooted in the in-group, while their
Latino cultural identity is in the out-group. (Stokes-Brown 311).

Furthermore, this section explores the way multiple external factors influence the construction of collective social identities for the protagonists. Conversations of social and racial issues furthermore complicate the construction of these social identities.

In Shadowshaper (2015), Sierra has several interactions in which her social identity is torn as an outsider and insider. These interactions can be analyzed through a process of social comparison, which according to Tim McNamara, “involves awareness of the relative status of the social identities of both the in-group and the out-group; individuals are seen to attempt to maximize a sense of their positive psychological distinctiveness by establishing terms for the comparison that will favour in-group membership” (McNamara 563). For example, Sierra expresses insecurity about herself as a Puerto Rican woman in an increasingly white neighborhood. When she talks about describing herself to a young man in a chat room, she describes her skin color as “the color coffee with not enough milk” (Older 79). Running away from an evil spirit, Sierra finds herself in Flatbush, a neighborhood dominated by white people. As she tries to recover, she is surrounded by several adults who live in the neighborhood who think she is “another OD from that damn Dominican club over on Flatbush!” and “a Spanish girl” (Older 106). As Sierra struggled to get up after being attacked, the onlookers surrounding her discussed whether or not they should help her or even come close to her, causing shame in Sierra for accidentally ending up in that neighborhood. In a separate conversation about her ethnicity, Sierra’s friend Jerome asks Sierra if she is Spanish,
when he is corrected by one the members of the group, he says, “Yeah, but we just say Spanish. Like Spanish food, Whatever, that’s just what we say” (Older 163). Similar to her experience in Flatbush, Sierra becomes increasingly aware of her position in her neighborhood, but also her duty to defend her culture and ethnicity by defending the shadowshapers.

The conversations about social and racial issues are not as explicit in Dreams of Significant Girls (2011). Vivien, Ingrid and Shirin are living amidst the 1970s, when World War II has directly impacted each of her parents’ and therefore the girls’ themselves. The budding second wave feminism is in its early stages, and the girls have conversations about their actions and this movement. Becky Thompson refers to this second wave as “hegemonic feminism,” which, “white led, marginalizes the activism and world views of women of color, focuses mainly on the United States, and treats sexism as the ultimate oppression” (337). While the movement is rising around the girls’ lives, they are oblivious to its implications as groups of multiracial women rise to overcome white feminism and white supremacies. The girls’ beliefs of feminism are rooted in their thoughts of sexual freedom, as Ingrid is caught fellating a boy from the boys’ boarding school and they practice kissing with each other when Vivien and Shirin finally see the possibility of sexual experiences ahead of them. The lack of knowledge and awareness from the friends only highlights the problematic cultural representations in the novel, which relies on hegemonic portrayals of feminism through the three friends while overlooking the multicultural aspects of the novel. In an argument about boyfriends and
feminism Vivien accuses Ingrid of being hypocritical in her vows of feminism, “‘I thought you were the adventurous, cynical, sisterhood-is-everything feminist here. Uses boys and discards them. Doesn’t believe in love. Pretends to give everyone strictly utilitarian advice’” (García 139). Vivien’s statement along with Ingrid’s reassurance of her feminism displays their lack of understanding, but also their privilege in only knowing one kind of feminism, which excludes multiple races and cultures.

Furthermore, the novel, though focused on their friendship, also focuses on the girls’ coming-of-age experiences. McInally asserts:

For second-wave feminism, which assumes an essential bond between women, all are seen to share particular attributes because they are women, and while class and race might influence their personal histories, “femaleness” is primary, something that is common across cultural locations (McInally 189).

While McInally’s theorizing rings truth to the novel, there is also a juxtaposition of ideas within the racial construction rooted in the fact that the positive friendships portrayed in *Dreams of Significant Girls* don’t demonstrate in-group preference and biased attitude and out-group bias. On the contrary, the novel demonstrates, “positive multicultural interactions, cross-cultural relationships, and personal adjustments are hypothesized to result from the development of higher levels of ethnic identity” (Negy, et. al 336). While the positive portrayal of female multicultural friendships is present in the novel, it is problematically counteracted by the simultaneous erasure of this multiculturality. This is
often demonstrated in the friends’ awareness of their lack of consciousness to each other’s past histories, but also of the world surrounding them,

The Watergate hearings were dragging on but none of us paid much attention to them. There was a coup in Chile and an OPEC oil embargo and the U.S. was bombing Cambodia but these barely registered on our radar. The headlines came to us from the TV lounge at Pierpont or the occasional newspaper, as if from another planet. The truth was that we were much too wrapped up in our own worlds to notice. (Garcia 198)

Consumed by their racial and cultural oblivion, the girls are encased and worried about their personal hardships, but are unaware of how these personal hardships are directly impacted by the events happening outside of them. Though Negy, Shreve, Jensen, and Uddin look to developmental theorist Penn et. al and argue that the lack of emphasis is positive and a sign of maturity that on individuals’ “ability to objectively view both in-group and out-group members should emerge. Thus, individuals would be able to look beyond people’s “color” and instead identify with those who share similar values and interests” (337). This “erasure” of color is problematic, especially in a text where the cultural identities of the characters play such important parts of their lives. While it may be seen as a “sign of maturity” that the characters do not categorize in in-group and out-groups, the fact that they ignore each other’s cultural identities prolongs the problematic discourse that race should be ignored.

The construction of racial identity in the novel is crucial to Vivien’s social
identity construction. Stokes-Brown explores cultural assimilation and social commodities to the construction of racial identity,

Social mobility into the mainstream may encourage some Latinos to racially self-identify as white, everyday social interactions that include experiences of discrimination based on perceived group membership may encourage some Latinos to choose other racial identities. (Stokes-Brown 311)

This is demonstrated in Dreams of Significant Girls by the way Vivien’s personal and professional growth only happens away from her home, in Switzerland. The development of her social identity strictly occurs in her time spent with her friends, whereas the time she spends apart from them during the span of those three years does not portray growth for her, in comparison to her friends’ successes. In Switzerland, Vivien is courted by Omar, a young Tunisian man, while back in New York, she is often ignored by boys. Away at boarding school, she also nurses and develops her love for cuisine, highly encouraged by her friends as much as her cooking teacher. Vivien comes out of her shy shell, wearing a scantily clad belly dancer outfit to a dance with the boys’ boarding school on their second summer. She is often urged by Shirin and Ingrid to explore areas of discomfort, like horseback riding despite her obesity or taking the lead in her own courtship with Omar. Aside from the social assimilations Vivien is able to conform to in Switzerland, she is also away from the marginalization she experiences in Miami and New York. As a result of her father’s known traitorship of her country by affiliating with
Fidel Castro, Vivien’s social identity soars away from her home where it is not influenced or tied down by her father’s culpability as a traitor of their nation or her own culture as a Cuban woman.

The erasure of her racial identity, by cultural assimilation is explored by McInally in “the “boutique” version of multiculturalism which, in the end, serves to promote whiteness through showing cultural difference to be merely an “add on” to essentialized femininity” (190). Despite their multicultural lack of awareness, the girls are deeply impacted by the events occurring in the world around them, forcing to be aware of them. Shirin is trapped in the confines of Iran, the blockade between Iran and the U.S. due to the war after the revolution keeps Ingrid and Vivien away from Shirin. Vivien’s cultural identity is touched on a final time when she enters a cooking contest to win a scholarship to an elite cooking school in Paris, and she creates a menu with Cuban cuisine. She loses the cooking contest, but in the epilogue, she narrates that she opens a Cuban-Polish restaurant in honor of her new Polish boyfriend. Ingrid becomes a photographer for a news magazine, which she uses to document the impacts of injustice, genocide, poverty and war.

M.T. constantly struggles with her own construction of racial identity versus that of her father’s. Her identification of her racial identity lies in her process of self-categorization, “people develop and enact racial and ethnic identities within social contexts, and subsequently internalize these identities to comprise important dimensions of self-understanding” (Hitlin and Brown 593). Both M.T.’s and her father’s racial
identities are constructed by their personal experiences, while both are immigrants from Argentina, their social contexts for construction of racial identity are different. Her father believes that failure ensued when he left Argentina, while M.T. believes that her success lies in the United States and nowhere else. This circumstance in M.T.’s life demonstrates that,

contentions that people both process information and behave differently when in group contexts and/or a deeply-held collective identity is rendered prominent. Specifically, people demonstrate perceptual and behavioral biases favoring their in-groups, and thus do not objectively process incoming information. (Hitlin and Brown 594).

M.T. recognizes that her construction will never be the same of her father’s despite the fact that they come from the same place, further demonstrating that the construction of racial identity for the Latinx community is a complex and socially constructed on within the United States, making the process of social identity construction a fluid and ever-changing one.

3.5 Social Identity and Social Issues: Bullying

Danah Boyd defines bullying according to Swedish psychologist Dan Olweus, who stated that bullying entitles “three components: aggression, repetition, and imbalance of power” (Boyd 131). Joanne Larson and John H. Hoover conduct a study in 2012 in which they extensively review young adult literature with bullying related themes in order to point out common occurrences in bully themed young adult literature. The only
novel portraying bullying within the context of social identity is *When Reason Breaks*, which contains six of the nine themes presented by the authors. These themes include: emerging sexuality, change in status, identity; tension at home, gifted and talented characters, dyads in brokenness, and invisibility (Hoover and Larson 52).

*When Reason Breaks* (2015) is the only novel in this analysis dealing with bullying in various social settings. Emily and Elizabeth both deal with bullying to various degrees, but Emily has personal perpetrators who lead her to the final events of the novel. For Emily these experiences of bullying often happen on social media, rather than in person. The novel is not strictly about the experiences of a Latina with bullying, but the events that unravel before Emily Delgado that lead her to attempt suicide are rooted in the bullying she experiences, therefore becoming a determining factor in her construction of social identity. Emily is mostly taunted by her supposed best friend Abby, but Sarah also instills guilt in her and the fear of disappointing her parents while her friends taunt her with acts that will culminate in her suicidal attempt. Emily indeed experiences repeated aggressions from Abby and Sarah, and her lack of power in retaliating leads her to isolation and her ultimate decision.

While both Elizabeth and Emily experience bullying and increasingly negative social experiences, Elizabeth demonstrates resilience, while Emily does not. W. David Wakefield and Cynthia Hudley theorize that the development of racial and ethnic identities in adolescents positively impact their self-esteem, “all adolescents, at more advanced stages of ethnic and white adolescents, at more advanced stages of ethnic
identity development report fewer symptoms of depression and anxiety and a more positive self concept overall” (150). Furthermore, the event of being punched by Elizabeth is the turning point of Emily’s and Elizabeth’s journey. While it is an eye-opening event for Elizabeth, where she realizes she is self-destructive and needs to change, the opposite happens for Emily. As Elizabeth punches her, she asks, “‘Who the fuck do you think you are?’,” to which Emily responds, “‘I’m nobody’” (Rodríguez 227). After this moment, Emily feels that she is not of value to anyone and after writing a suicide note to Miss Díaz, goes into the woods on a Saturday morning to commit suicide. Emily experiences more than just bullying, but also racial discrimination and erasure from Abby and Sarah as they force her to act against the values instilled by her father through blackmail and distortion, “self reports of experiences of racism or discrimination are related to lower self-esteem, increased depressive symptoms, increased behavioral problems, and psychological distress” (Wakefield and Hudley 151). This discrimination also alters Emily’s social identity as she retreats into isolation, “different identities have conflicting implications for behavior, in which case self-expression reflects some choice or compromise among different aspects of self-concept” (Brewer 121).

3.6 Conclusion

The young adult novels analyzed in this chapter demonstrate that the social identities of young adult Latinas are never fully defined, but rather, are works in progress, frequently shifting as they find and create spaces where their metaphorical, physical and emotional borderlands can roam freely, a “survival tactic that people, caught between
worlds, unknowingly cultivate” (Anzaldúa 61). As the purpose of this chapter is to
demonstrate the way these Latinas construct their social identities, it is also imperative to
note how they do so. For example, despite the strong influence of their own cultures of
origin, the protagonists were torn in their constructions of social identity, often having to
decide between their cultures and the dominant culture they are living in. This is reflected
in the way their social identities assimilate and demonstrate acculturation, often rather
than enculturation.

Sierra is the only character who openly inquires and assimilates to
shadowshaping, an aspect of her culture she did not previously know about. She is also
the only one to openly hold conversations about race and culture with her friends, often
being open to her lack of knowledge of her own culture. In *Dreams of Significant Girls*
and *When Reason Breaks*, the characters’ social identities distanced themselves against
their own cultures in order to be able to construct social identities separate from the ones
in their homes. In the case of Emily in *When Reason Breaks*, her home does not offer
solace or solidarity when she tries to escape the troubles with her friends, but the world
outside of her home does not offer much solace either. Finally, the struggle to form a
social identity based on a secret in M.T.’s case, proves the most complicated. M.T.’s
social identity attempts to ignore the fact that she is Argentine and an illegal immigrant,
which leaves her with a distinctly different persona outside of her own culture. When this
identity is torn down by the events that unfurl around her, she has no choice but to
surrender to creating a new social identity that is intertwined with her culture of origin.
There is also a brief exploration of the collective social identities, which would be interesting to explore in further research. The construction of collective social identity is most prominent in *Shadowshaper*, where Sierra utilizes art as a collective form of social identity construction with members of her family, such as her grandfather Lázaro and her brother Juan, as well as individuals outside of her family, such as Robbie. The common practices Sierra shares with Lázaro, Juan and Robbie in different expressions of art within her social circle and family traditions create both a relational social identity and a collective social identity that can be read closely in multiple layers.

The portrayals of Latina young adults constructing their social identities, lies in the fact that they, one way or another, are real. Young adults often lie about their culture, social class and ethnicity, in order to hide a part of them that won’t affect their social identities. The Latinas in the young adult novels analyzed navigate the borderlands in different ways, and their negotiations of spaces and social identities. For their readers, these portrayals present authentic struggles, with realistic turnouts. Anzaldúa states, “when we’re up against a wall, when we have all sorts of oppressions coming at us, we are forced to develop this faculty so that we’ll know when the next person is going to slap us or lock us away” (61). These are best demonstrated in *When Reason Breaks* and *The Secret Side of Empty*. Emily in *When Reason Breaks*, attempts suicide, but is saved in time by Ms. Diaz, yet the repercussions of her attempt are not omitted or skipped. She indeed, endures a hospitalization and psychiatric care, her parents demonstrate a mixture of fear and anger and her true friendships lie in the people who show her support. *The
Secret Side of Empty also provides realistic depictions of the endurance and limitations of immigrant youth, for example, M.T. cannot ask for help from the police for her father’s abuse for fear of being deported.

Though young adult literature often focuses on immigration, it is important to note the other influential aspects in the development of social identities, often overshadowed by the concept of immigration itself. The need for more multicultural and Latinx young adult literature portraying issues of mental health, self-esteem, bullying, social class, and collective identities exists and as the development of young adults’ social identities changes, so should the literature reflecting it.
Conclusion

This work of research is rooted in the necessity of representation of Latinas in young adult literature, but also from the lack of scholarship examining these representations. In looking at the representation of Latinas in this sample of young adult literature, I can conclude that there cannot be one conclusion, but rather, multiple thoughts to contribute to the voices on multicultural literature that will hopefully, stir change in publishing as well as representation trends in young adult literature. Multiple scholars, such as Barry in “Hispanic Representation in Young Adult Literature,” advocate for the growth in the representation of young adult literature, but the advocacy should extend further than research on numbers. This research study sought to begin a conversation about close analysis of the Latina young adult literature currently present, in order to improve the forthcoming young adult literature, but also, to create critical readings of the texts, rather than a submissive acceptance, because “at least there are Latinas in young adult literature”.

Conversations about Intersectionality

The representation of Latinas in young adult literature is complex and multifaceted – as it should be. Ignoring the fact that there are multiple layers to the construction of identity would be facetious, but ignoring the interwoven aspects of
intersectionality in the formation of identity of Latina young adults, would be impossible. Each work of literature represented a different aspect of the tumultuous Latina experience in the United States. The dominant culture that forces the erasure of another leaves no room for debate, yet the Latinas presented in these novels are doing that precisely; disrupting the cultural, sexual and social dichotomies that dominate discourses. Anzaldúa states, “culture forms our beliefs. We perceive the version of reality that it communicates. Dominant paradigms, predefined concepts that exist as unquestionable, unchallengeable, are transmitted to us through the culture.” (38). Anzaldúa’s statement could not ring more truth in light of this research, in which the Latina experience simultaneously disrupts and is disrupted by the dominant culture. While the narrative can prove to be problematic at times, they do not fail to portray the necessity for accurate portrayals of intersectionality.

Throughout this research, the identity of these Latinas have intersected with religion, culture, race, ethnicity, and sexuality. Though most of the novels portray these intersections, only *Juliet Takes a Breath* turns the topic of intersectionality into a larger conversation within the novel itself. The portrayal of a confused and inquiring Juliet presents more than the young adult’s curiosity of the unknown, especially in sexuality, but also expresses the power of young adults to create social change within and outside of their literature. In these conversations, Juliet is confronted with the multifaceted aspects of sexual and gender identity, in the form of her interactions with a White feminist, a Black Womanist, and other LGBTQ Latinas. Juliet’s interactions force her to confront that there are multiple
discourses about sexuality and gender in relationship to culture and race, “all I’d amassed was questions. Questions about words and phrases, queerness, POC spaces, whiteness, the world of women, privileges, and the women I still had to research” (Rivera 101).

While Juliet experiences oppression and marginalization, she also discovers the ways in which her oppressors are hidden behind their own feminist discourses. Ann Garry explains, “although intersectionality builds on a rich literature by feminists of color about multiple oppressions and double consciousness, it does not merely repeat that women of color or lesbians of any ethnicity are multiply oppressed. Instead it points to the ways in which oppressions intermesh with each other or are used to construct each other” (829).

_Dreams of Significant Girls_ also portrays the topic of second-wave feminism in a different light, that of the privilege of being able to assimilate to the movement while simultaneously being able to be removed from it due to the belief that it did not affect the characters directly. _Juliet Takes a Breath_ is the opening of many doors for multiple difficult but hopefully honest conversations about the experiences of diverse groups within political movements.

_When the Moon Was Ours_, _Labyrinth Lost_, and _Shadowshaper_ also introduce intersectional characters who are accepting of one of the strongest and most avoided aspects of cultural identity: religious practices. _Labyrinth Lost_ and _Shadowshaper_ work to accept a part of cultural and social identities that are often rejected, especially by young adults. _When the Moon Was Ours_ portrays Miel’s apprenticeship of Aracely’s skills as a curandera, with the expectation of following in her steps, a skill she strongly wants to
master, “Miel didn’t cure lovesickness herself. She didn’t have what she called el don, the gift Aracely had. But often, Miel helped her” (McLemore 47). The novels complicate these characters by establishing a certain amount of hesitation and resistance about accepting this aspect of their cultural identities. Though the practices of their religions are fictional, explicitly stated by its authors, the representation of religious practices becomes a part of the protagonists’ cultural and social identities as well as yet another layer of questioning for their identities.

Additional spokes of the wheel of intersectionality that are present in the works of literature are physical bodies and mental health. As part of their formation of identity, the Latinas in The Education of Margot Sanchez, Dreams of Insignificant Girls, Gabi, The Secret Side of Empty, A Girl in Pieces, and Shadowshaper all grapple with the insecurity and rejection of their Latina bodies. The protagonists aforementioned all endure these insecurities and sometimes discrimination in the shapes and size of their bodies, which are often attributed to their Latina roots. Gabi, for example, states, “if you’re me (short, plump, long straight hair, and super light-skinned),” in which she openly states a direct relationship between her cultural identity and her physical body, which does not comply with beauty standards on either her culture of origin or the dominant culture outside of her home (Quintero 14). Similarly, Margot complains that her body is too plump, “my curves bulge out. Too many Cuban sandwiches. I’ll never look good enough for the Hamptons” (Rivera 168). Sierra makes multiple comments towards her “ever-changing Puerto Rican body” (Older 79). Finally, Vivien also grapples with issues of body image,
“I’d gained fourteen pounds and gone up two dress sizes - without growing so much as an inch” (Garcia 81). Within these narratives, there is also the assimilation to societal standards of white beauty, in which the characters, such as Margot Sanchez straightens her hair and tries not to eat, Vivien who says “I either had to grow eight inches in a huge hurry, or forego eating altogether” (Garcia 82). M.T., who hints at a larger issue of the existence of an eating disorder says, “maybe if I just don’t eat until school starts I’ll look skinny and I can wear those black jeans to our first dance” (Andreu, Ch.2, location 303). The Latinas all attempt to alter, change or assimilate their body image to fit the white, dominant culture’s expectations of beauty.

Similarly, in *When Reason Breaks* and *The Secret Side of Empty*, the characters also endure depression, suicide and social anxieties. This particular intersectional aspect lacks scholarship in Latina young adult literature, but also representation. *When Reason Breaks* presents the declining emotional health of Emily Delgado, “remember when I said my plank in reason broke? That I was falling and would hit the ground at some point?” (Rodriguez 234). M.T. also displays multiple self-destructive behaviors, like binge drinking at her prom.

Furthermore, most of the novels portray struggles of class divides and poverty. *The Education of Margot Sanchez* places Margot in a middle class position, while her co-workers, within her cultural group are in lower classes. She states, “The pressure is on to excel. They don’t call me Princesa for nothing. I’m being groomed for bigger and better things” (Rivera 9). Despite her inflated ego, Margot is also torn by the fact that her rich
friends from school belong to upper class families in New York, often humiliating Margot due to her social status, but also forcing her to shed even more aspects of her cultural identity. *The Secret Side of Empty* offers similar examples: M.T. attends an elite high school while her family lives in extreme poverty. *Dreams of Significant Girls’s* Vivien’s mother is left with no money after her father leaves. In *Flowers in the Sky*, Nina’s mother receives money from Nina’s brother regularly. On the other hand, in

In Chapter Two: Gender and Sexual Identity, only *What the Night Brings* portrayed financial instability in the character’s family, while the other four novels did not mention financial status or class divisions. Noting that class divisions are not as prominent in gender and sexual identity books presents the possibility that these aspects of the characters’ identities may be omitted deliberately.

There are limited representations in young adult literature of Latinas grappling with problems of mental health, making the assimilation and identification of young adult readers to miss aspects of their own identity. Additionally, in the search for young adult literature featuring different aspects of intersectionality in cultural, social and sexual and gender identity, I discovered that there have been no books about Latinas with disabilities published in the realm of young adult literature. With the growing population of the Latinx community in the United States, as well as the young adult population, along with the growing diversity of other populations, it is imperative that the young adult literature grows in similar ways. These portrayals of Latina young women disrupting the discourses that dominate the culture in which they have to choose between one of two cultures
represents not only a leap of progress in young adult literature, but also a path for other multicultural authors of diverse groups to do the same in their empowerment of young adults through young adult literature. Furthermore, the positive representations also empower young Latinas to explore multiple aspects of their identities without feeling forced to eliminate others.

**Stereotypes**

This research study also focuses on the accurate and authentic portrayal of the Latinas along with the Latinx culture in the young adult literature. With the exception of *Shadowshaper*, all novels featuring Latina protagonists were written by Latina women themselves, who have experienced cultural displacements, illegal immigration status, and discrimination of their gender and sexual identities. The authentic and honest portrayals of these characters relies on their authors’ intent of breaking down problematic discourses, but also on their intent of presenting a new discourse to readers while affirming to their audience that their search of identity is not stereotyped either. Though these representations were authentic, they also proved to adhere to many known stereotypes of the Latinx community, not always portrayed by the main character herself, but still equally problematic.

On April 27, 2017, the *Los Angeles Times* published an article titled “4 Latino Stereotypes in TV and Film that Need to Go.” While these stereotypes are looking at TV and Film, young adult literature should not be an exclusion; “the sex pot,” “the gangbanger,” “the Spanish-speaker Only,” and “the maid” were the mentioned
stereotypes and all of these were one way or another present in the young adult literature analyzed for this research study (Anderson 2017). Latina.com shares a similar list, where the stereotypes of “Lazy Latino,” “No Speak English,” and “We’re all fiery, as in ill-tempered” reign the list (Estevez 2016). These stereotypes are present in the young adult novels, either masked as representations of Latinx populations or used in hyperbolic ways to highlight the Latina’s experiences. As young adult literature works to expand representation of Latinx characters, it should also be noted that strong stereotypes are still present.

In the portrayal of cultural identity, for example, The Education of Margot Sanchez, Flowers in the Sky, What the Night Brings, and Gabi, a Girl in Pieces all presented the main characters in familial environments with gender biases. These portrayals, in which a machista family bears favoritism over the males of the family, is constantly present in Latinx narratives. These narratives usually include brothers that are favored despite their troublemaking. In The Education of Margot Sanchez and Flowers in the Sky, the older brothers of the protagonists are drug dealers or sellers of stolen merchandise, fulfilling the stereotype of Latinx community members involved in criminal activity or as “gangbangers”. In Gabi, A Girl in Pieces, her brother Beto is a graffiti artist who gets arrested after getting caught tagging a wall. Her mother blames Gabi for her brother’s lack of discipline, while providing sympathy for Beto, “Beto got arrested and my mom blames me. ‘Is this what you teach him? Ese es el ejemplo que le das?’” (Quintero 79).
In addition, *The Education of Margot Sanchez* and *Gabi, A Girl in Pieces* also touched on the stereotype of teenage pregnancy in Latinas. In 2014, NPR host Celeste Headlee informed on a radio show on the declining statistics of teenage pregnancies in the Latinx community titled: “Why Do More Latina Teens Get Pregnant?” In the segment, Headlee introduced and spoke of the decline of teenage pregnancy in both boys and girls in the Latinx community, yet focused the bulk of her discussion on girls’ pregnancies. Similarly, *The Education of Margot Sanchez* presented a pregnant Latina, who was having an affair with Margot’s father. In *Gabi, A Girl in Pieces*, Gabi’s best friend is pregnant. The male characters of the novels studied were not portrayed in any situations of teenage pregnancy. What is most problematic about the representation of teenage pregnancy in young adult literature is the lack of resilience portrayed in the pregnant character, oftentimes a key concept in the understanding of the experience for a reader. In the NPR interview, health expert Jane Delgado explains, “that’s why you have to look beyond the numbers in each situation…that’s why I get very concerned when there are these blanket statistics because they give you like a frame, but the details of the picture” (2014). This statement by Delgado explains why the concept of teenage pregnancy must be treated with intent in young adult literature, but also, why it requires a resolution for the reader to experience, but most importantly, to avoid turning Latina young adults into a statistic.

On the other hand, in gender and sexual identity, the binaries of masculine and feminine are often reaffirmed, rather than disrupted in *Down to the Bone*. There are
multiple instances in the novel where the main character, Shai states a difference between a feminine lesbian and a “butch dyke,” often with degrading connotations. At the same time, there are also multiple portrayals of the fetishization of homosexuality, for example, in the glamorization of Shai’s life dominated by clubs, restaurants and frequent trips to the beach. The representation of familial relationships in the novel are also problematic. Shai’s narrative often makes note of the people around her, often describing gay men as “effeminate” and lesbian women with buzzcuts and tough demeanors. Shai and Marlena’s mothers are described as overly erratic and homophobic, often strictly focused on their daughters’ abilities to marry young men and start a family over attending college or completing an education, much less following their sexual identities. Shai’s mother portrays this directly, “‘I can’t continue loving you f you stay with that girl’” (Dole 26). While Latinx families are known for traditional views of marriage, “If a woman doesn’t renounce herself in favor of the male, she is selfish. The queer are the mirror reflecting the heterosexual tribe’s fear: being different, being other and therefore lesser, therefore sub-human, in-human, non-human” (40-41). As presented in Anzaldúa’s *Borderlands*, the representation of these in the young adult literature turns objectifying and satirical in their lack of resilience and exaggerated manners.

*The Los Angeles Times* and Latina.com’s recognition and call for action to completely ridding media of these stereotypes is necessary, but should also include and work to keep young adult literature included. As young adults inform most of their worldviews through media, literature is also a part of this media ingested by young adults
and by affirming these stereotypes, the mainstream discourse is indeed, prolonged. It must be recognized that the lines between accuracy and stereotyping are intentionally blurred in topics such as familial relationships and family values. Within Latinx values and traditions, like the aforementioned marianismo and machismo, play strong parts in the way young adult Latinas are expected to behave and grow up and this accurate portrayal is important. Omitting these important aspects of Latinx culture and tradition only feeds the debate that Latina women should sacrifice their cultural identity of origin for the dominant one. It is also important to differentiate between the accuracy that lends to the plot and the stereotyping that is used as a plot device, in Down to the Bone or The Education of Margot Sanchez, for example.

**Further Research and the Future**

Though there is a lack of scholarship about the representation of Latinas in young adult literature, this study is only a grain of salt in the growing discussions. This research does not encase all there is to be known about Latina identity formation in young adult literature. There are still many aspects of each work of young adult literature that can be deconstructed even further for interpretation and close reading in order to create an even more thorough understanding of the needs of multicultural young adult literature. More importantly, this study aims to contribute to the discussions of representation of Latinx populations in young adult literature, but also, advocate for more representation and more accurate portrayals of these representations in young adult literature. The texts show evidence that identity formation does not have clearly stated boundaries between cultural,
social and sexual identities, but rather, each are connected and constantly shifting. For example, topics such as Margot Sanchez’s cultural identity could also make contributions on the construction of individual and collective social identity. Gabi’s budding sexual curiosity in contrast to her mother’s attempts to shelter her with strong religious and traditional values could also cross over to gender and sexual identity. *Shadowshaper* could look at the ways representation of tradition and legacy of religious practices influence cultural identity. These ideas and many more examples of possible research opportunities lie within the young adult texts.

While there are many opportunities for research in the material that is present, there is also opportunity for research in what is not. For example, in the identification of texts, there were no transgender Latina characters. Also, aside from the middle grade novel *The Wild Book*, by Margarita Engle, no depictions of Latina protagonists with disabilities in young adult literature were found. This lack of representation in young adult literature perhaps speaks to the discomfort of multiculturality that still exists, but also the fear and discomfort of creating diverse characters that might be interpreted as “too diverse.” *The Guardian* published an online article in 2016 titled “Is YA Fiction Too Politically Correct?” In which they attempt to make a case for political correctness versus diversity, “some authors endeavor to write a book which embraces diversity it can be so easy to fall into the bracket of just trying to please everybody” (2016). This is, perhaps the kind of dominating voice that is keeping multicultural literature at bay, silencing
multicultural authors. Whether this fear lies in the publishers or the audiences, the absence of these representations cannot be ignored.

Furthermore, there were several young adult texts that were not utilized for this study. For example, written by Ellen Wittlinger, *Love and Lies: Marisol’s Story* (2008), is the follow up novel of *Hard Love*. Written from the perspective of Marisol, the story follows her relationship with two young women. Though the novel is not written by a Latina woman, the reason behind the rejection of this text lies in the actual content. Throughout the novel, the only indicator of Marisol’s cultural identity as a Latina is her name, any other aspects are completely omitted by the author. Another novel that was not used for this study is Anna-Marie McLemore’s *The Weight of Feathers* and *Wild Beauty*. Although there was potential in both texts for close reading of a Latina character, McLemore’s *When the Moon Was Ours* presented more opportunity for interpretation in the portrayal of multiple intersectional characters and an LGBTQ Latina in a relationship with a transgender boy.

The first scholarly article mentioned in this research was Arlene L. Barry’s “Hispanic Representation in Literature for Children and Young Adults,” written in 1998. Barry states that “while Hispanics did not seem to have a Hispanic advocate for their representation in literature, neither did they appear to have such an advocate outside of their culture” (632). The texts analyzed in this study prove that this has certainly changed. The blog Latinxs in Kid Lit is dedicated to providing the spotlight for emerging Latinx
writers to be recognized, proving that there are indeed, multiple advocates for Latinx literature. The blog’s mission is to,

- engage with works about, for, and/or by Latinxs; offer a broad forum on children’s, MG, and YA books; promote literacy and the love of books within the Latinx community; encourage interest in Latinx children’s, MG, and YA literature among non-Latin@ readers; share perspectives and resources that can be of use to writers, authors, illustrators, librarians, parents, teachers, scholars, and other stakeholders in literacy and publishing. (2014)

The blog’s dedication to review and inform on books and their portrayals of Latinx characters in children’s and young adult literature advocates for authentic portrayals of children and young adults in Latinx literature. At the same time, the emergence of Latinx authors in the world of young adult literature has proven that there are indeed advocates of Latinx literature in Latinx writers themselves.

Gloria Anzaldúa’s works on intersectionality and Latinas’ multiple facets of identity has been a key vehicle for this research. Furthermore, the study focused on individual aspects of intersectionality such as race, culture, ethnicity, sexual and gender identity, etc. Gloria Anzaldúa’s work, in its groundbreaking form, focuses on the Latinas’ intersectional as a whole, rather, a multifaceted entity where these aspects connect, intersect and shift together. On that note, I’d like to explore ways in which the protagonists of these novels analyzed could be observed not through individual aspects of
their identity, but because of their multiple intersections in identity. Works such as *Gabi, A Girl in Pieces, Juliet Takes a Breath*, and *Shadowshaper* present multiple opportunities to explore multiple facets of intersectionality within one work of young adult literature.

For example, the multiple reasons why Gabi’s identity in *Gabi, A Girl in Pieces* is so complex is because of her awareness of the multiple lenses through which she sees herself. She is a White, Mexican-American young woman, who openly deals with her obesity, her language, sexuality and ethnicity. To that end, to look at Gabi through the multiple lenses of her identity, would mean to look at the way each one influences her identity formation. Gabi’s multiple facets of identity cannot be ignored or alienated, in fact, her narrative works towards uniting them in order to create a synchronous identity, channeling the prominent words of Anzaldúa. In observing Gabi through these multiple lenses, close readings of the novel can also shed light on aspects of oppression and discrimination in relationship to the formation of identity presented in the novel as well as that experienced in real life by young adults.

While *Juliet Takes a Breath* centers the story on Juliet’s sexual identity, the novel can be explored through other lenses. For example, Juliet explores her identity as a Puerto Rican woman from the South Bronx, but also because of her race and color, her religion and her mental condition. The novel briefly touches on Juliet’s religion, as she often recites *Ave Marias* or explores her spirituality in a closing prayer that ends in “In La Virgen’s name and in the name of Selena” (Rivera 260). Furthermore, the novel also briefly explores the mental condition of Juliet, as she suffers from an asthma that seems
to be rooted in anxiety, but also a depression she endures after her girlfriend breaks up with her. Finally, the dynamics of family can also be analyzed further in this novel as Juliet’s brother writes her a letter confessing he is also gay.

In *Shadowshaper*, Daniel José Older portrays the image of Sierra as one that has multiple planes. Sierra’s identity is not only formed by the constructs of the religious practices of her culture as she becomes a shadowshaper, but also through her body and looks as a Latina, and her gender in a culture where machismo is the main discourse and men are favored. When thinking of Anzaldúa’s work, these are all items on her agenda of the Latina identity, as a whole. *Borderlands/La Frontera* opens a conversation about the intersectionality of a Latina woman, but also of the inextricable association between these.

While Anzaldúa’s work created a ripple in the scholarship of Latina women in the late 1980s, there is an important aspect of the formation of identity she did not focus on: young adult Latinas. Anzaldúa’s work is strongly bound to the marginalization and oppression of adult Latina women navigating multiple spaces, multiple cultures and being forced to navigate multiple identities. Anzaldúa also writes about the marginalization experienced by older Latinas. The young adult Latinas experience similar oppressions and marginalization, especially as they attempt to navigate a dominant culture in the United States while fulfilling or fighting against the expected duties of a Latina woman in her family dynamics. Furthermore, this research sought to expand the work of Anzaldúa to include an equally entangled identity.
In concluding thoughts, these young adult literature texts presenting Latinas in the formation of their identity proved to be excellent, though there is still a lot of work to do in multicultural young adult literature. While the thought of a character “too diverse” exists, the need for multicultural texts will be underplayed, underrated and not enough advocated for. Once discourses on representation of multicultural texts reach a point where it is not a matter of acceptance, but a matter of the need of all voices to be heard, then perhaps there will be a more impactful change. This statement is not to say, that young adult literature is not undergoing that change right now, but rather, that there is more to the change than sprinkling characters of color or with sexually nonconforming ideas to break down these barriers.

It is also important to make notice of the rapid growth of Latinx young adult literature within the young age of young adult literature itself. Having surfaced in 1967 with S.E. Hinton’s *The Outsider’s*, young adult literature is still in its early stages, and within those 50 years of existence, Latinx young adult literature has rapidly grown. The study conducted by Koss and Teale in 2005, which found that there were 0 books featuring young adult Latinx published, is a stark contrast to the 66 books that were published in 2014, proving that in the last 10 years Latinx young adult literature has demonstrated consistent growth. Not only is the representation of Latinas in young adult literature growing, but the Latina authors who are writing these stories has also grown exponentially, making room for the Latinas themselves to tell their stories through these young adult characters.
Ultimately, the texts analyzed present a positive step forward in a much expected and needed direction towards the representation of Latinas in young adult literature. Whether used with didactic or recreational purposes, the texts analyzed do not speak for all representations of Latinas, and while flawed, are pivotal in the growing process of the presence of diversity in young adult literature. These texts could represent certain aspects of identity formation in Latinas, but more importantly, all portray openly and clearly, that regardless of the context, Latinas will always have multiple borders to navigate, cross and negotiate with their culture’s identity and their own. This research proves that in multiple contexts, young adult Latinas are struggling to define their identities in relationship to the one of origin, that the borderlands are a plane of existence for most, but more importantly, are aware that their culture of origin cannot be sacrificed or erased, but must be stay and become incorporated with the person they are trying to become. While Alzaldúa’s feminist theory is encased in the adult immigrant Latina, this research study aimed to explore her theoretical framework, to expand and explore the cultural, social and sexual identities of Latina young adult women in order to further aid the scholarship of identity formation of young adults as well as forthcoming young adult literature authors.
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