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Crossing Borders: Voices from the "Margins"

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Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold

W. B. Yeats, "The Second Coming"

How many years can some people exist
Before they're allowed to be free?

Bob Dylan, "Blowing in the Wind"

What happens to a dream deferred?

Does it dry up
like a raisin in the sun?
Or fester like a sore –
And then run?
Does it stink like rotten meat?
Or crust and sugar over –
like a syrupy sweet?

Maybe it just sags
like a heavy load.

Or does it explode?

Langston Hughes,
"Dream Deferred"

CONTENTS

ABSTRACT

In an increasingly transnational and multicultural world, cultural identities are shaped through a constant process of mobility and displacements, resulting in the formation of diasporic cultural identities. These hybrid heterogeneous cultural identities are characterized by multiple crossings of borders and limitations imposed on the construction of a sense of subjectivity. The present study consists of an interpretative analysis of representations of diasporic cultural identities in two fictional autobiographical writings: Gloria Anzaldúa's *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza* (1987) and Audre Lorde's *Zami A New Spelling of my Name, a biomythography* (1982). The representations of diasporic cultural identities developed in both texts produce disruptive effects on the politics of representation of cultural identity by articulating identifications and desires informed by hybridity and difference as well as reconstructing the category of experience and the production of knowledge through the fictionalization of the construction of identity. The objective is to investigate how the narrative voices project representations of diasporic cultural identities simultaneously resistant and "marginal" to the hegemonic culture. These representations are analyzed under the following theoretical framework: Joan Scott's reconceptualization of the category of experience; Donna Haraway's theory of situated knowledges; and a critical strategy that proposes an intersection of arguments derived from feminist and postmodern thinking, which posit identity as a fluid, multiple, and unstable construct, supported on Linda Hutcheon's *The Politics of Postmodernism*; the collection of essays edited by Linda Nicholson, *Feminism/Postmodernism*; and Jean-François Lyotard's *The Postmodern Condition*. The theoretical framework provides a privileged perspective to investigate representations of cultural identity that question the conception of identity as fixed, autonomous, and prior to the social-historical context in which identity and its representation are shaped.

Key words: Gloria Anzaldúa, Audre Lorde, representation, cultural identity, experience, situated knowledges, hybridity, difference.

RESUMO

Em um mundo cada vez mais transnacional e multicultural, a identidade cultural é formada por meio de um processo constante de mobilidade e deslocamentos, resultando na formação de identidades culturais diaspóricas. Tais identidades culturais híbridas e heterogêneas se caracterizam por travessias de fronteiras e limitações impostas à construção da subjetividade. O presente estudo consiste em uma análise interpretativa de representações de identidades culturais diaspóricas em dois escritos autobiográficos ficcionais: *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza* (1987), de Gloria Anzaldúa e *Zami A New Spelling of my Name, a biomythography* (1982), de Audre Lorde. As representações de identidades culturais diaspóricas desenvolvidas em ambos os textos produzem efeitos que desestabilizam a política de representação da identidade cultural articulando identificações e desejos informados por hibridismo e diferença bem como reconstruindo a categoria da experiência e a produção do conhecimento através da ficcionalização da construção da identidade. O objetivo é investigar como as vozes narrativas projetam representações de identidades culturais diaspóricas simultaneamente resistentes e marginais em relação à cultura hegemônica. Tais representações são analisadas à luz do seguinte referencial teórico: a reconstrução da categoria da experiência de Joan Scott; a teoria dos conhecimentos situados de Donna Haraway; e uma estratégia crítica que propõe uma intersecção entre argumentos advindos do pensamento feminista e pós-moderno, que postulam a identidade como um constructo fluído, múltiplo, e instável, sustentada em *The Politics of Postmodernism*, de Linda Hutcheon; a coleção de ensaios editada por Linda Nicholson, *Feminism/Postmodernism*; e *The Postmodern Condition*, de Jean-François Lyotard. O referencial teórico oferece uma perspectiva privilegiada para a investigação de representações de identidades culturais que questionam a concepção de identidade como fixa autônoma e anterior ao contexto sócio-histórico no qual a identidade e sua representação são formadas.

Palavras-Chave: Gloria Anzaldúa, Audre Lorde, representação, identidade cultural, experiência, conhecimentos situados, hibridismo, diferença.

INTRODUCTION

Movement and Migration: Representing Diasporic Cultural Identities

> We live in a world where identity matters. It matters both as a concept, theoretically, and as a contested fact of contemporary political life. The word itself has acquired a huge contemporary resonance.
>
> *Paul Gilroy, "Diaspora and the Detours of Identity"*

The discussion proposed in my investigation is inserted in the theoretical field of cultural studies. First, I begin by exposing some arguments developed in cultural studies concerning the nature of cultural identities and the role literature plays in shaping these identities and an understanding about them. In the transition to an increasing transnational and multicultural world, there has been a strong emphasis on issues related to cultural identity and diaspora. Globalization and growing migratory movements have increased cross-cultural encounters among diversely situated subjects raising issues related to border crossings. In this drifting environment, marginalized subjects, in particular, undergo the consequences of the advent of multiculturalism and globalization, since a great number of them has to leave their homelands and origins to strive for better economic conditions elsewhere. In this way, marginalized subjects engage on multiple performances of cultural identity. Cultural critic Stuart Hall argues that cultural identity:

> "is a matter of 'becoming' as well as of 'being'. It belongs to the future as much as to the past. It is not something which already exists, transcending place, time, history and culture. Cultural identities come from somewhere, have histories. But, like everything which is historical, they undergo constant transformation. Far from being eternally fixed in some essentialised past, they are subject to the continuous 'play' of history, culture and power."[1]

The notion of cultural identity refers to the understanding of sentiments associated to home, community, and belonging, and, in an ever-increasing transnational multicultural world, is often multiple and contradictory as a result of subjects' geographical, social, individual, and cultural mobility. Nowadays, a vast number of people live in more than one place in the course of their lives occupying diverse subject positions that add new dimensions and perspectives to the construction of a sense of self. Cultural identity constitutes the result of a process through which subjects or groups judge and express consciously their position within the social arrangement in order to establish a sense of self-esteem and self-confidence that allow them to understand their allotted place in the social milieu. It involves acceptance of similarity and difference from oneself to the others since the notion of cultural identity is produced through a continuous process of relation and negotiation.

Role models are extremely important, if marginalized subjects are to succeed in overcoming widely disseminated stereotypes associated to the constitution of their cultural identity. These role models are (re)produced in literature to the extent that literary discourse constitutes a space in which forms of organization of personal, social,

[1] Hall, Stuart. "Cultural Identity and Diaspora." *Identity and Difference*. Kathryn Woodward (ed.) London: The Open University, 1997, p. 52.

political, and cultural experience are transformed into systems of signs that comprise multiple readings and interpretations. Literature constitutes a field of knowledge that (re)produces the avowed meanings and values of a culture; it unveils interrelation of personal, social, political, and cultural issues allowing subjects to achieve a broader understanding of their existential condition. Therefore, representations of cultural identities performed in literary discourse offer the opportunity for subjects to deepen their knowledge about themselves.

Searching for answers to the question "who am I?", which is a dominant feature in literary discourse, readers have to establish a dialog between themselves and the text. In this way, literature, in the same way as other disciplines, becomes a space of contestation and negotiation where identity and its representation can be shaped and reshaped. As a space of disputed meanings, literature represents a privileged space of analysis and investigation of cultural identities as well as the relation between the social, historical, and cultural contexts and the construction of a sense of self. I believe the study of the representations of cultural identities in literary discourse may allow readers to analyze more attentively paradigmatic issues such as the interpenetration of fact and fiction expressed through the narrator's referentiality to the lived experience in fictional autobiographical writing. Literature cannot be set apart from other social and cultural disciplines as an autonomous site of constitution and attribution of meaning and value, since it is unavoidably permeated by ideological glosses[2] that locate it within a specific

[2] In my investigation, the notion of ideological glosses is related to Althusser's conception of ideology. Althusser observes that subjects are enforced to reproduce oppressive relations of production by ideological state apparatuses such as the educational system, religion, the family, the law, the media, culture, and

time and place. Through literature, readers can extract meanings to formulate conceptions of themselves and the world. However, power relations are never disconnected from literary representations as the access to discourse, and, consequently, to representation, is dependent on the conditions enforced by the network of power relations. Although hegemonic power generally remains consistent, the constantly changing particularities and specificities involved in the mechanisms of power relations render the networks of power shifting and transitory.[3]

Constant fluctuations of power and the interpenetration of political and cultural issues have produced movement and migration as common experience of marginalized subjects. The term "diaspora", used to describe a state of transnational existence, either of an individual or groups, has produced extensive critical debate over the last decades in literary and cultural studies,[4] since images such as the immigrant, nomad, and refugee have become metaphors of the displacement of the contemporary subject and the

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literature, for instance. These apparatuses contribute to the reproduction of relations of exploitation determined through language. In this way, language establishes the conditions by which subjects are governed by ideological state apparatuses according to the interests of the hegemonic culture. See: Althusser, Louis. "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses." *Lenin and Philosophy and Other Essays*. Trans. Ben Brewster. London: New Left Books, 1977.

[3] On the organization and exercise of power, see: Foucault, Michel. *The History of Sexuality: Vol. 1. An Introduction.* Trans. Robert Hurley. New York: Vintage, 1990.

[4] See: Bhabha, Homi. "The Location of Culture." *Literary Theory: An Anthology*. Julie Rivkin and Michael Ryan (eds.) Oxford: Blackwell, 1998. Hall, Stuart. "The Question of Cultural Identity." *Modernity and its Future*. S. Hall, D. Held, and T. McGrew (eds.) Cambridge: Polity Press, 1992; "New Ethnicities" *Stuart Hall: Critical Dialogues in Cultural Studies.* D. Morley & Kuan-Hsing Chen (eds.) New York: Routledge, 1996; "Who Needs Identity?" *Questions of Cultural Identity.* Stuart Hall and Paul du Gay (eds.) London: Sage, 1996; "Cultural Identity and Diaspora." *Identity and Difference*. Kathryn Woodward (ed.) London: The Open University, 1997.

consequent notion of fragmentation of identity attached to it – a sense of having no roots and not belonging that derives from multiple dislocations. In my analysis, the representations of cultural identity that simultaneously embody more than one subjectivity,[5] culture, and knowledge constructing a conception of the self that crosses diverse established borders are denominated diasporic cultural identities. This notion entails the recognition of the necessary heterogeneity and diversity in the construction of a sense of self. Diasporic cultural identities are continuously producing and reproducing self-created versions of themselves according to the shifting locations and multiple existences they embody. In addition, these identities are associated with transgression and renunciation of conventional views of national, religious, racial, sexual, and gender identification. The representations emerge as the narratives unfold since this alternative conception of subjectivity is shaped though a process of literary self-creation that challenges notions of authenticity in the politics of representation of cultural identity by performing extreme instances of border crossings.

The primary *corpus* consists of two paradigmatic fictional autobiographical writings in which the narrative voice constructs representations of diasporic cultural

[5] The terms "subjectivity" and "identity" are employed in my analysis suggesting an overlap. More specifically, "subjectivity" relates to subject's sense of self as an individual and includes conscious and unconscious thoughts and emotions. Subjectivity is always constructed in a socio-cultural context in which language and culture assign meaning and value to it. As subjectivity is formed through power relations and discourses, individuals are "recruited" by these forces to adopt a position that defines and classifies his/her "identity". In this way, "identity" involves subjects' positioning in the social setting defined according to the interrelation of subjectivity, ideology, and power relations. The process of interpellation of individuals posits them within specific ideologies. As ideology functions by interpellating the individual, that is, constituting his/her identity in language, identity is constituted as an effect of ideology.

identities, namely: Gloria Anzaldúa's *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza* (1987) and Audre Lorde's *Zami: A New Spelling of my Name, a biomythography* (1982). I am interested in how the diasporic cultural identities developed in these texts produce disruptive effects on the politics of representation of cultural identity subverting and resisting traditional representations of identity. My reading strategy renders ambiguous categories that used to be clear and puts into question norms previously taken for granted; it does so by rejecting the idea that there is a definite and stable meaning, reading, and interpretation. I believe the examination of these writings, paying attention to the fictionalization of the oppression and injustice endured by the autobiographical subjects, can provide readers with critical insights to analyze subjectivity and its representation as well as offer a situated perspective in the analysis of the politics of representation of cultural identities. It is thus fundamental to explore the contribution of these texts as opportunities to contemplate possible alternatives than the ones imposed by the hegemonic culture.[6]

As both works have been studied under a variety of perspectives, it is necessary to mention and acknowledge some of Anzaldúa's and Lorde's critical heritage to visualize the scope of the criticism devoted to them. In relation to *Borderlands/La Frontera*, in "Constructing Mestiza Consciousness: Gloria Anzaldúa's Literary Techniques in *Borderlands/La Frontera – the New Mestiza*" Tereza Kynclová argues that the narrator constructs the text in a hybrid style through which the notion of the *mestiza* consciousness is developed. According to Kynclová, the technique of code-switching and

[6] In my analysis, the notion of hegemonic culture relates to the dominant social arrangement supported by Eurocentric, colonial, imperialist, patriarchal, racist, and homophobic discourses and ideologies.

the transitions in narrative perspective constitute some of the major literary achievements of the work.[7] In "Overlapping and Interlocking Frames for Humanities Literary Studies: Assia Djebar, Tsitsi Dangarembga, Gloria Anzaldúa", from a comparative point of view Anne Donadey argues that Anzaldúa's work advances a "decolonial" feminist perspective. Donadey provides specific examples of such perspective comparing and contrasting multilingual strategies employed in the works of three transnational authors.[8] Finally, in "Bodies in the Borderlands: Gloria Anzaldua's and David Wojnarowicz's Mobility Machines", Todd R. Ramlow employs Anzaldúa's critique of dualism as a starting point to consider how liminal spaces and states such as the borderlands and the *mestiza* consciousness produce new possibilities of existence that destabilize the normative structures enforced by hegemonic systems.[9]

In regards to *Zami*, in "Writing Power: Identity Complexities and the Exotic Erotic in Audre Lorde's Writing" Yakini Kemp analyzes Lorde's construction of identity in regards to the author's use of the erotic, especially in formulations of Caribbean and lesbian identity. According to Kemp, in Lorde's writing the erotic, while remaining a site of conflict and contradiction, operates in fact as a liberating force.[10] In "Catholicism's

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[7] Kynclová, Tereza. "Constructing Mestiza Consciousness: Gloria Anzaldúa's Literary Techniques in *Borderlands/la Frontera – the New Mestiza*." *Human Architecture: a journal of the sociology of self-knowledge* 4 (2006).

[8] Donadey, Anne. "Overlapping and Interlocking Frames for Humanities Literary Studies: Assia Djebar, Tsitsi Dangarembga, Gloria Anzaldúa." *College Literature* 34.4, Fall 2007.

[9] Ramlow, Todd R. "Bodies in the Borderlands: Gloria Anzaldua's and David Wojnarowicz's Mobility Machines." *MELUS* 31.3 (2006).

[10] Kemp, Yakini B. "Writing Power: Identity Complexities and the Exotic Erotic in Audre Lorde's Writing." *Studies in the Literary Imagination* 37.2 (2004).

Other(ed) Holy Trinity: Race, Class, and Gender in Black Catholic Girl School Narratives", Jeana Delrosso focuses on the representation of Lorde's childhood particularly her school experience at a Catholic educational institution. Delrosso posits Catholicism as another factor of difference intersected with the categories of race, gender, and class. She examines the author's growing perception of difference throughout the narration of her life story and the impact of Catholic education on the development of a sense of self.[11] Finally, in "Towards Recognition: Writing and the Daughter-Mother Relationship" drawing from psychoanalytic theory Suzanne Juhasz argues that writing represents a space for the negotiation of the originary lost mother-daughter relationship, which is understood as the model for the subsequent relationships for the female subject. Juhasz examines the psychosexual dynamics of the mother-daughter relationship and how it is refashioned into literary discourse in Lorde's work.[12] These are just few examples of both authors' vast critical heritage as a way to illustrate the amplitude and quality of the criticism devoted their works.

The cornerstone objective of my investigation is to analyze how Gloria Anzaldúa's *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza* and Audre Lorde's *Zami: A New Spelling of my Name, a biomythography* project representations of diasporic cultural identities that are simultaneously resistant and "marginal" to the hegemonic culture. In order to achieve this goal, I try to demonstrate how mechanisms that illustrate the

[11] Delrosso, Jeana. "Catholicism's Other(ed) Holy Trinity: Race, Class, and Gender in Black Catholic Girl School Narratives." *NWSA Journal* 12.1 (2000).

[12] Juhasz, Suzanne. "Towards Recognition: Writing and the Daughter-Mother Relationship." *American Imago: Studies in Psychoanalysis & Culture* 57 (2000).

narrators' ideological glosses such as displacements, subversions, interventions, and resistances operate in these fictional autobiographical narratives as possibilities for cultural transformation. In both works, the narrative voices construct literary self-representations in a continuous process and movement, crossing diverse borders imposed on the construction of identity. In my analysis, the concept of "narrative voice" is employed as a political term; as such, it "rescues textual study from a formalist isolation that often treats literary events as if they were inconsequential to human history."[13] If the traditional prevailing idea of subjectivity is supported on the myth of a coherent unitary self, how can subjectivity be performed not as a single unified entity but as the subversion of this conception of identity? How does a sense of self interrelate to categories of subjective stratification such as gender, race, class, sexuality, and cultural difference? Why certain representations of cultural identity are relegated to silence and obscurity in literary discourse? These are the questions intended to be addressed in my investigation.

The primary *corpus* is analyzed under the following theoretical framework: Joan Scott's reconceptualization of the category of experience, Donna Haraway's theory of situated knowledges, and a critical strategy of intersecting arguments derived from feminist and postmodern thinking, which posit identity as fluid, multiple, and unstable, supported on Linda Hutcheon's *The Politics of Postmodernism*; the collection of essays edited by Linda Nicholson, *Feminism/Postmodernism*; and Jean-François Lyotard's *The Postmodern Condition*. The discussion proposed by these theorists is particularly relevant

[13] Lanser, Susan Sniader. *Fictions of Authority*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1992. p. 5.

because they propose a methodology of critical deconstruction to the investigation of representations of cultural identity that criticizes the conception of identity as fixed, autonomous, and prior to the historical context in which identity and its representation are shaped. The theoretical framework emphasizes the importance of the position of the subject in the production of knowledge highlighting the discursive mechanisms that inform subjectivities and place them within the network of power relations. Thus, since I analyze texts that are at the boundary of literary and cultural studies and cross diverse established borders under various perspectives, I propose an interdisciplinary methodology of investigation through the critical strategy of intersecting feminist and postmodern thinking as one theoretical axis of analysis. Interdisciplinary approaches are recurrent practices in cultural studies. Besides, I believe such an interdisciplinary approach is justified because, in my opinion, to investigate representations of identities inherently hybrid, multiple, and different as diasporic cultural identities, one has necessarily to cross the boundaries between disciplines to benefit from the multiple perspectives an interdisciplinary approach can provide to reading and interpretation of representations of cultural identities.

Blurring the boundaries between fiction and reality, Lorde and Anzaldúa construct literary self-transpositions in which they take on the voice a fictional autobiographical subject. The representation of the fictional autobiographical subjects' cultural identity constitutes a negotiated performance constructed within a system of previous established meanings and values. The fictionalized account of the authors' experience challenges the assumption that autobiographical writing should merely refer to the sequence of facts in

the author's life and reconstruct the past in an objective correspondence to the lived experience. The kind of fictional autobiographic writing developed by the authors represents an important artistic and political intervention since it interrogates the modes of representation of subjective experience and how it is transposed into fiction according to the social, historical, and cultural conditions that inform the politics of representation of cultural identity. The fictional autobiographical subjects are actively involved in the process of re-narrating personal experience as an opportunity of self-invention materialized through literary discourse. The fictional autobiographical subjects embark on a fictionalized journey toward a deeper understanding of themselves. Their representations are not fixed or unitary; they are textually and discursively performed as shifting constructions. Thus, the cultural identities developed in the texts propose a critique that seeks to promote the positioning of "minor" perspectives interfering on the hegemonic discourses that uphold the subjugation of these perspectives. Therefore, fictional autobiographical writing represents a prolific space for "minor" subjects to articulate their voice and legitimize their silenced and marginalized experiences. This kind of writing represents a possibility to construct a sense of self and agency through the rearrangement of experience into literary discourse as well as a source of empowerment and knowledge which is instrumental to the construction of cultural identity for "marginal" subjects.

As subjects construct identity in relation to other subjects, and in accordance to pre-established rules, identities are relational since they are constituted through social practices dependent upon asymmetrical cultural exchanges. Identity is not only relational

to other subjects and cultural settings; it is also a process that demands inner negotiation and articulation. In this way, the performance of identity is at the same time internal and external, projected and imposed, as subjects have to contrast and confront a self-created sense of identity with the impositions and regulations enforced by the hegemonic culture. As a result, the negotiation of the notion of identity remains a complex process – a constant becoming – as subjects try to understand who they are by recognizing who they are not and also by observing how they are treated, valued, and located according to the regulations of the socio-cultural arrangement.

The delineation of the contours between the "margins" and the "center" is a pertinent issue to be addressed in the American cultural context as there is the possibility of these contours to be redrawn. The representations of the authors' diasporic cultural identities exist at the "margins" of hegemonic, white, American culture under diverse aspects. They belong to marginalized groups in terms of social status as the authors come from the working class; race, since Lorde is African-American and Anzaldúa, Chicana; and gender and sexual expression, due to their performance of unconventional identifications and desires throughout the narratives. In fact, it is from this "marginal" position that the authors are able to perform self-figurations through fictional autobiographical writings that go beyond the "either/or" logic imposed by the hegemonic, white, American culture. Furthermore, the texts are authored by late twentieth-century American women writers who had their work published within a very short time span – only five years. This historical proximity is relevant because it can expose the conditions

imposed through the politics of representation of cultural identities in that particular period of the American literary history.

One of the reasons in examining these fictional autobiographical writings under this perspective comes from the recognition that the self does embody multiple subject positions that cross multiple physical and cultural borders. Subjectivities are molded in ways to form identities arranged into categories and labels enforced by the hegemonic culture. One cannot speak without discourse, yet discourse itself shapes how subjects are represented. At the same time, subjective experience is shaped by cultural mechanisms as one cannot claim identity unless one does so in relation to the ever-present hegemonic discourse. However, some experiences and identities are not reflected on the "center" of literary discourse; they are placed outside, at the "margins", evidencing that representations of cultural identity are inevitably shaped in relation to the network of power relations. The awareness of the existence of the "center" and the "margins" expressed through literary discourse is the other reason that has triggered out my interest in this investigation. As the analysis of the politics of representation of cultural identities is a rather complex endeavor, I employ a broad definition of culture in my analysis, derived from the field of cultural studies. The notion of culture adopted blurs the boundaries between conceptions of "high" and "low" culture and literature. To understand how classification and hierarchization function in the politics of representation of cultural identities, there has to be an understanding of how the principle of identity – the order for a stable and coherent configuration of identity, its meaning, and materiality – relates to binary logic. Binary logic consists of the dominant hegemonic

approach to establish difference, that is, one polarity is established as the defining center such as the "universal" disembodied subject, the phallus,[14] or compulsory heterosexuality[15] so that difference can only be thought as the "other" or "deviant" from this absolute notion of the "center". Within a binary logic of representation, the principle of identity is used to establish hierarchy. This is the logic from which the notion of identity politics[16] employed by minorities sometimes does not escape. Hence, I suggest the possibilities of crossing the borders of identity politics founded on binary paradigms, since the representations of diasporic cultural identities developed in the texts resist prejudice, oppression, and violence, without reproducing normative categories of belonging and exclusion.

Under this perspective, what does the politics of representation of cultural identity signify? Definitely, it does not mean to speak in the name of somebody or express interests grounded merely upon an identity or experience considered as ideal or

[14] The concept of "phallus" derives from psychoanalytical theory and refers to the abstract idea of patriarchal male power, characterized as the symbol or source of meaning. Castle, Gregory. *The Blackwell Guide to Literary Theory*. Oxford: Blackwell, 2007. p. 319.

[15] According to Adrienne Rich, compulsory heterosexuality is a political institution, disseminated as natural, and intended to control and disempower women. Rich exposes the prevailing dominance of compulsory heterosexuality and the disregard of lesbian existence asserting that the primordial mother-daughter bond has been interrupted by the imposition of compulsory heterosexual culture toward women. See: Rich, Adrienne. "Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence." *The Lesbian and Gay Study Reader*. Henry Abelove, Michèle Aina Barale, and David M. Halperin (eds.) New York: Routledge, 1993.

[16] The term "identity politics" was employed by the Combahee River Collective to describe activism and beliefs aiming to improve the situation of subjects who share a particular identity. According to the Collective, identity politics did not stipulate that identities are natural or fixed; instead, identity politics relates to the way one identifies and how this identification determines one's politics. See: Combahee River Collective. "A Black Feminist Statement." *This Bridge Called my Back: Writings by Radical Women of Color*. Gloria Anzaldúa and Cherríe Moraga (eds.) Latham: Kitchen Table, 1983.

"universal". Instead, it represents an alternative that transcends minority identity politics supported on binary paradigms. Thus, I believe that to analyze the politics of representation of cultural identities in fictional autobiographical writing, it is more productive to explore it in terms of intersecting boundaries and borders. The reevaluation of representations of cultural identities is an important task to be performed in literary and cultural studies as it can destabilize traditional paradigms of approaching and interpreting literature.

In relation to the construction of one's sense of cultural identity, normative effects of exclusion and inclusion work incessantly: while there are explicit or subtle exclusions of those who do not fit in the norm of a classified group, those who either aim to or unintentionally are assimilated by a certain configuration of identity also undergo continuous (self) normalizing regulations. Frequently, mechanisms of definition and categorization of identities support discrimination and oppression even when employed to achieve recognition and integration of marginalized subjects. Demands for recognition and integration of "minorities" inevitably assume a "majority" as the defining "center". Thus, hierarchical binary oppositions such as heterosexuality and homosexuality, male and female, white and of color, are just some of the binary paradigms that remain unquestioned and unquestionable. Therefore, the terms "center", "marginal", and "margins" are written between inverted commas to emphasize the questioning to the boundary between the "center" and the "margins". As I try to criticize the imposition of borders and hierarchies on the politics of representation of cultural identities, rather than

extinguishing categories of identity, I believe that rendering these categories ambiguous comprises more promising possibilities.

My analysis tries to promote arguments that emphasize the standpoint of cultural identities, discourses, and representations within the network of power relations.[17] In this way, representations do not simply describe reality or express a "truth", they actually (re)produce meanings, values, and subjectivities. This point of view tries to subvert the mechanisms that protect the working of systems of orders and categories enforced as natural or unquestionable. It intends to intervene into processes of regulation in literary discourse by revealing ambiguity and ambivalence where a single unified truth is avowed, or identity is fixed and stabilized. If representations can influence lived and embodied subjectivities, a critical analysis of representations of the construction of diasporic cultural identities is full of promise, since it allows the possibility of critical interventions into the mechanisms that regulate the politics of representation of cultural identity. As representations of identity are an inexhaustible source of meaning for subjects, they become functional for the understanding of our existence. To consider identities as "representations" does not mean that the concept of identity is irrelevant, or that it does not have substantial consequences. Identities are constructions that arise from particular times and places; however, it does not imply that identities can be easily

[17] See: de Lauretis, Teresa. *The Practice of Love: Lesbian Sexuality and Perverse Desire*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994; "The Technology of Gender" *Technologies of Gender: Essays in Theory, Film, and Fiction*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1987. Weedon, Chris. *Feminist Practice and Poststructuralist Theory.* Oxford: Blackwell, 1987. Fuss, Diana. *Essentially Speaking: Feminism, Nature and Difference*. New York: Routledge, 1989. Hall, Stuart. "Who Needs Identity?" *Questions of Cultural Identity.* Stuart Hall and Paul du Gay (eds.) London: Sage, 1996.

paralleled to particular biological features or any sort of empirical fact. Rather, identities only come into being when meaning and value are assigned to a set of cultural attributes and practices. Stuart Hall's observations are in conformity with this understanding of identity:

> "I use 'identity' to refer to the meeting point, the point of *suture*, between on the one hand the discourses and practices which attempt to 'interpellate,' speak to us or hail us into place as the social subjects of particular discourses, and on the other hand, the processes which produce subjectivities, which construct us as subjects which can be 'spoken.' Identities are thus points of temporary attachment to the subject positions which discursive practices construct for us." [18]

Identities are produced in terms of articulation between the discourses that make subject positions available and the subjects invested in these subject positions. That is, one's sense of identity is constituted when subjects make a meaningful connection between themselves and the discourses predicated by culture. Other theorists share Hall's conception of identity: Teresa de Lauretis argues that subjectivity is shaped in the interaction between individuals and the discourses available for them;[19] and Linda Alcoff understands identity developed through personal experience as a means to make sense of the events of daily life.[20] Identities do not constitute random combinations of categories; they are constantly modulated by power relations and discourses. While subjects might not have intentions to make themselves fit into certain identity category, subjectivity is

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[18] Hall, Stuart. "Introduction: Who Needs Identity?" *Questions of Cultural Identity.* Stuart Hall and Paul du Gay (eds.) London: Sage, 1996. p. 5 – 6. (Italics in original)

[19] de Lauretis, Teresa. "The Technology of Gender" *Technologies of Gender: Essays in Theory, Film, and Fiction*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1987.

[20] Alcoff, Linda. *Visible Identities: Race, Gender, and the Self.* New York: Oxford University Press, 2006.

limited by the discourses and subject positions available within the particular material and ideological contexts in which subjects are located. Restrictive social constrictions on the construction of identity, according to Judith Butler, constitute the "norms of cultural intelligibility"[21] that must be adhered to so that individuals can be recognized as "real" subjects. The power of these norms implies that certain discourses are more available and acceptable than others. Thus, these discourses are able to exercise power by imposing themselves with violence over those individuals whose configuration of identity does not fit into the expectations enforced by the norms of cultural intelligibility, leaving these subjects vulnerable to social punishment and reprobation.

The mechanisms of power that control representations of cultural identity are not only repressive, they are also productive of prototypes that classify and delineate cultural identities. Hall argues that "identification is constructed on the back of a recognition of some common origin or shared characteristics with another person or group, or with an ideal, and with the natural closure of solidarity and allegiance established on this foundation."[22] In other words, individuals desire to recognize themselves reflected in particular discourses and choose to align themselves with others who also recognize themselves as such. This highlights the fundamentally social relational nature of identity. To affirm that one identifies with a certain subject position is to recognize that this subject position exists in a wider sense also available to others. The notion of identity as

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[21] Butler, Judith. *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*. New York: Routledge, 2006. p. 24.

[22] Hall, Stuart. "Who Needs Identity?" *Questions of Cultural Identity.* Stuart Hall and Paul du Gay (eds.) London: Sage, 1996. p. 2.

the articulation between subjects and discourses through fictional autobiographical writing points out diverse ways to analyze representations of cultural identities. Since identities are viewed as fictional constructions, rather than mere reflections of empirical reality, they only become substantial through interpretation and consequent attribution of meaning and value. This understanding of identity sustains some of the critiques that have been made about identity as a unitary concept. According to Linda Alcoff, "Accepting identities is tantamount to accepting dominant scripts and performing the identities power has invented. Identities are not and can never be accurate representations of the real self, and thus interpellation always in a strict sense *fails* in its representational claim even while it succeeds in inciting and disciplining one's practice."[23]

The approach of my analysis makes neither any claims to transparent reflection of a "real" self nor to an escape from hegemonic power. The fundamental hypothesis of the investigation is that marginalized identities do not hold stable, coherent, and unitary selves. I believe that representations of marginalized identities are informed by various discourses and power relations and participate in diverse spaces and times as they represent performances of fragmented and "marginal" selves intersected by multiple differences. Since meaning is open to permanent shift and contestation, the self-definition of one's cultural identity is contingent and necessarily fictional. Nevertheless, this does not make the notion of cultural identity meaningless as an organizing force because it is possible to envision configurations of identity not founded on the idea of a fixed, disembodied, "universal" subject and that do not automatically derive from a fully closed

[23] Alcoff, Linda. Op. cit. p. 77.

narrative of the self. Categories of identity such as race, class, gender, and sexuality are viewed as free-floating constitutive dimensions of subjectivity as these categories are chosen with different combinations, emphases, and understandings. At times, gender identity clashes with racial identity and it is through these clashes that subjectivity is further developed. These conflicts in subjectivity are not to be viewed negatively; instead, they are a beneficial characteristic that enables the subject to exist on different levels and negotiate conflicting identifications. The conflicts of categories of identity reflect how multiple discourses operate on representations of cultural identities. In this way, an analysis of fictional representations of multiple and fragmentary subjects cannot take on the presupposition of objective knowledge, but rather embody its location taking necessarily into account subjectivity and partiality. From this point of view, as diasporic cultural identity expose their being continually (re)produced in the context of discourses that predate and continue beyond their existence, they demonstrate to be more inclusive and aware of its *locus* of enunciation than the conception of the "universal" disembodied subject. In relation to the relevance of the sphere of the discursive, Hall declares:

> "My own view is that events, relations, structures do have conditions of existence and real effects, outside the sphere of the discursive; but that it is only within the discursive, and subject to its specific conditions, limits and modalities, do they have or can they be constructed with meaning. Thus, while not wanting to expand the territorial claims of the discursive infinitely, how things are represented and the 'machineries' and regimes of representation in a culture do play a *constitutive*, and not merely a reflexive, after-the event, role. This gives questions of culture and ideology, and the scenarios of representation – subjectivity, identity, politics – a formative, not merely an expressive, place in the constitution of social and political life."[24]

[24] Hall, Stuart. "New Ethnicities." *Stuart Hall: Critical Dialogues in Cultural Studies.* D. Morley and Kuan-Hsing Chen (eds.) New York: Routledge, 1996. p. 444. (Italics in original)

The dynamics of constriction between culture and individuals inevitably creates unsatisfied subjects. Thus, the most dangerous culture is the one in which there is no resistance, not because culture has stopped restraining its subjects, but rather because subjects have stopped exercising their potential for agency.[25] If release from restraint is unrealistic, resistance to hegemonic culture through self-invention may function as the best way to intervene. As representations of diasporic cultural identities are not given and complete, they remain open and in process, at the same time "being" and "becoming". These representations are relational to the extent that categories of identity gain prominence or recede depending on the circumstances around the fictional autobiographical subjects. As a result, these representations are not viewed as intrinsic or innate, in a biological or cultural sense, but much more loosely and tenuously defined – as a manifestation of a series of identifications.

This dissertation is divided into three chapters. In the first one entitled "Home/Lands", contributing to the examination of the representation of the "other", I discuss Joan Scott's reconceptualization of the category of experience in the subchapter "Challenging the Authority of Experience", pointing to its relevance and contribution to my reading and interpretation analysis as it emphasizes the discursive formation of cultural identities. I try to demonstrate how Scott understands experience not as irrefutable fact or as the point of origin for the construction of a sense of self, but rather as an ongoing process shaped by multiple discourses and power relations. In the

[25] See: Foucault, Michel. *Power/Knowledge*. *Selected Interviews and Other Writings. 1972-1977*, Colin Gordon (Ed.). New York: Pantheon, 1980.

subchapter "Borderlands as Homeland", I examine how the narrative voice in *Boderlands/La Frontera* fictionally reconstructs the Chicano people's history of dispossession interweaving personal and collective experience, the adversities related to illegal border crossings, and the specific implications concerning gender relations at the borderlands. In the subchapter "Desiring the Mother's Homeland", I investigate how the fictional autobiographical subject in *Zami* fictionalizes the formative experience with her mother and the effects of the racial intolerance endured during childhood and adolescence as she struggles to find a home and community where her diasporic cultural identity would be fully accepted and recognized.

In the second chapter, entitled "Crossings", analyzing the representation of cultural identity as a form of knowledge production, I explore Donna Haraway's situated knowledges theory in the subchapter "Locating 'Marginal' Perspectives", attempting to uncover the ideological glosses embedded in the production of knowledge materialized in the politics of representation of cultural identities in literary discourse. According to Haraway, all forms of knowledge derive from particular situated locations. This theory is relevant as one of the theoretical axes of my analysis due to the exposition of the material, social, and cultural dimensions that structure the production of knowledge and inform the politics of representation of cultural identity. In the subchapter "Mythical Deities and Spiritual Path", I analyze how the narrative voice reconstructs the status of mythical female deities from the borderlands as a project of resistance as well as the extrasensory cognitive dimension developed by "marginal" subjects. In the subchapter "Travel and Transculturation", I examine how the fictional autobiographical subject's

travels demonstrate the construction of cultural identity as a form of situated knowledge and the significance of the relationship with Eudora to the construction of a sense of self.

In the third chapter, entitled "Intersections", articulating the interdisciplinary dimension of analysis, I delineate the critical strategy of intersecting arguments derived from feminist and postmodern theories in the subchapter "A Radically Pluralist Point of View", proposing a provisional intersection between these theories as they converge in relation to the questioning to the notion of a "universal" subject and knowledge. I try to expose a critique that denaturalize social constructs advanced as unquestionable, which influence the politics of representation of cultural identities, and consequently subjects' ways of thinking and existing, by exposing that entities imposed as "natural" are, in fact, culturally constructed. This critical strategy supports the investigation of representations of diasporic cultural identities that emphasizes hybridity and difference in the construction of cultural identity. In the subchapter "Multiple Languages toward a New Consciousness", I investigate how the narrative voice crosses linguistic borders through the acknowledgement and affirmation of the language of the borderlands as well as the development of a new consciousness – the *mestiza* consciousness. Finally, in the subchapter "Queer Subculture and the Return to the Mother", I examine the fictional autobiographical subject's effort to overcome prejudice struggling to find home and community in the Greenwich Village queer subculture, the encounter with the mythical female deity Afrekete, and its implications to the protagonist's construction of cultural identity.

The mechanisms involved in the politics of representation of cultural identities need to be discussed in a wider context, where identities are viewed as fragmented, nomadic, and open to re-signification. I believe that reading and interpretation are complex practices, dependent upon innumerous factors, and that can be regarded in diverse ways: as activity or process, as hermeneutics, as understanding, as something shaping experience, as a universalized reader's abstraction, or as that which echoes the reader's personal experience – reading as a process of identification. Nevertheless, reading and interpretation are processes affected by ideological glosses throughout. Therefore, it is fundamental to determine not merely content or formalities of language and its effects, but also concentrate on the structures of representation that give significance to such effects.

Chapter I

Home/Lands

1.1 Challenging the Authority of Experience

> Experience is at once always already an interpretation *and* is in need of interpretation. What counts as experience is neither self-evident nor straightforward; it is always contested, always therefore political.
>
> *Joan Scott, "Experience"*

In her essay "Experience", Joan Scott unveils the process of constitution of identity of those subjects who have been assigned to the category of the "other". By doing so, she exposes the artificial construction of categories of identity that take for granted the naturalness of these categories in order to question the authority of experience "as uncontestable evidence and as an originary point of explanation."[26] Scott criticizes what, according to her, has been an exaggerated emphasis on the authority of empirical experience; that is, the understanding of experience, unmediated by language and interpretation, as the foundation for the constitution of knowledge and identity. Thus, taking into account Scott's reconceptualization of the category of experience the investigation of the construction of "the history of difference, the history, that is, of the designation of 'other,' of the attribution of characteristics that distinguish categories of people from some presumed (and usually unstated) norm"[27] becomes a rather challenging task.

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[26] Scott, Joan W. "Experience." *Feminists Theorize the Political*. Judith Butler and Joan W. Scott (eds.) Routledge: New York, 1992. p. 24.

[27] Ibid. p. 22.

As subjects incessantly strive to acquire and produce knowledge, the production of knowledge is frequently obtained merely through vision. According to Scott, "vision is a direct, unmediated apprehension of a world of transparent objects."[28] In addition, "Seeing is the origin of knowing. Writing is reproduction, transmission – the communication of knowledge gained through (visual, visceral) experience."[29] Under this perspective, a privileged position is assigned to the role of vision and writing is just considered as an instrument at the service of vision. However, Scott evidences the preponderance of the role of writing and the unavoidable linguistic and interpretative reconstruction of experience. The simple act of making unmediated experience visible excludes the examination of the ideological glosses that regulate the politics of representation of cultural identities; thus, "the evidence of experience, whether conceived through a metaphor of visibility or in any other way that takes meaning as transparent, reproduces rather than contests given ideological systems."[30] In this way, binary oppositions are simply re-established and not questioned. Therefore, it is not enough simply to make experience visible, since the discursive processes that inform experience and place subjectivities in the complex network of power relations also need to be examined and questioned.

For Scott, the category of experience, which is preponderant in the process of formation of identity, is never a-historical; rather, experience is always contextual and

[28] Ibid. p. 23.

[29] Ibid. p. 24.

[30] Ibid. p. 25.

contingent. She reveals the inadequacy of depending exclusively on unmediated experience to the extent that subjective experience is transformed into unquestionable fact. Events are not mere facts that just happen to subjects given that they are irrevocably mediated by language and constituted through discursive practices. In this way, experience may not be a trustful source of knowledge, when it presents as natural that which is culturally and historically constructed. If representations of subjective experience are not contextualized in accordance with power relations, they simply reproduces existing ideological systems attesting that difference exists, but not exposing the mechanisms that constitute it: "The evidence of experience then becomes evidence for the fact of difference, rather than a way of exploring how difference is established, how it operates, how and in what ways it constitutes subjects who see and act in the world"[31] Thus, analyzing experience not as the foundation of knowledge and identity means to emphasize the historicity of experience and the ideological mechanisms that shape and control the politics of representation of cultural identity. According to William S. Wilkerson, Scott's reconceptualization of the category of experience "proposes that we leave behind the idea of experience as a foundation, and even a beginning of our knowledge, and instead inquire about the production and constitution of experience and identities."[32] Understanding the category of experience under this perspective does not imply disregarding or diminishing its importance, instead it means taking into account

[31] Ibid. p. 25.

[32] Wilkerson, William S. "Coming Out and the Ambiguity of Experience." *Reclaiming Identity: Realist Theory and the Predicament of Postmodernism*. Paula M. L. Moya and Michael R. Hames-García (eds.) Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000. p. 272.

how experience is interpreted and constitutes individuals in subjects through cultural practices and significations.

The investigation of representations of diasporic cultural identities, taking into consideration this reconceptualization of the category of experience, constitutes an important task to the legitimization of marginalized and silenced voices. This kind of investigation does not observe the representation of experience as an individual isolated event; rather it analyzes how experience and its fictional representations are shaped according to intricate configurations of discourses and power relations. If "It is not individuals who have experience, but subjects who are constituted through experience",[33] subjects are actually constituted through the very process of interpretation and narration of experience. When subjects narrate experience, they employ subjective evidence in the attempt to legitimate their points of view. However, to analyze representations of diasporic cultural identities, one has to take into account a conscious effort to locate experience within specific socio-cultural contexts. According to Paula Moya, "in her efforts to establish the correct causal (and historical) relationship between discourse, experience, subjectivity, and identity, Scott effectively delegitimizes experience as an authoritative source for knowledge."[34] As no one can attain a full comprehension of the "truth", since there are many versions of "truth", one has to recognize the limitations of the possibilities to understand experience.

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[33] Scott, Joan. Op. cit. p. 26.

[34] Moya, Paula M. L. *Learning from Experience: Minority Identities, Multicultural Struggles*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002. p. 6.

Since categories of identity cannot be conceived as a natural given or point of origin for representations, analyzing representations of marginalized experience demands taking into consideration the interrelation of several aspects in the narration of experience. In my analysis, representations of marginalized cultural identities and experiences are analyzed taking in consideration ambivalence and ambiguity articulated by the fictional autobiographical subjects. In this way, my reading and interpretation cannot be considered as totalized or "universal" in relation to representations of marginalized subjects. Della Pollock evidences that in pursuing the deconstruction of "fact" Scott "moves us from questions of representation (or the role of the narrator/historian) to questions of discursive production (the role of social structures and practices in the formation of the narrator as a telling subject). Scott (among others) shifts the terms of debate from the politics of representation to the politics of production."[35] As analyses of the production of cultural identities have to start from the conception that cultural identities and experience are constructed within previously established systems of distribution of meaning and value, it is not possible to analyze "marginal" cultural identities and experiences as not permeated by social, cultural, and political determinants.

According to Scott, experience "becomes not the origin of our explanation, not the authoritative (because seen or felt) evidence that grounds what is known, but rather that which we seek to explain, that about which knowledge is produced."[36] Thus, the category of experience is conceived as a linguistic event, given that language and experience

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[35] Pollock, Della. "Making History Go." *Exceptional Spaces: Essays in Performance and History*. Della Pollock (ed.) Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1998. p. 19.

[36] Scott, Joan W. Op. cit. p. 26.

cannot be separated in the same way as lived experience is not self-evident. Scott's reconceptualization of the category of experience refuses a referential conception of language that purports the "belief in a direct relationship between words and things."[37] Rather, all categories of analysis are regarded as "contextual, contested, and contingent"[38] which contributes to the analysis of voices that have been assigned to the "margins" of literary discourse, comprising the category of the "other". Sandra Hartsock describes how the establishment of the category of the "other" was institutionalized in fact and thought:

> "First, the Other is always seen as "Not," as a lack, a void, as lacking in the valued qualities of the society, whatever those qualities may be. Second, humanity of the Other becomes 'opaque.' Colonizers can frequently be heard making statements such as 'you never know what they think. Do they think? Or do they operate according to intuition?' Third, the Others are not seen as fellow individual members of the human community, but rather as part of a chaotic, disorganized, and anonymous collectivity. They carry the 'mark of the plural.' In more colloquial terms, they all look alike."[39]

The category of the "other" was created to inscribe those subjects whose beliefs, desires, and knowledges are antagonistic to the ones imposed by hegemonic culture in order to establish a hierarchical scale of values to the constitution of the subject. It is therefore necessary that readers and literary criticism become aware of the losses suffered with the erasure or distortion of the experience of the "other" from literary discourse and consequently the cultural domain. Furthermore, as "marginal" subjects are extremely

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[37] Ibid. p. 34.

[38] Ibid. p. 36.

[39] Hartsock, Nancy. "Foucault on Power: A Theory for Women?" *Feminism/Postmodernism*. Linda Nicholson (ed.) New York: Routledge, 1990. p. 160 – 161.

vulnerable to oppression and domination on the basis of these subjects' embodiment of difference, what is implicated to the subjects who fall under the label of the "other"? According to Hartsock:

> "She/he is pushed toward becoming an object. As an end, in the colonizer's supreme ambition, she/he should exist only as a function of the needs of the colonizer, that is, be transformed in a pure colonized. An object for himself or herself as well as for the colonizer. The colonized ceases to be a subject of history and becomes only what the colonizer is not." [40]

The category of the "other" is necessary to secure the place of the "universal" subject: without the "other" the "universal" subject would cease to exist. According to Chris Weedon, the political significance of displacing the conception of the "universal" subject is what allows subjectivity to change. In this way, the critique to the conception of the "universal" subject functions as a way to question the politics of representation of cultural identities exposing the belief in the fixed, stable, "universal" subject to be a false one and also demonstrating that both sides of the binary system are, in fact, co-dependent, so the ascribed "inferiority" of one over the other must be deconstructed. As the role of the victim, often associated to "marginal" subjects, can at the same time resist and transform power, analyses of diasporic cultural identities that take into account Scott's reconceptualization of the category of experience can provide critical insights to question the politics of representation of identity so as to displace the belief in the notion of a "universal" subject.

[40] Ibid. p. 161.

Hegemonic discourses on representation of identities, which understand identity as single, fixed, and unified enforce and reproduce the exclusion and marginalization of the "other". Thus, when colonialist, patriarchal, capitalist, and homophobic systems, presented as the "natural" way of observing the world or disguised as "common sense", are exposed as socially and culturally constructed, it is possible to identify the ideological matrixes that sustain these systems. Hegemonic discourses on the representation of cultural identity claim that there are two opposite sides to everything, one "good" and another "bad." The "good" side will persist on erasing what it is "bad." One of the hindrances with such perspective is that it disregards the understanding that the judgment as to what is "good" or "bad" falls in the hands of an extremely reduced and selected group of people biased in their perceptions due to their social location, background, and predisposition. This group of people is often the one to which power is more available at a certain period in history. Power remains mainly under control of those subjects who detain a particular kind of power: economic, political, religious, or educational; while less privileged subjects are denied the right to articulate their opinions and knowledges. Subjects, who are more prone to have access to power, resist any perspectives in disagreement with their position and seek to assert their thoughts and beliefs by presenting them as the *only* legitimate "truth" to be credited. By refusing other perspectives, with the intention to assert hegemonic knowledge, the hegemonic culture deprives itself from the knowledge that might be gained from "marginal" voices.

In the same way, in the affirmation of certain values and beliefs as the only legitimate ones, the politics of representation of cultural identity prevents the different

perspectives that might be gained taking into account the system of values and beliefs of the "other", merely because they are considered as "savage" or "superstitious". The recognition that marginalized subjects' perspectives are different does not imply that they are illegitimate or must be simply rejected and not considered at all. Weedon observes that "To practice literary criticism is to produce readings of literary texts and in the process of interpretation temporarily to fix meaning and privilege particular social interests."[41] Therefore, what is at stake in the perspective that takes into consideration the sovereignty of the "other" in his/her own right? This perspective emphasizes subjects' potential to exert agency. Likewise, subjective experience is viewed as varied and multiple, that is, what a certain experience means to some individual will depend on how this experience is interpreted according to the discourses available at that particular historical moment. However, if experience is a linguistic event, is it possible for subjects to exercise agency? I reply with Scott's words:

> "Subjects are constituted discursively, but there are conflicts among discursive systems, contradictions within any one of them, multiple meanings possible for the concepts they deploy. And subjects have agency. They are not unified, autonomous individuals, exercising free will, but rather subjects whose agency is created through situations and statuses conferred on them"[42]

Scott's discussion on the discursive formation of the category of experience emphasizes the construction of cultural identities in constant process, movement, change. These identities are shaped by discourses and at the same time subvert and resist these discourses in the construction of a sense of self. In this way, Scott does not advocate

[41] Weedon, Chris. *Feminist Practice & Poststructuralist Theory*. Oxford: Blackwell, 1987. p. 136.

[42] Scott, Joan W. Op. cit. p. 34.

linguistic determinism in detriment of subjects' agency; rather, she exposes the socio-cultural circumstances in which experience, subjectivity, and agency are shaped and constrained.

As interpretation and the consequent attribution of meaning and value to literary discourse constitute extremely important activities to the investigation of the politics of representation of cultural identities, Scott's reconceptualization of the category of experience is particularly relevant as one of the theoretical axes of my analysis due to the exposition of the centrality of language and interpretation in the construction of cultural identity and also the critique to the construction of subjectivity as fixed, autonomous, and prior to the historical contexts in which it is inserted. I believe that analyzing how language, interpretation, and discourses influence representations of cultural identities is a fundamental task that represents the possibility of bringing into light the silenced and omitted experience of the "other" from the undergrounds of literary history. Fictional autobiographical writings such as *Borderlands/La Frontera* and *Zami* have generated "a wealth of new evidence previously ignored about these others and has drawn attention to dimensions of human life and activity usually deemed unworthy of mention in conventional histories"[43] and literary discourse. Therefore, the reinterpretation of the meaning and value attributed to representations of the cultural identity of the "other" constitutes a legitimate strategy that provides textual spaces for "marginal" voices.

[43] Ibid. p. 24.

1.2 Borderlands as Homeland

But the skin of the earth is seamless.
The sea cannot be fenced,
el mar does not stop at borders.
To show the white man what she thought of his arrogance,
Yemayá blew that wire fence down.

This land was Mexican once,
was Indian always
and is.
And will be again.

Gloria Anzaldúa, Borderlands/La Frontera

Before proceeding to the textual analysis of *Borderlands/La Frontera*, it is necessary to discuss the significance of the "borderlands" metaphor to the work. The idea of "borderlands" has been frequently used in discussions on American literature and culture. Throughout the history of American literature, there has been a strong emphasis on the limits imposed by boundaries: native inhabitants and English colonizers, pure blood and mixed blood, English and other languages. Borders are primarily associated to geographical territory, but they also convey symbolic meanings. On the one hand, in its physical dimension the borderland refers to the United States-Mexico dividing line. In this sense, it represents a reminder of the war between the two countries that resulted in the takeover of the Mexican northern territories by the American government, producing a second-rate class of citizens in the United States – the Chicano people. On the other hand, this notion refers to the strict cultural ideological boundaries that hold subjects

within single unified configurations of identity and establish a division between the material and spiritual dimensions of subjectivity. In this way, the borderlands not only refer to a specific geographical location but also have a symbolic dimension. The borderlands represent a territory of constant flux and uncertainty as it is at the same time real and imagined: a concrete material limit between two countries and an ideological construction. Through the borderlands metaphor, the narrative voice expresses the desire to cross imposed limitations – physical and ideological. This sentiment of transgression to borders is a moving force in the narrator's journey toward self-knowledge through the process of construction of a sense of self.

The history of the United States-Mexico divide is full of conflicts and oppression. As the fictionalized transposition of life experience at the borderlands, the narrative voice retells the Chicano people's history, a people who occupy liminal positions and transgress diverse borders. Anzaldúa's life narrative is constructed in a hybrid style, a sort of literary *mestizaje*, as the subtitle *The New Mestiza* prefigures. In this style, prose and poetry, personal stories and collective history, material and spiritual realms are interwoven in the very fabric of the text. The work can be considered as both literary and theoretical. In its literary dimension, it represents a journey toward the development of a sense of cultural identity by the performance of multiple voices and different perspectives; whereas, in its theoretical dimension, it exposes the historical, political, social, cultural, and linguistic subjugation to which the Chicano people are exposed, and Chicanas' predicament inside the Chicano community. Furthermore, the text is multilingual, written in English permeated with Spanish and several dialects. This hybrid

style of writing emphasizes a critical authorial positioning revealing the interrelation between the cultural and the political in the construction of identity.

Borderlands/La Frontera is divided in two parts: the first one entitled "*Atravesando Fronteras*/Crossing Borders" is written mainly in prose and structured in the form of seven essays; the second one entitled "*Un Agitado Viento*/*Ehecatl*, the Wind" consists in six collections of poems that enact the issues exposed in the first part. In the narrative section of the book, the narrator employs the discourse of disciplines such as history, ethnography, anthropology, and linguistics to delineate the cultural heritage of the Chicano people. The textual strategy of intersecting factual information with personal, mythical, and imaginative reconstruction of Chicano people's experience is employed to expose the ambivalent constitution of the Chicano people's cultural identity. The first narrative section, narrated in the voice of a fictitious historiographer, sets an atmosphere of displacement focusing on the material borderland which separates the two countries and the ideological repercussions derived from this divide.

The politics of representation of cultural identity is central to the work: "It is a question of social categories, personal understanding, and language, all of which are connected, none of which are or can be a direct reflection of the others."[44] The narrator's experience is reconstructed in the form of a hybrid, fictional, autobiographical writing. The "marginal" perspective of the text enables readers to recognize the imposition of several borders on the construction of one's sense of cultural identity. If the geographical

[44] Scott, Joan W. Op. cit. p. 35.

borderland relates to the United States-Mexico limit, its ideological dimensions are not associated with any particular material locality. Although Chicano people live inside the limits of the country and are necessary to the economic system, the concrete material border that separates the United States from Mexico produces internal margins to which this people is relegated. In this way, ideological borders transform the Chicano people into the "other" to the hegemonic white American culture: "Borders are set up to define the places that are safe and unsafe, to distinguish *us* from *them*. A border is a dividing line, a narrow strip along a steep edge. A borderland is a vague and undetermined place created by the emotional residue of an unnatural boundary."[45] The narrator suggests two different kinds of borders: a physical geographical divide and a constructed ideological limit that establishes the division between the subject and the "other". The history of the marginalized "other", materialized in the Chicano people's experience, has been erased from literary discourse. To recover this forgotten experience, the narrator, disguised as a historiographer, asserts that according to forensic evidence the first human inhabitants of the United States Southwest lived 35,000 years ago in what is now Texas. The Cochise people, who developed a culture similar to that of the Aztecs, are the direct ancestor of most of the Mexican population.[46] In the 16th century, Hernán Cortés conquered the indigenous populations of Mexico resulting in the birth of a new race, the *mestizo*, comprising mixed-raced individuals from Indian and Spanish ancestry. The fictional reconstruction of the Chicano people's experience is pervaded by the materiality of the land, migration, colonization, exploitation, and eventually homecoming. The information

[45] Anzaldúa, Gloria. *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza*. San Francisco: Aunt Lute Books, 1987. p. 25. (Italics in original)

[46] Ibid. p. 26.

about the land and its people sets the ground for the cross-cultural encounters that produced the heterogeneous population of the American Southwest. Spanish, Indian, and *mestizo* peoples settled in the borderlands territory representing "a return to the place of origin, Aztlán, thus making Chicanos originally and secondarily indigenous to the Southwest."[47] The geographical borderland occupies a territory that is not either Mexican or American. In primeval times, it was "Aztlán – land of the herons, land of whiteness, the Edenic place or origin of the Azteca."[48] Aztlán, literally means "home of the Aztecs", is the land of the *Aztecas del norte* – nowadays the Chicano people – the true inheritors of the territory. Affirmation of belonging to the Chicano community involves the recognition of working-class and indigenous origins as well as resistance to assimilation and acculturation into the hegemonic American culture.

The United States invaded the Mexican northerner territories in the 19th century enforcing its inhabitants to relinquish their lands. The treaty of Guadalupe-Hidalgo established Mexico's concession of almost half of its territory to the United States, comprising the states of Texas, New Mexico, Arizona, Colorado, and California. What is more significant is that, after the annexation of the land, approximately 100,000 Mexicans all of a sudden became at the same time "citizens" of the United States and foreigners in their own homeland. The Chicano people were deprived of their properties without any right: "we were jerked out by the roots, truncated, disemboweled, dispossessed, and separated from our identity and our history."[49] Besides the usurpation

[47] Ibid. p. 27.

[48] Ibid. p. 26.

[49] Ibid. p. 30.

of the land, the Chicano people have also been denied full access to a sense of cultural identity, since they are considered as a dominated race in the Mexican point of view and as second-rate citizens according to that of the Americans. At the borderlands, marginalized subjects are vulnerable to violence and oppression due to prejudice and stereotypes directed toward them: "Gringos in the U.S. Southwest consider the inhabitants of the borderlands transgressors, aliens – whether they possess documents or not, whether they're Chicanos, Indians, or blacks."[50] This demonstrates the asymmetry in terms of cultural exchanges to the marginalized inhabitants from the borderlands. It is thus necessary to develop interventions into the politics of representation of cultural identity in order to subvert imperialistic hegemonic stereotypes imposed on marginalized subjects' identity. After the Chicano people's dispossession, the Texan rural background was thoroughly transformed by wealthy American entrepreneurs:

> "Later the Anglos brought in huge machines and root plows and had the Mexicans scrape the land clean of natural vegetation. In my childhood I saw the end of dryland farming. I witnessed the land cleared; saw the huge pipes connected to underwater sources sticking up in the air. (…) In the 1950s I saw the land, cut up into thousands of neat rectangles and squares, constantly being irrigated. In the 340-day growth season, the seeds of any kind of fruit or vegetable had only to be stuck in the ground in order to grow. More big land corporations came in and bought up the remaining land."[51]

The narrative voice reveals the process by which manual work was substituted by heavy machinery and the occupation of the land by American investors, contrasting the land before and after Chicano's dispossession. The land was further divided and regarded

[50] Ibid. p. 25.

[51] Ibid. p. 31.

merely as a commercial item to be negotiated and exploited. The narrator denounces the deprivation of the community describing the poverty and economic crisis in the area. The exploitation of the land aligns with the exploitation of its people as the natural environment is destroyed to guarantee the progress and advancement of the hegemonic, white, American culture. The subjugation of the inhabitants of the Southwest contributed to the formation of the colonial system of production. In the United States, racial minorities such as Chicanos, Latinos, Native Americans, African-American, and Asians have traditionally occupied subordinate work positions compared to that of whites'. As an internal colony, the Chicano people undergo labor repression, subjective coercion, and legal restrictions that hinder their access to equitable social opportunities in the American society.

Occupational stratification is one of the forms of subordination to which the Chicano people are exposed in the United States. This kind of stratification is informal, rather than an institutionalized practice. It employs racial categorization as a determinant factor to classify workers as suitable or not for particular tasks. People of color have always been relegated to the most dangerous and unqualified positions such as agricultural, mining, and railroad work. This predicament in relation to class status is one of the factors evidencing that the Chicano people occupy "the designation of 'other,' of the attribution of characteristics that distinguish categories of people from some presumed (and usually unstated) norm",[52] since they are considered and treated as disposable objects without individuality and humanity by the hegemonic, white,

[52] Scott, Joan W. Op. cit. p. 22.

American culture. The colonial system of production, especially in regards to labor repression and occupational stratification, is constitutive of Chicano people's sense of cultural identity. However, the narrator does not convey Chicano experience as "the ontological foundation of working-class identity, politics, and history",[53] since the fictional reconstruction of her life journey does not assume the category of experience as self-evident. The narrative voice denounces gender-related labor exploitation revealing the life story of women who work at factories known as *maquiladoras*:

> "One-fourth of all Mexicans work at *maquiladoras*; most are young women. Next to oil, *maquiladoras* are Mexico's second greatest source of U.S. dollars. Working eight to twelve hours a day to wire in backup lights of U.S. autos or solder minuscule wires in TV sets is not the Mexican way. While the women are in the *maquiladoras*, the children are left on their own. Many roam the street, become part of *cholo* gangs."[54]

The experience of illegal women immigrants is fictionally reconstructed so as to reveal the mechanisms of occupational stratification that rely on women to perform meticulous and repetitive activities that demand a lot of patience and attention to details. In addition, the narrative voice discloses that while these women are working at the *maquiladoras* their children are left on their own becoming extremely vulnerable to urban violence. The narrative voice fictionalizes the experience of illegal women immigrants, who are especially jeopardized after their crossing the border:

> "Often the *coyote* (smuggler) doesn't feed her for days or let her go to the bathroom. Often he rapes her or sells her into prostitution. She cannot call on county or state heath

[53] Ibid. p. 30.

[54] Anzaldúa, Gloria. Op. cit. p. 32.

> or economic resources because she doesn't know English and she fears deportation. American employers are quick to take advantage of her helplessness. She can't go home. She's sold her house, her furniture, borrowed from friends in order to pay the *coyote* who charges her four or five thousand dollars to smuggle her to Chicago. She may work as a live-in maid for white, Chicano or Latino households for as little as $15 a week. Or work in the garment industry, do hotel work. Isolated and worried about her family back home, afraid of getting caught and deported, living with as many as fifteen people in one room, the *mexicana* suffers a series of health problems."[55]

The narrative voice explicitly reveals the subhuman conditions to which illegal women immigrants are subjected. Besides labor exploitation, they have to deal with sexual violence and exploitation. The borderlands territory demonstrates to be a space with additional charges imposed onto women, since undocumented women immigrants are doubly threatened in this area. These illegal women immigrants generally end up performing domestic chores necessary to maintain upper-class, white, American women's houses. As illegal women immigrants' work has somehow facilitated the access to the public sphere of upper-class, white, American women, it is problematic to think that *all* women can achieve emancipation if this emancipation is supported by poor, illegal, women immigrant's domestic work. Therefore, the representation of illegal women immigrants, as an instance of diasporic cultural identity, reveals the mechanisms of power relations that posit poor, illegal, women immigrants as one of the most undervalued individuals in the hierarchical scale of value of subjects.

The scenery of land appropriation, exploitation, and occupational stratification has set the conditions for perpetuating the status of an internal colony of the Chicano

[55] Ibid. p. 34.

people in the United States. The Chicano people are forced to assimilate the American culture and reject their ethnic belongings. The necessity to adapt to a hegemonic culture renders the construction of Chicano people's cultural identity a process in tension with the possibilities of assimilation or resistance to hegemonic, white, American culture. The Chicano culture cannot be annihilated because the Chicano people's desire to preserve their origins through cultural expressions is a fundamental element of their capacity to endure. In addition, the narrator reveals that the experience of being Mexican does not relate necessarily to nationhood: "being Mexican has nothing to do with which country one lives in. Being Mexican is a state of the soul – not one of mind, not one of citizenship. Neither eagle nor serpent, but both. And like the ocean, neither animal respects borders."[56] Mexican cultural identity is characterized by the resistance to imposition of borders. To survive in the borderlands territory, Mexicans have to learn how to be lithe like the serpent and watchful like the eagle. The narrator's fictional reconstruction of the experience of life at the borderlands entails contradictory belongings since the construction of cultural identity is articulated relation to multiple intersecting forces. In this vein, the work advances issues concerning "discourse, difference, and subjectivity, as well as about what counts as experience and who gets to make that determination – that would enable us to historicize experience, to reflect critically on the history we write about it, rather than to premise our history upon it."[57]

The narrative voice enumerates the different labels the Chicano people adopt in relation to the various locations they occupy in the system of racial categorization and

[56] Ibib. p. 84.

[57] Scott, Joan W. Op. cit. p. 33.

how this classificatory system in fact represents a way to evade definitions of identity supported by rigid parameters:

> "As a culture, we call ourselves Spanish when referring to ourselves as a linguistic group and when copping out. It is then that we forget our predominant Indian genes. We are 70 to 80% Indian. We call ourselves Hispanic or Spanish-American or Latin American or Latin when linking ourselves to other Spanish speaking peoples of the Western hemisphere and when copping out. We call ourselves Mexican-American to signify we are neither Mexican nor American, but more the noun 'American' than the adjective 'Mexican' (and when copping out)."[58]

In the territory of the borderlands, "marginal" subjects, such as the Chicano people, are vulnerable to multiple mechanisms of oppression and exclusion. The impasse of Chicanos and Chicanas is that they embody hybrid cultural identities due to their multiple situated positions. As the material border that separates Mexico and the United States is an important metaphor to the work, the narrator's questioning to the imposition of a border between "Mexican" and "American" becomes critical insight materialized into literary discourse. An illegal border crossing is lyrically transposed in the poetical prelude that opens the first essay to the work:

> "1,950 mile-long open wound
> dividing a *pueblo*, a culture,
> running down the length of my body,
> staking fence rods in my flesh,
> splits me splits me
> *me raja me raja*
> This is my home
> this thin edge of

[58] Anzaldúa, Gloria. Op. cit. p. 84.

barbwire."[59]

The imagery of the poem evokes the figure of an illegal immigrant crossing the border expressing the suffering and pain of such an act reflected on the body. The borderlands are portrayed as the home of illegal crossers. The material border that separates the two countries represents an emblem of the Mexican people's colonization and subordinate status within the hegemonic, white, American culture. The existence of illegal border crossings reveals intersections of power relations and difference within and across nations, subjects, and communities. Thus, the representation of illegal crossers constitutes an instance of diasporic cultural identity that subverts the inside-outside borders of nationalistic belonging. In addition, representations of diasporic cultural identities performed by illegal immigrants do not subscribe to the "either/or" conception of construction of identity, since they are considered as a third category that relates to the "neither/nor" perspective. That is, these marginalized subjects are neither "inside" nor completely "outside" the American society as their social status is not that of a legal citizen, but, at the same time, they are an essential part of the socio-economic setting. Undoubtedly, the cheap labor force performed by the Chicano people contributes to the wealth of both sides of the border. However, regardless of their necessary existence to the American economic system, they are still viewed as an inferior race due to the history of domination, exploitation, and the ethnic difference they represent. As a result, through the representation of illegal crossers as an instance of diasporic cultural identities, the boundary between inside and outside in the construction of cultural identity is trespassed.

[59] Ibid. p. 24 – 25.

It is necessary to emphasize that nowadays illegal Mexican crossers make their way to the United States knowing that they are "illegally" crossing to a land that was previously their own homeland. Even though the United States have created a whole system of vigilance and control at the borderland to ensure that illegal immigrants do not cross to the American territory, the ever-growing number of illegal crossings demonstrates that borders cannot thwart illegal immigration. As Chicanos and Chicanas are considered an inferior race in the American society, they are usually stereotyped as criminals and bandits. The borders that segregate people according to difference are materialized through stereotypes and preconception directed to marginalized subjects' identities and cultural practices. These stereotypes are disseminated because hegemonic, white, American culture is in fact afraid of the Chicano people due to the difference and hybridity they embody. Since hierarchical evaluation based on racial paradigms is one of the ideological glosses employed to control and subdue "marginal" subjects, Chicanos and Chicanas are constantly oppressed on the basis of their multiple ethnic belongings. As a result, illegal immigrants occupy the lowest ranks in the social ladder. The narrative voice exposes the cruel reality that illegal crossers have to face once they get to the American side of the border and the treatment they receive:

> "Those who make it past the checking points of the Border Patrol find themselves in the midst of 150 years of racism in Chicano *barrios* in the Southwest and in big northern cities. Living in a no-man's-borderland, caught between being treated as criminals and being able to eat, between resistance and deportation, the illegal refugees are some of the poorest and the most exploited of any people in the U.S."[60]

[60] Ibid. p. 34.

Illegal immigrants risk their lives crossing the border expecting that they will be able to make enough money to sustain themselves and their families. However, as the narrator shows, those who manage to cross the border alive find themselves in a setting that despises their very existence. After crossing the border, illegal immigrants realize that the American dream is not so easily achieved just because they are inside the national limits of the United States.

If material borders are only one of the dimensions through which the metaphor of the borderlands takes place, ideological borders can assume a variety of forms. That is, they are meant to enforce paradigms that sets up hierarchical modes of thinking used to subdue marginalized subjects according to their difference. The pervasive influence of ideological borderlands is materialized in social and cultural spheres through power relations as subjects erect geographical and ideological borders, and, at the same time, are shaped by them. Ideological borderlands are evident when subjects are categorized according to rigid, fixed, and unitary categories of identity. These boundaries establish fixed categories of identity that produce isolation and oppression to subjects that do not adhere to strict classifications and definitions. In this way, Scott argues that "The meanings of the categories of identity change and with them possibilities for thinking the self."[61] Thus, the representation of illegal immigrants' diasporic cultural identities performs a crucial intervention to the enforcement of strict categories of identity. By fictionalizing experience, the narrative voice questions American paradigms stranded exclusively on Western, white, imperialistic, colonial values adopting the perspective of

[61] Scott, Joan. Op. cit. p. 35.

the marginalized – the outsider. This perspective subverts conceptions that posit the "other" as inherently inferior disseminated with the intention of enforcing submission and control. By resisting domination, the narrator transgresses imposed cultural boundaries as the imposition of borders is challenged to allow the emergence of diasporic cultural identities. Diasporic cultural identities constantly negotiate their positioning since difference is not easily accepted or valued. Linda Garber observes that "Anzaldúa seeks not to transcend differences but to inhabit them in all their messy multiplicity."[62] Thus, "marginal" subjects can indeed transgress the limitations and borders imposed on the construction of their cultural identity through the process of multiple identifications and differentiations.

The subjugation of the "other" through the imposition of borders produces immense effects on representations of cultural identity given that "marginal" subjects are rarely portrayed as protagonists in literary discourse. However, the imposition of cultural borders cannot set subjects completely apart. As an apparatus of control, the role of borders is flawed because subjects can exert the potential for agency to transgress imposed obstacles. As representations of diasporic cultural identities question the necessity of creating borders, physical and ideological, readers are encouraged to identify with the position of the marginalized. In this way, Anzaldúa's life narrative represents a fictional autobiographical writing that points to different possibilities of representation and existence. In the first place, the narrative voice seeks the transformation of the

[62] Garber, Linda. *Identity Poetics: Race, Class, and the Lesbian-Feminist Roots of Queer Theory*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2001. p. 148.

individual; only after that, society will be changed. However, for transformation to occur one cannot stay still waiting for it to happen:

> "But it is not enough to stand on the opposite river bank, shouting questions, challenging patriarchal, white conventions. A counterstance locks one into a duel of oppressor and oppressed; locked in mortal combat, like the cop and the criminal, both are reduced to a common denominator of violence. The counterstance refutes the dominant culture's views and beliefs, and, for this, it is proudly defiant"[63]

The narrative voice visualizes a middle ground where a balance of opposites can finally be achieved. A third way is proposed representing an in-between path that disrupts dualistic thinking. The battle of "cop" versus "criminal" generates violence and prevents the possibility of a coalition among multiple located subjects. Unity and cooperation are promoted to defy dominant hegemonic beliefs. If the author had merely rewritten experience from a Chicana perspective and claimed it as the only "truth", she herself would have run the risk of occupying the place of the oppressor – the dominant hegemonic position that regards all other perspectives as inferior, defective, and worthless. The monopoly of truth and knowledge leaves no room or need for additional discussion on the topic, rather than underwriting a single truth or knowledge, the narrative voice fictionalizes experience to construct a sense of self. The narrator exposes that binary thinking is one of the main causes of oppression: "A massive uprooting of dualistic thinking in the individual and collective consciousness is the beginning of a long struggle, but one that could, in our best hopes, bring us to the end of rape, of violence, of

[63] Anzaldúa, Gloria. Op. cit. p. 100.

war."[64] In the same vein, the narrative voice claims for a convergence of marginalized voices in which material divisions and limits established among diversely situated subjects are crossed:

> "Before the Chicano and the undocumented worker and the Mexican from the other side can come together, before the Chicano can have unity with Native Americans and other groups, we need to know the history of their struggle and they need to know ours. Our mothers, our sisters and brothers, the guys who hang out on street corners, the children in the play grounds, each of us must know our Indian lineage, our afro-*mestizage*, our history of resistance."[65]

In the path towards de-colonization, the healing of personal and historical wounds is imperative. This healing will only be achieved if subjects become conscious of their own personal history of oppression as well as other "marginal" subjects' histories to build up solid cross-cultural alliances. In this sense, the narrator "reminds white people that 'race matters'"[66] claiming that dominant cultures must acknowledge their responsibility for having colonized, dominated, and exploited the "other." The oppressors have to recognize and embrace the existence of those they insistently set to the "margins" and shadows. The Chicano people represent the hegemonic, white, American culture's shadow projected as the embodiment of the American society's internal contradictions. Therefore, the hegemonic, white, American culture needs to confront, recognize, and come to terms with their shadow:

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[64] Ibid. p. 102.

[65] Ibid. p. 108.

[66] Chabram-Dernersesian, Angie. "On the Social Construction of Whiteness within Selected Chicana/o Discourses." *Displacing Whiteness: Essays in Social and Cultural Criticism*. Ruth Frankenberg (ed.) Durham: Duke University Press, 1997. p. 123.

> "To say you've split yourself from minority groups, that you disown us, that your dual consciousness splits off parts of yourself, transferring the 'negative' parts onto us. (Where there is persecution of minorities, there is shadow projection. Where there is violence and war, there is repression of shadow.) To say that you are afraid of us, that to put distance between us, you wear the mask of contempt. Admit that Mexico is your double, that she exists in the shadow of this country, that we are irrevocably tied to her. Gringo, accept the doppelganger in your psyche. By taking back your collective shadow the intra-cultural split will heal."[67]

Personal and collective experiences are interwoven to seek recognition on the part of the hegemonic, white, American culture of the atrocities committed in the name of economic progress and development. The American culture has to carry out the complex task of self-healing through the recognition of the atrocities committed to the "other". Only through the reciprocal recognition of each other's needs, the intra-cultural split will be bridged.

In *Borderlands/La Frontera*, the Chicano people's experience of exploitation, domination, and oppression is transformed into fictional autobiographical writing that retraces and interweaves personal and collective histories. The narrative voice constructs the representation of diasporic cultural identities through the image of illegal crossers. The Chicano people cultural identity is the emblem of these nomadic crossers as it is formed by an assemblage of languages, cultures, and subject positions. Therefore, the representation of this "marginal" experience, mediated by language and interpretation, consists of a critical textual intervention to overcome the subaltern position assigned to

[67] Anzaldúa, Gloria. Op. cit. p. 108.

marginalized subjects in literary discourse, since “marginal” belongings are both real and constructed, resulting in a combination of factors not based on definite empirical criteria, but in a constant process of transformation and becoming. Thus, the territory of the borderlands, as the Chicano people’s homeland, represents a locale of extreme instability and uncertainty, where hegemonic, white, American power is constantly confronted by illegal crossings performed by diasporic cultural identities.

1.3 Desiring the Mother's Homeland

What kind of lover have you made me, mother
Who drew me into bed with you at six/at sixteen
Oh, even at sixty-six you do still
Lifting up the blanket with one arm
Lining out the space for my body with the other

as if our bodies still beat
inside the same skin
as if you never noticed
when they cut me
out
from you.

Cherríe Moraga, "La Dulce Culpa"

Subjects who are constantly exposed to oppression and marginalization due to the embodied difference they represent are either absorbed by the hegemonic culture or channel their anger into autobiographical writing reconstructing their experiences through fiction and articulating textual spaces where multiple subjective identifications can take place. In *Zami: A New Spelling of my Name, a biomythography*, Audre Lorde recreates the experience of alienation and marginalization into the fictional transposition of her life journey in search for home and community through the construction of cultural identity. Considering the representation of cultural identities in literary discourse, one has to admit that only certain stories are allowed to be expressed and valorized as "authentic" literature. I believe the understanding of the representation of the "self" and the "other" could be broadened if readers do not restrict their reading interests only to the traditional

stories with which they are comfortable and familiar. Although autobiographical writing is traditionally understood as one single person writing his or her life story, Lorde's life narrative reveals the interconnectedness of her individuality to the "others". By reconstructing experience through artistic recomposition of identity, the narrator creates a fictionalized version of cultural identity to remember, reinvent, and reinterpret the past, the present, and the future so that she finally can achieve a deeper understanding of herself.

The work crosses borders in terms of form and content, creating an original literary form – the biomythography. This literary form consist in a hybrid style of writing that incorporates intertextual moments merging poems, personal stories, history, myths, dreams, songs, and memories into the fabric of the text. According to Chandra Tyler Mountain, the author's definition of her work as a biomythography "suggests that this is a fictionalized account of her life, combining both biography and myth. However, this is not myth in the sense that it is untrue but in the sense that it points to an origin and explains Lorde's *raison d'étre*."[68] If myths are stories meant to explain the world to individuals, the mythical interludes inserted in the narrative can be understood as textual inscriptions that point out the possibility of subverting conventional disseminated "myths" on subjectivity, or, as according to Butler, the "norms of cultural intelligibility"[69] that individuals are expected to comply with to be recognized as "real" subjects.

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[68] Mountain, Chandra Tyler. "Audre Geraldine Lorde." *African American Autobiographers: A Sourcebook*. Emmanuel S. Nelson (ed.) Westport: Greenwood Press, 2002. p. 239.

[69] Butler, Judith. Op. cit. p. 24.

Zami starts with a three page unlabeled section where the narrative voice reveals the personal inspirations that have contributed to the construction of a sense of self asking whom she owes the power behind her voice, the symbols of her survival, and the woman she has become. Her father had an intense and ruthless authority upon the protagonist, but his influence remains unsubstantial and far away. The fictional autobiographical subject feels constrained by the authoritarian power represented by her father's image. As his image symbolizes patriarchal authority, she tries to find nurturance and protection in women's subjectivity revealing that it is the images of women that guide her throughout the journey and contribute to the construction of her sense of self. The women in her life stand like "dykes"[70] between the protagonist and the chaos. The use of the word "dyke" is ambiguous as it points to different meanings. On the one hand, the term symbolizes the women that would stand like defensive walls protecting her from destructive forces. On the other hand, in a derogatory sense the term "dyke" is used as an insult for lesbians, especially those whose gender identity performance aligns with expectations conventionally attributed to masculinity. The use of this term to describe this particular kind of women implies that the configuration of their gender identity does not fit into what would be normally acceptable, since a woman whose gender performance is masculine is, at the same time, an outsider, and an imminent threat to compulsory heterosexual culture. The derogatory use of the term is subverted to signify empowerment to the subjects assigned to this category. The term is refashioned into an

[70] Lorde, Audre. *Zami: A New Spelling of My Name, a biomythography*. Freedom: The Crossing Press, 1982, p. 3.

approbatory form of classification to refer to strong and independent women who do not restrict themselves to traditional gender conventions and regulations.

After the initial unlabeled section, in the prologue to the work the narrator-protagonist unveils the desire to cross over sex-gender binary oppositions to construct a performance of diasporic cultural identity as both man and woman. Traditional notions of sexual identity are destabilized as the narrator goes beyond the compulsory heterosexual model of gender and sexuality reshaping the constitution of the self: "I would like to enter a woman the way any man can, and to be entered – to leave and to be left – to be hot and hard and soft all at the same time in the cause of our loving."[71] This configuration of identity represents an instance of diasporic cultural identity suggesting that there are limitations regarding the experience of being simply a man or a woman. The desire to embody simultaneously both masculine and feminine attributions is ascertained without reestablishing hierarchical categories since both aspects are expressed and valued as equally important. Furthermore, as neither sexual experience is privileged this construction of identity cannot be associated to psychoanalytic conceptions of penis envy.[72] Although neither experience is assigned to a higher status, the performance of just one sexual and gender performance seems to be lacking. The constitution of this hybrid sexual identification represents a prelude to the narration of the experience of the autobiographical subject.

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[71] Ibid. p. 7.

[72] The conception of penis envy derives from psychoanalysis. It relates to the supposed wish of a girl to possess a penis, postulated by Sigmund Freud, as the reason for psychic conflict and feelings of inferiority associated to women's subjectivity. See: Freud, Sigmund. "Some Psychical Consequences of the Anatomical Distinction between the Sexes." *SE*, 19: 248-258 (1925).

The questioning to traditional conceptions related to the constitution of sexual and gender identity is a crucial issue as the traditional triangle of the constitution of the self made up of mother, father, and child is translated into the trinity grandmother, mother, and daughter with the self moving in both directions as desired. This represents a movement from a single one-dimensional perspective to a multidimensional sacred trinity of origins represented by a matrix of black women's power. In this configuration of identity, the Oedipal complex[73] of the constitution of the subject is rejected as the most important structural narrative in the development of a sense of self. As a result, the articulation of this desire represents an intervention into the politics of representation of the sex-gender system that posits lesbian sexuality as a central constitutive element of the protagonist's diasporic cultural identity subverting traditional hierarchical paradigms of subjective formation.

Through the fictionalization of experience, the narrator-protagonist strives to find a home and community where the multiple aspects of her diasporic cultural identity would be fully recognized and embraced:

> "Once *home* was a far way off, a place I had never been to but knew well out of my mother's mouth. (…) This now, here, was a space, some temporary abode, never to be

[73] The Oedipal complex designates the attraction of the male child toward the mother accompanied by rivalry and antagonism toward the father. The resolution of the Oedipus complex for the male child is considered to take place through the identification with the father and affirmation of sexual interest toward the parent of the opposite sex. The Oedipal complex is considered the cornerstone of the development of the personality and viewed as the nucleus of human relationships. See: Freud, Sigmund. "The Interpretation of Dreams." *SE*, 4 – 5: 1-625 (1900).

> considered forever nor totally binding nor defining, no matter how much it commanded in energy and attention. For if we lived correctly and with frugality, looked both ways before crossing the street, then someday we would arrive back in the sweet place, back *home*."[74]

The narrator-protagonist refers to Carriacou, the Grenadian island where her mother, Linda, was born. At the same time, she points to a figurative metaphorical home constituted through the search of a sense of home and community. The protagonist is instilled with a sentiment of exile from home inherited from her mother's memories. The word "home" is in italics and is the only word italicized in the paragraph to emphasize its multiple meanings. According to Maggie Humm, Lorde "creates two parallel voices: a poetic voice (usually in italics) describing myths and dreams, and a prose voice for the overall narrative."[75] The mythmaking dimension of the text develops outside the chronological sequence of Lorde's life narrative. The fictional autobiographical self has never been to Carriacou; thus it becomes a dream land, an imagined space where she would feel safe, comfortable, and loved. It is the feeling of belonging to a community that the protagonist seeks in the narrative. In addition, Lara E. Dieckman observes that "Lorde constructs her multiple subject positions through the metaphor of 'homes' she variously occupies. Significantly, these homes are determined as much by others as by the character of the individual self."[76] During the protagonist's childhood, home lies in her mother's memories and is materialized in her words. Her mother's stories about home generate the yearning to discover this mythical place. In addition, the use of Grenadian

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[74] Lorde, Audre. Op. cit. p. 13.

[75] Humm, Maggie. *Feminism and Film*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1997. p. 137.

[76] Dieckman, Lara E. "Audre Lorde" *Significant Contemporary American Feminists: A Biographical Sourcebook*. Jennifer Scanlon (ed.) Westport: Greenwood Press, 1999. p. 157.

traditional food, products, and dialect reinforces the protagonist's bond with this mythical homeland. The protagonist dreams about Carriacou as a sanctuary even when she could not find the island on the map. The narrative voice expresses both aesthetic and political concerns as the fictional reconstruction of experience, in search for home and community, blurs the boundary between fact and fiction advancing the representation of a "marginal" subjectivity. The feeling of loving, comfort, and belonging, associated with the idea of home, will be achieved as the fictional autobiographical subject reaches a broader understanding of her cultural identity. In this way, the search for home and community, associated with the construction of a sense of cultural identity, represents an alternative way of conceiving the construction of the self.

Even though the protagonist's mother considered Carriacou as a place of mythic proportions, she immigrated to the United States in order to find better economic opportunities. When entering the country, her mother had to lie about her age because "americans (sic) wanted strong young women to work for them, and Linda was afraid she was too old to get work."[77] This necessity of having to lie to be accepted displays the conditions to which poor immigrants are relegated to achieve their objectives. The protagonist's parents underwent several difficulties as poor black immigrants in New York: unsafe working conditions, badly paid wages, and low status professions. At a time of absolute racism, Linda got a job only because she was believed to be Spanish due to her light complexion. However, when her husband went to her workplace Linda's passing

[77] Lorde, Audre. Op. cit. p. 9. The word "American", "American", and "United States" are not capitalized in the narrative. This textual strategy can be viewed as the narrator-protagonist's intervention to hegemonic, white, American culture as a way to express her disappointment and anger toward it.

was discovered and she was immediately dismissed. The narrator-protagonist denounces the subhuman work conditions to which Linda was subdued: she went to work before dawn, worked twelve hours a day, seven days a week, with no time off. In this situation, Linda's subject position can be compared to that of a slave as she worked under these inhospitable circumstances with no labor rights, only obligations and duties.

In addition, the difference in skin color between the protagonist and her mother made the protagonist feel perplex as her mother seemed to belong to the same group of people she was told not to trust in. According to American racial standards, people who are not "white" are classified as "colored." Linda and her children are classified as "colored." However, due to their light complexion they are not considered as an authentic "black" in the black community. This strict racial classification illustrates interstices in terms of ethnic belongings emphasizing the oppression and alienation that subjects who cannot be precisely classified according to rigid categories of identity endure due to the different possibilities of interpretation their cultural identities represent. Linda's racial alienation points out the complex relation between appearance and identity. As the materiality of identity is challenged by the perspective of the person who looks and specific historical locations of time and space, conceptions of "pure" race are questioned by the embodied experience of the subjects who transgress racial boundaries and whose ethnic belonging may be interpreted differently in relation to whom is looking and other individuals in comparison. When subjects perform the strategy of passing, factors of social stability are relevant reasons to be taken into consideration, especially the risk of being discovered and consequently stigmatized as "other." By showing the consequences

of acts that produce conflicting interpretations of ethnic belonging, the narrative voice displaces beliefs that establish the category of race as self-evident. Therefore, subjects who cannot be straight away defined and classified reveal ambiguity and ambivalence in their constructing of cultural identity.

Linda performs a decisive role upon the fictional autobiographical self's development in the middle of the twentieth century America, a time when changes were taking place in regards to African-American citizens. Although the ideology of segregation was being abandoned, it did not make the protagonist's search for home and community any easier. The protagonist wishes her mother would fit into culturally-conceived roles of motherhood and womanhood as the presence of the mother at home and blondness are an expected behavior and characteristic: "I was very proud of her, but sometimes, just sometimes, I wished she would be like all the other mothers, one waiting for me at home with milk and home-baked cookies and a frilly apron, like the blonde smiling mother in *Dick and Jane*."[78] This expectation demonstrates the introjected prejudice internalized by the fictional autobiographical self as these ideals represent social constructions imposed by the hegemonic, white, American culture. The protagonist recognizes racial difference even from fictional representations: "All our storybooks were about people who were very different from us. They were blond and white and lived in houses with trees around and had dogs named Spot."[79] As she grows up, the fictional autobiographical subject develops the awareness that racial difference is one of the causes of the oppression and marginalization she suffers. As a child, she idealized her mother as

[78] Ibid. p. 55. (Italics in original)

[79] Ibid. p. 18.

a very powerful woman, at a time when the combination of the word woman and powerful was almost inconceivable in the American culture, "except or unless it was accompanied by some aberrant explaining adjective like blind, or hunchback, or craze, or Black."[80] In relation to the belief of Linda being a powerful woman, Rosemarie Garland Thomson observes that:

> "Lorde searches here for language to express her experience of the oxymoronic 'powerful woman.' Rejecting both 'woman' and 'man,' she imagines this iconoclastic black female as occupying a 'third designation' distinct from the only two available normative options. This woman thus falls outside standard categories and necessarily into the realm of the 'aberrant,' intelligible only if inflected by 'explaining adjective[s]' invoking that which is outside what counts as normal. For Lorde, the designations 'blind,' 'hunchback,' 'crazy,' and 'Black' become the only available semantic vehicles into the ontological safe space of the extraordinary, where alternative ways of being can be articulated and validated."[81]

The protagonist sees her mother as different from the other women. This perception gives her pleasure, and, at the same time, becomes a source of sorrow. Even Linda herself was concerned in displaying the image of a powerful woman and suffered to hide her real weakness. In addition, as she was a very large woman, Linda's body contributes to make her difference visible. Therefore, the performance of Linda's cultural identity demonstrates to exceed the restrictive social space assigned to feminine subjectivity, exclusively associated to passivity and maternity.

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[80] Ibid. p. 15.

[81] Thomson, Rosemarie Garland. "The Extraordinary Subject: Audre Lorde's *Zami: A New Spelling of My Name*." *Extraordinary Bodies: Figuring Physical Disability in American Culture and Literature*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1997. p. 104.

The idealization of her mother as a powerful woman and the way her family dealt with racism puzzles the fictional autobiographical subject in regards to the formation of a sense of self. Linda tries to protect her daughter from the cruelties of racism, but as she did not know how to deal with racism, she pretended it did not exist. Linda believed that if she could not change reality, she could change how to perceive it. When people spit on her daughter on the street, she never admitted the reason why that happened, instead she "fussed about low-class people who had no better sense nor manners than to spit into the wind no matter where they went",[82] making her daughter believe that it happened simply by chance. Linda did not tell her daughter that people did that because of their race. As Linda had already experienced the cruelties of racism, she chose to pretend it did not exist as an alternative to survive in a country overwhelmed by the oppression based on the color of one's skin. She thought that silence would guarantee the protection of her children; however, it only contributed to the fictional autobiographical subject's misunderstanding of racism. There is a scene in which the protagonist and her sisters talk about someone being "colored" and none of them was sure about the meaning of the word. This moment is described as "the first and only time my sisters and I discussed race as a reality in my house, or at any rate as it applied to ourselves."[83]

Later, the protagonist asks what color her mother is and one of her sisters answers impatiently that she does not know. Thus, the protagonist replies that if anybody asks about the color of her skin, she would say she is "white" as her mother. As both of her sisters refute this retort, it produces a deep sense of alienation in the protagonist. Their

[82] Lorde, Audre. Op. cit. p. 17 – 18.

[83] Ibid. p. 59

discussion reveals the failure to relate language to ethnicity. Throughout her fictional journey, the narrator-protagonist undergoes the learning process of relating the adequate language to racial belonging. As words are not sufficient to change the perceptions of how she is seen by others, her self-created conception of subjectivity is undermined and the desire to identify with Linda and Linda's skin color is frustrated from young age. In addition, Linda tells the protagonist never to call her "mother" on the streets and the protagonist notices that her sisters walk unacknowledged and unadmitted next to her on the street. In this way, the narrative unveils racial prejudice that segregate even members of the same family. The narrative voice deconstructs traditional expectations about the family, characterizing it as the primary source of oppression and distrust for marginalized subjects, rather than the idealized image of a sanctuary of safety, comfort, and shelter traditionally disseminated by hegemonic representations. As Linda would not openly admit her racial belonging, nor would discuss the variation of skin tone in the family, this silence concerning race hinders the protagonist's full understanding of the manifold aspects that shape her diasporic cultural identity. As the protagonist had no words for racism, she could not comprehend its negative influences. By reconstructing experience in the form of autobiographical writing, the fictional autobiographical subject reveals the knowledge about race obtained throughout the journey.

The family's silence regarding racism demonstrates that the entire family refuses to discuss about this issue openly. In a time of extreme racial convulsion, the fictional autobiographical self had nobody to discuss the prejudice experienced on a daily basis, not even members of her own family. The silence regarding the oppression of African-

Americans only contributes to alienate the protagonist from establishing solid connections with the black community. As a result, the denouncement of racial prejudice among members of the same family demonstrates "the impact of silence and repression on the lives of those affected by it and bring to light the history of their suppression and exploitation."[84] The protagonist's relationship with her family illustrates how this relationship is entangled by the history of racism, discrimination, and exploitation of African-American subjects in the United States. The determination to understand the workings of racism is a critical strategy employed by the protagonist in order to confront it, contrarily to her mother that would rather pretend it did not exist.

The mother-daughter relationship has a profound impact on the fictional autobiographical subject's construction and understanding of cultural identity. The fictional reconstruction of this formative experience, revealed in the section entitled "HOW I BECAME A POET", is central to the protagonist's development, as this relationship is the primary model of relation that connects her to other women's experiences. According to Anna Wilson, "*Zami* has been assimilated into the matrilineal African-American tradition. (…) Literarily, African-American women are conceived of in this tradition as passing on their mother's words, bringing forth into speech what those before left unsaid."[85] Linda represents part of a female ancestry that descends from Carriacou, which symbolizes a place of female power, mutual support, and love. Lesbianism is a central element to the protagonist's Grenadian matrilineage and the

[84] Scott, Joan W. Op. cit. p. 25.

[85] Wilson, Anna. "The Visible Margin: Audre Lorde as I/Icon." *Persuasive Fictions: Feminist Narrative and Critical Myth*. Lewisburg: Bucknell University Press, 2001. p. 103.

reconstruction of the fictional subject's experience with her mother is foundational to shape her self-created conception of cultural identity: "My mother had a special and secret relationship with words, taken for granted as language because it was always there."[86] The reference to her mother's especial relationship with words proclaims the birth of a matriarchal literary tradition. The protagonist's relationship with her mother deeply influences the construction of a sense of self: "*I am a reflection of my mother's secret poetry as well as of her hidden angers*."[87] The literary reconstruction of female subjectivity through ancestral connections to women substitutes patriarchal power in the hereditary system, which is established on the exchange of power from fathers to sons and the trade of women as subaltern objects devised to satisfy men's pleasures and necessities. In the same way, the literary reconstruction of the protagonist's experience with Linda propels the awareness of a lesbian identity as this relationship represents the basilar model for the protagonist's connection to other women.

The first scene between mother and daughter suggesting eroticism represents Linda's attempt to assimilate her daughter into the hegemonic, white, American culture: "Sitting between my mother's spread legs, her strong knees gripping my shoulders tightly like some well-attended drum, my head in her lap, while she brushed and combed and oiled and braided."[88] The act of combing the protagonist's hair symbolizes the transference of black female knowledge and resilience from mother to daughter. The scene conveys a shared erotic connection that allows the protagonist to recognize that she

[86] Lorde, Audre. Op. cit. p. 31.

[87] Ibid. p. 32. (Italics in original)

[88] Ibid. p. 32 – 33.

is loved and cared for as the mother-daughter relationship is extremely intimate. The fictional autobiographical subject's sexuality is initially awakened through the contact with her mother and this moment of intimacy is described as an overwhelmingly enlightening experience. The fictional reconstruction of the mother-daughter relationship suggests the beginning of the development of a lesbian identification that aligns Linda's gesture with devotion: "the radio, the scratching comb, the smell of petroleum jelly, the grip of her knees and my stinging scalp all fall into – *the rhythms of a litany, the rituals of Black women combing their daughter's hair*."[89] The fictionalization of the protagonist's experience with Linda questions compulsory heterosexual regulations imposed to the formation of a sense of self.

There is another scene in which again the mother-daughter relationship conveys an intense physical and emotional intimacy. In this scene, the protagonist goes to her parent's bedroom in a morning when she knew that her mother would stay in bed until late: "I frolic with the liquid-filled water bottle, patting and rubbing its firm giving softness. I shake it slowly, rocking it back and forth, lost in sudden tenderness, at the same time gently rubbing against my mother's quiet body. Warm milky smells of morning surround us."[90] The father is absent from the scene just as he is absent from the most part of the fictional autobiographical subject's life. The protagonist's substitution of the father's figure displaces regulations concerning gender and sexuality pointing to the return to an early time of a shared connection with the mother and the continuity of this primordial relationship. The protagonist comes to fully understand the connection with

[89] Ibid. p. 33. (Italics in original)

[90] Ibid. p. 33.

her mother as she accepts her lesbian subjectivity. Linda's body is intensely desired as a way to return to the origins from where the fictional autobiographical self emerged. The reconstruction of the experience with Linda highlights the potential of black women's mother-daughter relationship as a space of articulating difference and identification since Linda reveals an ambiguous influence to her daughter, embodying, at the same time, the positive image of black women's power and the negative consequences of her silence in relation to racism. In the following passage, charged with erotic undertones, the protagonist is in the kitchen helping Linda pound spices:

> "I plunged the pestle into the bowl, feeling the blanket of salt give way, and the broken cloves of garlic just beneath. The downward thrust of the wooden pestle slowed upon contact, rotated back and forth slowly, and then gently altered its rhythm to include an up and down beat. Back and forth, round, up and down, back, forth, round, round, up and down…. There was a heavy fullness at the root of me that was exciting and dangerous."[91]

In this passage, the protagonist associates the movement of pounding spices to sexual intercourse discovering a new constitutive dimension of her diasporic cultural identity. The development of her cultural identity depends upon the interaction with the others and the environment: first her family and later the school scenario. Before going to school, Linda is the closest person in the protagonist's life. Within the family, the protagonist identifies with Linda; whereas at school, she desires to be like her classmates. This suggests a split between mind and body and when the two aspects diverge the protagonist becomes disorientated due to a fragmented sense of self. In the family and at school, she recognizes differences and similarities in relation to others. However, when

[91] Ibid. p. 78.

she goes to school the family's silence in relation to racism only makes the attempts to comprehend it more difficult: "At St. Catherine's School, the Sisters of Charity were downright hostile. Their racism was unadorned, unexcused, and particularly painful because I was unprepared for it."[92] The experiences at school represent a reflection of the macrocosmic racial bias advanced by the hegemonic, white, American society.

Lack of knowledge about racial prejudice complicates the situation at school as the protagonist is treated differently from the others students and harassed about her appearance and "odor". She reveals the methods employed to distinguish the "intelligent" from the "unintelligent" students: "The thing that I remember best about being in the first grade was how uncomfortable it was, always having to leave room for my guardian angel on those tiny seats, and moving back and forth across the room from Brownies to Fairies and back again."[93] This attitude consists in a biased color-oriented form of defining subjects according to racial characteristics since the "good" and "bad" students are defined according to skin color. As one of the first black students in a predominantly white school, the fictional autobiographical subject begins to understand the extent to which the hegemonic, white, American society can undermine a black subject's development of a sense of self.

The protagonist's greatest deception at school occurs when she loses the election for class president. She decides to run for the election even though Linda warned her not to do it. Although racial matters had never been openly discussed at school, the

[92] Ibid. p. 59.

[93] Ibid. p. 30.

protagonist thought she could be fairly treated. After this upsetting experience, she acquires even more knowledge on how racism works. This school episode is the beginning of the conflict between mother and daughter, as it proved that Linda's admonition was right, since her daughter was in fact not elected for class president. After each instance of racial bias, she acquires more and more knowledge in relation to the fact that her race is one of the targets of hegemonic, white, American culture against her subjectivity.

A difficult childhood results in even more questionings in adolescence. In high school, the protagonist gets involved in two different communities: a group of white girls called "The Branded" and Gennie a black girl who avoided this group. With her friends from The Branded, almost every topic could be discussed, even the subjugated position of women in society, but they never "talked about what it meant and felt like to be Black and white, and the effects that had on our being friends."[94] Despite the openness in terms of gender, race still remains a forbidden topic inside the group. This situation causes perplexity to the fictional autobiographical self as she realizes once again that race consists in the source of her alienation. The protagonist searches for a community with whom she could talk openly about a variety of issues, but as a member of The Branded gender is the only label that brings the group together. In this female community, she can share her feelings with other women and discover her inclination to write poetry: "Writing poetry became an ordinary effort, not a secret and rebellious vice. The other girls at Hunter who wrote poetry did not invite me to their homes, either, but they did

[94] Ibid. p. 81.

elect me literary editor of the school arts magazine."[95] Even though the protagonist is elected literary editor of the arts magazine, she is not invited to her classmates' home. Gennie is the only friend who invites the protagonist to spend some time at her house, whereas the members of The Branded never invite the protagonist to theirs, making her wonder: "What was it that kept people from inviting me to their houses, their parties, their summer homes for a weekend?"[96] For a long time, the fictional autobiographical self did not see difference as something racial; she considered it as just being herself. This fact indicates that the realization of difference, in the construction of a sense of cultural identity, is individual and goes beyond socially constructed borders as there are certain aspects of the self that can only be known in comparison to the "other".

On the one hand, The Branded is supportive to women and the protagonist feels comfort as a member of the group learning how to appreciate her peculiarities. On the other hand, Gennie performs a very significant role to the development of the fictional autobiographical subject's sense of self. Gennie is important not only because she is also black, but because she reinforces the protagonist's desire for women as she was the first person the protagonist is conscious of loving. Secretly, the protagonist visualizes Gennie as her lover. The imagined relationship with Gennie allows the protagonist to achieve a new dimension of herself. However, their relationship is very brief due to Gennie's suicide. This is an extremely difficult moment in the fictional autobiographical subject's life: "Gennie was buried in Woodlawn Cemetery on the first day of April. The *Amsterdam News* story about her death announced that she was not pregnant and so no

[95] Ibid. p. 82.

[96] Ibid. p. 81.

reason for her suicide could be established. Nothing else."[97] Gennie's story represents the predicament of helpless, young, black women in the face of hegemonic, white, patriarchal, American culture. Through their unconsummated love, they rebel against regulations enforced by the compulsory heterosexual culture such as the enforcement of parental control and submission. This relationship allows the protagonist to experience hope and the potential for the construction of a community. Memories of Gennie will remain throughout the protagonist's entire life as a source of creative impulse. In this way, the relationships with Linda and Gennie are extremely important to the protagonist's development of a sense of self as they represent the foundation of her subsequent emotional connections. As the configuration of her diasporic cultural identity was not accepted by her family, the protagonist leaves her parents' home to embark upon the journey toward the discovery of home and community.

[97] Ibid. p. 103.

Chapter II

Crossings

2.1 Locating "Marginal" Perspectives

> Vision is always a question of the power to see – and perhaps of the violence implicit in our visualizing practices. With whose blood were my eyes crafted? These points also apply to the testimony from the position of "oneself". We are not immediately present to ourselves. Self-knowledge requires a semiotic-material technology linking meanings and bodies.
>
> *Donna Haraway, "Situated Knowledges: The Science Question in Feminism and the Privilege of Partial Perspective."*

Donna Haraway's situated knowledges theory consists in an exponent of feminist standpoint theory.[98] As a theoretical tool, it can be used in a variety of ways. In my analysis, I employ it to investigate the politics of representation of cultural identities to observe how diasporic cultural identities produce knowledges derived from particular situated locations through the fictionalization of the journey toward the construction of identity. As a critical theory, it aims to provide resources to empower marginalized subjects so that they can understand and overcome their subordinated predicament. This theory investigates the production of knowledge according to the perspectives of "marginal" subjects in the attempt to authorize voices that have been silenced and omitted. As the knowledge of marginalized subjects emerges from the process of analyzing their predicament of oppression, it cannot be viewed as a given or an

[98] For more feminist standpoint theorists, see: Hartsock, Nancy. *Whose Science? Whose Knowledge? Thinking from Women's Lives*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1991. Hartsock, Nancy. *The Feminist Standpoint Revisited and Other Essays*. Boulder: Westview Press, 1998. Harding, Sandra. "Feminism, Science, and the Anti-Enlightenment Critiques." *Feminism/Postmodernism*. Linda Nicholson (ed.) New York: Routledge, 1990. Collins, Patricia Hill. *Black Feminist Thought*. New York: Routledge, 1991.

inheritance. This knowledge is in fact an achievement, a project that has to be negotiated in order to be accomplished. In this way, Haraway's theory engages with Scott's reconceptualization of experience, since situated knowledges do not derive directly from empirical experience unmediated by language and interpretation. In fact, situated knowledges are the result of an intense reflection upon the interpretation of experience. Therefore, both Scott and Haraway criticize the preponderance of disembodied vision in representations of experience and consequently in the production of knowledge.

In relation to disembodied vision, Haraway states that "Insisting metaphorically on the particularity and embodiment of all vision (though not necessarily organic embodiment and including technological mediation), and not giving in to the tempting myths of vision as a route to disembodiment and second-birthing, allows us to construct a usable, but not an innocent, doctrine of objectivity."[99] This "doctrine of objectivity" constitutes an interpretative theoretical framework that attempts to uncover ideological mechanisms embedded in the production of knowledge materialized in the representation of cultural identities in literary discourse. In this way, the theory of situated knowledges as a "doctrine of objectivity" becomes an important critical instrument to understand and question asymmetrical power relations in fictional autobiographical writings that represent the "other". According to Nancy Hartsock, situated knowledges represent "the knowledges of specific cultures and peoples. As an aspect of being situated, these knowledges represent a response to an expression of specific embodiment. The bodies of

[99] Haraway, Donna. "Situated Knowledges: The Science Question in Feminism and the Privilege of Partial Perspective." *Simians, Cyborgs, and Women*. New York: Routedge, 1991. p. 189.

the dominated have been made to function as the marks of our oppression."[100] Haraway's theory reveals the specific epistemology of marginalized subjects inside a social arrangement that excludes them due to the embodiment of difference.

However, given that marginalized subjects perform multiple perspectives not just a single one, how is it possible to embrace multiplicity employing situated knowledges theory to analyze representations of cultural identities? I believe it is indeed possible as situated knowledges theory exposes the cultural, political, historical, and local factors that influence the construction of one's sense of identity and the production of knowledge. In addition, according to Haraway, "'Subjugated' standpoints are preferred because they seem to promise more adequate, sustained, objective, transforming accounts of the world."[101] The cultural identity of marginalized subjects does not constitute a homogenous unitary whole. In fact, the category of the "other" makes up heterogeneous communities, which include women, people of color, queers, lower class citizens, colonized peoples, and all those configurations of identity excluded from the "center", but, at the same time, the condition of its existence. It is thus necessary to deconstruct the notion of a "universal" subject into its multiplicity and variety as this deconstruction allows the articulation of an account of subjectivity and the world seen from the "margins". This proposition is extremely relevant since it represents a perspective that emphasizes the marginalized subjects' capacity of resistance and subversion, and also

[100] Hartsock, Nancy. *The Feminist Standpoint Revisited and Other Essays*. Boulder: Westview Press, 1998. p. 244.

[101] Haraway, Donna. Op. cit. p. 191.

provides the possibility of understanding representations of subjectivities taking into account difference as a way to intervene into the network of power relations.

Situated knowledge is partial because it is materialized in space and time since it does not claim its production from an alleged disembodied position; rather, it reveals particular aspects of the construction of identity from a specific located position. In relation to beliefs in disembodied perspectives, Hartsock writes that "First, the 'god-trick' was pervasive: The tradition depended on the assumption that one can see everything from nowhere, that disembodied reason can produce accurate and 'objective' accounts of the world."[102] Contrary to this perspective, situated knowledges are expressions of specific located embodiments; they are partial and local since they do not stand for the so-called "universal" disembodied subject and knowledge. In fact, any knowledge is affected by cultural, political, and social positionings. Sally E. Talbot argues that "For Haraway, critical positioning requires a commitment to both 'mobile positioning' and 'passionate detachment'. These are important terms in her analysis, capturing as they do the paradoxical nature of acts of situated or critically positioned knowledge."[103] Haraway's theory provides the possibility of visualizing alternative accounts of representations of cultural identities, rather than those disseminated by dominant hegemonic culture. Her theory strives "for politics and epistemologies of location, positioning, and situating, where partiality and not universality is the condition of being

[102] Hartsock, Nancy. *The Feminist Standpoint Revisited and Other Essays*. Boulder: Westview Press, 1998. p. 206

[103] Talbot, Sally E. *Partial Reason: Critical and Constructive Transformations of Ethics and Epistemology*. Westport: Greenwood Press, 2000. p. 170.

heard to make rational knowledge claims."[104] It recognizes its own derivation from a particularly posited perspective and context as material and social locations both structures and sets limits to the conditions of the production of knowledge.

Given that "power is not equitably distributed across humanity but depends on our differential access to various prostheses or optical technologies",[105] Haraway's theory emphasizes the interrelation of power and knowledge: "All knowledge is a condensed node in an agonistic power field."[106] Likewise, she argues that "local knowledges have also to be in tension with the productive structurings that force unequal translations and exchanges – material and semiotic – within the webs of knowledge and power."[107] Thus, the production of knowledge, though the representation of diasporic cultural identities, consists in an inevitably political event. As a result, there are two important tasks to be performed: one is to develop a critique of oppression from particularly situated points of view; and the other, equally important, is to expose the mechanisms of the politics of representation of cultural identities capable of excluding certain configurations of identity from literary discourse, and, consequently, existence. Hartsock underlines the relevance of "the construction of the subjectivities of the Others, subjectivities which will be both multiple and specific."[108] In this sense, the analysis of the construction of the subjectivity of the "other" is extremely relevant for those who fall under this label and are thus

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[104] Haraway, Donna. Op. cit. p. 195.

[105] Kruks, Sonia. *Retrieving Experience: Subjectivity and Recognition in Feminist Politics*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2001. p. 114.

[106] Haraway, Donna. Op. cit. p. 185.

[107] Ibid. p. 194.

[108] Hartsock, Nancy. "Foucault on Power: A Theory for Women?" *Feminism/Postmodernism*. Linda Nicholson (ed.) New York: Routledge, 1990. p. 163.

disregarded as worthless, inferior, and defective. As Haraway's theory has the potential to resist hegemonic discourses in the construction of cultural identity, I believe it can provide possibilities for voices, at the same time, multiple and specific to visualize alternative conceptions of the construction of the self. In this sense, situated knowledges function as a form of counter-discourse. In fact, they consist of counter-discourses that seek to subvert regulatory prescriptions on the construction of identity. Daniel W. Conway argues that:

> "Haraway believes that some subjugated standpoints may be more immediately revealing, especially since they have been discounted and excluded for so long. They may prove especially useful in coming to understand the political and psychological mechanisms whereby patriarchy discounts the radically situated knowledges of others while claiming for its own (situated) knowledge an epistemic privilege that divorces objectivity from partiality."[109]

Situated knowledges establish a different relationship to power than the one established by hegemonic knowledge. Since the positioning of the subject is continuously shifting, all knowledges, even the one derived from the hegemonic culture, are necessarily situated. Haraway's hypothesis that the location/perspective of the marginalized is privileged, since due to its multiplicity this location/perspective is more aptly equipped to disclose ideological mechanisms embedded in social and cultural scenarios, contributes to my investigation of representations of diasporic cultural identities by exposing the ambivalent constitution of marginalized subjects' identity and the way these subjects are asymmetrically placed in the network of power-knowledge

[109] Conway, Daniel W. "Das Weib an Sich. The Slave Revolt in Epistemology." *Nietzsche, Feminism, and Political Theory*. Paul Patton (ed.) New York: Routledge, 1993. 116.

relations. However, Haraway observes that "To see from below is neither easily learned nor unproblematic, even if 'we' 'naturally' inhabit the great underground terrain of subjugated knowledges."[110] In this vein, Conway argues that "Haraway makes no pretence of aspiring to epistemic purity or foundational innocence. For Haraway, any epistemic privilege necessarily implies a political (i.e. situated) preference. Her postmodern orientation elides the boundaries traditionally drawn between politics and epistemology."[111] Haraway's theory consists of a form of epistemology that recognizes its partiality, locality, and specificity. In relation to the recognition of difference in the production of knowledge, Lynn A. Staeheli and Eleonore Kofman argue that:

> "The recognition of difference, of the expanded geographies of the political, and of the role of masculinity and femininity has important implications for the ways in which feminists understand knowledge and knowledge claims. If social agents are differently situated with respect to power and to structures of power, then these positionings will lead to different experiences and understandings of the world. These understandings – this knowledge – is inevitably partial, as our ability to 'see' or to gain perspective is conditioned by how we are positioned."[112]

Supported by Haraway's theory, I believe it is possible to develop a systematic account of representations of diasporic cultural identities from the specific location and perspective of marginalized subjects that will not result in another totalizing and universal paradigm. My situated perspective is "bound to seek perspective from those

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[110] Haraway, Donna. Op. cit. p. 191.

[111] Conway, Daniel W. Op. cit. p. 116.

[112] Staeheli, Lynn A. Kofman, Eleonore. "Mapping Gender, Making Politics: Toward Feminist Political Geographies." *Mapping Women, Mapping Politics: Feminism and Political Geography*. New York: Routledge, 2004. p. 11.

points of view, which can never be known in advance, which promise something quite extraordinary, that is, knowledge potent for constructing worlds less organized by axes of domination."[113] Therefore, the production of transformative knowledge is in fact possible, knowledge effectively capable of producing resistance, subversion, and displacement to totalizing regulatory discourses imposed on the construction of identity.

Haraway's theory proposes "a doctrine and practice of objectivity that privileges contestation, deconstruction, passionate construction, webbed connections, and hope for transformation of systems of knowledge and ways of seeing."[114] In this way, this theory cannot be misunderstood as a subterfuge to relativism, since it is indeed "hostile to various forms of relativism as to the most explicitly totalizing versions of claims to scientific authority."[115] As a matter of fact, it represents a way to avoid relativism, constituting a method that consists of "partial, locatable, critical knowledges sustaining the possibility of webs of connections called solidarity in politics and shared conversations in epistemology."[116] This theory emphasizes the fact that there is not a "universal" knowledge or one single "truth", but there are multiple knowledges and truths irrevocably filtered by language, interpretation, and ideology. For Haraway, "the distinction between asserting an identity and assuming a critical positioning involves an awareness of the mediated nature of all experience and of the ways that power differentials permeate those mediations."[117] Thus, Haraway's theory points to the

[113] Haraway, Donna. Op. cit. p. 192.

[114] Ibid. p. 191 – 192.

[115] Ibid. p. 191.

[116] Ibid. p. 191.

[117] Kruks, Sonia. Op. cit. p. 114.

inherent partiality of *all* experience. Due to its situated condition, experience can only be understood from a concrete material *locus*, marked by a particular place and time, and thus partial to those circumstances. However, partiality does not result in deficit. The partial nature of situated knowledges allows the possibility to take into consideration different ways of knowing and representing the self.

The awareness of the inevitable partiality of knowledge alerts us to the impossibility of having a view from "everywhere", but, more importantly, it emphasizes the advantages of having the view from "somewhere." My critical perspective, drawing from an interdisciplinary approach, tries to question the belief in a neutral standpoint, what Linda Nicholson defines as the "God's eye view."[118] This belief in a disembodied vision from above is what Haraway criticizes in the production of knowledge. I believe that situated knowledges theory can be productive if applied to literary criticism and interpretation because the analysis of representations of diasporic cultural identities constitutes a critical instance that can reveal the mechanisms of asymmetrical power relations and cultural exchanges. Knowledge does not simply derive from subjective experience, it is the result of social and cultural entanglement anchored on material bodies. Thus, the belief in the existence of disembodied knowledge has consequences that maintain the privileged position of the ones to whom power is more readily available at a

[118] To define this position, Linda Nicholson argues that: "The scholarship of modern Western culture has been marked by the attempt to reveal general, all-encompassing principles which can lay bare the basic features of natural and social reality. This attempt can be related to an earlier, more religiously based belief that the purpose of scholarship was to make evident the word of God as revealed in his creations. One crucial consequence of this legacy was a vision of true scholarship as that which replicated 'a God's eye view' as opposed to that which expressed the perspectives of persons or groups." Nicholson, Linda. "Introduction." *Feminism/Postmodernism*. New York: Routledge, 1990. p. 2.

certain time. The so-called "universal" knowledge does not admit its privileged position in the network of power-knowledge relations. Contrarily to that, besides recognizing its situated position, situated knowledges theory supports the notion that partial knowledges provide cognitive edge as they emphasize the shifting positions subjects occupy according to the changing forces of the social setting. When the subject of knowledge realizes that his/her existence in one side of the subject/object binary is temporary, the position of the subject and object of knowledge becomes interchangeable.

Therefore, the dialectics that exists between the subject and the object of knowledge remains constantly open to change by means that the subject can become object and the object, subject. As marginalized subjects speak from multiple standpoints providing multiple knowledges and forms of resistance, Haraway's theory as a form of counter-discourse tries to expose the ideological investment of notions such as the "universal" disembodied subject and knowledge. In addition, it exposes how the production of knowledge is particular and socially shaped embodying simultaneously specific and multiple perspectives. This theory demands the recognition that knowledge must be viewed as produced by discursive power structures and also by the materiality of the body. In this sense, Hartsock observes that "As the knowledges that recognize themselves as the knowledges of the dominated and marginalized, these self-consciously situated knowledges must focus on changing contemporary power relationships and thus point beyond the present."[119] Hence, instead of assuming an objective "truth" in the analysis of the politics of representation of cultural identity, situated knowledges are the

[119] Hartsock, Nancy. *The Feminist Standpoint Revisited and Other Essays*. Boulder: Westview Press, 1998. p. 245.

result of an embodied subjectivity that accounts for its location and the knowledge derived from it. It is thus necessary to problematize the production of knowledge through the analysis of representations of diasporic cultural identities in order to visualize the possibility of articulating alternative ways of existence and representing the self that will not be considered as a definitive given; on the contrary, as expressions of situated knowledges, they are necessarily local, specific, and particular forms of critical intervention to cultural systems of oppression and exclusion.

2.2 Mythical Female Deities and Spiritual Path

A chicken is being sacrificed
at a crossroads, a simple mound of earth
a mud shrine for *Eshu*,
Yoruba god of indeterminacy,
Who blesses her choice of path.
She begins her journey.

Gloria Anzaldúa, Borderlands/La Frontera

Exploring the spiritual dimension of marginalized subjects' identity, *Borderlands/La Frontera* crosses the border between the material and the sacred. The narrative voice performs this crossing by reconstructing the status of mythical female deities from the borderlands and also unveiling the extrasensory knowledge developed by marginalized subjects as a form of situated knowledge intending to advance a project of resistance. The representation of the construction of situated knowledge goes beyond white, Western, Eurocentric thought to set up new frontiers. Through the project of reconstructing mythical female deities from the borderlands, the narrative voice reveals asymmetry in terms of sex and gender relations in the Chicano community, subverting traditional stereotypes associated with Chicanas' cultural identity. In such a way, access to discourse is fundamental to promote this subversion of stereotypes imposed on Chicanas. Haraway argues that "There is a premium on establishing the capacity to see from the peripheries and the depths. But here lies a serious danger of romanticizing and/or appropriating the vision of the less powerful while claiming to see from their

positions."[120] The narrator speaks from a "marginal" positioning as a queer feminist Chicana, but does not romanticize this positioning. In fact, this perspective represents a situated location aspiring to produce transformative and inclusive knowledge that crosses disciplinary boundaries to interrogate discursive fields of knowledge, going beyond the limits of the sanctioned debates professed by the Academy. The narrative voice delineates an alternative pantheon of mythical female deities to intervene into the Chicano tradition of disregarding women, feminists, queers, and anyone who is not considered of "pure" Chicano descent. Thus, the narrative resists conventional notions of purity and stability in the construction of identity. Linda Garber observes that the author "'kneads' her personal experiences, reclaimed cultural symbols, history of oppression, and political resistance into a text at once analytic and mystical, literary and visionary."[121] The text itself with its intersection of historical, social, political, cultural, spiritual, and poetic discourses can be considered to embody a multiple existence intending to emphasize continuous transformations in the construction of cultural identities. Stereotypes, oppression, and dichotomies are questioned through the elevation of the status of mythical female deities from the borderlands to preeminent positions. The ancient Indian deity *Coatlicue* is one of the mythical figures evoked by the narrator:

> "*Coatlicue da luz a todo y a todo devora. Ella es el monstruo que se tragó todos los seres vivientes y los astros, es el monstruo que se traga al sol cada tarde y le da luz cada mañana. Coatlicue* is a rupture in our everyday world. As the Earth, she opens and

[120] Haraway, Donna. "Situated Knowledges: The Science Question in Feminism and the Privilege of Partial Perspective." *Simians, Cyborgs, and Women*. New York: Routedge, 1991. p. 191.

[121] Garber, Linda. *Identity Poetics: Race, Class, and the Lesbian-Feminist Roots of Queer Theory*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2001. p. 148.

> swallows us, plunging us into the underworld where the soul resides, allowing us to dwell in darkness."[122]

This mythical female deity has the power to give life and take it back as she possesses both light and dark aspects. She is the goddess that allows human beings to perform the passage toward the domains of the spiritual – "the underworld where the soul resides". *Coatlicue* symbolizes the contradictory as she represents a third perspective in which "all the symbols important to the religion and philosophy of the Aztecs are integrated. Like Medusa, the Gorgon, she is a symbol of the fusion of opposites: the eagle and the serpent, heaven and the underworld, life and death, mobility and immobility, beauty and horror."[123] This deity represents an extreme instance of diasporic cultural identity due to the incorporation of aspects believed to be opposite such as creation and destruction, life and death.

In addition, the narrative voice describes the *Coatlicue* state as an inner journey though which spiritual and subjective awareness is developed. The *Coatlicue* state encourages the subject to explore the depths of one's consciousness to deal with the negative forces that influence the formation of a sense of self. The achievement of this state entails an expansion of consciousness as this journey leads to a dimension that transcends Western, rational, scientific knowledge. This journey is not easy to be taken since not knowing would be less painful. Once this path is trodden, it represents a point of no return. It generates suffering and anguish to the extent that subjects must face

[122] Anzaldúa, Gloria. Op. cit. p. 68.

[123] Ibid. p. 69.

imposed inner demons and fears all alone. These inner demons and fears are the result of the negative stereotypes imposed on marginalized subjects' identities that have to be confronted in order to be surpassed. However, to reach the *Coatlicue* state there has to be an understanding of the mechanisms of power relations in regards to the construction of identity to recognize the in-between spaces that allow the necessary awareness to question oppression and marginalization.

In the path toward self-understanding and acceptance, marginalized subjects must pass through the *Coatlicue* state. However, this passage can be dangerous if there is a lack of self-control and psychological stability in the individual, since in this passage one is confronted with the shame and despair generated from being cast out to the "margins" and labeled as inferior, inhuman, defective, and irrational. One can get lost in the *Coatlicue* state accepting the mantle of the subaltern as an inherent aspect of subjectivity for the eternity. As a process of life, death, and reconstruction, the passage through this state involves the recognition of stereotypes attached to marginalized subjects in order to understand, question, and therefore deconstruct them. However, once the *Coatlicue* state is reached one is able to realize that inner demons and fears are not completely negative; instead, these negative feelings can be used as a source of knowledge and empowerment for marginalized subjects to overcome their predicament. When the narrator falls into infernal regions in the *Coatlicue* state, confronting dread, demons, and the unknown to achieve a higher level of consciousness, she is protected by a pantheon of mythical female deities that guide her in the journey toward the achievement of self-knowledge and understanding. Old representations of the self are abandoned along the way as

serpents abandon their old skin. When subjects pass through *Coatlicue* state, reality is unveiled so that the self can reach to a higher spiritual ground that transcends Western, binary, "universal" thinking. However, it is necessary to reinstate that the crossing through the *Coatlicue* state is not an easy process, since it can be a source of revelation of profound traumas and despair, if one does not know how to handle the imposed stereotypes and feelings of inferiority enforced on "marginal" subjects.

Subverting established patriarchal dichotomies and conventions, the narrator announces that "*La gente Chicana tiene tres madres*. All three are mediators."[124] The Chicano people have three spiritual mothers: *la Virgen de Guadalupe*, *la Maliche*, and *la Llorona*. The reconstruction of the status of these spiritual mothers constitutes an intervention to the Chicano tradition of subduing women to subordinate positions. In addition, the reconstruction of these mythical figures as symbols of complex feminine ambivalence projects these figures as symbolic icons to the process of reconstructing Chicanas' cultural identity. The narrative voice delineates how the image of these mythical female deities has been distorted by institutionalized religion:

> "Ambiguity surrounds the symbols of these three 'Our Mothers.' *Guadalupe* has been used by the Church to mete out institutionalized oppression: to placate the Indians and *mexicanos* and Chicanos. In part, the true identity of all three has been subverted – *Guadalupe* to makes us docile and enduring, *la Chingada* to make us ashamed of our Indian side, and *la Llorona* to make us long suffering people. This obscuring has encouraged the *virgin/puta* (whore) dichotomy."[125]

[124] Ibid. p. 52.

[125] Ibid. p. 53.

The virgin/whore dichotomy imposed on these mythical female deities and consequently on Chicanas' identities is questioned and deconstructed by the narrator. The process of deconstructing and reconstructing the mythology from the borderlands produces new interpretations to the traditional image of the docile and tolerant *Virgen de Guadalupe*, the dishonored and mischievous *Malinche*, and the suffering and tormented *Llorona*.

The Virgin of *Guadalupe*'s image as a nurturing mother contrasts with the role that *la Malinche*, also known as *la Chingada*,[126] is thought to have played in the history of the Spanish conquest. *La Malinche* is seen as an evil woman who linguistically and sexually betrayed her people serving as a translator and giving birth to Cortés' children. The Aztecs considered *la Malinche* as a traitor and whore because they believed she betrayed her Indian ancestry being the cause of its downfall to the Spanish empire. However, the narrative voice reveals that in fact it was patriarchal authority the real cause of the defeat of the Aztec empire. Therefore, *la Malinche* represents just one more victim of the binary system of representation that assigns her to the undervalued side of the binary as the configuration of her identity falls into the category of the "other". In addition, the narrator reveals the ideological mechanisms of the Chicano culture extremely domineering over women: "The culture expects women to show greater

[126] According to Linda Garber, "*La Chingada* (a derogatory name for Malinche/Malintzín) is a common Mexican curse word; she is the legendary traitor who supposedly sold out the Mexican people to the Spaniards by sleeping with Cortés and literally giving birth to the mestizo 'race'". However, Garber claims that "Not women nor queers sell out *la Raza*, but through the image of *la Chingada* (the Fucked One, the traitor, the bad mother), her people harm her". *Identity Poetics: Race, Class, and the Lesbian-Feminist Roots of Queer Theory*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2001. p. 158.

acceptance of, and commitment to, the value system than men. The culture and the Church insist that women are subservient to males."[127] In the Chicano community, women are viewed as objects without names or individualities prevented from pursuing personal aspirations to subdue to the prevailing male authority buttressed by the Chicano tradition.

The Chicano culture traditionally associates the image of *la Llorona* to that of a destroyer and murderer to perpetuate Chicanas' subordinate status inside the Chicano community and to justify Chicana's plight as an irrevocable mantle. According to the legend, *la Llorona* is the specter of a mother condemned to search for the souls of her children that she drowned to take revenge of their father who left her to marry another woman. *La Llorona* searches bodies of water for her children's lost souls weeping and crying. According to the narrator, *la Llorona*'s crying, which is "grounded in the Indian woman's history of resistance",[128] represents Chicana's way to displace and resist cultural oppression as well as a means of protest and rebellion against the imposition of inferiority and subservience over Chicanas by their own community.

In relation to *la Virgen de Guadalupe*, the narrator claims that her image was distorted and colonized not only by the Spanish invaders, but also by the Aztec empire, since "*La Virgen de Guadalupe*'s Indian name is *Coatlalopeuh.*"[129] According to the narrator, *la virgen* descends from the Mesoamerican fertility deities and the serpent

[127] Anzaldúa, Gloria. Op. cit. p. 39.

[128] Ibid. p. 43.

[129] Ibid. p. 43.

goddess – *Coatlicue* and Tonantsi. These deities were considered manifestations of the mother Earth embodying war and birth, heavenly and diabolic principles, and also male and female aspects. They possessed both light and dark facets; the dark side of these ancient Indian deities represents a manifestation of the Shadow-Beast aspect, the felling in the narrator that "refuses to take orders from outside authorities".[130] This aspect symbolizes the incarnation of a forbidden knowledge and powerful disruptive force. The presence of the Shadow-Beast aspect in these female mythical figures is the reason why they were disempowered, assigned to inferior roles, characterized as monsters, and substituted for male deities resulting in the fragmentation, subordination, and marginalization of Chicanas' identity. In the process of colonization, the Chicano people identified the ancient Indian goddess *Coatlalopeuh* with *la Virgen de Guadalupe*. *La Virgen de Guadalupe* is a central figure in the narrative representing a symbol of union: "Today, the *Virgen de Guadalupe* is the single most potent religious, political and cultural image of the Chicano/mexicano. She, like my race, is a synthesis of the old world and the new, of the religion and culture of the two races in our psyche, the conquerors and conquered."[131] *La Virgen de Guadalupe* is believed to be the mediator between the human and the sacred domains representing a symbol of comfort and tolerance of a mother that, differently from *la Llorona*, has not abandoned her children – the Chicano and Mexican people. The Virgin of *Guadalupe* is "a symbol of hope and faith, she sustains and insures our survival. The Indian, despite extreme despair, suffering and near genocide, has survived."[132] With *la Virgen* as an emblem of mediation among multiple

[130] Ibid. p. 38.

[131] Ibid. p. 52.

[132] Ibid. p. 52.

cultures, the narrative voice promotes the status of the feminine to a higher level in the patriarchal Chicano culture.

The elevation of the status of these mythical female figures from the borderlands constitutes an important step in the narrator's spiritual path toward the construction of cultural identity. This mythological pantheon consists of the narrator's project of resistance to the overpowering patriarchal Chicano culture. Thus, this project represents an important critical intervention to the politics of representation of cultural identity as a form of situated knowledge intended to question established paradigms.

In addition to the reconstruction of the mythology from the borderlands, the narrative voice also addresses the symbol of the serpent revealing that it entails, contrarily to what common sense avows, both masculine aspects related to war and feminine ones, associated to the Earth goddess. According to the narrator, the Earth itself is a coiled serpent and she endows the symbol of the serpent to herself since when she was bitten by a snake she developed her *tonos*, that is, her animal soul. However, the symbol of the serpent as associated to the feminine has been erased by patriarchal cultures. This symbol is also related to the forbidden knowledge associated to the Shadow-Beast aspect embodying the expression of a female sexuality that has been denied, silenced, and stereotyped throughout the ages. Therefore, the narrator unveils the constitution of symbols to articulate new systems of meanings and values in the attempt to subvert and resist disseminated stereotypes.

By reconstructing symbols and projecting an alternative mythical pantheon, the narrator is finally enable to transform her position from the sacrificial offering into "the officiating priestess at the crossroads."[133] This subversion of roles results in major disruptions in the politics of representation of cultural identities as an effective strategy of cultural and political intervention. The narrator's project of reconstructing symbols and the images of mythical female deities from the borderlands represents a possibility of survival. In this process, she is guided by the pantheon of mythical female deities and also by her inner spiritual knowledge – *la facultad* – defined as:

> "The capacity to see in surface phenomena the meaning of deeper realities, to see the deep structure below the surface. It is an instant 'sensing,' a quick perception arrived at without conscious reasoning. It is an acute awareness mediated by the part of the psyche that does not speak, that communicates in images and symbols which are the faces of feelings, that is, behind which feeling reside/hide."[134]

Subjects whose constitution of cultural identity is hybrid are vulnerable to several forms of prejudice, hate, and violence. These subjects are more likely to develop *la facultad* due to an intimacy with the proximity of danger and an extremely developed instinct of survival against the adversities imposed by the hegemonic culture. This capacity represents the achievement of a higher level of consciousness and a source of situated knowledge. In this way, as a supernatural perception, *la facultad* displaces hegemonic religions and beliefs that proclaim "universal", absolute, and unquestionable truths. The development of this capacity involves a loss of innocence and an awareness of feelings of discrimination, fear, depression, and death. *La facultad* is the result from an

[133] Ibid. p. 102.

[134] Ibid. p. 70.

interface between the supposedly impermeable material and spiritual realms representing a source of empowerment for "marginal" subjects. Central to this empowerment is the achievement of self-knowledge and understanding. *La facultad* as process of knowing is associated with the knowledge acquired through the path marginalized subjects have to pass toward self-discovery and acceptance. This process of knowing represents one means of survival of marginalized subjects. The journey toward self-knowledge, understanding, and acceptance, no matter how excruciating it may be, represents an essential process to the consolidation of a diasporic cultural identity, particularly when "marginal" subjects are charged with the necessity to make "sense" of exclusion, oppression, and degrading stereotypes imposed on their sense of self. As "marginal" subjects are constantly victims of exploitation and domination, the construction of multiple ever changing notions of cultural identity consists of an effective critical intervention into the process of overcoming stereotypes. In the same way, as representations of "marginal" subjects' cultural identity are grounded on individuals' multiple subjectivities, these representations should not be considered as new paradigms to be followed. In fact, the representation of diasporic cultural identity exist in a state of constant transformation, a dimension that cannot be neatly classified, nor claim universal transhistorical validity.

Furthermore, fictionally reconstructing memories from her childhood the narrator reveals the prejudice directed toward a neighbor, who was labeled and excluded from the Chicano community due to her embodiment of a diasporic cultural identity:

> "They called her half and half, *mita' y mita'*, neither one nor the other but a strange doubling, a deviation of nature that horrified, a work of nature inverted. But there is a magic aspect in abnormality and so-called deformity. Maimed, mad, and sexually different people were believed to possess supernatural powers by primal cultures' magico-religious thinking. For them, abnormality was the price a person had to pay for her or his inborn extraordinary gift."[135]

The representation of diasporic cultural identity as *mita' y mita'* goes beyond binary frames of reference in terms of gender and sexual identity developing the performance of a plural hybrid subjectivity that permeates the borders erected between categories of identity. This conception of sexuality is formed according to the "neither/nor" perspective and thus represents a threat to the regulations enforced on the formation of cultural identities. The affirmation of this cultural heritage constitutes a major impact on the mechanisms that regulate the politics of representation of cultural identity. The narrative voice refers to ancient cultures' beliefs that posit queer subjectivity as a significant path since "deviance" was viewed as a spiritual gift. The path of being queer constitutes a form of situated knowledge and relates to the awareness of queers' history of oppression, alienation, and marginalization: "It's an interesting path, one that continually slips in and out of the white, the Catholic, the Mexican, the indigenous, the instincts. In and out of my head. It makes for *loqueria*, the crazies. It is a path of knowledge – one of knowing (and of learning) the history of oppression of our *raza*."[136] The narrator denounces that queer subjects have been excluded and condemned as deviants, yet at the same time they are feared due to the "embodiment of the *hieros*

[135] Ibid. p. 41.

[136] Ibid. p. 41.

gamos: the coming together of opposite qualities within."[137] The capacity that queer identified subjects have to embody multiplicity and difference is feared by the hegemonic, compulsory, heterosexual culture. This fear produces the desire to annihilate these subjects in the same way the mythical deity *Coatlicue* was obliterated and disempowered when she was severed from the dark aspect of the Shadow-Beast. Therefore, a hybrid sexuality epitomizes the narrator's "deviance" from canonical compulsory ideals of subjectivity representing a bridge that interconnects her with subjects of different cultural backgrounds all over the globe: "Being the supreme crossers of cultures, homosexuals have strong bonds with the queer white, Black, Asian, Native American, Latino, and with the queer in Italy, Australia and the rest of the planet. We come from all colors, all classes, all races, all time periods. Our role is to link people with each other."[138] The representation of this diasporic cultural identity not only displaces hegemonic discourses on the construction of cultural identity, but also exposes the ambivalence and multiplicity of queer subjectivity. As there is a great emphasis on the need to separate and control the knowledge derived from the "margins", the fear of recognizing that there is more than one way of knowing and existing is one of the causes of the oppression of queer identified subjects. Although queer subjectivity is feared and excluded, it is necessary to the definition of the "norm" as the sanctioned experience to be complied with. In this sense, the narrator declared that "The queer are the mirror reflecting the heterosexual tribe's fear: being different, being other and therefore lesser,

[137] Ibid. p. 41.

[138] Ibid. p. 106.

therefore sub-human, in-human, non-human."[139] This rejection illustrates that the fear of the "other" is based on the possibility that the norm can definitely be overthrown.

Besides denouncing the way the Chicano culture diminishes queer subjects, the narrator also exposes how the Chicano culture thwarts women. Surpassing conventional dichotomies of binary thinking, she exposes oppression and marginalization within her own community, trying not to reinstate dichotomies in order to disclose the "cultural tyranny" of Chicano culture over women. If the Chicanos are marginalized by the hegemonic, white, American culture, women are the marginalized subjects within Chicano culture, as they are relegated to silence and subservience: "If a woman rebels she is a *mujer mala*. If a woman doesn't renounce herself in favor of the male, she is selfish. If a woman remains a *virgen* until she marries, she is a good woman. 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 the home as a mother."[140] The narrator strives to overturn Chicano patriarchal power over women revealing how women are restricted and subdued by Chicano dogmatic imperatives. In this way, through the project of resistance of constructing a new mythology from the borderlands the status of Chicanas in their community is also elevated. This new mythology is envisioned to influence the process of Chicanas' identity formation that has been persistently devalued by the patriarchal paradigms advanced by their community. In addition, the narrator reveals how she subverted the effort of the Chicano culture to stifle her potential to develop as an integral subject:

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[139] Ibid. p. 40.

[140] Ibid. p. 38.

> "Even as a child I would not obey. I was 'lazy.' Instead of ironing my younger brothers' shirts or cleaning the cupboards, I would pass many hours studying, reading, painting, writing. Every bit of self-faith I'd painstakingly gathered took a beating daily. Nothing in my culture approved of me. *Había agarrado malos pasos*. Something was 'wrong' with me. *Estaba más allá de la tradición*."[141]

The family structure is unveiled to expose that it constitutes the primary site of subordination for marginalized subjects. As a queer identified woman, the fictional autobiographical self refuses to be constrained by hierarchical impositions; rather, she advances critical interventions such as the exposition of the impairment inflicted upon Chicanas by their own people, the critique to hegemonic stereotypes attached to Chicanas' identities, and the questioning to limitations imposed upon Chicana's potential for self-invention. However, despite the alienation imposed on Chicanas, the figure of the mother and mysticism are very important in the Chicano tradition: "*La cultura chicana* identifies with the mother (Indian) rather than with the father (Spanish). Our faith is rooted in indigenous attributes, images, symbols, magic and myth."[142] The narrative voice reveals that the Chicano people identify with the Indian half of the mother rather than the Spanish half of the father in the construction of their cultural identity as well as the Chicano culture's tradition of relying on the spiritual domains.

The project of rewriting the status of mythical female deities from the borderlands is employed as a counter-discourse to the practice of stereotyping Chicanas' identities as essentially negative, inferior, and faulty. This project challenges the hegemonic notion of

[141] Ibid. p. 38.

[142] Ibid. p. 52.

identity based exclusively on white Eurocentric paradigms. Rather than a single unified way of approaching representations of cultural identities, the narrative voice supports the idea that the self is composed by multiple identifications. Through this project the narrator intends to deconstruct the scale of value imposed on representations of cultural identity.

Furthermore, the project of reconstructing mythical female deities represents a form of situated knowledges that question institutionalized religion: "Institutionalized religion fears trafficking with the spirit world and stigmatizes it as witchcraft."[143] According to the narrator, institutionalized religion demonstrates not to be able to fully incorporate the multifaceted hybrid spirituality of diasporic cultural identities:

> "In my own life, the Catholic Church fails to give meaning to my daily acts, to my continuing encounters with the 'other world.' It and other institutionalized religions impoverish all life, beauty, pleasure. The Catholic and Protestant religions encourage fear and distrust of life and the body; they encourage a split between the body and the spirit and totally ignore the soul; they encourage us to kill off parts of ourselves."[144]

The narrator proposes the reunification of the split between the material and the sacred from the standpoint of the marginalized to confront the power of institutionalized religions, articulating diasporic cultural identities as plural, hybrid, and multiple ways of existing and knowing. The borders established between categories of identity are crossed by the questioning of the patriarchal paradigms prevailing in the Chicano culture. This questioning is accomplished by the project of reconstruction of the status of mythical

[143] Ibid. p. 59.

[144] Ibid. p. 59 – 60.

female deities from the borderlands relocating them into preeminent positions. The project of reconstruction reveals the narrator's resolute resistance to stereotypical images disseminated by hegemonic cultures and religions toward "marginal" subjects. This reinterpretation of myths endorses the critique to the binary system of representation that enforces the exclusion of minorities. As a result, the recovery of female mythical deities, narrated from a "marginal" perspective, reveals the power of writing as a critical intervention to the mechanisms that regulate the politics of representation of cultural identity in literary discourse. Barbara Harlow outlines the work as follows:

> "*Borderlands/La Frontera* foregrounds the issue of the personal identity of the subject and complicates it by an analysis of the mythic and historic elements that have contributed to its constitution: the legacies of Aztec civilization and Spanish culture, a mestizo heritage and the recent past of legal and illegal Mexican American immigration across the U.S. borders, and women's traditions of compliance with and opposition to the machismo-sanctioned practices of their men."[145]

The reconstruction of mythical female deities from the borderlands consists of a project of resistance to the "either/or" structural limits imposed on the construction of identity to advance the performance of diasporic cultural identities. In this way, the narrator, in alignment with Haraway's situated knowledges theory, articulates "a doctrine and practice of objectivity that privileges contestation, deconstruction, passionate construction, webbed connections, and hope for transformation of systems of knowledge

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[145] Harlow, Barbara. "Sites of Struggle: Immigration, Deportation, Prison, and Exile." *Reconfigured Spheres: Feminist Explorations of Literary Space*. Margaret R. Higonnet and Joan Templeton (eds.) Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1994. p. 118.

and ways of seeing."[146] As myths and fictions can be used to create realities that work to the detriment or the advancement of marginalized subjects' perspectives, from a queer, feminist, Chicana positioning, the narrator rewrites the place of mythical female deities from the borderlands to elevate their statuses, and, consequently, that of the Chicanas' in their community. From her situated perspective, as a queer feminist Chicana, the fictional autobiographical self inhabits multiple locations to show that the movement across diverse established borders is necessary for survival. The narrator refuses to give priority to either category of her diasporic cultural identity as her cultural identity posits her as a subject who cannot find liberation in only one single axis of subjectivity. Borderlands mythical female deities are inscribed at the center of the narrative guiding the narrator on her journey so that she can recover the power that patriarchal cultures have extirpated from them. This cultural repositioning represents an important critical gesture since the reconstruction of the lost mythology from the borderlands means driving the feminine aspect out of the shadows and silence to which it has been relegated. As a result, the reconstruction of the borderlands mythology recovers the place of female deities from a past that has demonized and split them apart, representing a significant critical intervention to the politics of representation of cultural identity.

[146] Haraway, Donna. Op. cit. p. 191 – 192.

2.3 Travel and Transculturation

> I have often wondered why the farthest-out position always feels so right to me; why extremes, although difficult and sometimes painful to maintain, are always more comfortable than one plan running straight down a line in the unruffled middle.
>
> *Audre Lorde, Zami: A New Spelling of my Name*

Searching for a home and community that recognize the multiple aspects of her diasporic cultural identity the fictional autobiographical subject encounters provisional homes throughout the fictionalization of her life story. She continues the journey with a sojourn in Stamford, Connecticut. She decides to move to this city because she thought there would be more work opportunities for a black woman in the factories in Stamford than in New York. In Stamford, she gets a job at an industrial unit that processes quartz crystals extracted from Brazil. She works together with other black and Puerto Rican women whose work options are also restricted due to their social class, ethnic background, gender, and lack of qualified professional skills. With the exception of the plant supervisors, every employee in the factory belonged to the category of the "other". The work at the factory is extremely demanding and insalubrious: "Entering the plant after 8:00 A.M. was like entering Dante's Inferno. It was offensive to every sense, too cold and too hot, gritty, noisy, ugly, sticky, stinking, and dangerous."[147] The sentiment of aversion toward this work is materialized in intertextual allusions to the infernal regions described in Dante Alighieri's *Divine Comedy*. As the work was so grueling, it generates

[147] Lorde, Audre. Op. cit. 126.

such intense psychological charges on the protagonist to the point that she admits the wish to commit suicide by slitting her throat. However, this impulse is channeled in the form of writing as a way to overcome the self-denial imposed on her. These negative emotions demonstrate the alienation caused by the objectification of the subject in the process of labor stratification and exploitation. In a context of complete alienation, the fictional autobiographical subject can only rely on the writing of poetry to channel her anger against the constraints of such debasing work conditions. Writing poetry becomes the way through which she is able to delineate the contours of her subjectivity and imaginatively construct a community that would accept and recognize the multiple aspects of her diasporic cultural identity. However, to reach self-knowledge and fulfillment she must deal with feelings of rejection and exploitation. Therefore, she transmutes anger into poetry to criticize the social and subjective traumas resulted from her denigration as a subject in the United States. By writing poetry, the fictional autobiographical self demonstrates the emergence of her situated knowledge and "marginal" subjectivity so that writing becomes a potentially revolutionary practice.

The sojourn in Stamford represents only a preparation to the next stop in her journey, Mexico. According to Richard L. Jackson, "Lorde's trip to Mexico, which she had long awaited and planned, came at the right time for her. Returning to New York after her father's death, Mexico became her chief goal."[148] Mexico represents a very important place in her life narrative. As the protagonist's knowledge is constructed and affected in relation to the place and people she interacts with, it aligns with Haraway's

[148] Jackson, Richard L. *Black Writers and Latin America: Cross-Cultural Affinities*. Washington: Howard University Press, 1998. p. 54.

observations that "The topography of subjectivity is multi-dimensional; so, therefore, is vision. The knowing self is partial in all its guises, never finished, whole, simply there and original; it is always constructed and stitched together imperfectly, and therefore able to join with another, to see together without claiming to be another."[149] As location influences the way subjects understand and interpret themselves, the construction of the protagonist's cultural identity is influenced by the interaction with Mexican citizens and the Mexican culture. Her search for home and community points out the multi-dimensionality of the construction of the self. In this vein, according to Rosemarie Garland Thomson the fictional self performed in the text represents an "African-American female self grounded in the singular body that bears the etchings of history and whose validation, power, and identity derive from physical difference and resistance to cultural norms."[150]

What contributed for the decision to sojourn in Mexico was the possibility to free herself from the racial oppression in New York. Jackson points out that the "departure to Mexico was like an escape from New York, leaving behind problems of personal relationships, family tragedy, and political disappointment."[151] Before travelling to Mexico, her parents' house was the only home the protagonist knew. In Mexico, she envisions a possibility of coming home: "I don't know why I was seized with such a desire to go to Mexico. Ever since I could remember Mexico had been the accessible land

[149] Haraway, Donna. Op. cit. p. 193.

[150] Thomson, Rosemarie Garland. "The Extraordinary Subject: Audre Lorde's *Zami: A New Spelling of My Name*." *Extraordinary Bodies: Figuring Physical Disability in American Culture and Literature*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1997. p. 105.

[151] Jackson, Richard L. Op. cit. p. 54.

of color and fantasy and delight, full of sun, music and song."[152] Mexican culture impresses the protagonist by its liveliness and ethnicity is a major characteristic noticed as different from New York. In relation to the fictional autobiographical subject's satisfaction during the sojourn in Mexico, Jackson reveals that "Lorde personalizes Mexico, converting the country into a wish fulfillment that even she could not explain."[153] Differently from the outright racism experienced in New York, in Mexico the protagonist encounters people of *mestizo* background everywhere. In New York, she was vulnerable to prejudice and racism of a judgmental society; whereas, in Mexico she is delighted with the colors and vivacity of the welcoming Mexican culture:

> "By noon, it amazed me that the streets of a city could be so busy and so friendly at the same time. Even with all the new building going on there was a feeling of color and light, made more festive by the colorful mural decorating the sides of high buildings, public and private. Even the university buildings were covered with mosaic mural in dazzling colors."[154]

Most of the Mexican population are descendants of Spanish, Indian and Black intermarriages, having a complexion as dark as the protagonist's. In this way, she recognizes a communion in terms of resemblance of skin color as she can see it reflected on the Mexican population. The recognition of this racial communion makes the fictional autobiographical self become visible to other subjects, but more importantly, to herself. This community represents the possibility of being the place where her diasporic cultural identity would be fully accepted and embraced. The time spent in Mexico offers the

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[152] Lorde, Audre. Op. cit. p. 147.

[153] Jackson, Richard. L. Op. cit. p. 54.

[154] Lorde, Audre. Op. cit. p. 154.

protagonist a sense of home and community because of this racial resemblance. However, in this geographical context the protagonist's kinship is constructed only in terms of skin color resemblance. In the following excerpt, the narrator-protagonist reveals an episode in which an intense inverted process of identification occurs:

> "My favorite statue was one of a young naked girl in beige stone, kneeling, closely folded in upon herself, head bent, greeting the dawn. As I walked through the fragrant morning quiet in the Alameda, the nearby sounds of traffic increasing yet dimming, I felt myself unfolding like some large flower, as if the statue of the kneeling girl had come alive, raising her head to look full-faced into the sun."[155]

The fictional autobiographical subject identifies with the statue of a brown girl greeting the sunrise. However, differently from the statue she imagines herself raising her head and looking straight ahead into sun illuminating the path ahead to be travelled. This identification demonstrates that the narrator develops a sense of self-esteem and determination in Mexico. This voyage restitutes the protagonist with hope. She feels at home in Mexico because of the identification with the lively Mexican culture and the racial constitution of the Mexican population. This identification is positive for the protagonist's construction of cultural identity revealing how identity is shaped as a kind of situated knowledge. Furthermore, the narrator discloses divergent perspectives in relation to racial categorization exposing how the word "negro" is differently valued according to the Mexican and the American point of view: "For me, walking hurriedly back to my own little house in this land of color and dark people who said *negro* and meant something beautiful, who noticed me as I moved among them – this decision felt

[155] Ibid. p. 155.

like a promise of some kind that I half-believed in, in spite of myself, a possible validation."[156] The fictional autobiographical self is recognized as part of the community in Mexico only because of racial similarity, besides it there is no other common characteristic between her and the Mexican population. Similarity in racial constitution does not seem enough to construct the idea of home and community searched for. Although the people around the protagonist have the same skin color as hers, she is unable to develop close relationships with them due to language barrier. She attends classes at university but does not mention the name of any classmate or friend. As she cannot speak Spanish fluently, language barrier represents an obstacle that sets her apart in the Mexican culture. The sojourn in Mexico is a moment in Lorde's life narrative that demonstrates the construction of cultural identity as a form of situated knowledge produced though an intersection of diverse constituting dimensions. Even though the feeling of home and community developed in Mexico City offers the protagonist a provisory sense of belonging, in fact she feels like a foreigner living in a hotel room as she does not have a house of her own. The protagonist feels in a provisional community, but she actually embodies the role of the outsider, since important aspects of her diasporic cultural identity are still being unacknowledged.

Due to the limited personal interactions with Mexican residents, the protagonist demonstrates a growing desire to speak English. Consequently, she decides to relocate to Cuernavaca: "After the day spent in the easy beauty of Cuernavaca and easy-going company of Frieda and her friends, it took little urging on Frieda's part to persuade me to

[156] Ibid. p. 173. (Italics in original)

consider moving down to Cuernavaca. I was still anxious to find cheaper lodgings that the Hotel Fortin. I could commute to the District for classes, she assured me."[157] The relocation from Mexico City to Cuernavaca again indicates the protagonist's construction of cultural identity as an expression of situated knowledges since it depends on relational and localized processes of recognition and differentiation. As the fictional autobiographical self does not stay in one fixed place, traveling between Mexico City to attend classes and Cuernavaca where she resides, this movement symbolizes the multiplicity and ambivalence of the performance of her diasporic cultural identity.

In the 1950s, non-conformist American citizens opposing to McCarthyism[158] immigrated to Cuernavaca to escape the persecutions of this political regime. These American expatriates constructed a community in this area which became a refuge for American political dissenters. The protagonist is enthralled by the American expatriates she met in Cuernavaca. The relocation to this place represents a reflection of her situated knowledge shaped through a process of continuous movement and re-articulation. Cuernavaca becomes a provisional home for the protagonist because she can speak her mother tongue with other American compatriots and establish deeper interpersonal relations with them. Referring to the stimulating experience of living in Cuernavaca, she observes that it was in this place that "For the first time in my life, I had an insight into

[157] Lorde, Audre. Op. cit. p. 157.

[158] McCarthyism is related to the period known as the Second Red Scare in the United States, extending from the late 1940s to the late 1950s. This period was characterized by fear of communist influence on American institutions and espionage by Soviet agents. The term is used to describe the making of accusations of disloyalty, subversion, or treason without proper regard for evidence. It was originally coined to criticize the anti-communist pursuits of Senator Joseph McCarthy. Wikipedia contributors. "McCarthyism." *Wikipedia, The Free Encyclopedia*. Access on 14th October, 2010.

what poetry could be. I could use words to recreate that feeling, rather than to create a dream, which was what so much of my writing had been before."[159] Besides rediscovering her poetic inclinations, she delineates the growing political tension of the time:

> "For the american colony in Cuernavaca, the political atmosphere was one of guarded alertness. There was not the stench of terror and political repression so present in New York; we were 3,500 miles away. But any idea that immunity from McCarthyism might be conferred by borders had been shattered two years before in the minds of anyone who had ever been the least bit politically active. FBI agents had descended upon Mexico and hustled Morton Sobell, alleged co-conspirator of Ethel and Julius Rosenberg, out of Mexico and right back across the border to stand trial for treason"[160]

The fictionalization of the autobiographical subject's life narrative intertwines with political issues mentioning the Ethel and Julius Rosenberg[161] episode. This episode represents the social punishment directed toward individuals considered different at that time in the American history. The apprehensive political climate produced an atmosphere of feeble relationships, distrust, and eschewal of close relationships. The Rosenberg's electrocution epitomizes the instability and limitation of freedom imposed by the political regime. During the McCarthy era, the protagonist fought against hostile surroundings in order to survive as this was a time of intense political turbulence. In addition,

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[159] Lorde, Audre. Op. cit. p. 160.

[160] Ibid. p. l58.

[161] Ethel Greenglass Rosenberg and Julius Rosenberg were American communists. They were imprisoned and electrocuted under charges of espionage in June 19th 1953. They were charged because of their passing information about the atomic bomb to the Soviet Union. They were the first civilians executed for espionage in the United States history. Wikipedia contributors. "Julius and Ethel Rosenberg." *Wikipedia, The Free Encyclopedia*. Access on 14th October, 2010.

McCarthyism was particularly concerned with subjects' sexual orientation enforcing a rigid homosexual/heterosexual divide. However, as the fictional autobiographical self constructs her diasporic cultural identity by crossing imposed normative divisions, she articulates a "marginal" positioning within the hegemonic, white, American culture.

During the time spent in Mexico, the protagonist develops a sense of belonging with Mexican citizens, but a more natural identification is established with the American expatriates in Cuernavaca. This sentiment of belonging is developed because she shares the same language and culture with the American expatriates in Cuernavaca. Nationality is what constitutes their bond of identification and community. However, the American expatriates in Cuernavaca felt especially at risk in relation to individuals who had recently arrived from the United States:

> "Caution and fear of newcomers was everywhere, mixed up with a welcoming excitement at any new face. Expectation of some new political disaster from the north, as yet unspecified, was also everywhere. So were the ripe luscious bougainvillea with their flame-red voluptuous flowers, and the delicate and persistent showers of jacaranda blossoms, with their small white and pink and purple petals, behind which all of these anxieties flourished."[162]

As this community was the only place where American expatriates could feel partially safe, recently arrived individuals were viewed with suspicion as they might be undercover agents from the American government. However, even in this time of political turbulence the protagonist feels somehow at home because she is able to develop deep personal relationships with the American expatriates in the area. Instead of living

[162] Lorde, Audre. Op. cit. p. 159.

the life of a tourist, as she did in Mexico City, she rents a house for herself in Cuernavaca: "I was open to anything. Cuernavaca felt like a gift. The house consisted of one large room, with windows facing the mountains, and a bathroom, kitchen, and tiny dining alcove."[163] Thus, the fictional autobiographical self develops a sense of belonging with the American community in Cuernavaca as it represents the possibility of finding home and community.

The protagonist realizes that many women in Cuernavaca are lesbians or bisexuals, but despite their being outspoken in regards to politics as opponents to the American government, sexuality is still a very hidden part of their lives. Although these women are progressive liberals who support political advancement, they are extremely conservative in regards to sexual identity. The American women in Cuernavaca strive to hide their sexuality because they live in a patriarchal community extremely conservative to non-normative sexualities. Since heterosexuality is the compulsory model to be followed worldwide, expressing openly one's sexuality requires much more courage than that needed to assume an alternative political position. As political dissenters, they could simply immigrate to another country in order to escape persecution. However, as outspoken lesbians, they have to face further charges to find a place to feel secure, to feel at home. Consequently, the American women in Cuernavaca kept their sexuality as a highly confidential part of themselves. In this way, besides her perspective on sexuality the fictional autobiographical self is also different from these American women in terms of race. This situation is reminiscent of the time when she was among progressive circles

[163] Ibid. p. 158.

in which race was an approved topic to be discussed, but sexuality was not considered appropriate:

> "But my feelings of connection with most of the people I met in progressive circles, were as tenuous as those I had with my co-workers at the Health Center, I could imagine these comrades, Black and white, among whom color and racial differences could be openly examined and talked about, nonetheless one day asking me accusingly, 'Are you or have you ever been a member of a homosexual relationship?'"[164]

The persecution in relation to sexuality that happened in progressive groups is repeated once again in Cuernavaca because the protagonist could only express her subjectivity in terms of political stance and racial belonging, but sexuality stills remains a forbidden topic.

In Cuernavaca, the protagonist has a relationship with Eudora who like the other American women in the area are white, older, cultured, and well-to-do, defying the protagonist's conception of lesbian identity. The protagonist is spellbound by Eudora; she is described as the most fascinated woman she had ever met: "In 1925, she became the first woman to attend the University of Texas".[165] Besides, Eudora is "witty and funny and sharp and insightful, and knew a lot about an enormous number of things. She had written poetry when she was younger, and Walt Whitman was her favorite poet."[166] Eudora is a very important character in Lorde's life narrative because their relationship contributes to the awakening of the protagonist's sexuality to previously unknown

[164] Ibid. p. 149.

[165] Ibid. p. 162.

[166] Ibid. p. 164.

dimensions. Through Eudora, the protagonist deepens her understanding not only of sexual identity, but also of her integral self. As Eudora is older and more experienced, she teaches the protagonist about lesbian love. In this way, the journey toward self-knowledge is aligned with sexual awakening: "When I told Eudora I didn't like to be made love to, she raised her eyebrows. 'How do you know?' she said, and smiled as she reached out and put down our coffee cup. 'That's probably because no one has ever really made love to you before,' she said softly, her eyes wrinkling at the corners, intense, desiring."[167] The protagonist has never felt truly loved before, but the contact with Eudora makes her feel valued and desired. This sexual experience is more intense and rewarding than the previous ones because the protagonist admits that her body came to life with their shared connection. Both of them have already been wounded in several ways. Thus, their relationship represents a form of healing as they understand each other's suffering in silence. Their love reveals the consummation of an intense, mutual, lesbian desire. The lovers' touching is taken to more significant dimensions due to Eudora's bodily peculiarity: she had lost a breast to breast cancer and is compared to an Amazon[168] warrior. Therefore, the protagonist's search for a sense of home and community through the construction of cultural identity demonstrates to articulate "a particularized self who both embodies and transcends cultural subjugation, claiming physical difference as exceptional rather than inferior."[169]

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[167] Ibid. p. 169.

[168] According to Audre Lorde, "The Amazons were highly prized, well-trained, and ferocious women warriors who guarded, and fought under the direction of, the Panther Kings of Dahomey." *The Collected Poems of Audre Lorde*. New York: WW Norton, 1997. p. 330.

[169] Thomson, Rosemarie Garland. Op. cit. p. 105.

Eudora evokes memories of the protagonist's experience with her mother as both of them are older women that represent a source of support and nurturance awakening the protagonist's sexuality and providing a sense of belonging. Eudora, in the same way as Linda, represents a channel connecting the protagonist to other women. By the time of the relationship with Eudora, the fictional autobiographical self had no words to express her diasporic cultural identity as a black, working-class, lesbian woman, only later she will be able to articulate her own voice attaining self-knowledge and understanding.

The protagonist's sojourn in Mexico is extremely important because it made her feel visible and her relationship with Eudora contributed to the development of her diasporic cultural identity and acceptance of her integral self: "'You're very beautiful,' I said suddenly, embarrassed at my own daring. There was a moment of silence as Eudora put down her hammer. 'So are you, Chica,' she said, quietly, 'more beautiful than you know.' Her eyes held mine for a minute so I could not turn away. No one had ever said that to me before."[170] Eudora makes the protagonist feel valued and sexually attractive. In her previous sexual experiences, the protagonist assumed the role of the butch, the sexual partner who performs the active masculine role. However, with Eudora the butch/femme divide is subverted as the protagonist is the one who is physically approached. While butch/femme roles offer cultural models that contribute to the process of identity formation, the reversal of roles in this relationship reveals the potential of the fictional autobiographical subject to exercise agency in the construction of a self-created notion of identity. Eudora is white, but does not disregard the protagonist's race; on the contrary,

[170] Lorde, Audre. Op. cit. p. 165.

she considers the protagonist as "very beautiful" and this makes the protagonist feel accepted, recognized, and loved. They spend whole nights talking about language, poetry, love, and how life should be lived. Even though Eudora is different from the protagonist in terms of race, Eudora valorizes her for who she really is: "Eudora had not ignored me. Eudora had not made me invisible. Eudora had acted directly towards me."[171] Therefore, this relationship contributes to the development of a broader understanding of the protagonist's self through the affirmation and valorization of her diasporic cultural identity and situated knowledge. However, Eudora is an alcoholic, and as it implies her attempt to escape reality, this relationship does not constitute the ideal home and community searched for.

Through her travels, the protagonist achieves a deeper understanding of her subjectivity. These travels represent an escape from diverse forms of persecution, oppression, and marginalization. Stamford is only a preparation for the too much anticipated travel abroad. In Mexico, the narrator constructs a temporary home due to racial identification with the Mexican population, the interaction with American citizens in Cuernavaca, and the warmth and reciprocity found in the relationship with Eudora. Language and cultural difference are features that, at the same time, fascinate and set her apart from the Mexican scenario. However, this identification still do not seem enough to construct the common bonds necessary to establish the ideal home and community searched for throughout the narrative, due to the protagonist's diasporic cultural identity and situated knowledge.

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[171] Ibid. p. 175.

Therefore, the representation of the protagonist's diasporic cultural identity personifies the material-semiotic actor "intended to highlight the object of knowledge as an active, meaning-generating axis of the apparatus of bodily production, without *ever* implying immediate presence of such objects or, what is the same thing, their final or unique determination of what can count as objective knowledge at a particular historical juncture."[172] The representation of the protagonist's cultural identity is molded in relation to the various places and people she interacts with. In addition, the fictionalization of travelling interrogates prescribed ways of existing and representing the self, venturing far beyond the norms established by the hegemonic, compulsory, heterosexual culture, and also challenging prejudice against interracial relationships. As a result, the temporary homes found throughout her travels indicate the construction of the protagonist's diasporic cultural identity as a process performed through continuous identifications and misidentifications.

[172] Haraway, Donna. Op. cit. p. 200. (Italics in original)

Chapter III

Intersections

3.1 A Radically Pluralist Point of View

> Feminisms have successfully urged postmodernism to reconsider – in terms of gender – its antimetanarrative challenges to that humanist "universal" called "Man" and have supported and reinforced its "de-doxifying" of the separation between the private and the public, the personal and the political.
>
> *Linda Hutcheon, "Incredulity toward Metanarrative: Negotiating Postmodernism and Feminisms."*

In this subchapter, I discuss the critical strategy of intersecting feminist and postmodern[173] thinking in relation to both theories' critiques to "the existence of a stable, coherent self"[174] in order to "de-naturalize some of the dominant features of our way of life"[175] and also "'de-doxify' our cultural representations and their undeniable political import."[176] According to Linda Hutcheon, "'de-doxification' is as inherently a part of feminist as it is of postmodernist discourse."[177] Hence, I believe the disarticulation of the

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[173] Fraser and Nicholson observe that "For Lyotard, postmodernism designates a general condition of contemporary Western civilization. The postmodern condition is one in which 'grand narratives of legitimization' are no longer credible. By grand narratives he means overarching philosophies of history like the Enlightenment story of the gradual but steady progress of reason and freedom, Hegel's dialectic of Spirit coming to know itself, and, most importantly, Marx drama of the forward march of human productive capacities via class conflict culminating in proletarian revolution." Fraser, Nancy. Nicholson, Linda. "Social Criticism without Philosophy: An Encounter between Feminism and Postmodernism." *Feminism/Postmodernism*. Linda Nicholson (ed.) New York: Routledge, 1990. p. 22.

[174] Flax, Jane. "Postmodernism and Gender Relations in Feminist Theory" *Feminism/Postmodernism*. Linda Nicholson (ed.) New York: Routledge, 1990. p. 41.

[175] Hutcheon, Linda. *The Politics of Postmodernism*. New York: Routledge, 1989. p. 2

[176] Ibid. p. 3.

[177] Ibid. p. 20.

conceptions of the "universal" disembodied subject and knowledge can be achieved through the critical strategy of a provisional intersection of feminist and postmodern theories in the attempt to reveal that such ideas and the conviction in them are in fact shaped by social, cultural, and linguistic constructs not based on unquestionable truth. Feminist and postmodern theories converge to the extent that both of them formulate critiques that promote the displacement of the notion of "universality", embedded in the politics of representation of cultural identity, and, consequently, in the production of knowledge.

In *The Postmodern Condition*: *A Report on Knowledge*, Jean-François Lyotard discusses the process of production and legitimization of knowledge in contemporary society, which according to him can be defined as postmodern. Lyotard argues that "knowledge is not only a set of denotative statements, far from it. It also includes notions of 'know-how', 'knowing how to live', 'how to listen', etc." [178] In this way, knowledge is a construct that transcends the determination and application of the criterion of truth. He defines two types of knowledge in the postmodern society: scientific knowledge and narrative knowledge. Scientific knowledge is determined by reason and rationality, while narrative knowledge is determined by people's consent. Scientific knowledge, the kind of knowledge endorsed by the hegemonic culture, rejects the acknowledgement of other knowledges and is, therefore, limited to its own assumptions.

[178] Lyotard, Jean-François. *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*. Trans. Geoff Bennington and Brian Massumi. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1979. p. 18.

The interpretation to an absolute "truth", assumed to constitute knowledge in approaches to literature based solely on aesthetic values, is informed by subjective factors and criteria. As the knowledge derived from literary interpretation needs to be legitimated to support the *status quo*, it turns out to be a question of whose truth is acknowledged and proclaimed in literary discourse. On the one hand, narrative knowledge does not give precedence to the issue of its own legitimization and is certified in the pragmatics of its own transmission without recourses to argumentation or proof. The scientific discourse questions the validity of narrative knowledge asserting that it can neither be verified nor confirmed. The assumptions of scientific knowledge posit narrative knowledge as belonging to a different and inferior mentality made up of underdeveloped individuals composed merely of opinion, ignorance, and ideology. On the other hand, scientific knowledge requires only one language or denotation to be preserved and all others must be excluded. The truth-value of a statement is the criterion which determines its acceptability, one is "learned" if one can produce a true statement about a referent, and one is a "scientist" if one can produce provable statements about referents known by experts. However, scientific and narrative knowledges are interdependent, since scientific knowledge is legitimated in the pragmatics of oral discourse. As such, scientific knowledge relies fundamentally on narration.

The consensus needed to legitimate scientific knowledge remains under control of a certain class of people that establish the conditions under which knowledge is produced and legitimated. The capacity of this class to exert power derives from various reasons such as economic, educational, political, and religious. Thus, examining the status of

scientific knowledge, when science seems to be subordinated to the hegemonic culture, brings to the forefront the question of legitimization of knowledge, revealing that knowledge and power are indeed interrelated and indissoluble. Due to the disclosure of different kinds of knowledge, the interrelation between knowledge and power, and its necessary legitimization, Lyotard's analysis on the production of legitimization of knowledge is extremely productive to support the critique to the belief in a "universal" disembodied subject and knowledge represented in literary discourse as well as the power of the selected group of subjects that enforces the conviction in such belief.

In this context, it is necessary to pose the question: is it possible to combine the postmodern skepticism toward metanarratives with the social, political, and cultural dimensions of feminism? I think this is possible through the strategy of a provisional intersection between these theories to reinforce the critique to the subaltern condition of marginalized subjects. Due to the postmodern disbelief in metanarratives that posit subjectivity as permanent, unitary, and unchallengeable, postmodern thinking provides discursive *loci* where multiple subject positions can be performed to destabilize the ideological mechanisms embedded in the politics of representation of cultural identities. I believe such a strategy can challenge "what we consider to be literature (or rather, Literature) but also what was once assumed to be seamless, unified narrative representations of subjectivity in life-writing"[179]

[179] Hutcheon, Linda. Op. cit. p. 23.

As the objective of traditional literary criticism, in search of an absolute "truth", is to classify and attribute definite meaning to texts, it is exactly this notion of searching for an absolute "truth" that the strategy of intersecting theories tries to question. Such strategy provides the basis to disclose that impartiality in analyses of representations of cultural identities is a false criterion, since interpretation and knowledge are dependent upon the subjects who produce or define the criteria to be followed. Knowledge becomes power as it allows superiority to those who have it over those who do not. According to Seyla Benhabib, "Not only knowledge is power, but power generates access to knowledge, thus preparing for itself a self-perpetuating basis of legitimacy."[180] As the legitimization of knowledge is evident in the belief in a "universal" disembodied subject, knowledge, and experience, the critical strategy of intersecting feminist and postmodern theories promotes the questioning of the authority and legitimization of such beliefs revealing that representations of cultural identities can be reshaped so that "marginal" voices can finally be heard.

The critique to the production and legitimization of knowledge, through the representation of diasporic cultural identities, subverts and resists the ideological mechanisms embedded in the politics of representation of cultural identities. In this way, the idea of objectivity in relation to the analysis and interpretation of fictional cultural identities is discredited, since what is considered as "universal" is only so in the eyes of the ones who constitute it. Therefore, this critical strategy constitutes a possibility to question objectivity in readings and interpretations of cultural identities, since accepting a

[180] Benhabib, Seyla. "Epistemologies of Postmodernism: A Rejoinder to Jean-François Lyotard." *Feminism/Postmodernism*. Linda Nicholson (ed.) New York: Routledge, 1990. p. 109.

fixed perspective without critical questioning would be the same as subduing to traditional modes of reading and interpretation literature that legitimize certain representations of identities in detriment of others. By deconstructing the object of literary interpretation, it is possible for readers to realize that the "universal" disembodied subject, power, and knowledge are constructs dependent upon diverse points of resistance.

However, materialist feminist critics develop strong arguments against the conflation of postmodern and feminist theories claiming that postmodern thinking disregards the concept of class as a relevant category of analysis.[181] In fact, postmodern theory is charged of completely ignoring categories of identity such as class, gender, sexuality, and experience. As discussed before, the critique to the legitimacy of the criterion of experience does not invalidate the role of experience in its totality, it merely objects to its role as an unmediated empirical factor in the formation of one's sense of self. The conviction on the idea of a "universal" experience has its limitations as it draws boundaries around what should be legitimated as representative of the human experience; it also suggests that there is an essential self that establishes one single experience as the model for all others. By totalizing the category of experience, "marginal" voices will still be silenced and excluded. However, with the critical strategy of intersecting theories emphasizing hybridity and difference in the construction of a sense of self it is, indeed, possible to produce alternative accounts to representations of cultural identity in order to deconstruct hegemonic conceptions of the subject. Therefore, regardless of its limitations

[181] See: Hennessy, Rosemary. Ingraham, Chris. (eds.) *Materialist Feminism: A Reader in Class, Difference, and Women's Lives*. New York: Routledge, 1997.

I believe postmodern theory can indeed be employed as a supplement to question the suppression of "marginal" voices from literary discourse, and, consequently, the cultural domain.

A single, fixed, unified theoretical approach in the analyses of representations of cultural identities has necessarily to refute other positions, placing itself as the only voice of knowledge that holds the absolute "truth". Under this conception, theory is understood as the search for the only one factor capable of explaining oppression and domination cross-culturally and transhistorically. In this sense, theorizing equals to producing a quasi-metanarrative. The belief in the existence of only one definite answer or "truth" may lead some critics to delineate their own metanarratives in the advancement of their theory as the only voice of knowledge. Differently from this perspective, I try to point out not only the necessity of taking in account difference and hybridity in terms of representations of diasporic cultural identities, but also in relation to the constitution of the theoretical background of analysis. Thus, employing one single unified theory, in my opinion, would be a contradiction in itself, given that it would imply the necessary inappropriateness of other theories and knowledges.

However, one may argue against the deconstruction of disciplinary borders and categories of identity claiming that this point in history is not the best time for marginalized subjects to permit such a deconstruction, since this deconstruction produces a fear of the displacement of the category of the subject exactly at the time when "marginal" subjects are beginning to find their own voices. However, rather than

annihilating "marginal" subjects' identity and potential to exert agency, I believe it is necessary to produce alternative and inclusive analyses of representations of cultural identities to undermine the social construction of subjective roles that insist on maintaining strict fixed definitions to cultural identities. In sum, claiming a strict definition of subjectivity prevent us from envisioning and articulating alliances with multiple situated subjects.

The simultaneous and multiple subject positions individuals assume mandate that one take on complex performances of identity that may be at the same time conflicting and complementary, dominant and marginal. Material bodies both occupy and resist categories of identity since the construction of identity remains in a constant process of movement and re-articulation. Likewise, attempts to analyze representations of cultural identities need to be multiple and heterogeneous. When employing a "theory" one has to bear in mind that analyses on the representations of diasporic cultural identities can only be approached by an intersection of "theories", not a single unified perspective. Thus, I try to encourage dialogs between multiple situated subjectivities not posited as mutually exclusive "self" versus "other", but that understand cultural identities to be complexly alike and dissimilar. Therefore, it is necessary to stress the complexity of dealing with difference and hybridity in the analysis of representation of cultural identities, since the voice of the "other", once raised and taken into account in its own right, cannot impose another "universal" disembodied "truth". In this sense, what does the strategy of intersecting theories signify in face of the asymmetrical distribution of power in the sex-gender system? I believe that rather than setting up strict binary oppositions to the

construction of identity, the questioning to hegemonic categories and classifications can be facilitated through the representation of difference and hybridity in representations of identity in literary discourse. This point of view is also proposed by Flax:

> "Feminist theories, like other forms of postmodernism, should encourage us to tolerate and interpret ambivalence, ambiguity, and multiplicity as well as expose the roots of our needs for imposing order and structure no matter how arbitrary and oppressive these needs may be. If we do our work well, reality will appear even more unstable, complex, and disorderly than it does now."[182]

I try to take into consideration Flax's emphasis on ambivalence, ambiguity, and multiplicity as fundamental constituents of my analysis. As the investigation of the politics of representation of cultural identities is a crucial task to be performed, the critical strategy of intersecting feminist and postmodern theories can offer the possibility to articulate discourses deriving from multiple and situated locations. Besides mobilizing subjects from diverse backgrounds, such an analysis can employ difference and hybridity as positive characteristics in the construction of the self. This radically pluralist point of view involves analyzing representations cultural identity in order to empower "marginal" voices that have remained in the undergrounds of literary history. Rather than advancing unitary consensus, universalism, and common emancipation for all marginalized subjects, this critical strategy tries to promote an idea of radical pluralism, locating a series of discontinuities and local struggles in the construction and negotiation of cultural identity. Instead of offering a universally valid perspective, it emphasizes the importance of the local and specific. As a final point, it is necessary to mention that this pluralist point of

[182] Flax, Jane. Op. cit. p. 56 – 57.

view does not preclude critical and systematic analysis of representations; rather, it demands that categories are conceived as fluid and transitory. Only by emphasizing difference and hybridity in the construction of identity, it is possible to articulate representations that allow “marginal” subjects to fully express and value the multiple constitutive aspects of their subjectivities overcoming the imposition of the master-slave divide.

3.2 Multiple Languages toward a New Consciousness

> I remain who I am, multiple and one of the herd, yet not of it. I walk on the ground of my own being browned and hardened by the ages. I am fully formed carved by the hands of the ancients, drenched with the stench of today's headlines. But my own hands whittle the final work me.
>
> *Gloria Anzaldúa, "Cihuatlyotl, Woman Alone"*

Language is an extremely important constituent to the constitution of one's sense of cultural identity. Acknowledging the major impact performed by language in shaping cultural identity, in the chapter "How to Tame a Wild Tongue" the narrative voice criticizes monolingual societies emphasizing hybridity and difference in relation to language use. The cultural experience of the Chicano people is investigated under aspects such as linguistic repression, linguistic variation, gender related language bias, and artistic expression. Linguistic variation and dialects are used across geographical areas according to the needs of communication of different social groups. The narrative voice reveals the intricate relation between language and the construction of cultural identity as well as the necessity of social groups to create their own way of communication:

> "For a people who are neither Spanish nor live in a country in which Spanish is the first language; for a people who live in a country in which English is the reigning tongue but who are not Anglo; for a people who cannot entirely identify with either standard (formal, Castillian) Spanish nor standard English, what recourse is left to them but to create their own language?" [183]

[183] Anzaldúa, Gloria. Op. cit. 77.

The hybrid language of the borderlands, denominated as Chicano Spanish, is employed in the very fabric of the text. The Chicano people have developed their dialect to distinguish themselves from the oppressors and to stress the specificity of their cultural background. Chicano Spanish is the way the Chicano people use to identify with each other within their ethnic community. It represents, at the same time, a secret way of communication, the proclamation to hegemonic, white, American society that their cultural background is different, and the exposition of the social denial and stigmatization of sub-cultural practices and affiliations. Chicano Spanish is the language the fictional autobiographical subject grew up with, it is her native language, the language closest to her heart. Therefore, ethnic and linguistic belongings intersect to the extent that language is one fundamental constitutive aspect of the narrator's cultural identity: "So, if you really want to hurt me, talk badly about my language. Ethnic identity is twin skin to linguistic identity – I am my language. Until I can take pride in my language, I cannot take pride in myself."[184] The narrative voice does not obey the imposition of using just one language in literary discourse since the hybrid language of the borderlands and different perspectives and styles are articulated to emphasize ambiguity and ambivalence in the construction of cultural identity. If the narrator spoke just one language, she would determine her identity as belonging to just one culture. As the Chicano people make use of a hybrid way of speaking, their cultural identity is also hybrid and in constant process of transformation, resisting the limits imposed by rigid borders. One of the reasons why the Chicano people's identity is stigmatized is because they use a language which is considered bastard and is not approved by any society. This view reinforces the idea that

[184] Ibid. p. 81.

Chicano Spanish is inferior and defective in comparison to other languages: "Repeated attacks on our native tongue diminish our sense of self."[185] This reveals that just as Chicano Spanish is rejected, their sense of self undergoes the same process of assimilating rejection and subordination.

The narrative voice sets a demanding task for the reader non-acquainted with Spanish to decipher the complexity of the code-switching strategy employed in the text. The reader's resulting feelings of frustration and incapacity are similar to the feelings suffered by the fictional autobiographical subject struggling to communicate in a country where non-English speakers are stigmatized and debased. The narrator admits no longer to feel the need to implore entrance into discourse always having to translate her language to the various cultures in which she inhabits. Although English translations or footnotes are provided for some of the Spanish sections, the text does not imply an easy translation and several passages are simply not translated at all. In this way, the narrative demonstrates not to be supported on a single "universal" common language. Therefore, the code-switching strategy represents a severe hindrance to the mono-cultural reader, since the text cannot be translated into either Spanish or English without losing its cross-cultural dimension. Code-switching is employed as an artistic strategy with political implications. Kim Whitehead observes that the narrator's use of code-switching:

> "involves the role of Anzaldúa as translator. Even as she relates Mexican and Indian history, that is, 'translates' it for Americans not of or not familiar with Mexican heritage (and Chicano/as unfamiliar with their backgrounds), so she is faced with the necessity to

[185] Ibid. p. 80.

> translate all of her thoughts/writings in Spanish in order to attract the obviously desired American audience."[186]

Speaking English with a Mexican accent is also a relevant issue in the construction of the narrator's sense of cultural identity since her mother would be "mortified"[187] because her daughter spoke English like a Mexican. In relation to accent reduction, the narrator confesses that "At Pan American University, I, and all Chicano students were required to take two speech classes. Their purpose: to get rid of our accents."[188] This requirement represents one of the mechanisms of the hegemonic culture to exert control over linguistic variation of minority groups, amounting to an institutionalized means of violation to subjective expression. The narrator remembers being punished for speaking Spanish during break at university and accused of talking back to the teacher when she was only trying to explain a classmate how to pronounce her name. These repressive attitudes toward minority groups' linguistic variation demonstrate coercive power relations materialized in the form of linguistic terrorism.

The narrative voice reveals Chicanas' exclusion from language: "The first time I heard two women, a Puerto Rican and a Cuban, say the word '*nosotras*,' I was shocked."[189] The narrator was shocked because in Mexico the female plural is not used; thus, women use the masculine form to address themselves. In the Mexican and Chicano culture, from early age women are taught to be silent and obedient: first to their father

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[186] Whitehead, Kim. *The Feminist Poetry Movement*. Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1996. p. 132.

[187] Anzaldúa, Gloria. Op. cit. p. 76.

[188] Ibid. p. 76.

[189] Ibid. p. 76.

and later to their husband. Language has been used as a prison house for Chicanas since they are enforced to be voiceless and invisible in their community. However, in spite of cultural impediments Chicanas strive to produce forms of resistance and intervention with the potential to cross imposed borders and expose fluidity and permeability in the construction of a sense of self. Besides language, Chicanas' cultural identities are profoundly marked by the socio-historical conflicts and asymmetrical cultural exchanges that take place at the border, since the constitution of Chicanas' identity implies dealing with continuous oscillations and ambivalences derived from multiple belongings.

Likewise, the narrative voice presents an overview of the Chicano people's artistic manifestations such as literature, criticism, movies, music, and cuisine. Expressions such as *tortillas*, *tamales*, *corrido*, and *norteña* music cannot be translated into English. Therefore, they are graphed in italics to emphasize the untranslatability of cultural manifestations. The representation of the Chicano people's cultural and linguistic expression constitutes an affirmation of the importance, specificity, and value of their subjectivity. In this way, by representing their cultural identity in the artistic domain, they perpetuate Chicano/a cultural heritage throughout history. Although the work is written mostly in English, intersected with Spanish and other dialects, it is addressed to all cultures.

Through the intersection of multiple languages, discourses, and cultures the narrative blurs the distinction between "high" and "low" literature performing a kind of folk art. This kind of art is traditionally considered inferior because it is mainly produced

by indigenous cultures, peasants, and working class people; and, contrasting to fine art, folk art is considered primarily functional rather than exclusively aesthetic. In this sense, the narrative voice enquires into the status of literary texts as writing is related to shamanism and healing, and the writer performs the role of a "shape-changer, (…) a *nahual*, a shaman"[190] Writing is conceived as an intrinsically political, personal, and aesthetic activity, consisting of a powerful emancipatory tool that can both reveal and resist oppression. By accessing the written word, there is the possibility for marginalized subjects to overcome the predicament of leading a merely subservient existence to enter the sphere of the cultural, a domain traditionally limited to the upper class. Thus, a "marginal" subject with access to writing represents an empowered subject viewed as a threat by the hegemonic culture. As it is through the multiplicity of languages and styles that representations of diasporic cultural identities emerge, it is through the multiplicity of readers' experiences that they can relate to this hybrid kind of writing. In the same way, as language and subjective constitution are inevitably embedded, the ambivalence of the Chicano people's cultural identity and their resolute capacity to endure are poetically rendered: "*Humildes* yet proud, *quietos* yet wild, *nosotros los mexicanos*-Chicanos will walk by the crumbling ashes as we go about our business. Stubborn, persevering, impenetrable as stone, yet possessing a malleability that renders us unbreakable, we, the *mestizas* and *mestizos*, will remain."[191]

In the section "*La Conciencia de la Mestiza*/Towards a New Consciousness", the narrative voice advances the development of a new consciousness. This new

[190] Ibid. p. 88.

[191] Ibid. p. 86.

consciousness consists of a *mestiza* consciousness fundamentally constituted by hybridity and difference. The development of this consciousness demands a recovery of language to envisage new possibilities of cultural identity. It relates to a capacity to tolerate ambiguity that crosses the strict boundaries erected between categories of identity. This consciousness is characterized by a continual transgression of binary thinking such as personal/collective, theory/practice, spiritual/material, male/female, among others. According to the narrator, the imposition of rigid dichotomies is one of the causes of violence: "A massive uprooting of dualistic thinking in the individual and collective consciousness is the beginning of a long struggle, but one that could, in our best hopes, bring us to the end of rape, of violence, of war."[192] The development of the *mestiza* consciousness is marked by a continual transgression of borders that involves the overcoming of dichotomous principles established by the hegemonic, patriarchal, white culture. Although the *mestiza*'s strength to survive lies in the capacity to surpass dichotomies, the predicament of constantly dealing with contradiction and ambivalence leads to a dangerous state of perplexity: "Because I, a *mestiza*/ continually walk out of one culture/ and into another,/ because I am in all cultures at the same time,/ *alma entre dos mundos, tres, cuatro,*/ *me zumba la cabeza con lo contradictorio.*/ *Estoy norteada por todas las voces que me hablan*/ *Simultaneamente.*"[193] As the borderlands represent a territory of perpetual movement, crossing, translation, and confrontation of languages and cultures, in this scenario the *mestiza* consciousness is caught between multiple interstices, resulting in feelings of disorientation, fragmentation, and even mental distress. In the next

[192] Ibid. p. 102.

[193] Ibid. p. 99.

passage, the narrative voice delineates the process of construction of the *mestiza* consciousness:

> "At the confluence of two or more genetic streams, with chromosomes constantly 'crossing over,' this mixture of races, rather than resulting in an inferior being, provides hybrid progeny, a mutable, more malleable species with a rich gene pool. From this racial, ideological, cultural and biological cross-pollinization, an 'alien' consciousness is presently in the making – a new *mestiza* consciousness, *una conciencia de mujer*. It is a consciousness of the Borderlands."[194]

The miscegenation that characterizes this consciousness does not result in the production of an inferior being as suggested by disseminated stereotypes; rather, it epitomizes ideological, cultural, and biological hybridity and difference. As the new *mestiza* consciousness deals with the multiple intersections that inform her diasporic cultural identity, no constituent part of subjectivity is cast aside. As the result of cultural *mestizaje*, the development of a *mestiza* consciousness involves the consequences of performing an ambivalent identity and facing contradictory messages derived from multiple and contradictory cultures.

In the path toward the development of the *mestiza* consciousness, one has to discard the role of the victim in search for transformation of the self individually, as a subject, and collectively, as a community. In this way, it is necessary to understand and recognize one's location in relation to the diverse constitutive contexts that shape subjectivity. Therefore, marginalized subjects have the possibility to develop a *mestiza* consciousness and exercise their potential for agency by subverting the imposed scripts

[194] Ibid. p. 99.

on the construction of identity and reinventing the self. The *mestiza* consciousness is not an inborn state, it has to be performed and enacted to be achieved. As an extreme instance of diasporic cultural identity, the *mestiza* consciousness symbolizes the expression of an identity engaged in continual transformations and movements across borders: "She has a plural personality, she operates in a pluralistic mode."[195] As such, stereotypical identities derived from the imposition of rigid cultural scripts are deconstructed. The development of the *mestiza* consciousness is only the first step toward cultural transformation to generate emancipating interventions, subversive practices, and new possibilities to the politics of representation of cultural identity. In addition, this consciousness advances a positioning that goes far beyond simplistic understandings of cultural and political activism:

> "But it is not enough to stand on the opposite river bank, shouting questions, challenging patriarchal, white conventions. (…) All reaction is limited by, and dependent on, what it is reacting against. (…) At some point, on our way to a new consciousness, we will have to leave the opposite bank, the split between the two mortal combatants somehow healed so that we are on both shores at once and, at once, see through serpent and eagle eyes."[196]

The narrator proposes a third way between complete elimination of the concept of identity and total dependency on the notion of a single unified identity as the development of this new consciousness involves the awareness of the interrelation of personal and political stances materialized through writing. Therefore, it is not enough to deconstruct traditional convictions, it is necessary to invent new possibilities from the wreckage of old norms and regulations. Once the *mestiza* consciousness is achieved, this

[195] Anzaldúa, Gloria. Op. cit. p. 101.

[196] Ibid. p. 100 – 101.

"marginal" perspective becomes a space of resistance and intervention to the alleged "center."

Supporting the development of the *mestiza* consciousness, the narrator refers to Mexican philosopher José Vasconcelos, who "envisaged *una raza mestiza, una mezcla de razas affines, una raza de color – la primera raza síntesis del globo*. He called it a cosmic race, *la raza cósmica*, a fifth race embracing the four major races of the world. Opposite to the theory of the pure Aryan, and to the policy of racial purity that white America practices, his theory is one of inclusivity."[197] Vasconcelos defines the *mestizo* as an all-inclusive racial synthesis made up of a combination of hybrid genetic backgrounds. Nonetheless, he does not include gender in his theory. Therefore, the representation of the new *mestiza* consciousness puts in evidence gendered voices articulating the *mestiza* as the harbinger of this cosmic race. The conception of a cosmic race emphasizes hybridity and difference as positive features in the constitution of cultural identity representing a symbol of Chicano people's resistance to homogenization, oppression, and marginalization.

Furthermore, the narrator declares that "The work of the *mestiza* consciousness is to break down the subject-object duality that keeps her a prisoner and to show in the flesh and through the images in her work how duality is transcended."[198] To achieve this breaking down of dualities, it is necessary to consider the value and specificity of the "other" in his/her own right. As a way to celebrate the worth of the "other", the narrator

[197] Ibid. p. 100.

[198] Anzaldúa, Gloria. Op. cit. p. 102.

announces *el día de la Chicana* – the day of the Chicana – December 02nd, as an emblem of the Chicano people's endurance in the affirmation of their cultural identity and heritage, acknowledging the struggle for legitimization, dignity, and self-esteem. The complexity involved in the process of development of the *mestiza* consciousness is revealed:

> "We can no longer camouflage our needs, can no longer let defenses and fences sprout around us. We can no longer withdraw. To rage and look upon you with contempt is to rage and be contemptuous of ourselves. We can no longer blame you, nor disown the white parts, the male parts, the pathological parts, the queer parts, the vulnerable parts. Here we are weaponless with open arms."[199]

Rather than creating a stereotypical image of a single, unified, disembodied identity, the narrator employs metaphors to envision a society that does not reject any integrant part of its "body". In the affirmation of this alternative perspective, she reinforces the construction of a community in which every subject would be valued, accepted, and respected regardless of his/her configuration of identity. As the development of the *mestiza* consciousness is a process achieved through constant transformations, ambivalences, and oscillations, there is no definite point in space and time in which this configuration of identity can be apprehended and defined:

> "The *mestiza*'s dual or multiple personality is plagued by psychic restlessness. In a constant state of mental nepantilism, an Aztec word meaning torn between ways, *la mestiza* is a product of the transfer of the cultural and spiritual values of one group to another. Being tricultural, monolingual, bilingual, or multilingual, speaking a patois, and

[199] Ibid. p. 110.

> in a state of perpetual transition, the *mestiza* faces the dilemma of the mixed breed: which collectivity does the daughter of the darkskinned mother listen to?"[200]

With the development of this consciousness, normative impositions on representations of cultural identity are challenged through the construction of a perspective that articulates hybridity and difference as positive factors to the constitution of the self. Through the representation of this perspective, the narrator creates a textual space where she can belong not as the "other", but finally as herself.

However, *la mestiza* has to face specific struggles in regards to her gender identity: "As long as *los hombres* think they have to *chingar mujeres* and each other to be men, as long as men are taught that they are superior and therefore culturally favored over *la mujer*, as long as to be a *vieja* is a thing of derision, there can be no real healing of our psyches."[201] This demonstrates that the narrator is aware of gender implications and intersecting systems of oppression in the constitution of identity. As a result, the development of the *mestiza* consciousness consists of realizing a borderland existence, the capacity to move across multiple cultures, and translate the metaphor of the border into that of the bridge. According to Linda Garber, "Anzaldúa rejects the battle for supremacy of one over the other; instead, she expresses the state of being both/and/neither, the border existence of the new *mestiza*, a culturally specific, complex, and self-conscious articulation of identity poetics."[202] The development of this consciousness requires not only an understanding and recognition of the multiplicity of

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[200] Ibid. p. 100.

[201] Ibid. p. 106.

[202] Garber, Linda. Op. cit. p. 148.

cultures that shape it, but also a redefinition of the conception of one's own self: "*Soy un amasamiento*, I am an act of kneading, of uniting and joining that not only has produced both a creature of darkness and a creature of light, but also a creature that questions the definitions of light and dark and gives them new meanings"[203] Therefore, the development of the *mestiza* consciousness represents the achievement of an extreme instance of diasporic cultural identity through the incorporation of hybridity, difference, and the capacity of self-transformation and adaptation to continuous shifts. This consciousness is developed and articulated by absorbing different aspects from the various cultures in which it is located. According to Kim Whitehead:

> "As a landscape or textual territory, Anzaldúa's text itself is a borderland and Anzaldúa the *mestiza* who shapes it and is shaped by it: it is a journey back and forth across the borders of genre and language, so that the result is a new kind of text, in which borders move and sometimes disappear, and writer, written, and reader all take a *mestiza* shape through the recovery of hidden histories, the autobiographical assertion of oppressed selves, the evocation of both of these in the lyrical voice of personal poetry (which in many ways remains the central literary impulse in the text), and the challenge to the reader to understand and even live a borderlands mentality."[204]

The new *mestiza* consciousness is the result of an intersection of categories of identity as well as the recognition that subjectivity is shaped in ambiguous and ambivalent ways. This instance of diasporic cultural identity demonstrates to be formed by a multiplicity of languages, cultures, and histories bound to resist and subvert hegemonic discourses imposed on the construction of identity. The metaphor of the borderlands provides the background for the construction of this cultural identity as a

[203] Ibid. p. 103.

[204] Whitehead, Kim. Op. cit. p. 120.

performative process materialized in the text. In this way, *Borderlands/La Frontera* constitutes a fictional autobiographical writing that questions conventional representation of cultural identity by articulating subjective agency as self-invention trying to accommodate a sense of individual identity with the idea of a collective self. This alternative view transforms the hegemonic "center" into the "margin" by subverting formal and disciplinary conventions, languages, and cultural boundaries. As the *mestiza* consciousness re-appropriates mind, body, spirit, voice, and knowledge, it points out the possibility of subjective self-creation, that is, the possibility for subjects to construct their own path. In this vein, the representation of the construction of a sense of cultural identity in *Borderlands/La Frontera* demonstrates to be:

> "represented as something in process, never as fixed and never as autonomous, outside history. It is always a gendered subjectivity, rooted also in class, race, ethnicity, and sexual orientation. And it is usually textual self-reflexivity that paradoxically calls these wordly particularities to our attention by foregrounding the doxa, the unacknowledged politics, behind the dominant representations of the self – and the other."[205]

Therefore, the development of a *mestiza* consciousness is a fundamental necessary process for marginalized subjects due to its recognition of social and cultural intersections in the formation of cultural identity and the interconnection between the individual and the collective. In the search for non-authoritarian ways of performing and representing the self, merely representing diasporic cultural identities is not enough, as readers must take a step further to question what happens once hibridity and difference are actually recognized as positive features in the politics of representation of identity. As

[205] Hutcheon, Linda. *The Politics of Postmodernism*. New York: Routledge, 1989. p. 39 – 40.

the representation of cultural identity delineated in *Borderlands/La Frontera* disrupts dominant hegemonic systems of belief presented as deep-seated irrevocable truths, the *mestiza* consciousness cannot intend to assume the position of a "universal" all-inclusive representation of identity due to the recognition of the multiple, situated, and "marginal" aspects that shape it. By breaking down the subject-object duality, the *mestiza* consciousness crosses the limits erected on the construction of cultural identity, since it is not defined as either "one" or the "other", rather this consciousness is both and/or something else – a self-created performance of the self.

Queer Subculture and the Return to the Mother

Afrekette Afrekette ride me to the crossroads where we shall sleep, coated in the woman's power. The sound of our bodies meeting is the prayer of all strangers and sisters, that the discarded evils, abandoned at all crossroads, will not follow us upon our journeys.

Audre Lorde, Zami: A New Spelling of my Name

After the period of travelling, the fictional autobiographical subject returns to New York and settles residence in Greenwich Village. This neighborhood is well-known for its queer population and unconventional lifestyle. During this period in her life narrative, the search for a sense of home and community intersects with additional constitutive aspects. In Greenwich Village, there is a variety of places such as bars, clubs, and bistros that constitutes a refuge for the queer community. For awhile, the queer subculture formed in these places provides a sense of home for the protagonist: "The important message seemed to be that you had to have a place. Whether or not it did justice to whatever you felt you were about, there had to be some place to refuel and check your flaps."[206] In the queer subculture, lesbian women have more opportunity to express their desire without subduing to the sexism, homophobia, and violence enforced by compulsory heterosexual society. However, they could only be partially free in relation to their sexual and gender identity as lesbian women could only fully express themselves in the restricted places allotted for the queer community.

[206] Lorde, Audre. Op. cit. 225.

The protagonist lives in Greenwich Village, downtown Manhattan, and studies uptown at Hunter College. The constant movement through different spaces demonstrates the multiple situated position of her diasporic cultural identity: "At the Bag, at Hunter College, uptown in Harlem, at the library, there was a piece of the real me bound in each place, and growing."[207] Interconnecting layers of oppression compel the protagonist to adopt a different perspective of self according to the different spaces she inhabits. In fact, what allows her participation in these multiple locations is the hybrid configuration of her diasporic cultural identity that permits border crossings.

The Greenwich Village queer subculture is made up of subjects who are deemed as outlaws in the hegemonic, compulsory, heterosexual culture. This community is reminiscent of the American political non-conformist population in Cuernavaca in the sense that it is also composed by white American non-conformists. However, differently from the queer community in Greenwich Village, the Americans in Cuernavaca are extremely conservative in regards to their sexual identity, since they did not reveal it as they did in relation to their political stance. In this way, the Americans in Cuernavaca are transgressors only in terms of politics, while the Greenwich Village queer subculture comprises outsiders in diverse categories such as arts, politics, philosophy, and sexuality. Thus, the narrative voice not only questions identity politics based on the notion of a common, single, unified identity, but also criticizes progressive circles for its homophobia, since for them homosexuality was viewed as a bourgeois deviation.

[207] Ibid. p. 226.

The Greenwich Village queer spaces mentioned in the narrative are the Swing, the Sea Colony, Page Three, Laurel's, and the club Bagatelle, also known as the Bag. These places represent a community that gathers queer identified subjects. The Bagatelle is described as the most frequented and fashionable place at the time. As the protagonist went to this club with her white friends, the interracial clientele demonstrates that black and white lesbian women were trying to subvert racial segregation: "gay girls were the only Black and white women who were even talking to each other in this country in the 1950s, outside of the empty rhetoric of patriotism and political movements."[208] Although interracial clientele was allowed, every time the protagonist went to this club, she was harassed by the security asking for her identification: "I didn't go to the Bag very much. It was the most popular gay-girl's bar in the Village, but I hated beer, and besides the bouncer was always asking me for my ID to prove I was twenty-one, even though I was older than the other women with me."[209] The protagonist's white friends pretended not to take into account her ethnic belonging, but by that time the protagonist knows that she is treated differently exactly because of it. Although the Greenwich Village queer community offers the fictional autobiographical self a sense of home, her diasporic cultural identity is still not fully acknowledged, since prejudice against black people is present in the Greenwich Village queer subculture. Sexuality is the only shared connection between the protagonist and the queer community, whereas race is the difference that sets her apart from it. Even though her racial belonging is not acknowledged in this community, the protagonist highlights the power of queer recognition among black lesbian women:

[208] Ibid. p. 225.

[209] Ibid. p. 180.

> "Sometimes we'd pass Black women on Eighth Street – *the invisible but visible sisters* – or in the Bag or at Laurel's, and our glances might cross, but we never looked into each other's eyes. We acknowledged our kinship by passing in silence, looking the other way. Still, we were always on the lookout, Flee and I, for that telltale flick of the eye, that certain otherwise prohibited openness of expression, that definiteness of voice which would suggest, I think she is gay. *After all, doesn't take one to know one*?"[210]

The narrative voice reveals the process of recognition developed by queer identified subjects. This process represents a learned ability of interpretation as a means of survival and identification of "*invisible but visible*" like-minded subjects in a hostile, compulsory, heterosexual environment. As the protagonist's racial constitution is more visible than her sexual orientation, she struggles to establish bonds with the Greenwich Village queer subculture, given that its great majority was composed by white lesbians who would rather avoid the topic of race. The protagonist reveals the awareness of being viewed as an outsider in the Greenwich Village queer subculture: "But when I, a Black woman, saw no reflection in any of the faces there week after week, I knew perfectly well that being an outsider in the Bagatelle had everything to do with being Black."[211] The fictional autobiographical subject does not intend to establish a hierarchical paradigm for difference; rather, she believes that the various layers of difference that constitute her cultural identity cannot be simply translated one into the other.

In the Greenwich Village queer subculture, most lesbians identified with the butch/femme sexual and gender dynamics. In relation to these roles, Lillian Faderman

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[210] Ibid. p. 180. (Italics in original)

[211] Ibid. p. 220.

argues that they "came to have an important function in the working-class and young lesbian subculture because they operated as a kind of indicator of membership. Only those who understood the roles and the rules attendant upon them really belonged."[212] However, due to the hybridity and difference of her diasporic cultural identity the fictional autobiographical subject does not fit into these rigid role models as the performance of her cultural identity disrupts masculine/feminine stereotypical expectations in the construction of lesbian subjectivity. The interpretation of appearance and clothing is fundamental to the identification of butch/femme roles. In this configuration of gender and sexuality, clothes represent the emblem of the role performed by the subject. The protagonist reveals her position in relation to the butch/femme identification:

> "For some of us, however, role-playing reflected all the depreciating attitudes toward women which we loathed in straight society. It was a rejection of these roles that had drawn us to 'the life' in the first place. Instinctively, without particular theory or political position or dialectic, we recognized oppression as oppression, no matter where it came from. But those lesbians who had carved some niche in the pretend world of dominance/subordination, rejected what they called our 'confused' life style, and they were in the majority."[213]

As the protagonist's diasporic cultural identity does not fit into the strict well-defined models established by the butch/femme dynamics, she is classified as "Ky-Ky" by the lesbian community that adhered to this paradigm and considered the protagonist's

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[212] Faderman, Lillian. *Odd Girls and Twilight Lovers: A History of Lesbian Life in Twentieth Century America*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1991. p. 167.

[213] Lorde, Audre. Op. cit. p. 221.

sexual identity as a "confused life style". The fictional autobiographical subject reveals the perplexity and dissatisfaction caused by this configuration of identity:

> "The Black women I usually saw around the Bag were into heavy roles, and it frightened me. This was partly the fear of my own Blackness mirrored, and partly the realities of the masquerade. Their need for power and control seemed a much-too-open piece of myself, dressed in enemy clothing. They were tough in a way I felt I could never be. Even if they were not, their self-protective instincts warned them to appear that way."[214]

Black women could only identify with the role of the butch because even in the lesbian subculture conceptions of femininity were defined by hegemonic, white, male, paradigms. However, the fictional autobiographical self does not accept this rigid definition of subjectivity due to the hybridity and difference that make up her diasporic cultural identity. As a black lesbian woman in the United States in the 1950s, the protagonist faces a society dominated by white, upper-class, heterosexual men with no companion in struggle to soothe her feelings of isolation and despair. Despite the fact that the discoveries made throughout the journey produces a sense of alienation from society in the protagonist, her quest symbolizes a statement of independence that demonstrates the importance of taking one's own decisions in the construction of cultural identity. As the majority of the lesbian women in Greenwich Village queer subculture are white, the protagonist could hardly meet other black lesbians with whom she could identify. Additionally, as all the consummated love affairs the protagonist has had were with white women, she reveals the desire to have a relationship with a black woman and also the difficulties black lesbians found in the process of constructing subjectivity:

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[214] Ibid. p. 224

> "In the gay bars, I longed for other Black women without the need ever taking shape upon my lips. For four hundred years in this country, Black women have been taught to view each other with deep suspicion. It was no different in the gay world. Most Black lesbians were closeted, correctly recognizing the Black community's lack interest in our position, as well as the many more immediate threats to our survival as Black people in a racist society."[215]

Because of this hostile environment toward queer identified subjects, most black lesbians would remain in silence in regards to their sexual identity, exposing the prevailing sexism, homophobia, and racism of the American society. The protagonist's diasporic cultural identity places her in an ambiguous position in relation to the Greenwich Village queer subculture as she is simultaneously inside and outside this community. In this way, sexual belonging does not situate her completely inside the Greenwich Village queer subculture because even in this community she is viewed as an outsider, an invisible black woman. Therefore, sexuality alone does not seem to provide enough grounds on which her idea of home and community can be built. Lack of community bonds, shared experience, and collective heritage represent some of the consequences of black women's alienation in the United States. The narrator admits that "There were no mothers, no sisters, no heroes. We had to do it alone, like our sister Amazons, the riders on the loneliest outposts of the kingdom of Dahomey. We, young and Black and fine and gay, sweated out our first heartbreaks with no school nor office chums to share that confidence over lunch hour."[216] Due to the lack of a shared history of queer people of color, the constitution of black lesbian women's subjectivity involves

[215] Ibid. p. 224.

[216] Ibid. p. 176.

feelings of extreme despair and isolation. Nevertheless, the fictional self strives to overcome these feelings relying in her inner strength and will to survive. It is therefore necessary to unearth this omitted history in order to preserve from oblivion and silence sub-cultural practices and representations of queer of color subjects. The portrayal of the Greenwich Village queer community reveals silenced voices and sub-cultural practices offering the possibility to recognize the struggle of "marginal" subjects from the past. Despite the violence more commonly directed toward subjects who openly express their sexual identity, the protagonist's representation of diasporic cultural identity as a black lesbian woman who challenges identity stereotypes establishes an important intervention to the hegemonic system of compulsory heterosexuality. As the fictional autobiographical subject performs a multiple and ambiguous position in relation to the Greenwich Village queer subculture, she undergoes a painful process of coming to terms with her cultural identity:

> "In a paradoxical sense, once I accepted my position as different from the larger society as well as from any single sub-society – Black or gay – I felt I didn't have to try so hard. To be accepted. To look femme. To be straight. To look straight. To be proper. To look 'nice.' To be liked. To be loved. To be approved. What I didn't realize was how much harder I had to try merely to stay alive, or rather, to stay human. How much stronger a person I became in that trying."[217]

Despite the external forces antagonistic to the protagonist's diasporic cultural identity, her inner strength and desire to survive are fundamental in the search for a home and community where she would not be judged by sexuality, appearance, and behavior. Thus, the process of construction of cultural identity as the "house of difference" allows

[217] Ibid. p. 181.

the possibility to think cultural identity as a site of multiple intersected differences: "Being women together was not enough. We were different. Being gay-girls together was not enough. We were different. Being Black together was not enough. We were different. Being Black women together was not enough. We were different. Being Black dykes together was not enough. We were different."[218] The narrator-protagonist emphasizes the intersecting oppressions through which her subjectivity is informed as a way to criticize conceptions of identity politics based merely on empirical biological factors and strict notions of identity. However, this awareness does not lead to the adoption of a separatist attitude; rather, it upholds that the acknowledgment of difference can indeed encourage new forms of alliance and coalition. The fictional autobiographical self is vulnerable at the same time to the hegemonic culture's prejudice towards blacks, lesbians, and women, as well as to the way these identity groups view and relate to each other. If the imposition of limits in terms of categories of identity restrained the protagonist from feeling fully connected to others, these limits also allow her to experience what each of these configurations of identity adds to her subjectivity individually. Identification with each one of these marginalized identities intensifies the process of construction of cultural identity as each identification reflects a piece of herself, but none of them separately can express the wholeness of her diasporic cultural identity. Therefore, the home and community found in the Greenwich Village queer subculture represents only a transitory abode where alienation and exclusion are still present, derived from prejudice and establishment of strict borders to identities. Anna Wilson argues that "Audre's invisibility, too, attains the level of textual theme, articulated around the shifts of her

[218] Ibid. p. 226.

various identities, the refusal of the Black community to see her as a lesbian, and the refusal of the 'gay girls' of the 1950s lesbian community to see her Blackness."[219]

The Greenwich Village queer subculture consists of a refuge for mostly white lesbians, whereas black lesbians used to hold private parties at their homes. The protagonist reveals that she "had started to really enjoy the parties out in Queens that we went to with Vida and Pet and Gerri. Those parties given by Black women were always full of food and dancing and reefer and laughter and high-jinks."[220] In one of these parties, the protagonist encounters Afrekete, also known as Kitty. She is enthralled by the appearance of this character described in the interface between the real and the mythical dimension. Afrekete triggers out an intense desire in the protagonist: "I thought that she was very pretty, and I wished I could dance with as much ease as she did, and as effortlessly. Her hair had been straightened into short feathery curls, and in that room of well-set marcels and D.A.'s and pageboys, it was the closest cut to my own."[221] In relation to this encounter, Wilson observes that "the description of Audre's culminatory relation with Afrekete begins in the minutiae of Black women's parties and bars, but shifts into a different register as Kitty the Black woman with the almost natural hair becomes Afrekete the goddess: history becomes history of myth."[222] The fictional autobiographical subject is mesmerized by Afrekete as this mythical female figure represents sexuality elevated to the highest potency. The encounter with Afrekete

[219] Wilson, Anna. Op. cit. p. 107.

[220] Lorde, Audre. Op. cit. p. 217.

[221] Ibid. p. 243.

[222] Wilson, Anna. Op. cit. p. 102.

represents the acceptance and recognition of a deeper awareness of the protagonist's self, intensified by this character's sensual presence. If hegemonic society is hostile and aggressive toward marginalized subjects such as black lesbian women, Afrekete embodies a particular reinvention of subjectivity that repudiates white patriarchal paradigms epitomizing the strength of the powerful women that have guided, nurtured, and protected the protagonist in the search for home and community. This encounter challenges the boundaries between the physical and the spiritual domain involving the affirmation and recognition of a black female heritage.

Up to that point, race has been the recurrent difference between the protagonist and her lovers. However, as Afrekete is also black she symbolizes the re-establishment of a connection with the protagonist's black female ancestors. In the narration of the love affair with Afrekete, there are many passages graphed in italics because this mythical female figure is represented in the interface between the material and the sacred dimension and also to differentiate this relationship from the others. In dense poetical language, the narrator-protagonist expresses the sexual fulfillment obtained from this relationship and how Afrekete is envisioned as a goddess: "*The oil and sweat from our bodies kept the fruit liquid, and I massaged it over your thighs and between your breasts until your brownness shone like a light through a veil of the palest green avocado, a mantle of goddess pear that I slowly licked from your skin*."[223] Their lovemaking is represented as a consecrated act performed by two goddesses in a mythical dimension.

[223] Lorde, Audre. Op. cit. p. 251. (Italics in original)

Differently from the sexual interaction with other women, the sexual relation with Afrekete is explicitly detailed: "There were ripe red finger bananas, stubby and sweet, with which I parted your lips gently, to insert the peeled fruit into your grape-purple flower."[224] These sexual scenes convey the woman-to-woman connection with an added element of sensuousness as the lovers use tropical fruits in the consummation of their desire. Tropical fruits are employed as a supplement of mutual satisfaction. Likewise, the female body is portrayed as a source of knowledge and affirmation for black lesbian women. The natural imagery associated to their lovemaking is evocative of the protagonist's mother's homeland. As the protagonist's model of lesbian identity was molded by that first loving, sensuous, nurturing relationship with her mother, the encounter with Afrekete represents an imaginary return to the mother's homeland and also a connection to her foremothers' strength to endure and survive. This encounter is the climax of the narrative as it establishes the idea of home and community the protagonist searches for. Besides offering a sense of home and community, Afrekete establishes a bond between the protagonist's childhood and adulthood, bringing back memories of Gennie and thus reconnecting the protagonist to her first discovery of love.

Afrekete represents a mythical female deity that personifies "*Ma-Liz, DeLois, Louise Briscoe, Aunt Anni, Linda, and Genevieve; MawuLisa, thunder, sky, sun, the great mother of us all; and Afrekete, her youngest daughter, the mischievous linguist, trickster, best-beloved, whom we must all become.*"[225] The presence and power of this mythical female deity interweave with the protagonist's self merging the mythical dimension of

[224] Ibid. p. 249. (Italics in original)

[225] Ibid. p. 255. (Italics in original)

the narrative with the harsh reality of New York, finally establishing the idea of home and community searched for, and reconnecting the fictional autobiographical self to her mother, her childhood, and her mother's homeland. The narrator-protagonist emphasizes the vital role of the women who have crossed her path in search of home and community as the memories of these women allow the redefinition of her notion of self. Moreover, the portrayal of relationships with women from different backgrounds demonstrates that hybridity and difference can indeed lead to the construction of multiple coalitions and identifications for differently situated subjects. In relation to the protagonist's connection to other women, Carole Boyce Davies observes that:

> "The connection between gender and heritage is never really severed by Lorde, as we learn in *Zami.* The legendary women of the extended family become sources of reidentification and allow her to make specific personal and political connections. The politics of Zami-life is seen on a continuum between her female ancestors and the women who sustained her during her departure from her mother's house."[226]

As foreshadowed in the preface, the fictional autobiographical subject's journey is guided by a lineage of women, friends, lovers, and ancestors. The most important of them is Afrekete, represented in the interface between the real and the mythical world. Afrekete is a black lesbian woman and also a nomadic immigrant mother embodying characteristics thought of as contradictory. Afrekete represents the material, textual, and cosmic mother who emerges from the narrative as an intense reflection of diasporic cultural identity. According to Thomson, the protagonist's search for a sense of self is permeated by relationships with other women "beginning with her foremothers and

[226] Davies, Carole Boyce. *Black Women, Writing, and Identity: Migrations of the Subject*. New York: Routledge, 1994. p. 127.

culminating with Afrekete, the black love-goddess figure with whom Audre affirms herself as a Carriacouan, woman-loving poet. By representing these relationships with women, including her mother, as both erotic and constitutive of herself as poet, Lorde connects word and body."[227] After these formative relationships, the protagonist is finally able to piece herself together through the literary transposition of her life journey into fictional autobiographical writing that connects "word and body". The mythical female deity Afrekete and the fictional autobiographical subject embody subjectivities that refute the traditional identity stereotypes assigned to black women. As a result, *Zami* constitutes a life narrative that represents black women as the origin and destiny of their own desires; in the same way, it "manages to point at once to the contingency of art and to the primacy of social codes, making the invisible visible and 'de-doxifying' the doxa."[228]

By the end of the narrative, past, present, and future coalesce through memories, dreams, and voices of all the women that have crossed the protagonist's life. The moon shining on their bodies while they make love for the last time symbolizes female power and autonomy articulating same-sex desire as a positive alternative of existence. Afrekete allows the full awakening of the protagonist's subjectivity. This final encounter contributes to the consolidation of the protagonist's lesbian self-awareness, placing the erotic as a source of creativity, healing, and knowledge through the acceptance and understanding of the wholeness of her diasporic cultural identity. In sum, their relationship fills with love and affection the void of the protagonist's life pointing to the possibility of new ways of existing for marginalized subjects. Even though the

[227] Thomson, Rosemarie Garland. Op. cit. p. 127.

[228] Hutcheon, Linda. Op. cit. p. 29.

relationship with Afrekete is extremely important for the protagonist's construction of cultural identity, it is only a brief affair ending abruptly with Afrekete's departure. Afrekete embodies chance and uncertainty as her appearance is as unexpected as her disappearance: she leaves the protagonist a note saying that she went to Atlanta to perform in a show and visit her mother and daughter. The fictional autobiographical subject simultaneously lets Afrekete go and keeps her in memories: "We had come together like elements erupting into an electric storm, exchanging energy, sharing charge, brief and drenching. Then we parted, passed, reformed, reshaping ourselves the better for the exchange. I never saw Afrekete again, but her print remains upon my life with the resonance and power of an emotional tattoo."[229] Thus, the representation of diasporic cultural identity demonstrates to align with the statement "that all the postmodernist questions of redefinition of the meaning of identity, of home, of linear history, the metanarratives of self and identity are destabilized in the writing of Black women's experiences."[230]

The protagonist's cultural heritage provides a language that transforms her life journey into a work of art as she reveals the meaning of the word "zami". This term comes from the cultural tradition of her mother's homeland, Carriacou, where women who work and live together with other women while their husbands go for seafaring journeys are known as zami. The term singularizes an inescapable double connection between women who cannot simply be called lesbians and also do not exclude sexual

[229] Lorde, Audre. Op. cit. p. 253.

[230] Davies, Carol Boyce. Op. cit. p. 116.

involvement. The term merges the multiple dimensions of the protagonist's diasporic cultural identity. The affirmation of a combination of diverse forms of identity evidences the protagonist's potential to exert agency through self-invention, materialized in the literary reconstruction of her life journey. In the epilogue, the narrator-protagonist recreates through words the women who have guided and protected her along the way: "Their names, selves, faces feed me like corn before labor. I live each of them as a piece of me, and I choose these words with the same grave concern with which I choose to push speech into poetry, the mattering core, the forward visions of all our lives."[231] As voices of women permeate the whole work contributing to the construction of the protagonist's cultural identity, her life narrative represents the performance of both an individual and a collective self, as the process of formation of subjectivity is connected to all the women that have passed through her life.

In the beginning of the journey, the protagonist states that she is a journeywoman whose pieces will become Afrekete. In the last episode, she finally comes to terms with her diasporic cultural identity, irrevocably marked by hybridity and difference. Thus, defying rigid categorizations and classifications, this representation of diasporic cultural identity crosses the borders imposed on the construction of identity by expressing an embodied inscription of desire and also demonstrating that fictional autobiographical writing constitutes a powerful critical tool that can challenge culturally-determined life scripts so as to highlight "marginal" subjects' potential to exert agency through the construction of their own versions of the self.

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[231] Ibid. p. 256.

CONCLUSION

From Silence to Storytelling: The "Margins" Emerge

The bridge I must be
Is the bridge to my own power
I must translate
My own fears
Mediate
My own weakness

I must be the bridge to nowhere
But my true self
And then
I will be useful.

Donna Kate Rushin, "The Bridge Poem"

Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza and *Zami: A New Spelling of My Name, a biomythography* develop representations of diasporic cultural identities that resist and subvert the imposition of limits and borders in the construction of cultural identity, re-envisioning the process of formation of identity so as to grant "marginal" subjects the right to express their voices. In both works, the narrative voices fictionalize the category of experience, the production of knowledge, and the construction of identity as processes intersected by hybridity and difference. Personal and collective stories are merged with the social, political, and historical aspects that regulate the politics of representation of cultural identity through a kind of fictional autobiographical writing that

does not eschew the analysis and exposition of the ideological glosses that shape the constitution of subjectivity. Both narratives articulate representations of diasporic cultural identities as changing and malleable constructs in which several discourses intersect to produce multiple possibilities of identification recognizing that identity is simultaneously informed by the materiality of the body and contextual circumstances. Instead of arguing that representation can be abstracted from corporeality, the narrators construct representations that derive from their lived embodied experience. These representations are simultaneously complete and fragmented, cannot be compartmentalized by inflexible categories and classifications, and cannot be conceived as homogenous entities made up of detached functions; rather, cultural identity and its representation are viewed as relational to the "other" and the world, in a constant process of becoming. Diasporic cultural identities are simultaneously the origin of their discourse and produced by power relations that extend beyond their reach. These representations transcend the framework of binary oppositions that control and normalize representations of identity functioning as counter-discourses to this frame of reference. In addition, these representations vocalize a perspective of heterogeneity without a center, demonstrating that the role of the victim is double-edged, since these identities are not grounded on physical or cultural categories, but draw from them as starting points in the conception of broader versions of the self.

Gloria Anzaldúa's *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza* is a text that exists across several borders; it relates to the material border that separates the United States from Mexico and the psychological, sexual, and spiritual borderland that stretches out far beyond the American Southwest. Fictionally designed as the author's reconstruction of

her life experience at the borderland territory, the text rewrites the history of the Chicano people; the adversities involved in illegal crossings; and Chicana's struggle to survive one national border and multiple cultural limitations. Furthermore, it reestablishes the status of mythical female deities from the borderlands; inquires the spiritual dimension of marginalized subjects' identity; and endorses language hybridity and alternative forms of existence through the development of the *mestiza* consciousness. For the narrator, the border is a metaphorical wound left open. This wound involves dealing with suffering and affliction yet to be healed. The borderlands territory is a space where diverse cultures, sexualities, races, classes, and genders interact, regulated by asymmetrical power relations. In this scenario, the *mestiza* consciousness emerges as the eternal transition of body, mind, and spirit capable of shattering traditional dualistic conceptions in the construction of identity. As the *mestiza* consciousness tolerates ambiguity and transcends borders to replicate hybridity and difference across cultures, this consciousness interrogate predetermined categories of identity and their relation to the politics of representation of cultural identity. This consciousness is created through a continuous process of transformation and adaptation, rather than achieved through already-existing narratives. To develop it, one has to learn a new form of existing – knowing how to live without borders in a constant process of movement and transformation.

In the same way, the Chicano's culture imposition of silence and oppression over Chicanas is questioned through the elevation of the status of mythical female deities from the borderlands as a way to advance a project of resistance, resulting in the production of

situated knowledge. In addition, disclosing the process of knowing and the hidden inner power developed by marginalized subjects, as *la facultad* and the Shadow-Beast, the narrative voice demonstrates to perform the crossing of "inside" and "outside" borders, emphasizing an interface between the material and the extra-sensory world as well as the incorporation of multiple sources of knowledge to the construction of cultural identity.

Another significant issue is the exposition of the hybrid language of the borderlands – Chicano Spanish – as a strategy to overcome cultural and linguistic terrorism. The affirmation of this language allows the recovery of the Chicano people's subjectivity, since to survive the adversities of the borderlands one must learn to be flexible to switch not only between languages but also between multiple and conflicting cultural codes and identifications: "I will no longer be made to feel ashamed of existing. I will have my voice: Indian, Spanish, white. I will have my serpent's tongue – my woman's voice, my sexual voice, my poet's voice. I will overcome the tradition of silence."[232] In the affirmation and recognition of multiple and marginalized voices that constitute her diasporic cultural identity, the fictional autobiographical self acknowledges hybridity, difference, ambivalence, and ambiguity as important constitutive parts to the formation of subjectivity struggling to overcome subservience and alienation.

In her turn, in Audre Lorde's *Zami: A New Spelling of my Name, a biomythography*, the narrator-protagonist delineates the journey in search of a home and community where her diasporic cultural identity would be fully acknowledged; the

[232] Anzaldúa, Gloria. Op. cit. p. 81.

reconstruction of the experience with her mother; the gradual process of understanding racism; the awareness of the construction of subjectivity as a form of situated knowledge; and the formative experiences with the women that helped find the way home. The fictional autobiographical subject develops a sharp awareness of her diasporic cultural identity in a racist, homophobic, patriarchal world. The themes of oppression and discrimination are prevailing as the narrator illustrates the multiple injustices suffered in the hegemonic American culture. These experiences accumulated enough rage to struggle for change in the form of fictional autobiographical writing. As the awareness of being different has profound effects on Lorde's life story, the transcendence of the hegemonic, compulsory, heterosexual framework is visualized as a source of joy and a gesture of self-government.

During her childhood, the protagonist did not understand the meaning of racism as nobody had ever discussed it in her family. Consequently, this silence produces negative effects on the way she perceives herself and relates to the others. Due to this silence, the protagonist faces the world unconscious of her positioning in the social setting, growing up with a falsified version of reality created by her mother, until she was finally able to reach a deeper understanding of herself. Since the protagonist struggles against a culture that disregards constitutive aspects of her diasporic cultural identity, the construction of her cultural identity demonstrates to be relational, situated, and manipulated according to circumstances: as an African-American, she is disregarded and excluded; as a woman, she is expected to be submissive and silent; and as a lesbian, she is considered an undesirable deviation. The combination of all these forms of oppression

and marginalization results in the inability to fully understand herself until she finds home and community and fulfill the omitted spaces of the self by giving voice to cultural silences.

The protagonist strives for empowerment overcoming diverse obstacles to perform her own version of identity; she attains this despite the restrictions imposed by the hegemonic American culture. By the end of the journey, she acknowledges that her diasporic cultural identity is an amalgamation of all the women she has encountered through life, and this realization permits the enunciation of a new spelling of her name – as a zami. With this new spelling of her name, she pays tribute to all women that contributed to the construction of her sense of self: "in those years my life had become increasingly a bridge and field of women."[233] This interconnection of women becomes the new interpretation of herself that finally allows her to enjoy the protection, solace, and nurturance that the idea of home conveys. Therefore, home and community are no longer a distant intangible place; they are personified in Afrekete and finally materialized into the fictional transposition of her life story.

By presenting the fictional reconstruction of experience, the production of knowledge through the representation of cultural identity, and the construction of subjectivity performed by an intersection of categories, both works demonstrate that cultural identity cannot be rigidly compartmentalized by classificatory systems. The representations of diasporic cultural identities succeed in subverting the mechanisms of

[233] Lorde, Audre. Op. cit. p. 255.

the politics of representation of cultural identities that assign them a pre-determined subaltern role by showing that characteristics considered as “inferior” are indeed liberating when subjects have the potential to exert agency. In this way, characteristics generally associated to marginalized subjects such as “intuition” and “passion”, for instance, can indeed be liberating to the extent that they allow subjects to value every constitutive part of their subjectivities. The location of the subject in the socio-cultural setting; a sense of individuality performed through the potential to exert agency; and the way power relations concerning language can limit the acquisition of knowledge and understanding about the self are all factors involved in the politics of representation of cultural identities. Therefore, through the investigation of this politics, the mechanisms that perpetuate the subaltern position assigned to the “other” can be revealed and dismantled. In my analysis of representations of diasporic cultural identities in fictional autobiographical writings, I tried to demonstrate that representations are shaped through situated and relational processes, rather than determined by a “universal” paradigm.

In relation to the politics of representation of cultural identity, there are two theoretical positions believed to be diametrically opposite and contradictory. On the one hand, an essentialist standpoint on the formation of identity asserts a strong conviction on intrinsic transhistorical subjectivity. On the other hand, a constructionist position emphasizes that identities are multiple, fluid, and continually shaped in relation to the social, political, and cultural contexts in which they are located. In this way, it is specifically in relation to the mark of difference, which the “other” is thought to carry, that the impasse between essentialist and constructionist perspectives on the construction

of identity revolves. Diana Fuss exposes how these perspectives are in fact embedded into one another. As a considerable amount of criticism is directed against essentialism, Fuss discusses the limitations of constructionist thinking: "It is difficult to see how constructionism can be constructionism without a fundamental dependency upon essentialism."[234] Her argument against the critique to an essentialist perspective focuses on the hindrances of seeing these standpoints as completely opposite and contradictory to each other:

> "It is important not to forget that essence is a sign, and as such historically contingent and constantly subject to change and to redefinition. Historically, we have never been very confident of the definition of essence, nor have we been very certain that the definition of essence is to be the definitional. The deconstruction of essentialism, rather than putting essence to rest, simply raises the discussion to a more sophisticated level, leaps the analysis up to another register, above all, keeps the sign of essence in play, even if (indeed because) it is continually held under erasure."[235]

Fuss's argument relates to the illusion of the essentialist/constructionist binary. The main setback with constructionist criticism to essentialism is that it assumes an essentialist stance itself regarding the issue of "essence" as a fixed characteristic not influenced by change. Constructionist critiques consider the category of essence as "always already" immediately manifest, apparent, and transparent. Thus, constructionist criticism to essentialism is faulty to the extent that it denies the possibility of difference and hybridity in an essentialist perspective, insisting on viewing this perspective as eternally stable and unalterable. In this way, constructionist stances can be seen to

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[234] Fuss, Diana. *Essentially Speaking: Feminism, Nature, & Difference*. New York: Routledge, 1989. p. 4.

[235] Ibid. p. 20 – 21.

operate supported on an essence of the "always already" embedded in its language. Therefore, affirmation of an essentialist perspective would rely mainly on a subject's choice of what "essence" to assume; whereas, affirmation of a constructionist perspective would expose the difficulty of defining identity as it is a multiple construct dependent upon a variety of aspects. Fuss argues that an essential characteristic of constructionism is the perception of "where I stand", that is, what is denominated as "subject-positions."[236] Thus, constructionist perspectives demonstrate again to be supported and operate on a kind of essentialism as it relegates all explanations to the construction of identity to subject positions.

In *Borderlands/La Frontera*, the narrative voice succeeds in overcoming the boundaries between constructionist and essentialist perspectives pointing to subjects' self-awareness of their location: "a seeing of ourselves in our true guises and not as the false racial personality that has been given to us and that we have given to ourselves."[237] Living a borderland existence, the narrator finds herself at the crossroads of multiple cultures. However, instead of seeing a fundamental opposition in these cultures, she conceives her existence as whole in its fragmentariness. In the same way, in *Zami*, the narrator-protagonist refuses to confine herself even provisionally to any essence of her diasporic cultural identity: "It was a while before we came to realize that our place was the very house of difference rather the security of any one particular difference."[238] It is not only the interaction with people of her own cultural background that complements

[236] Ibid. p. 29.

[237] Anzaldúa, Gloria. Op. cit. p. 109.

[238] Lorde, Audre. Op. cit. p. 226.

and satisfies the protagonist, but also the realization that there are other cultures, other ways of being different. Moreover, as both fictional autobiographical subjects perform the disruption of a binary frame of reference in the politics of representation of cultural identity, they are finally able to accept and understand that hybridity and difference do not necessarily mean inferiority and defectiveness, but are integral parts of the self. As a result, the representations of diasporic cultural identities are not simply the byproduct of crossing geographic borders, since they represent intricate subjective configurations in which complex processes of identification and misidentification take place.

Therefore, Anzaldúa and Lorde project representations of diasporic cultural identities, at the same time, resistant and "marginal" to the hegemonic culture to the extent that they do not accept the constructionist perspective that denies their multiple essences, nor do they allow a single unified essence to constitute the exclusive configuration of their cultural identities. Neither essentialist nor constructionist – instead both – the authors are everything at once: essentialist in the recognition of their multiple constitutive essences, and constructionist in the recognition of the variety of aspects that shape their essences. The representations of diasporic cultural identities developed in the texts articulate constructed essences that demonstrate a profound understanding of the embodied experience and the multiple forces that structure it. Both authors construct representations of "marginal" identities forced into silence and invisibility in diverse ways. However, through the fictionalization of their life narratives they struggle to overcome the tradition of silence and obscurantism. The representation of these fictional

subjectivities engages in the redefinition of the paradigms that control and regulate the politics of representation of cultural identity to create transformative knowledges.

As representations of diasporic cultural identities are formed through ambivalence and ambiguity, the authors use fiction to rewrite history and subjectivity from a "marginal" perspective. They do not relate their life stories to a strict correspondence with unequivocal facts. However, the position from the "margins" provides them with a privileged perspective to question the ideological glosses embedded in the politics of representation of cultural identity. Since fiction is ambiguous, as it inhabits an interstitial space between fantasy and reality, it articulates what cannot be conveyed by empirical facts. As fiction is not intended to correspond faithfully to reality, it avoids the danger of empiricism, which asserts complete conviction in its ability to produce knowledge and establish the "truth", disavowing other forms of knowledge. By blurring the limits between fact and fiction, the authors break down the barrier between themselves and the reader creating a shared experience that points to the interconnectedness of all subjects. Therefore, fiction reveals the possibility of envisioning imagined realities.

It is the ability to reinvent themselves through fictional autobiographical writing that unites the authors across multiple boundaries as they fight against oppression, alienation, and exclusion through a resolute commitment to self-invention. In their fictional journeys, the autobiographical subjects search for an understanding of their diasporic cultural identities exploring "border" crossings from diverse perspectives. In my analysis, I tried to demonstrate material and symbolic forms of border crossing in

opposition to the conception of the "universal" disembodied subject. The texts perform representations of a nomadic migratory subject, who smuggles ideas across borders, as a producer of "subaltern" transformative knowledge. Ultimately, they try to articulate their positioning claiming that subjects must struggle for the right to discover who they are and who they wish to be without having to subdue to the predetermined roles imposed by the hegemonic culture.

The features of hybridity and difference are present in both works highlighting cultural miscegenation and the emergence of new ways of existing. These features can be detected in the texts in terms of form, content, style, and theme that converge to the possibility of cross-cultural identifications. Therefore, it is necessary to shed light on the life stories of "marginal" subjects that would otherwise have remained silenced and omitted in the undergrounds of literary history. Only through the recognition of difference, it is possible for individuality to exist so as to allow the full development of the subject. As *Borderlands/La Frontera* and *Zami: A New Spelling of My Name* endure the test of time, they will offer readers the possibility of reshaping traditional interpretations of cultural identities so that they may discover that restricting their perspectives to seeing difference only as an obstacle or threat hinders the possibility of contact with a whole system of "other" knowledge. *Borderlands/La Frontera* and *Zami: A New Spelling of my Name* demonstrate to perform ethics and aesthetics intertwined advancing a system of meanings and values that does not claim "universal" validity; rather, it demands the enactment of the particularity and specificity of one's own

perspective disseminating the idea of heterogeneity without a "center" and installing conditions of participation for marginalized voices.

However, one may argue that only marginalized subjects are able to produce adequate analysis of representations of "marginal" cultural identities. In this way, would it imply that to criticize dominant hegemonic systems of oppression such as patriarchy, compulsory heterosexuality, capitalism, racism, and colonialism, through the analysis of representations of diasporic cultural identities, one has necessarily to exist at the "margins" as a woman of color, for example? Likewise, would it be the case that men are excluded from the field of feminist criticism? I disagree with these positions since *every* subject is able to develop a *mestiza* consciousness, then anyone, man or woman, white or of color, rich or poor, straight or queer, have the capacity to criticize hegemonic systems of oppression through the analysis of representations of cultural identities. Above all, does not every subject, at some point in life, feel "torn between ways"[239] as *la mestiza*? In the same way, do not asymmetrical power relations, discourse, and cultural exchanges influence the constitution of every subject in particular ways? In *Borderlands/La Frontera*, the narrative voice declares: "Men, even more than women, are fettered to gender roles. Women at least have had the guts to break out of bondage. Only gay men have had the courage to expose themselves to the woman inside them and to challenge the current masculinity"[240] This passage is of great importance as it relates to my own situated perspective as a queer identified subject analyzing representations of cultural identities in literary discourse. Men attempting to question the hegemonic, compulsory,

[239] Anzaldúa, Gloria. Op. cit. p. 100.

[240] Ibid. p. 106.

heterosexual, patriarchal, white culture, whether straight or queer, are extremely rare and have never been readily accepted, since they are viewed as second-rate, derisory, worthless outsiders. To question this conception, I tried in my investigation to cross the boundaries of identity politics founded strictly on physical and biological criteria to the extent that I believe nobody is born inherently superior or inferior. Systems of value and classifications are imposed on individuals so they are expected to subdue to the performance of certain roles according to what is socially accepted. Therefore, the inferior position assigned to "marginal" subjects can in fact be reconstructed, since identity is constituted as subjects learn only in relation to the "other" how to assume particular forms of existence deriving meaning associated to values and regulations. It is therefore fundamental to unlearn old ways of being to visualize versions of the self that would be more inclusive and aware of the process of coming into existence.

Finally, it necessary to mention that in the process of writing this dissertation one of the most challenging tasks that confronted me was going beyond the binary system of opposition embedded in the politics of representation of cultural identity. Finding the adequate words to define marginalized identities became a rather complex task. In relation to the process of writing, it was constantly necessary to reevaluate my arguments to verify if they had not incurred in the establishment of a fixed unified position. By revising theoretical positions, one can avoid the danger of crystallizing an inflexible and authoritarian perspective. In this way, establishing a conclusion becomes a challenge, since it may be viewed as a way to crystallize meaning to fictional autobiographical writings that emphasize subjects' potential to exert agency through self-invention and the

crossing of multiple boundaries. Therefore, any absolute conclusion to the texts will be unfinished, as they construct representations of diasporic cultural identities that perform an ever-changing existence in a constant process of rewriting. Thus, I would like to come to an end with the poem that Anzaldúa's poetical voice enacts the performance of the new *mestiza* consciousness, which summarizes the conception of a Borderlands existence:

To live in the Borderlands means you

are neither *hispana india negra espanola*
ni gabacha, eres mestiza, mulata, half-breed
caught in the crossfire between camps
while carrying all five races on your back
not knowing which side to turn to, run from;

To live in the Borderlands means

knowing that the *india* in you, betrayed for 500 years,
is no longer speaking to you,
that *mexicanas* call you *rajetas*,
that denying the Anglo inside you
is as bad as having denied the Indian or Black;

Cuando vives en la frontera

people walk through you, the wind steals your voice,
you're a *burra, buey*, scapegoat,
forerunner of a new race,
half and half – both woman and man, neither –
a new gender;

To live in the Borderlands means to

put *chile* in the borscht,
eat whole wheat *tortillas*,
speak Tex-Mex with a Brooklyn accent;
be stopped by *la migra* at the border checkpoints;

Living in the Borderlands means you fight hard to

resist the gold elixir beckoning from the bottle,
the pull of the gun barrel,
the rope crushing the hollow of your throat;

In the Borderlands

you are the battleground
where enemies are kin to each other;
you are at home, a stranger,
the border disputes have been settled
the volley of shots have shattered the truce
you are wounded, lost in action
dead, fighting back;

To live in the Borderlands means

the mill with the razor white teeth wants to shred off
your olive-red skin, crush out the kernel, your heart
pound you pinch you roll you out
smelling like white bread but dead;

To survive the Borderlands

you must live *sin fronteras*
be a crossroads.[241]

[241] Anzaldúa, Gloria. Op. cit. p. 216 – 217.

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