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## Migration and Trauma: Memory and the Myths of El Otro Lado

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MIGRATION AND TRAUMA: MEMORY AND THE MYTHS OF EL OTRO LADO

by

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A THESIS

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For the Degree of Master of Arts

Major: English

Under the Supervision of Professor Amelia María de la Luz Montes

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# MIGRATION AND TRAUMA: MEMORY AND THE MYTHS OF EL OTRO LADO

Elva Moreno Del Rio, MA

University of Nebraska, 2022

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This thesis is composed of two parts that scrutinize the myth of the United States and el cuento of El Otro Lado. The first part titled, “The Illness Rooted in the American Myth” connects the U.S. myth to J. Hector St. John de Crevecoeur’s piece *Letters from an American Farmer*, published in 1782. In analyzing the writings of Toni Morrison, James Baldwin, and Eden E. Torres, I identify the impact that Crevecoeur’s myth had on Black, Indigenous and other people of color. This research illustrates the physical and psychological effects that these ideologies have on the mind and body of the marginalized. For part two, I use Gloria Anzaldúa’s theory to further analyze memory, trauma, and los cuentos in Reyna Grande’s *The Distance Between Us*. I am specifically using this in relation to the myths told to young migrants of El Otro Lado to depict the United States. It is for this reason that I am focusing on the cuentos in this book as it further complicates the narratives of El Otro Lado and the effects of these cuentos on the mind and body.

*Dedicado a mi madre y mi padre.*

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## **Part I: The Illness Rooted in the American Myth**

In “The Discovery of What it Means to be American,” an essay published in 1961, James Baldwin states that “Every society is really governed by hidden laws, by unspoken but profound assumptions on the part of the people, and ours is no exception” (184). This hidden law that has governed the United States since its early colonizers is an American myth. This myth swept through socio-political norms through writings, creating a canonical ideology of the United States. The American Myth consists of celebrating the ones who fought for their freedom and their following generations. “A whole tradition of ‘universal’ yearnings collapsed into that well-fondled phrase, ‘the American Dream,’” as Toni Morrison describes (33). In particular, J. Hector St. John de Crevecoeur, a French immigrant, defines what an American is, even though he was newly arrived. Not only does he define what it means to be an American, but he also reminds the reader who can or who cannot be a part of this great society. This great society is an idea that strongly supports patriarchy, white supremacy, and hierarchy. These ideas infected the population’s mind and body, later inflicting terror among those who are excluded. In his essay, “Notes of a Native Son,” James Baldwin uses hatred as a metaphor for this illness in the United States. An explanation of Crevecoeur’s essay through Toni Morrison’s scholarship demonstrates the illness that led authors such as Baldwin and Eden E. Torres to “fight” against the anger within.

I begin this thesis with J. Hector St. John Crevecoeur<sup>1</sup> who was born in Normandy, France and, as I point out, contributed to the shaping of the North American

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<sup>1</sup> Despite creating this fictional idea of the United States, J. Hector St. John Crevecoeur ended up returning to France in 1790 (Moore).

identity in his *Letters from an American Farmer* in 1782. Shortly after the American Revolution and the signing of the Declaration of Independence, this reading shaped the early mythology of the thirteen colonies. In particular, in “Letter III-What is an American,” Crèvecoeur explicitly defined the North American as a useful citizen of the New World, shaping the idea of the American Dream and defining the people who have the potential of achieving this dream. In her book, *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination*, Toni Morrison describes the following characteristics as being a part of U.S. canonical literature: patriarchy, individualism, and the development of whiteness. Throughout his writing, Crèvecoeur clearly demonstrates the “major and championed characteristics” of the nation's early literature as explained by Morrison. Throughout this, Crèvecoeur focuses on the Englishman who are capable of achieving these dreams for themselves and their families. The patriarchy is the only one able to make correct choices for the family, and thus, for the government: “The greatest political error the crown ever committed in America, was to cut off men from a country which wanted nothing but men!” Crèvecoeur’s exclamation directly focuses on the white cisgendered male as the ones with power. “Here they rank as citizens,” he states, defining who is a citizen and what constitutes a citizen and the freedom and liberties these citizens are able and capable of enjoying. These men are the only ones with the ability to control the land, and are even capable of expanding their property and making the family into a useful one in society. “Here individuals of all nations are melted into a new race of men, whose labours and posterity will one day cause great changes in the world” (Crèvecoeur).

To make these changes, this new American man must understand the importance of individualism because for Crèvecoeur “self interest” is the basis of nature

(Crevecoeur). This “American farmer”—as he was known—encouraged “making room for more industrious people, who will finish their improvements, convert the longhouse into a convenient habitation” and “change in a few years that hitherto barbarous country in a fertile, well regulated district” (Crevecoeur). It is in this writing that Crevecoeur constitutes a myth of the possibilities of the New World for men who are willing to take their destiny into their own hands. “Power—control of one’s own destiny—would replace the powerlessness felt before the gates of class, caste, and cunning persecution” (Morrison 35). Crevecoeur implies that being a man in America not only means freedom, but also that one will have power.

This power was reflected through the ideas that man is better than what is considered to be the Other, creating a hierarchy between man and environment. These newly arrived Europeans were already considered “true American freeholders” (Crevecoeur). To continue to tame the “barbarous country,” these men believed they had the authority to protect their land and freedom. To describe this, Crevecoeur includes a metaphor relating man and wilderness:

By living in or near the woods, their actions are regulated by the wilderness of the neighbourhood. The deer often come to eat their grain, the wolves to destroy their sheep, the bears to kill their hogs, the foxes to catch their poultry. This surrounding hostility immediately puts the gun into their hands; they watch these animals, they kill some; and thus by defending their property, they soon become professed hunters; this is the progress; once hunters, farewell to the plough. (Crevecoeur)

The animals in this metaphor must be tamed and controlled or even killed as if it is a requirement to “regulate” the animals that settlers cannot tame. At the end of his essay, Crèvecoeur points out the importance of a home, a property, and the animals that can be domesticated. This colonization of property demonstrates the fear of powerlessness, or as Toni Morrison points out: “fear of loneliness, of aggression both external and internal” (37). This is power over what is considered the Other. In her book *Playing in the Dark*, Toni Morrison points out that major themes of American literature, including “autonomy, authority, newness, and difference, absolute power,” are “activated by a complex awareness and employment of constituted Africanism” (44). In addition, settlers believed that they had to protect what they believed was their land, especially from Native Americans. In other sections of this essay, Crèvecoeur dehumanizes Native Americans by describing them as “half civilised, half savages” (Crèvecoeur). In addition, Crèvecoeur describes enslaved human beings as a commodity: “the houses, the inhabitants, the negroes, and carriages: everything appeared equally new to him; and we went slow, in order to give him time to feed on this pleasing variety” (Crèvecoeur) indicating everything in the New World is there to be controlled and used as the settlers wished. Therefore, the writer excluded Native Americans and enslaved Africans from his own definition of who is an American. It is this continuous need for autonomy and authority over Black, Indigenous and people of color that remains in the U.S.

The American dream that is defined throughout Crèvecoeur’s essay mostly focused on wealth and whiteness. “American means white,” states Toni Morrison (45). Crèvecoeur begins his mythology of the American as one with limitless opportunities in the “new continent”: “We have no princes, for whom we toil, starve, and bleed: we are

the most perfect society now existing in the world. Here man is free as he ought to be; nor is this pleasing equality so transitory as many others are.” His idea of a “perfect society” can only be shaped by “a mixture of English, Scotch, Irish, French, Dutch, Germans, and Swedes” (Crèvecoeur). Therefore, this transition from being an Englishman into an American is an easy one. There is no such thing as assimilation or dehumanization. In his essay, Crèvecoeur makes it seem like these immigrants did not have to go through any losses. The only losses they experience are the oppressions of the Old World: “poverty, prison, social ostracism, and, not infrequently, death” (Morrison 34). If an immigrant is white and from Europe, they had the opportunity to become American. It is this whiteness that allowed the automatic American citizenship and the freedom that came with it. “Whatever the reasons, the attraction was of the ‘clean slate’ variety, a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity not only to be born again but to be born again in new clothes, as it were. The new setting would provide new raiments of self” (Morrison 34). This mythology that only white immigrants from Europe should be considered citizens in the United States has greatly affected the following generations in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. It is a mythology that was created and defined on the basis of fear.

Twentieth-century American writer James Baldwin describes the denial and exclusion of African Americans to become citizens in the United States and the resulting inability to attain freedom and power over their destiny. In his essay, “Notes of a Native Son,” Baldwin uses illness as a metaphor to describe the hatred that the American myth has injected. In this essay, Baldwin identifies and describes his feelings as an illness.

Even though Baldwin noticed this illness, or hatred, in his father, it took him the loss of innocence to become conscious of the policies that defined him as “the other.”

At the beginning of the essay, James Baldwin describes to the reader his father’s internal conflict as “a disease of the mind [that] allowed the disease of his body to destroy him” (140). Baldwin later mentions that his father had tuberculosis, an infectious disease that affected his lungs. His father’s main illness was the distrust he had toward his family and white people, which Baldwin described as the “disease of the mind.” Baldwin also describes this as “hating and fearing every living soul including his children who betrayed him, too, by reaching toward the world which had despised him” (141). Due to this illness, Baldwin’s father discouraged him from trusting white people: “The best thing was to have as little to do with them as possible” (142). And Baldwin was certain that in his innocence, he would never feel the same way towards white people.

However, Baldwin quickly realized his father’s feelings whenever he was reminded of his skin color and, therefore, his exclusion from being an American. While he is in New Jersey, Baldwin identifies the resulting hatred as a disease that he has finally noticed within himself:

That year in New Jersey lives in my mind as though it were the year during which, having an unsuspected predilection for it, I first contracted some dread, chronic disease, the unfailing symptom of which is a kind of blind fever, a pounding in the skull and fire in the bowels. Once this disease is contracted, one can never be really carefree again, for the fever, without an instant’s warning, can recur at any moment. It can wreck more important things than race relations. There is not Negro alive who does not have this rage in his blood—one has the

choice, merely of living with it consciously or surrendering to it. As for me, this fever has recurred in me, and will until the day I die. (Baldwin 143)

It is as if he diagnosed himself, describing the hatred as a chronic disease, one that is so painful and overpowering that it causes blindness. This disease has the possibility of not allowing him to have control over his mind and body. He continues to describe the illness as one that is detected and identified in other African Americans in the United States. He describes the hopelessness of this disease as one that does not have a cure. At the time, Baldwin believed that his illness did not have a cure because of the U.S. white supremacist myth that was upheld by institutions that discriminated and dehumanized anyone who was not white and from specific countries in Europe.

Baldwin describes the symptoms that lead to his own inability to understand his body and mind and, if left unchecked, can lead to the destruction of the self. He demonstrates anger and rage whenever he feels he is dehumanized in society. He particularly describes this pain as one he can physically feel: “And I felt, like a physical sensation, a click at the nape of my neck as though some interior string connecting my head to my body had been cut. I began to walk” (144). He repeatedly went to diners to try to get served and he was repeatedly told the “formula.”<sup>2</sup> It seemed that he did not want to accept that he was not going to be treated as if he belonged in the world. Most importantly, he did not want his father to be right about the humiliation that he would experience around white supremacists. When he finally realized his sickness, he ended up

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<sup>2</sup> In the essay, “Notes of a Native Son,” James Baldwin states: So I pretended not to have understood her, hoping to draw her closer. And she did step a very short step closer, with her pencil poised incongruously over her pad, and repeated the formula: “. . . don’t serve Negroes here” (145).

attacking white people. In this essay, Baldwin describes the violent act that he committed while feeling the rage:

She ducked and it missed her and shattered against the mirror behind the bar.

And, with that sound, my frozen blood abruptly thawed, I returned from wherever I had been, I saw, for the first time, the restaurant, the people with their mouths open, already, as it seemed to me, rising as one man, and I realized what I had done, and where I was, and I was frightened. I rose and began running for the door. (Baldwin 145)

The hatred within disconnected his mind and body. This led him not only to lose the control of his actions, but also to lose control of the time. Creative writer and professor Sarah Fawn Montgomery also discusses the disruption of time caused by illness “mental illness alters your sense of time,” she stated after being asked about the time between her first panic attack and her diagnosis.<sup>3</sup> In Baldwin’s case, he lost track of time while he felt the pain and rage that was induced by the white supremacist institutions around him. Baldwin frequently replayed the incident, “over and over and over again, the way one relives an automobile accident after it has happened and one finds oneself alone and safe” (145). The repetition of the scenes forced him to disrupt time and focus on his imagination: “I saw nothing very clearly but I did see this: that my life, *real* life, was in danger, and not from anything other people might do but from the hatred I carried in my own heart” (Baldwin 145). The realization arrives that he is the one who has to deal with

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<sup>3</sup> This interview was released on April 8, 2019 by *The Pell Center*. Sarah Fawn Montgomery was invited by “Story in the Public Square” at Salve Regina University to discuss her latest book, *Quite Mad: An American Pharma Memoir* (2018) (“April 8, 2019: Sarah Fawn Montgomery”).

the hatred that he is doing this to himself. His own reaction to racism is the cause of illness. This racism is encouraged and created in the American myth.

Following the description of the illness, its symptoms, and pain, Baldwin continues to describe the possible cures for this illness. He states that “one has to blot so much out of the mind—and the heart—that this hatred itself becomes an exhausting and self-destructive pose” (Baldwin 155). He mentioned that there were two possible cures: amputation or gangrene.<sup>4</sup> This gangrene may lead to numbness, one that restricts a particular part of the body to feel or to try to understand those around them (“What is gangrene?”). Baldwin even encourages one to pay attention to one's symptoms or run the “risk of swelling up slowly, in agony, with poison” (155). The poison is the hatred in the mind and heart caused by racism in the United States. In *Beloved*, Toni Morrison closely describes this poison: “It was the jungle whitefolks planted in them. And it grew. It spread. In, through and after life, it spread, until it invaded the whites who had made it” (234). Morrison describes this as if it was the American myth that white people created and romanticized. “[It] touched them every one. Changed and altered them. Made them bloody, silly, worse than even they wanted to be, so scared were they of the jungle they had made. The screaming baboon lived under their own white skin; the red gums were their own” (234). The American myth clearly affects everyone in the United States. James Baldwin was able to realize that this hatred placed him and those around him in danger whenever he was close to being killed or close to killing someone else. Finally, Baldwin tells the reader that there are two ideas that may cure this poison. Either one

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<sup>4</sup> According to John Hopkins Medicine, gangrene is a “dangerous and potentially fatal condition that happens when the blood flow to a large area of tissue is cut off” (“What is gangrene?”).

accepts life as it is, or “one must never, in one’s own life, accept these injustices as commonplace but must fight them with all one’s strength” (156). The language that James Baldwin uses to describe how to cure or heal the illness is common.

In her book *Illness as Metaphor and AIDS and Its Metaphors*, Susan Sontag references many authors that romanticized illness and the language that was and is used to describe illness. She specifically points out the military metaphors used to describe illness. In his essay, Baldwin states: “This fight begins, however, in the heart and it now had been laid to my charge to keep my own heart free of hatred and despair” (156). By describing his illness as a battle he needs to fight, Baldwin also uses military metaphors that Sontag describes and objects to in her book.

When describing tuberculosis, Susan Sontag mentions that this is a “disease that individualizes, that sets a person in relief against the environment” (*Illness as Metaphor* 37). One can directly state that U.S. mythology has created a “disease that individualizes, that sets a person in relief against the environment” (37). This connection with Crèvecoeur’s early essays can remind us that individualism and colonization of the land and the surrounding environment has been a value that the United States boasts about. Sontag uses Karl Menninger’s “more recent formulation” where he states that “illness is in part what the world has done to a victim, but in a larger part is what the victim has done with his world, and with himself. . .” (Menninger 42). This can be connected with the relationship between human beings and the political environment. This relationship between the body and the world is one that is very frequently related to illness as a metaphor. Sontag is particularly critical of the political language of illness. The military metaphors are ones that she believes must be retired (*Illness as Metaphor* 182). “More

recently, the fight against cancer has sounded like a colonial war—with similarly vast appropriations of government money—and in a decade when colonial wars haven't gone too well, this militarized rhetoric seems to be backfiring" (*Illness as Metaphor* 66).

During the twentieth century, James Baldwin was fighting a colonial war that was funded by the U.S. government. The war on drugs was briefly mentioned during the Civil Rights Movement, but it became a full force against African American men under Ronald Reagan.

The criminalization of Black men was another factor that is included in the war that the United States had towards the people that white supremacist believed should be controlled. Sontag does mention that "Illnesses [has] always been used as metaphors to enliven charges that a society was corrupt or unjust" (72). At the beginning of his essay, James Baldwin describes this nationwide phenomenon as an apocalypse: "I had declined to believe in that apocalypse which had been central to my father's vision; very well, life seemed to be saying, here is something that will certainly pass for an apocalypse until the real thing comes along" (137). This idea of an "apocalypse" is another factor that Sontag criticizes: "That even an apocalypse can be made to seem part of the ordinary horizon of expectation constitutes an unparalleled violence that is being done to our sense of reality, to our humanity" (*Illness as Metaphor* 181). Even though Susan Sontag is focused on the illness that crosses boundaries (especially borders), James Baldwin describes the illness of hate as one that also crosses boundaries. This boundary is the hatred of white supremacists towards human beings that are considered the "other." Therefore, the unjust judicial system was specifically created to target Black communities. These white supremacist institutions are killing the people, and inflicting this disease on them. "This

relation prohibits, simply, anything as uncomplicated and satisfactory as pure hatred” (Baldwin 155). Once again, the myth that the *Other* needs to be controlled, especially if they are not white, was upheld by legislators and their policies during the twentieth century. Even though it seemed much easier to hate the “white world [which] is too powerful, too complacent, too ready with gratuitous humiliation, and above all, too ignorant and too innocent,” Baldwin finds it better to battle this internal fight (155). But Susan Sontag reminds us that “We are not being invaded. The body is not a battlefield” (*Illness as Metaphor* 183). And yet, both Toni Morrison and James Baldwin describe their own body as one that has been infected with hatred.

Similarly, in *Chicana Without Apology: The New Chicana Cultural Studies*, Edén E. Torres uses military metaphor to describe a similar oppression as a never-ending battle. “We must learn to live knowing the battle will never be completely over, knowing that no human being is pain-free” (Torres 46). Like Baldwin, Torres also encourages the reader to go through this internal fight and be conscious of the past in order to heal from the present that was shaped by the American myth.

In the chapter titled “Anguished Past, Troubled Present: The Savagery and Promise of Traumatic Memory,” Edén Torres starts her main argument by introducing the scholarship of Mary Clearing Sky, a Native American and psychologist. Clearing Sky’s research and description of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) includes the historic trauma in Native American communities. Torres used this theory and extended it to include the connection between the self and history and to “show how this past trauma comingles with contemporary racism, ethnocentrism, sexism, classism, and homophobia” in communities (Torres 15). Most importantly, this trauma leads one to feel hatred and

bitterness towards the self and others—as we noticed in Baldwin’s essay. Torres, however, accepts this hatred and bitterness. She advocates that we must “express this anger constructively” (Torres 42). “But simply blaming (rather than identifying and expressing our feelings) fuels the anger, turns it inward, and keeps it from dissipating” (42). Reflecting on the self and one’s anger allows the possibility of growth: “If we hold people and institutions accountable for their actions, rather than simply blaming, we are opening the door to possibilities, to negotiation and problem solving” (42). Therefore, it is important to be conscious of one’s own mind, body, and spirit to be able to identify and heal from the trauma.

As Ana Castillo describes it, “[In non-western thinking] the body is never separate from the spirit or mind . . .” (156). Torres adds that if “A disturbance to, or assault on, any of the four parts of a person will push the center or the core Self off balance” (18). This is exactly what happened with James Baldwin whenever he was in the middle of a large group of white people and he felt the pain on his neck disconnecting the mind from the body. This disconnection disturbed him from his own peace. As Baldwin was able to understand his relationship with his father, Baldwin was able to reflect on his historical and personal memories that led him to the hatred that he felt in his mind/body and heart. Early in “Notes of a Native Son,” Baldwin states that his father’s mother was born into slavery, and his own father was the first generation of free men (138). His father quickly experienced his own trauma, oppression, and loss; especially as he realized the oppression that his own family went through. His father did experience the Old Country—the racist South—before moving to the North after 1919 (138). This trauma might not have allowed him to understand how he can live through his childhood,

adolescence, and adulthood—especially as a first generation of free men. At the beginning of his essay, Baldwin states “When his life had ended I began to wonder about that life and also, in a new way, to be apprehensive about my own” (137). The loss of his father both allowed him to understand the life that his father lived and how he would live the rest of his own life. It is here, where Baldwin lets the reader know that he is conscious of his own father’s oppression and trauma.

Edén E. Torres is critical of the trauma that is passed on from one generation to another. The process of dealing with shame, pain, and oppression within hierarchical structures can lead to unresolved trauma. “The inability to experience intimacy, to feel or give love unconditionally can spread across the community as it is expressed in violence toward others—(re)creating trauma for all those involved” (Torres 37). In “Notes of a Native Son,” Baldwin is clearly affected by the lack of emotion that his father has towards his children and the community. In Baldwin’s case, he re-created the hate towards white people whenever he was surrounded by them. The realization of his surrounding population triggered him, leading him to express that rage. It is as if Baldwin was ready to demonstrate the same shame and pain that he was forced to go through every time he was denied a seat or a meal at a restaurant. Even though Torres agrees with the anger that people feel, she still believes in the “constructive release of anger,” which results in identifying and expressing the feelings (42). Baldwin describes how painful this is: “I imagine that one of the reasons people cling to their hates so stubbornly is because they sense, once hate is gone, that they will be forced to deal with pain” (148). And Torres states that this “Denial and unrealistic perceptions are well-known features of both addiction and the inability to deal with pain” (25). Later on, Torres reminds us of the

need to force the body and mind through the pain that allows healing. “If we avoid grieving, which necessarily includes thinking about the trauma, then we never face the injured Self” (Torres 35). Denial of this grieving leads one to live with the hatred and trauma for the rest of their life.

James Baldwin and Edén E. Torres described the trauma that they have lived with due to their environment. This environment has been shaped by the American myth. Crevecoeur describes that people can achieve success if they work hard enough. However, this American Dream is not achievable when people are living with trauma, shame, and oppression in the United States. In addition, many people in the United States have health conditions that are not treatable because they cannot afford health insurance or medications. In her book, *Kindling: Writings on the Body*, Puerto Rican writer and poet, Aurora Levins Morales describes the illnesses that are caused by the environment that she grew up in. Levins Morales was exposed to heavy pesticide exposure and experienced traumatic sexual and psychological abuse (ii). The exposure to pesticides was due to the chemicals the US sold to Puerto Rican farmers since they were advertised as a “modern and better way to live” (Morales 66). The American myth, based on Crevecoeur’s essay, demonstrates that everything can be more modern and improved—as seen during the industrial revolution. But with these “modern ideas,” the United States keeps infecting the environment, including the soil, water, and air. In this book, Levins Morales talks about the use of toxic ingredients in our everyday products. The people working in these industries are affected as they are directly exposed to harmful chemicals everyday (72). Whenever people live in a toxic environment, one that allows hatred and racism everyday, the body will react through stress, trauma, and illness. Similar to James

Baldwin's father, who had trauma, stress, and later tuberculosis due to the constant dehumanization that he faced everyday.

Aurora Levins Morales, was encouraged to learn more about her family's history to continue to learn about her own health conditions. "[L]et's invent a psycho-social-genetic-cardio-endocrine storytelling practice, something that uses the shovel of memory and metaphor to dig around in the whole question of history and hereditary" (44). During the time that she was writing this book, Levins Morales was researching more about the environmental causes of epilepsy, epigenetics, and the experience of living with illness. However, she is not the only one who has completed research on epigenetics. In *Fatal Invention: How Science, Politics, and Big Business, Re-create Race in the Twenty-First Century*, sociologist Dorothy Roberts discusses epigenetics in her chapter titled "Embodying Race." This chapter focuses on the embodiment of inequity and the effects on health. These scientists believe that "experiencing racial discrimination on a daily basis throughout life is a form of chronic stress that pushes allostatic load to dangerous levels" which eventually restrains the immune system "driving up blood pressure, and increasing blood sugar levels" (Roberts 133). The body's response to these inequities can be passed onto future generations. "Through epigenetics, then, the effects of racism on parents might be transmitted to their children, perpetuating inequalities across generations<sup>5</sup>" (143). These are the inequalities that scholars, including Black, Indigenous, and people of color, write about today.

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<sup>5</sup> Christopher Kuzawa, a biological anthropologist at Northwestern University has completed research concluding that "we do not only inherit our parents' genes, but we also inherit their epigenome [an organism that can be modified by the environment]" (Roberts 142).

The American myth is a fictional invention that has led to the trauma and the hatred that oppressed communities face to this day. This ideology has been constructed since the colonization of the Americas as a racist, classist, and sexist “hidden law” that is embedded in whiteness, patriarchy, and terror. In his essay, Crevecoeur contributed to the scaffolding upon which the United States was built. These institutions not only systematically exclude human beings from participating in politics, but they also exclude them from living a healthy life. Because oppressed people face this institutional racism every day, they maintain the military language to describe the daily war they are living in. James Baldwin uses illness as a metaphor for the hatred and anger that people face whenever they are humiliated and dehumanized. This is the trauma that Baldwin’s father passed on to him and his siblings. Aurora Levins Morales writes about the illness that is caused by living in this environment and the harms that can be passed onto future generations. Most importantly, James Baldwin and Edén E. Torres remind us that we need to heal our own traumas before we pass them on to future generations.

## Part II: Memory, Trauma, and Los Cuentos in Reyna Grande's

### *The Distance Between Us*

In "The Homeland, Aztlan/El Otro México" Gloria Anzaldúa writes the following: "We have a tradition of migration, a tradition of long walks" (33). First published in 1987, the chapter in *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza*, still remains true today. Anzaldúa continues and describes the migration as an odyssey: "Today we are witnessing la migracion de los pueblos mexicanos, the return odyssey to the historical/mythological Aztlán. This time, the traffic is from south to north" (*Borderlands/La Frontera* 33). The "traffic" has included around 11.2 million immigrants from Mexico.<sup>6</sup> "The devaluation of the peso and Mexico's dependency on the U.S. have brought on what Mexicans call la crisis" (*Borderlands/La Frontera* 32). *La crisis* that Anzaldúa describes to us in her book is also highlighted in Reyna Grande's story. The crisis that her family goes through is due to the neoliberalism regime of the late twentieth century. Early in the book, Reyna describes the richness that surrounded her neighborhood. Close to her mother's house, there was a canal and train tracks "which served El Rio Balsas Railway up until 1990s, when the government privatized the railroads and the train from Iguala was suspended. But back then, the trains would come by carrying iron ore, grain, sugar, salt, fuel, cement, fertilizers, and passengers" (Grande 73). Eventually, the peso's devaluation and the unstable economy of Mexico in the early 1980s led Reyna's father to migrate to El Otro Lado.

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<sup>6</sup> According to Pew Research Center, "Mexico is the [top origin country](#) of the U.S. immigrant population. In 2018, roughly 11.2 million immigrants living in the U.S. were from there, accounting for 25% of all U.S. immigrants" (Budiman).

It is important to keep this in mind, as Gloria Anzaldúa also reminds us that “Los gringos had not stopped at the border” (*Borderlands/La Frontera* 32). The greed of capitalism and the U.S. and Mexican governments led to the displacement of human beings years before the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA). La crisis does not just mean that Mexico, as the nation-state—or the currency, is the only factor that depends on the United States—the people living in Mexico also depend on the United States due to the increasing migration of Mexicans. It is through her book that Reyna Grande walks us through the door that Gloria Anzaldúa opened in her chapter “The Homeland, Aztlan/El otro México” in *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza*.

In Reyna Grande’s *The Distance Between Us*, numerous cuentos are told preserving a number of secrets. In “Tesis Sobre El Cuento,” Argentine writer Ricardo Piglia states that “El cuento es un relato que encierra un relato secreto. No se trata de un sentido oculto que depende de la interpretación...” (18). In particular, the description of the United States is one that is rooted in the oral stories that are told from one person to another. Thus, creating an image of El Otro Lado based on collective cuentos created by communities in either side of the border. To Reyna, El Otro Lado was on the other side of the Mountain That Has a Headache, the landscape dividing Reyna and her father. El Otro Lado, is the “other side,” one that does not only create an imaginary line but also creates a border. Long before being in the United States, Reyna Grande defines El Otro Lado based on los cuentos from la gente, the media that she is exposed to, and her observations of those around her. Unlike the luggage carried to Mexico, storytelling does not constitute a physical weight. Reyna reminds us of the financial and physical distance: “But when you’re poor, no matter how close things are, everything is far away” (9).

When everything seemed far away, los cuentos in her memoir made Reyna and her siblings feel close together. Despite the distance and without needing to be in the United States (or leave her hometown, Iguala, Guerrero), Reyna was able to weave these stories together and create an image of what El Otro Lado is. From one side, the people imagine the other side that they have not been able to see. And the people who listen to these cuentos do not realize the secret in these cuentos until they are able to witness El Otro Lado.

The book itself opens with a terrifying description of the United States. Reyna Grande describes the United States as a myth that is worse than La Llorona. However, the United States is worse because it “takes parents away, not children,” (1).<sup>7</sup> The people in Guerrero also describe the United States as El Otro Lado. Just like the people on both sides of the border, there are multiple depictions of El Otro Lado, an ongoing cuento. The constant conversations in the community about El Otro Lado provides more than just a description of the United States. These conversations continue to contextualize and develop the ideas of El Otro Lado. These are stories from the people who have never been, the stories of the people who go to El Otro Lado and return to Mexico, and finally the cuentos that the children make out from those stories. Focusing the children’s conversations provides an insight to what they are thinking and what leads them to migrate to live with their father in El Otro Lado.

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<sup>7</sup> “La Llorona is an important part of Mexican storytelling traditions on both sides of the US/Mexican border. Also known as the Weeping or Wailing Woman, she is a ghost set to haunt the river banks and lake shores” (Perez xi).

## **Las Que Se Quedan, Se Van y Regresan**

The migration rooted in patriarchy leaves the women behind to tend to the children. The home, the private sphere, is the place where the children first get an idea of El Otro Lado. Early in the book, Reyna mentions the women who stay behind with the children and with the hope that their husbands will return. These wives are often completely left behind with constant worries. Reyna noticed that her mother would walk looking at the rocks, but years later she realized that her mother was constantly worried about her marriage: “I was too young to know about the men who leave for El Otro Lado and never return. Some of them find new wives, start a new family. Others disappear completely, reinventing themselves as soon as they arrive, forgetting about those they’ve left behind” (Grande 8). What is created: a financial and emotional dependence on the father. It is as if the only ones who knew this common knowledge were las mujeres that were married to a husband that was in El Otro Lado. For these married women, El Otro Lado did not take their parents, instead, this place took their husbands. It is through their own experiences that they were able to view the United States differently from other people around them. Even the people around them would view the United States based on the stories about the women and children left behind. And the children left behind with no other option but to comfort their mother until they, too, decide to leave for El Otro Lado.

Despite not having been to the United States, Tia Emperatriz heard that the United States is a “very beautiful place” (64). The people who leave and later return to Mexico come back with different cuentos of El Otro Lado that people like Tia Emperatriz listen to. María Félix, Reyna’s aunt and Tia Emperatriz’s sister, had one of the biggest houses

on the block near Abuelita Evila, her mother. She left the United States long before Reyna's own father left. During that time, she also left her daughter behind, Reyna's cousin, Élida. Élida was living with her grandmother "ever since El Otro Lado had taken her mother away" (Grande 12). But whenever María Félix returns, she returns with gifts and stories for the children. While all the cousins open up their gifts, María Félix turns to the kids and tells them that their parents did not send them anything. Despite this, Reyna and her brothers decide to ask her about El Otro Lado: "El Otro Lado is a beautiful place. Every street is paved with concrete. You don't see any dirt there. No mosquitoes sucking the blood out of you," she said (45). "There's no trash in the streets like here in Mexico. Trucks there pick up the trash every week. And you know what the best thing is? The trees there are special—they grow money. They have dollar bills for leaves" (45). With this cuento, Maria Felix romanticizes the United States giving the children the idea that poverty does not exist and that there is money everywhere, at least where there are trees. By telling this cuento, Maria Felix is also describing why she does not want to return to the United States. She has to reassure herself that the best option is El Otro Lado. Abuela Evila was also able to determine that Maria Felix was not going to return despite the house and her daughter. "It's been nine years, and every time Elida asks her when she's finally coming back, she gives her excuses as to why she can't yet" (64). Whenever María Félix returns, she returns with gifts and stories for the children continuing to create myths about the United States. Reyna and her siblings did not believe that money grew on trees, but they did imagine the United States as "the most beautiful place in the world, as close to Heaven as you could possibly get" (222). However, Reyna felt that she had

“just crossed over into another world” whenever she was in downtown L.A. to visit her mother.

While living in Mexico, Reyna notices that there's always something to say about the people that returned. The migrants that return to their hometown seem different to the local people. Whenever Reyna's mother returns from El Otro Lado, the children are not able to recognize the woman in front of them. They could not recognize the woman who looked like a TV star in a burgundy dress and golden high-heeled sandals, and dark sunglasses (Grande 70). The conversation with their cab driver on their way to Abuelita Chinta's house also continues to demonstrate the ongoing description of the United States and the people who return to the United States. The taxi driver was able to notice that Reyna's mother returned from El Otro Lado. The driver quickly asks, “Did you like it? Is it as nice as people say?” And although Reyna's mother agrees that it is “a truly beautiful place,” the driver continues to ask her why she returned: “So why did you come back? I mean, with our economy in the toilet, everyone is leaving for El Otro Lado, not the other way around” (72). And shortly after, Reyna wants to ask her about her father and about the United States. “Is it true what people say?,” she wants to ask. Despite these questions, Reyna's mother was able to avoid answering them. Her mother is not ready to talk about her experience in the United States. The betrayal and loneliness that she felt after Reyna's father had left her and married another woman. At that point the children do not know that their parents were separated. In *Borderlands/La Frontera*, Gloria Anzaldúa states that undocumented women are “doubly threatened” in the United States (34). “Not only does she have to contend with sexual violence, but like all women, she is prey to a sense of physical helplessness” (*Borderlands/La Frontera* 34-35). Unfortunately Reyna's

mother was no exception. Reyna's mother eventually tells the children that she felt helpless whenever Reyna's father told her that he found another partner: "He left me there on my own, and I knew no one, but I should have stayed. There were jobs. Maybe not great jobs, but at least we weren't starving. And here in Mexico, with the cost of everything going higher and higher, how are we to survive?" (Grande 81). It is this that led Reyna's mother back to Mexico, the place where she did not have a language barrier and she was able to receive the support from her mother.

Finally, the children's father returns unexpectedly after being gone eight years. At this point, the children are living with their mother at Abuelita Chinta's house. Whenever they saw their father they were able to recognize him because of *la foto que tenían de él*. Pero now, seeing their father after so many years, they saw him as a stranger. In this section, Reyna points out the difference between their clothes. "If we knew he were going to come, we would've showered" (43). *Le daba pena estar con su papa* and she was able to realize that her father was not necessarily looking at her. When she finally meets her father she doesn't want to *saludarlo*. Their father had given them some toys and clothes *y hasta las llevo a que se corten el pelo*. He made Reyna cut her hair extremely short and he did let Mago leave it long. Even though Reyna wanted to resist, she was "afraid he would disappear if I angered him" (145). The father's return is the turning point to the children's *cuento*. This is where the children realize that their father will never return to Guerrero. They also become stubborn by repeatedly telling their father they will not leave without Reyna.

This is where the children begin to reveal their own self determination. All this time they worried that their mother would never accept them and now they were clinging

to the father to make him accept them and so he will forever stay with them. It is in this section where the beginning of the father's perfect image begins to crack. They notice that the house is almost done, but their father doesn't want to stay. "Even though the house is finished," [he says] "there are no jobs here. If I come back, we'll still live in this miserable poverty, entienden?" (Grande 147). To be able to see this more clearly through the eyes of the adults around her, Reyna had to first live in the United States to notice the poverty and fragile state of the economy and buildings in Mexico. Even after their mother returns, they feel that they can continue to imagine the possibilities of having a family. Stories usually lead one to imagine the unimaginable and the stories of the United States that were told to the children were no different. After being told all these myths, they imagined themselves in the United States with both of their parents.

## **Memory and Trauma en Los Cuentos**

Despite being thousands of miles away, the children were able to find their parents en Iguala through memory and the imagination of los cuentos. This process of imagination to form los cuentos is described in Gloria Anzaldúa's writing process. Although Anzaldúa describes her writing in *Borderlands/La Frontera*, she elaborates on this process in *Light in the Dark: Rewriting Identity, Spirituality, Reality*. In her chapter titled "Putting Coyolxauhqui Together: A Creative Process," Anzaldúa explains her psyche during her writing ritual. Through the Nepantla state, Anzaldúa is able to "tap"

into el cenote and she hits a process where succumbs to imagination (98).<sup>8</sup> And eventually “[a] visual, aural, or olfactory memory of some trivial incident triggers a stream of images” (*Light in the Dark* 100). Even though the relation between the children and Anzaldúa’s writing rituals seems ludicrous, Anzaldúa’s explanation of imagination stimulated through the memories allows us to further understand the children’s understanding of the world.

At that age, the children do not have a full understanding of the world around them as they are still in the process of development. They are barely understanding the social institutions they are a part of and their interpersonal relations. Since these relations were disrupted by migration, the children longed for their parents when they were left behind in Mexico. However, the children lived with their parents long enough to retain a solid memory of them. It is through the “visual, aural, or olfactory memory” that triggered the imagination and allowed them to be with their parents. Reyna and her siblings encontraban a sus padres en las calles por la musica, los olores de perfumes, y los colores de la tierra. Those events that they each, whether together or individually, shared with their parents triggered memories. And while they were trying to live, they were also desperately trying to find their parents as they feared they would forget them. They each depended on each other to remember the stories and the scents that reminded them of their parents. For a moment, this collective memory helped allow the separation to feel brief and the distance to feel shorter. While being in Iguala, Reyna points out that the rain-

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<sup>8</sup> In ‘nepantla,’ a Nahuatl word for the space in-between, un lugar/no-lugar or tierra de un medio. Via Nepantla you tap ‘el cenote,’ the archetypal inner stream of consciousness, dream pool or reservoir of unconscious images and feelings stored as iconic imagery” (*Light in the Dark* 98).

soaked Earth reminded her of her father's skin tone ( Grande 33). Mago reminded her that their father enjoyed the legendary Ranchero musician and singer Vicente Fernandez, therefore, they were able to remember their father through him (33). During the first few months of her mother's absence, it was effortless for Reyna to find her mother:

It was easier to find Mami. She was in the smell of the apple-scented shampoo we asked Tia Emperatriz to buy for us. I found her in the scent of her favorite Avon perfumes I smelled on her old clients when Mago and I stood in line with them at the tortilla mill. I found the color of her lips in the flowers of the bougainvillea climbing Abuela Evila's house. I heard her in the lyrics of her favorite songs from Los Dandy's: "Eres la gema que Dios convirtiera en mujer para bien de mi vida . . ." And when Abuelita Chinta came to visit us every other week, I saw Mami in her eyes. (Grande 33)

Even though these senses triggered Reyna's memory, the distance and separation was still so real that it was hard for Reyna to retain the memories she had of her mother. "I was forgetting what she looked like, smelled like, felt like, I couldn't remember the sound of her voice, the way she laughed," she thought while glancing at the picture she had of her father (68). By using their senses, the children are transported to a time where they feel secure and at home.

While being in the United States, Reyna eventually does not believe that her parents provide a sense of protection. Her hometown in Mexico and her grandmother later became the comfort and safety that she missed while being physically and psychology abused by her father. "Mexico was also in a cup of hot chocolate, the steam curling up into the air. I would inhale Mexico through my nostrils" (Grande 174). In an

interview with the Department of Public Policy at Central European University (CEU), Reyna mentions that “One of the reasons why [she] write[s] is because I feel that in my writing I could revisit Mexico and I could claim it as my own in a way that I cannot claim it in real life because I’m not a real Mexican anymore” (“Reyna Grande on Immigration” 1:27). Even though Reyna tries to remember the good memories of her life through her senses, she also encounters situations that trigger the horrible experiences that she faced when she was younger.

While being in Mexico, Reyna found security and familiarity in the only portrait of her father. The pictures in *The Distance Between Us* is a topic that needs further analysis. Susan Sontag, American writer, film-maker, and philosopher, writes about the meaning of photographs and the practice of photography. In her book published in 1977, *On Photography*, Sontag describes the connection to the “unreal” past presented in photographs: “As photographs give people an imaginary possession of a past that is unreal, they also help people to take possession of space in which they are insecure” (7). It is for this reason that Reyna holds a deep connection with the picture of her father, the “man behind the glass.” “[T]his paper face behind a wall of glass was the only father I’d ever known,” Reyna tells Mago while they gather their belongings to move into their Abuelita Evila’s house (6). Reyna realmente no conoce a su papa hasta que se va a El Otro Lado a vivir con el.

Trying to remember a difficult moment again and having to relive it can be traumatizing. Looking at a picture can do that to you. Based on the end of the book, we know that Reyna received some of these pictures from the Grande family. Maybe like most people, they may each remember how they received a certain picture. Does she

remember the moment? Does this influence the way she looks at the pictures? Is there a history behind the picture that one imagines while looking and observing it? As the reader, the outsider looking in, it is hard not to observe the pictures and ask these questions.

In this same reading, Sontag further describes the depiction and construction of the idea of family through photography. “Through photographs, each family constructs a portrait-chronicle of itself—a portable kit of images that bears witness to its connectedness” (*On Photography* 6). Throughout *The Distance Between Us*, there is no picture of the entire family together. There are only pictures of separate family members. In chapter Eleven, there is a picture of Reyna’s parents newly married with Mago and Carlos (77). When Reyna and her siblings are in El Otro Lado with their father and go to the beach for the first time, she finally feels like they are a “normal family, a family with two parents, as [she] had often dreamed about” (168). The picture on this page only shows Reyna, Carlos and Mago. Along with the depiction of family, the pictures and Reyna’s memoir demonstrate that a “normal family” is non-existent. In *All About Love: New Visions*, by feminist writer and critic, bell hooks, she describes the nuclear family as “a fantasy image of family” influenced by capitalism and patriarchy (130). “Capitalism and patriarchy together, as structures of domination, have worked overtime to undermine and destroy this larger unit of extended kin” (hooks 130). In *Borderlands/La Frontera*, Gloria Anzaldúa also mentions that those in power, men, make the culture: “Dominant paradigms, predefined concepts that exist is unquestionable, unchallengeable, are transmitted to us through the culture” (38). Therefore the children believe their father when he says that he is going to build a house for all of them to live in.

Furthermore, in a presentation for Berkeley Center for New Media, linguist, writer, and ayuujk (mixe) researcher, Yásnaya Elena Aguilar Gil, described colonialism, patriarchy, and capitalism, as a mixture and not as systems that intersect. Describing each of them as a different color of paint in a bowl, she mentions that they are all mixed together until we can no longer distinguish where one connects with the other, or where one system even begins (“HTNM: Yásnaya” 17:36). Even though Yásnaya presents this to explain the leading causes of the climate catastrophe, this is still relevant when analyzing migration in Reyna Grande’s memoir. Through an analysis of Reyna’s story, *The Distance Between Us*, I was able to notice how all of these systems affected Reyna and her family. Even though Reyna’s father depended on Mila to take care of everything, Reyna’s father still refused to end his power. He still did not want to give up his privileges. He never apologized to the children for the psychological and physical abuse that they went through.

As the youngest, Reyna might not have been able to completely understand what was happening around her. One sibling can probably remember a story differently from another. Through Reyna Grande we are able to slightly understand the problems that each sibling faced. Even though the children could depend on one another, the oldest, Mago, had to be strong and depend on herself. She was able to notice and observe her sister’s reactions to their mother. Siendo la mayor, Mago is the designated one who is in charge of caring for her siblings. Whenever her mother leaves, she demonstrates no emotion. “There were no tears in her eyes, and as we walked back to my grandmother's house, I wondered if, when Mami asked Mago to be our little mother, it had also meant she was not allowed to cry” (Grande 12). Paragraphs earlier, Reyna also pointed out her

grandmother's lack of vulnerability: As her mother "choked up and wiped the moisture from her eyes," Abuela Evila "looked away, as if embarrassed by Mami's tears" (Grande 12). She was embarrassed that vulnerability and emotion was shown from the women who she did not like for her son. "Perhaps because she lived through the Revolution, when over a million people died and the ones who lived had to toughen up to survive, my grandmother was not prone to being emotional" (12). Reyna knew that living through violence and war affected the emotional response of people towards other human beings.

We can see this in the way that Abuela Evila took care of the children. She often ignored their needs, especially while they were sick. Through Reyna, we are told the way she is since Reyna also remembers her whenever she notices the maliciousness in her father while she is living with him in the United States. The fear that encompasses the life of Reyna through her father's patriarchy is the trauma passed on from one generation to another. It is reflected in the fear that Reyna has toward her grandmother and her father. The violence between these interactions is revived while Reyna is in the United States: "That father reminded me of Abuela Evila, although she didn't need alcohol to bring about that crazed look in her eyes" (170). The intergenerational trauma passed on from Abuela Evila to her son is later passed on to Reyna and her siblings. "His only form of discipline was to hit us with his belt and that was it," stated Grande during a presentation for Claremont McKenna College ("Reyna Grande-Beyond Borders" 1:02:12). It is through the process of writing that Reyna finds it important to reflect on her life and construct new structures within the institutions that she is a part of.

## Healing Through Writing

Finalmente, Reyna Grande usa los cuentos como resistencia. Her sister told her que su umbilical cord is buried in the house that she was born in. The house donde vivían todos antes de que su papá se fuera. This story was a constant reminder for Reyna to not forget her roots, especially when she had to give up a part of herself to fit into her environment in the United States. “I had already lost my mother by coming to this country,” she mentions after being told that she had to drop her mother’s name. “*Who am I now, then?*” (172). Similar to Gloria Anzaldúa, Reyna Grande decided to continue her education and she was able to realize that this was the only way that she would be able to really learn to self reflect. In the chapter titled “ Movimientos de rebeldía y las culturas que traicionan,” Gloria Anzaldúa tells her reader the directions that las mujeres have, “Today some of us have a fourth choice: entering the world by way of education and career and becoming self-autonomous persons” (*Borderlands/La Frontera* 39). To be able to find herself she had to let go of her father.

Reyna’s understanding of los cuentos, the fables that she often read of as a child helped her understand the world around her, especially her father. *Three Little Pigs*, a story that she commonly heard helped her understand why her father decided to migrate to the United States. While Mago tells Reyna el cuento of the *Three Little Pigs*, she reflects on her father’s decision to build them a house: “Maybe that’s why Papi wanted such a house, to protect us, to shelter us from the horrors waiting just outside our door” (Grande 110). She finally understood that her father wanted to protect them. But this also influenced the way that she viewed her father, as she wanted him to protect her.

Reyna's first book was a novel, however, she felt that she had to tell her own story. This novel helped her advocate for migrants like herself. Reyna states that writing "was an act of survival and nothing more. I wasn't trying to save the world, I was trying to save myself" ("Reyna Grande-Beyond Borders"). In his book, *The Body Keeps the Score*, psychiatrist, researcher, educator and author, Dr. Bessel van der Kolk described part of this healing process "[d]iscovering your Self in language is always an epiphany, even if finding the words to describe your inner reality can be agonizing process" (236). These are aspects of traumatic stress that she addresses as a young migrant. "For immigrants it's such a traumatic experience to emigrate because you are leaving everything behind" ("BookTV" 0:09). It is through this sense of loss and having to accept new changes that Reyna Grande negotiates who she is. "The object of writing is to write to yourself. To let your self know what you have been trying to avoid" (van der Kolk 245). Writing about the emotions and feelings helped her think through past experiences and, sometimes, understand her parents. It is the story of the umbilical cord that grounds her and reminds her of Mexico. "I consider myself Mexican American because I am from both places. Both countries are within me. They coexist within me. And my writing is the bridge that connects them both." (Grande 320). Thus, it is through writing that Reyna creates a space for belonging.

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