

## SERIOUSLY FUNNY: A Critique of Hollywood's Post-Colonial Gaze in the work of Michele Serros

Emma García

*This essay explores Michele Serros' How to Be a Chicana Role Model as a journey of self-discovery for the fictional character of Michele, the young Chicana narrator whose journal entries make up the book. Michele, a fourth-generation Chicana born in California confronts racist ideologies she encounters through Hollywood, her peers, and even her family. Serros' narrative demonstrates how this young Chicana must overcome internalized racism and the invisibility of her cultural identity in order to own and reclaim her voice, history, and U.S. citizenship. Chela Sandoval's methodology of the oppressed and Norma Alarcón's process of disidentification demonstrate how Serros' writing serves as an example of the ways in which Chicana writers re-claim our familial histories in order to resist dominant portrayals of Chicana feminist subjectivity. [Key words: decolonial imaginary, oppositional consciousness, disidentification, identity, and language politics]*

In “Rule #7: Buy American,” Michele, the fictional narrator in Serros' *How to Be a Chicana Role Model*, exemplifies how a search for self must begin at home. As Michele is looking through newspaper articles and magazine clippings in order to find inspiration and write a story, her aunt Tura calls her. Michele fakes a stomachache, so she can continue looking on the Internet for a story that will “spark something” (96). Unable to get Aunt Tura off the phone, Michele resigns herself to listen to Tura. Ironically, the phone call is not an interruption since the media had not provided inspiration. Story after story in mainstream media “wasn't really” (97) her. At the end of her conversation with Tura, in a sweet twist, Michele learns new information about her Tía Chaya and finally stumbles into the idea for a story. Aunt Tura wisely instructs Michele to pay attention to the family:

“Well, I think you don’t bother to look in your own backyard.”

“My own backyard?” I looked at my blank computer screen. I glanced at my newspaper clippings. “Tura, what do you mean?”

“Mi’ja” Tura said quickly. . . “if you want a real story, you need to look in your backyard more often.” (100)

Tía Chaya had pretended to be married to a German national. In reality, he was her business connection to Germany where she sold Mexican products. People thought that Tía Chaya was pretty. Men were always trying to talk to her about the VW bug she drove around town. One day Tía Chaya went for a ride to the grocery store in a big Ford pickup truck driven by Margie Luna. No one ever saw Chaya or Margie after that.

Michele’s own backyard is one that is Mexican and American at the same time. It is a backyard filled with the experiences of her fourth generation Mexican-American family. Throughout her phone conversation with her Aunt Tura, Michele wants to stop listening to her, so she can write her story into the blank computer screen. Yet, the newspaper clippings to which she turns for inspiration do not offer stories that tell “enough” of her (97). Aunt Tura reminds Michele that stories are valid even though they are not in the media. Thus, Michele must learn to see and redefine herself and her family as American through her own eyes. This story highlights the way in which Michele’s imperception of herself and of her family has trickled down from an invisibility of the Chicana/Latina community within dominant culture.

I understand Hollywood’s postcolonial gaze as the erasure of Chicanas and

Latinas from mainstream imaginary as members of U.S. American culture and society (Bhabha 1994; Henninger, 2003). I see this process as a subtle, yet effective void of Chicana identity. For example, in “Role Model Rule Number 5: Respect the 1 Percent,” through the life of Uncle Charlie, Michele explains how Latina/o actors do not fit the stereotypical images producers have of them. In the case of Uncle Charlie, “as a third-generation Mexican, he was always told he looked too brown or not brown enough, too Mexican, yet not Latino enough” (70). Uncle Charlie never gets an acting job because he does not fit into any of the images producers and casting-directors hold of Mexicans or Latina/os. Hollywood is unable to see and validate Uncle Charlie’s ethnic identity. Serros critiques the ways in which Hollywood’s postcolonial gaze represents Chicana/o identity through stereotypical images. Hollywood’s imaginary serves as an exclusionary tool to maintain Chicanas/os outside of the parameters that defines a desirable U.S. citizen by portraying Chicanas/os and Latinos of all other racial and national backgrounds as “illegals” (Fregoso 2003, 326), “frilly señoritas or volcanic temptress[es]” (Rodríguez 1997, 2), as well as “bandidos or Latin lovers” (Ramírez-Berg 2002, 66). Consequently, this portrayal denies Chicana/o subjectivity and the dignity and rightful claim to U.S. citizenship it deserves.<sup>i</sup>

Through the course of reading and interpreting Serros’ work, I have been drawn back to the scholarship of Gloria Anzaldúa and Cherríe Moraga, who both helped me define my experiences in academia as a young undergraduate. Reading them for the first time led me to understand that I, too, am a subject with agency to intimately negotiate the place I want to occupy in the multiple positions that living between the Mexican culture of my childhood and the mainstream culture of U.S. society provided me.<sup>ii</sup> Both of these revolutionary and revisionist writers questioned the colonized perspectives that continuously presented Mexicans, queers, and working-class people as lazy, perverse, and

unintelligent. In their essays, poetry, and plays, Moraga and Anzaldúa use their personal stories and observations as the basis for their analysis of oppression and marginalization to grant dignity to the experiences of Chicana farm laborers, Chicana homemakers, Chicana lesbians, Chicana students, Chicana teachers, and many other Chicanas. Although Serros' *How to Be a Chicana Role Model* sells itself as fiction, Serros stated at a public reading of the book in Davis, California, that it was not fiction but a collection of stories based on her life.<sup>iii</sup> In this collection, readers find some of the same issues that Anzaldúa and Moraga explore: a need for self-definition, a need to understand the process or systems that make an individual feel marginalized, a critique of cultural hegemony, and a rewriting of history. Using memory to reveal herself, Serros discloses, even to herself, the sources that glaringly mark her as an outsider as she constantly craves to belong. As a fourth-generation Chicana born in the southern California city of Oxnard, Serros strategically employs her writing to reflect the cultural and personal negotiations a young Chicana daily confronts with her peers, family, and co-workers. She is not attempting to define Chicana identity. To the contrary, her work exposes the absurdity of trying to pinpoint a singular Chicana experience.

This article reads Serros' *How to Be a Chicana Role Model* as a narrative that resists rigid identity definitions and exemplifies an oppositional consciousness through the memories of the narrator. I use the theoretical work of Chicana scholars Norma Alarcón and Chela Sandoval as the critical engine for my readings of Serros' work (Alarcón 1996, 129; Sandoval 1991, 24). I understand Alarcón's theory of disidentification as a process of self-definition that actively rejects dominant perceptions of women of color. I see Serros' fictional self engaging in more than just an exploration of her multiplicity of identities and cultural hybridity. Through the theory of disidentification, I see Serros'

writing assertively resisting the dominant gaze of Hollywood's postcolonial construction of a Chicana/Latina identity. According to Alarcón's theory of disidentification, women of color choose and reject how they want to be identified, which is what Serros is doing in her narrative.

Sandoval's oppositional consciousness allows me to underline the ways in which Serros' stories exemplify how her main character's everyday experiences present her with an opportunity to confront the ideology that constantly questions her cultural location as a Chicana and as a citizen of California. Sandoval defines oppositional consciousness:

In practical terms, this theory focuses on identifying forms of consciousness in opposition, which can be generated and coordinated by those classes self-consciously seeking affective oppositional stances in relation to the dominant social order. The idea here, that the subject-citizen can learn to identify, develop, and control the means of ideology, that is, marshal the knowledge necessary to "break with ideology" while also speaking in and from within ideology. (2)

Through self-conscious choices, Serros' protagonist, Michele, empowers herself and learns to enact her agency as she transforms the ways in which she sees her family, her peers, and her community in Southern California, and thereby redefines herself in her own terms. She refuses to be the "Chicana Falsa," the name her peers bestowed on her and instead writes about how she has learned to construct her particular Chicana identity within the referential markers offered to her by her family and her own understanding of her place in mainstream society.<sup>iv</sup>

Serros engages in a remembering process through which Michele recovers her own family history. Serros also creates a narrative of resistance where Michele negotiates what it means to be a Chicana and a U.S. citizen at the same time. Although the pressure from Michele's peers tells her that she must become part of the homogenous herd that constitutes U.S. society, as an alternative she acquires a sense of self by remembering the struggles her family has endured in order to be part of U.S. society. Consequently, what the reader is able to observe throughout *How to Be a Chicana Role Model* is that Michele fails to be part of the monolithic crowd, and in the end embraces her differences through a decolonizing process of self-discovery and self-identifying moves. In other words, Serros' work is engaging in what Chicana historian Emma Pérez has called the "decolonial imaginary" (1998). Serros is looking for her stories in places that mainstream has ignored—the Chicana community and the Chicana family. By writing, she is validating her reality and calling into question the erasure of Chicana subjectivity.

Following a literary tradition of Chicana writers, theorists, dramatists, and performers such as Monica Palacios (1998), Sandra Cisneros (1991), Gloria Anzaldúa (1987), Cherríe Moraga (1983, 1997), Norma Cantú (1995), Mary Helen Ponce (1993), and Pat Mora (1997), Serros' narrative style privileges the autobiographical "I" through a narrator mirroring the author's first name: Michele. Norma Klahn, calls this style "autobiographical fiction" (116). Klahn argues that Chicana writers use this innovative literary form because Chicana writers' "politics cannot be divorced from their poetics" (121). I believe that by using the autobiographical "I" in live-performances, and written stories, Chicana and Latina writers seek to engage readers in a more familiar way by dismantling the barriers that a more traditional omnipresent narrator would provide. The autobiographical "I" allows the reader to appreciate and

identify with the experiences of the narrator as memories of our cultural communities (Alarcón 2003). The usage of a first-person singular narrative gives the reader the possibility of seeing her own experiences reflected in the tale; thus validating the experiences of Chicanas by giving voice to our stories. Most importantly, Chicanas have used first-person narrative voice to allude to the multiplicity of our subjectivities and not to highlight a singular Chicana voice. The first-person voice is always understood to be part of a much larger community. Therefore, the anecdotes of Michele, the fictional narrator in Serros' stories, complicate the idea that all Americans look, talk, feel, or think the same.

Serros' work recycles mainstream racist ideologies and rewrites them in order to self-empower. In addition, through the process, Serros' work also confronts the ways in which racist ideologies negatively influenced her perception of self. It is through a journey of facing, erasing, denying and ultimately recognizing and reconstructing her identity that the main character, Michele, is able to reclaim herself as a valuable human being.

### **Colonizing Processes and Decolonizing Practices**

The need to belong is evident throughout *How to Be a Chicana Role Model*. Specifically, in the third story, "Senior Picture Day," the reader first sees Michele figuratively being told that she cannot claim a California heritage because Michele looks different than what her peers conceived as a "real Californian." The young narrator confronts racist stereotypes when as a seventh grader her identity and authenticity is questioned by her then-best friend Terri. At Terri's house, the pantry is always filled with sweet snacks for Terri and her friends. Michele perceives the treats as wonderfully free, but these snacks will later prove to be quite costly. Terri invites Michele to come over

after school to play with her father's CB radio. Terri explains to Michele, "we can make up handles for ourselves and meet lots of guys. Cute ones." (14) Michele responds, "Whatdaya mean, handles?" (14), and Terri continues to explain, "Like names, little nicknames" (14). Terri picks G.G., which stands for Golden Girl, but when Michele informs Terri that her own handle will be "Cali girl," the following exchange occurs:

"You mean like Californian?" she asked.

"Yeah, sorta."

"But you're Mexican."

"So?"

"So, you look like you're more from Mexico than California."

"What do you mean?"

"I mean like California is like, blond girls, you know."

"Yeah, but I *am* Californian. I mean, real Californian. Even my great-grandma was born here."

"It's just that you don't look like you're from California."

"And you're not exactly golden," I snapped. (16)

While Terri challenges Michele's right to assert a Californian identity, Michele defies Terri by proving she does belong in California. Michele is a California



native, and she can trace her family tree to at least four other California native generations. Terri's questioning of Michele's authenticity as a Californian and her right to establish her own identity and claim a name point to the kind of racialization that normalizes whiteness as the only legitimate marker of California subjects. Thus, Serros illustrates that viewing racial differences as markers for inclusion and exclusion of citizenship is an invalid practice.

Homi Bhabha explains how colonial subjects become trapped in a fixed identity because what is denied to them is "that form of negation which gives access to the recognition of difference" (1994, 108). It is not surprising that when Michele overhears Terri on the CB radio telling a boy about her, Michele begins to internalize some of that racism herself. Michele's cultural identity challenges a southern California environment where race functions as the primary marker of identification. As the author, Serros works within the visual constraints and liberties afforded by our very image-driven society. These kinds of hegemonic constructions of what it means to be a Californian ignore the different social, racial, ethnic, and cultural groups that compose Californians. One only has to watch so-called reality TV shows to realize that the dominant image of a Californian is a tall, blue-eyed, slender, tan, and filthy rich youth, like the young kids portrayed in the MTV show *Laguna Beach*.<sup>v</sup> In the same way Michele, as a young teenager, resists these kinds of representations when she asserts that she is Californian even if she does not fit into mainstream representations of this part of her identity.

These acts of resistance are part of young Michele's everyday life. However, as a young Californian teenager, she begins to learn to see herself as an outsider because of the repetitive ways in which her identity is viewed as that of one who does not belong. Additionally, she begins to feel and believe that being different

is also shameful because her peers view her physical characteristics as a reason to exclude her from their circles. For example, Terri describes Michele to one of the CB friends, “Lightning Bolt,” without realizing that Michele is listening:

“Yeah, and she also has this, this nose, a nose like...like an *Indian*.  
Over.”

“An Indian?” Lightning Bolt asked. “What do ya mean an Indian?  
Over.”

“You know, Indian. Like powwow Indian.”

“Really?” Lightning Bolt laughed on the other end. “Like Woo-Woo-  
Woo Indian?” He clapped his palm over his mouth and wailed. A  
sound I knew too well. (18)

It is here that Michele begins to believe that her nose is in fact an undesirable feature because it marks her as an outsider. For a second time, the twelve-year-old Michele is faced with the racist ideologies that her best friend holds. Although Michele initially challenged Terri’s assumptions about identity, when confronted with Terri’s persistent racist comments, Michele begins to internalize that racism. She also recognizes Lightning Bolt’s grotesque gesturing. To both Terri and Lightning Bolt, Michele becomes a caricature to ridicule. She becomes the object of their laughter, a subject whom they want to define, own, and control. Her difference becomes something with which they can only feel comfortable if they dehumanize and reduce her through their own colonizing perspective. Her difference becomes fixed and marked by “otherness.” And it is also by seeing her as different from them that their identity is legitimized as the “correct” Californian identity. Scholar bell hooks describes

that often, although not always, when young White people want to befriend and contact people of color, it is out of a misguided search for new encounters that will establish their social, cultural, and racial superiority. hooks articulates how these exchanges work:

To make one's self vulnerable to the seduction of difference, to seek an encounter with the Other, does not require that one relinquish forever one's mainstream positionality. When race and ethnicity become commodified as resources for pleasure, the culture of specific groups, as well as the bodies of individuals, can be seen as constituting an alternative playground where members of dominating races, genders, sexual practices affirm their power-over in intimate relations with the Other. (1999, 180)

Terri and Lightning Bolt both assert their perceived superiority by crudely poking fun at Michele's difference. Surprised by their insensibility, Michele leaves the house without Terri knowing she was ever there. Michele becomes a toy for Terri and Lightning Bolt, and a bit of her identity is stripped away by their need to consume and enjoy Michele's difference.

Her nose is a signifier of otherness, and Michele intends to control it. She does not want to look Indian. She does not want to be laughed at because of her difference. Just as dark skin is sometimes perceived as a negative marker by racists, a perceived Indian nose becomes the negative marker by which her peers identify Michele. In other words, the nose becomes the "negative difference" perceived through the colonial discourse in which Terri and Lightning Bolt ridicule Michele. Driven by her need to feel accepted, the young teenager begins to compulsively pinch her nose tightly to prevent it from

growing anymore. She explains to the reader:

Okay, so you might think it's just a total waste of time, but to tell you the truth, I do see the difference. Just last week I lined up all my class pictures and could definitely see the progress. My nose has actually become smaller, narrower. It looks less Indian. I look less Indian and you can bet that's the main goal here. (14)

In this instance it is clear that the young Michele has internalized that being different signifies being less attractive and alienated. Thus, Michele's concern with her nose becomes a compulsive drive to normalize her looks. By suppressing her nose into submission, she hopes to become part of what is considered acceptable. Cherríe Moraga in "La Güera" engages in a conversation about the ways in which Chicanas/os and Mexicans sometimes internalize the racist perspective of the dominant culture and prescribe to ideas of self-hatred (1983). As a young teenager, Michele represses that which is different and that which makes her unique. At this point in her life, she does not have the capacity to see things differently. Taking up internalized racism to which Moraga and others note, and by viewing herself through the racist colonized lenses of her peers, she represses her differences in order to secure a valid place in society. She wants to belong, to be validated and to be accepted. What teenager does not?

In "Role Model Rule Number 6: Live Better, Work Union," Michele's perspective changes. She learns to decode the way in which others see her nose. This switch comes when, as a woman in her twenties, she experiences the way her nose is seen again as a marker for exclusion and eroticization. Michele is now working part-time at a framing store while finishing her undergraduate education. One day a customer asks, "Are you Indian?" (76). Michele quickly

and curtly replies, “Nope,” knowing that it is better to cut people off before they “start talking about their last trip to Taos, Santa Fe or how much they loved turquoise jewelry” (76). As Michele continues to process the credit card purchase, the customer continues to question Michele’s identity because it does not fit neatly into how she sees Michele. The following is the exchange that takes place between Michele, who is behind the counter, and the customer who Michele described as a woman with a Florence-Henderson look:

“You sure look Indian,” she said as she pulled out a credit card.

“Well, I’m not.” I pressed my lips together tightly and formed a stiff smile. First rule of customer service, always smile.

“Are you sure?”

“What, you don’t think I know what I am?”

“I’m so sorry.” She placed her hand on her chest. “I didn’t mean it like that. Really, I didn’t. It’s just that a lot of people aren’t sure about their ancestry. I mean, I didn’t find out I was part Swiss until long after I married.”

“Oh, that’s okay, really,” I answered. Second rule of retail service, the customer is always right. Besides, maybe she was correct and maybe I wasn’t sure what I was. I did see *Dances with Wolves* three times and really enjoyed it. Anyway, there was no way I could afford to snap at a customer. (76-77)

Michele’s response is no longer shame over how this woman perceives her, but

rightful anger over the assumptions the woman so shamelessly expresses, or more specifically, to frame her and position her in a category easily accessible to this woman. However, Michele has to negotiate her identity within the confines of the unequal power relationship between herself as the employee and the woman as the customer who is always right. The customer insists not once or twice, but three times that Michele is Indian. This steady questioning of Michele's identity by someone who could get her in trouble with her employer reveals the process by which she becomes flexible about her understanding of herself so she can keep her job. Her reference to *Dances with Wolves*, a film in which a white man befriends Native Americans and becomes their protector, mirrors the way in which the customer tries to befriend Michele and offer her economic gains.

As the story progresses, the reader learns that this Florence-Henderson-looking woman continues to call, to visit the store, and to leave messages for Michele. Michele avoids her because she thinks that this woman might want to complain about how Michele pretended the woman's credit card was invalid. Michele attempts to humiliate the customer in order to inflict the only kind of shame she can exert to someone who so insistently questioned Michele's knowledge of herself. In other words, Michele upsets the way in which this customer normally consumes. This is important because when Michele finally talks to this woman she finds out that she wants Michele to model for her. She offers Michele ten dollars per hour for two afternoons. It turns out that the woman is an artist named Sheila Emmerson.

At first Michele is happy and flattered that an artist wants to do her portrait, but soon becomes curious as to why Sheila chooses her. As Sheila explains that it is Michele's Indian nose she likes, immediately a problem ensues. The reader

hears Michele's thoughts:

I slowly squeezed the sides of my nose and thought about her question. Well, yes, there was a problem with that. This woman was totally exoticizing me. It was plain and simple. I read about this type of behavior, this particular form of racism in that book *Making Face, Making Soul* [sic] and actually in an episode of *What's Happening!* when Shirley is hired for a job 'cause she made the work environment "interesting." Last thing I wanted was to be some exploited subject and be put on display for this woman's little art show. Yes, there was definitely a problem. But how do I go about making my point? (82)

To make her point, Michele decides to tell Mrs. Emmerson that she will have to charge her \$200 a day for posing her Indian nose. To have Michele pose solely because of the perceived Indian look of her nose automatically fragments Michele's identity. She is seen as a nose to be consumed by the art producer and the admirers of the work. The problem is not in the admiration or appreciation of someone's beauty. The way in which Michele is admired is what constitutes the thoughtless act of racism. The woman is unable to see Michele as a whole person and, most importantly, she is unwilling to see Michele as a person with a complex and multiracial history. For Sheila, Michele becomes the nose she needs to create for her own comfort and economic gain. Michele's Indian nose neatly fits her image of Indian-ness and her goals for the exhibition. Michele understands and articulates her affront to being used for her looks. She no longer hates her nose, but instead decides that she will take control of the way her nose has been perceived and molded for the needs of Sheila.

She effectively uses Sheila's white guilt to exert power and control. Michele

recognizes Sheila's behavior as exoticism as she remembers reading about this "form of racism in that book, *Making Face, Making Soul*" [sic] (82). This is a compilation of essays, short stories, and poems edited by Anzaldúa in which women of color explore issues on gender, stereotypes, discrimination, and racism. It is often read as a sequel to *This Bridge Called My Back* (1981), another collection of works of women of color edited by Moraga and Anzaldúa. In *This Bridge Called My Back*, writers use their essays, poems, and journal entries to engage in a dialogue of self definitions as they denounce White feminists' perceptions of women of color that were embedded in racist, homophobic, and classist discourses. Serros' reference to *Making Face, Making Soul* demonstrates that her critical views are influenced by the radical writings of women of color. Serros is now continuing the work of previous Chicana writers as she asserts her right to define and establish her own voice, her own political views, and her own story in opposition to dominant discourse. When she decides that she does not want to become "an exploited subject" (82), Serros acknowledges and honors the critical work of Chicana feminists as she begins to strategize what will be the best way to empower Michele, her fictional self. She invents a labor union, Union 233, to reclaim the way in which she is perceived. Simultaneously, the union is a reclaiming of her location in California as it duplicates her home address. Michele tells Sheila that if she wants her to pose she will have to pay her \$200 a day, per union rules. Sheila claims to know the union, which is a lie, since it is fictitious, and agrees to pay Michele. In the end, Sheila's ignorance and inability to see Michele as a human being and not solely as an Indian nose costs her more than she intended.

### **Hollywood Gazes and Latinidad Erases**

In her essay, "Are all Latins from Manhattan? Hollywood, Ethnography, and Cultural Colonialism," Ana López argues, "Hollywood does not represent ethnics and minorities [but rather] creates them, and provides its audience



with an experience of them” (405). In other words, Hollywood rarely produces narratives based on Latina/o experiences and stories, and when it does it is certainly not from a Latina/o perspective. Instead, when it chooses to represent us, it creates images of Latinas/os as “others” filtered through racist, ignorant, fearful, and eroticizing lenses. Serros explicitly challenges the ways in which some of Hollywood’s representations of Latinas/os function to erase the experiences of the complex, hybrid, and diverse character of Latinas/os as whole citizens of the U.S. and instead produces rigid images of what it means to be Latinas/os through its colonial discursive practices. Serros’ stories also mark the trajectory Michele takes from seeing herself through the imposing gaze of the Hollywood industry as a colonized subject to her reenvisioning of herself via her own seeing practices as she recuperates her own family history through oral stories. It is by understanding herself as a member belonging to her family, and by understanding how her family story forms part of the history of California, that Michele is able to own her rightful claim as a U.S. citizen belonging to California. In other words, *How to Be a Chicana Role Model* reads as a methodology of self-definition by reclaiming an inward vision of self that questions and criticizes the outward gaze of Hollywood.

For years, Michele and her family do not support Hollywood’s films about Latinas/os unless this mega industry employs Latinas/os actors. This changes in 1996, when Madonna plays Eva Peron in the Hollywood-produced musical, *Evita*, and Michele’s family chooses to ignore the “one percent” rule. However, Michele decides to stay home even as members of her family drive across town to see the film. It is here that the narrative turns to critique her Chicana family, which ignores the ways in which Hollywood erases Latina/o faces from Latina/o stories. As Michele tries to convince her family to boycott the film, her Tía Margaret reminisces:

“You know,” my aunt Margaret remarked as she caught herself in the living-room mirror, “I could have been Evita in my college musical. Remember that, Lennie? I had the voice of a choir girl. I almost had the role, too, but they said my hips were too wide and that I didn’t look Latin enough, not like *Madonna*.” (70)

This story illustrates how Latinas/os continually are told that they are not even good enough to represent themselves. Latina readers and audiences have been starving for images that include Latina/o characters and plots that tell their stories (Noriega 1992; Fregoso 1993; Ramírez-Berg 2002; Rodriguez 1997 and 2008). When Michele’s family sees the film *Evita* their viewing practice can be linked not to only to Madonna’s appeal, but to a greater need to see Latina/o role models on the big screen. To see *Evita* is to see a story about a Latin American historical figure who tried to help the working-class of her country. The act of seeing the film is not only an activity of self-recovery but also recognition of a shared history of the working class struggles across the Americas. Evita Peron’s story appeals to Michele’s working-class Chicana/o family in the U.S. because of their shared class experience.

The narrative teases out the ways in which Hollywood constructs as well as erases Latinidad. For Hollywood Latina/o actors are never good enough, much in the same way that Latinas/os are never American enough. Latina/o actors are too loud, too subservient, too eager to take over the U.S. as we “illegally” immigrate north. Yet we are also too unwilling or too unable to assimilate, too brown, too light, too skinny, and too fat. Ironically, this excess leaves us neither Mexican nor Latina/o enough to represent ourselves in Hollywood, a trope for American mainstream popular culture. Through this story, Serros criticizes the way in which Latino bodies serve as tools for Hollywood’s need to marginalize Latina/o actors and their experiences.

This tale also points out to the ways in which underrepresented groups sometimes have to negotiate between settling for seeing themselves misrepresented or being completely invisible. Additionally, even though Madonna is not a Latina actress representing a Latin American character, Madonna manages to connect with diverse audiences because of her own crafted image as a successful woman despite her nonconformist and sometimes polemical attitudes. When Michele pleads with her family to stay home, her aunts tell her that Madonna is “different,” because she lost her mother as a little child, and that Oprah almost cried when she heard this. To this, Michele replies “Oprah’s always crying...” (71), and Aunt Lydia’s protective and sympathetic alliance towards Madonna comes to the forefront as she responds, “Don’t say that about Oprah. She’s a wonderful person, such a good role model. Why, just the other day I saw her trying to talk Spanish with Gloria Estefan and she was actually doing pretty good!” (71). Michele’s family is also looking for role models. Their choice to see *Evita* despite the one percent rule, demonstrates how they perceive Madonna’s representation of Evita as unproblematic because they see her as one of them. In the eyes of Michele’s family, Madonna’s pain becomes a point of connection because that is what makes her different from other celebrities. She has lost her mother and therefore Madonna becomes different. Chicanas/os and Latinas/os in general are still constructed as different on the basis of race, class, and ethnicity. Thus, her difference simultaneously works as a tool of inclusion. Furthermore, Madonna’s association with Oprah and Gloria Estefan, two successful women of color in the entertainment industry, can also be read as a positive link. Even if Madonna is not Latina herself, she is a friend of Oprah, the most successful women of color in Hollywood and at least with one Latina celebrity, Estefan, and she is telling a Latina story.

After all, Uncle Charlie wanted to see his stories represented on the big screen.

One of his complaints was that “. . .we never hear our stories, see our lives on the big screen. We’re almost the largest minority in this country and we barely make up the one percent in film!” (71). The rest of Michele’s family is looking for the same thing as Uncle Charlie: a mirror image of himself on the big screen. However, it is not surprising that Michele decides to skip the family tradition of seeing a film on Christmas day, and instead stays home alone to “think of Uncle Charlie” (72) and honor the one percent rule that would include Latina/o actors for Latina/o roles and not mainstream Hollywood celebrities. Her move is bold even if it isolates her because she refuses to let Hollywood dictate how stories are supposed to be told. For Michele, inclusion is a more holistic practice that encompasses not only the telling of Latina/o stories on the big screen, but one that includes Latina/o stories from their point of view and that also includes the employment of Latina/o actors.

### **The Politics of Language**

While Hollywood is invested in constructing Latina/o images to formulate stories that subtly and/or overtly picture who belongs and how people belong in their imaginary of what it means to be an American—young, wealthy, in love, white, blonde, blue-eyed, slim, and clueless—unfortunately, Latinas/os living in the U.S., at times, also engage in jarringly painful ways of identifying who belongs in our ethnic communities and how Latinidad is best defined. Often language is used to demarcate who is more Latina, Hispanic, Mexican, Chicano, Puerto Rican, Cuban, Salvadoran, Colombian, or Argentinean than the next. Serros’ stories of language critique the ways in which the use of Spanish sometimes is used to alienate Latinas/os from each other because their speaking knowledge of Spanish might be minimal, not standard, or nonexistent. Her position echoes Anzaldúa’s observation about the ways in which Chicanas sometimes use language as a means to authenticate identity. In her fierce piece on “Linguistic Terrorism,” Anzaldúa states that Chicanas

“internalize how our language has been used against us by the dominant culture, we use our language differences against each other” (1987, 58). In “Role Model Rule Number 1,” Michele demonstrates the pain, alienation, and anger she feels when another Chicana questions her Spanish-language skills. Michele agrees to participate at a Chicana Writer’s Conference because she assumes she has been asked to read her poetry. When the conference organizer calls Michele to confirm the place and time of the event, it becomes clear that Michele has not been asked to share her writing. The caller assumes Michele is a volunteer, helping to serve food. In order to recover from the mistake and to retain a much-needed volunteer laborer, the caller offers Michele an opportunity to read during the open mic session. After feeling humiliated because of the misunderstanding, Michele concludes that the caller’s offer stems from pity rather than a genuine desire to consider her a Chicana writer. On her first morning as a volunteer, she asks the Chicana writers:

“Scone or croissant?”

“What, you don’t have any pan dulce?” A woman in a shoulder scarf looked over the pastry platter.

“No, all the kitchen help polished them off this morning with their champurrado,” I answered. “I’m afraid you’re stuck with either a scone or a croissant.”

“Well...I’ll take the croissant.”

The woman behind her asked me something in Spanish.

I answered her back and continued to scoop fruit salad onto her

paper plate. She didn't move forward but instead looked at her friend in the shoulder scarf, rolled her eyes, and remarked in Spanish, "I thought this was a Chicana writer's conference and this one here can't even speak Spanish!" (7-8)

This encounter illustrates the fragmenting ways in which our communities sometimes act as gatekeepers of Chicana/o identity. Instead of promoting cultural understanding of our historical, generational, geographical, and social differences, a separation and exclusion of our own people occurs. In this example, the Spanish language or more accurately her lack of proper use of it, is used to keep Michele from belonging to the Chicana community at the conference. This story speaks to the tensions and contradictions that occur when identity is fixed within specific paradigms. Here language is perceived as one of the ultimate markers of identity. Much in the same way in which English is perceived by the dominant culture as the language that marks U.S. nationality, the Chicana writer's comment engages in a non-critical exclusionary practice where Spanish becomes a marker of authentication of Chicana identity.

In response to the feeling of dislocation, Michele writes a poem hoping to make the writer understand her experience. The poem reads:

My skin is brown,  
 just like theirs,  
 but now I'm unworthy of the color  
 'cause I don't speak Spanish  
 the way I should. (10)

As Michele reads the poem at the open mic session, she notices that the Chicana writer for whom she wrote the poem is not paying her any attention. Instead of feeling defeat, Michele passionately reads the lines of her short poem. The poem articulates the racial dimensions of identity and challenges the way her Spanish is perceived. It identifies how the color of one's skin can at once be both a marker of inclusion and a demarcation of exclusion when muddled with the politics of language.

Latina/o studies scholar Frances Aparicio discusses the politics of language acquisition and ownership of Spanish for U.S. Latinas/os and Anglo students (1988). Aparicio examines the linguistic autobiographies she assigned to a class of undergraduate students composed of Anglo-American and U.S. Latina/o students about their relationship to their first and second languages. Reading the linguistic autobiographies as ethnographic samples to understand the historical, political, and economic perceptions that surround the acquisition and usage of both Spanish and English, Aparicio found that for the Anglo-American students learning Spanish represented an “instrumental, and socially prestigious” skill and that being bilingual was seen as an asset that brought them “valuable experiences that foster positive self-esteem, heightened social status, professional enhancement, and economic gain” (10). On the other hand, the Latina and Latino students experience a “sense of loss, pain, family and social conflict, exclusion and marginality” (11) when assuming knowledge of Spanish as well as when entering English-speaking society at large.

This sense of pain created by Michele's Spanish-language ability is clearly illustrated in the vignette, “Let's go Mexico!” As a twenty-seven-year-old undergraduate student at the University of California, Los Angeles, Michele faced the possibility of not graduating because she had not yet completed her

language requirement. Her academic counselors assumed she spoke, wrote, and read Spanish because of her last name. However, that is not the case. Michele has three options. The first is a false option: to drop out; second, she can add another year in order to complete the language requirement; and, third, she can enroll in a study abroad program to quickly earn the credit. Having been in and out of community college for the previous six years while working full-time and mourning the recent death of her mother, Michele does not want another delay. She goes to Mexico to learn Spanish. Her experience in Mexico proves to be lonely. She is surrounded by young white, wealthy, students, who have had more Spanish classroom experience than she, and who express their racial and class privilege when they remark about Mexican men:

“Damn, they are so horny.” [And] I’ve gotta make sure I keep track of my pill, ’cause these men are just so into making babies and starting families and I ain’t gonna be no green card for no one. That’s the last thing I wanna do. I got career plans. I got career goals. That’s why I’m even here in the fucking first place. Being bilingual is only gonna advance my opportunities in the workforce.” (106)

Michele’s classmates constantly correct her Spanish, her cultural knowledge of Mexico, and they make fun of her because she would rather spend time with the indigenous housekeeper than go out with them and flirt with the horny brown boys. When her classmates speak of Mexican men as only objects to fulfill their desire, they are unable to see that Michele is of Mexican descent. When they make fun of her because she is “Chicana” and does “not speak Spanish,” they are unable to see that she is a fourth-generation American. To these young women, Spanish becomes another tool to fulfill yet another desire: better career possibilities. For Michele this experience represents another instance of negotiations that at times become painful reminders of her dislocation.



Michele refuses to let anyone define her in limiting ways. It is also through language and writing that Michele challenges this practice that excludes her in the name of language. She is not maintaining that language should not be a marker of identity. Rather, Spanish should not be the only marker of identity. Inadvertently, Michele's improper language usage also speaks to ways in which privilege and access to education can produce an identity that is narrowed and not representative of a community as a whole. Exclusionary practices can and do work at all levels even from within our own communities as we internalize the messages that being American, Chicana, and woman means: speaking perfect standard Spanish, or perfect standard American English, or having blue eyes, blond hair, and a young and slender looking body regardless of the social, ethnic, racial, national, and class positions from which a person is located.

### **Conclusion: Writing as a Tool for Self-Definition**

Michele Serros is an outsider within both communities. Furthermore, she is an outsider within (Collins 1986). She belongs in both communities, yet rigid categories within both mainstream and Chicana/o communities deny her full membership in either. She sees herself as different yet as equally part of both communities. This does not mean it is an easy fit. It is this difficulty of fitting in that she negotiates and asserts throughout her narrative. Belonging is not an easy feat, especially if one does not follow all the rules imposed by rigid definitions of self. It is what Norma Alarcón calls identity-in-difference (1996).

Throughout *How to Be a Chicana Role Model*, Chicana identity resists a homogenous subjectivity. Michele's experiences are complicated and complex. They demonstrate the ways in which a young Chicana explores her identity as an American of Mexican descent. The strength and power of Serros' work lies in the multiple layers on which it works. At times, first-person voice

narrator, Michele, is self-critical of the ways in which her immediate family and Chicana/o community try to limit her scope of self-definition. Ultimately, it is within these structures that Michele also finds the space to self-define. It is a journey that Michele engaged in as a child.

At the age of ten, Michele told one of her aunts that the one thing she “knew for sure” was that she “loved” to write (41). Michele states:

Writing granted me freedom. It gave voice to all the opinions I was too afraid to say out loud for fear of sounding unladylike or babyish by family members, classmates, or stupid neighbor friend Paty Romero. But best of all writing allowed me to escape from household chaos, playground drama, and all of those boring *Wednesday After School Special* reruns. Yes, escape was wonderful. (40-1)

It is through writing that Michele talks back to those who insist on limiting the ways in which she defines herself. It is a tool she uses to protect herself from the ways in which her family, her community, society-at-large, and Hollywood attempt to control her, sometimes benignly and at other times dangerously.

Michele Serros' fiction functions as a response to the limiting ways in which Hollywood sees Latinos, to the self-colonizing practices, and to the ways in which Latino communities sometimes engage in a politics of identity that works within restrictive paradigms, and to the ways Chicanas/os sometimes also internalize racist, prejudiced, and reductionist views of themselves. Michele, the narrator, does not claim to have the right answer to define the identity of Chicanas. Instead, she cleverly assumes that to claim a Chicana identity is a fiction. Not because Chicana identity does not exist, but because

when one fixes any identity, a stagnation and limitation of identity occurs. Serros, the writer, concedes that her protagonist, Michele, cannot be a Chicana role model. Instead the protagonist Michele is part of a large and rich community of Chicanas living in the U.S., negotiating family, cultural, ethnic, and geographical histories in order to construct identity. Michele is reframing her identity and self through a revisionist strategy that looks deeply into herself, her family, and her multiple communities in order to craft her space as a fifth-generation Californian Chicana American.

Within the thirteen rules outlining how to achieve a Chicana role model persona, Michele explains to the reader the parameters by which she defines Chicana identity. By creating her own rules, she refuses to let others define who she is. It is this refusal that marks Serros' work as a decolonial project. Michele does not let Terri define her as a non-Californian, she struggles to establish herself as a writer in her own eyes, her family's perception, and her peers understanding of her, she rejects the notion that she is not Mexican or Chicana enough because of language politics, and she asserts her U.S. citizenship through a re-affirmation of her family's history as rightful inhabitants of California. Through Michele's experiences, Serros suggests that identity is always in process and "not yet" (Alarcón 1996, Sandoval 1991) completely determined. For Serros there is not a singular definition of Chicana identity. There are many multiple and complex ways of being Chicana.

The story of young Michele inevitably reminds me of ways in which my students at a small liberal arts college in New England daily negotiate their American identity as well as their ethnic experiences amid a majority that does not understand their hybrid positions. I have young, bright students who seek me out as I walk through campus or stop by my office when they see the door open.

In our conversations, I often hear the pain of feeling isolated and misunderstood by their fellow white students. The work of Michele Serros helps them understand that they are not alone and that they all have the power and capacity to define themselves and to understand and respect the differences that make Latinas/os living in the U.S. a complex, complicated, and dynamic people.

### Notes

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<sup>i</sup> Clara Rodríguez explains that, historically, Latinas in Hollywood have been represented as “passive, feeble, unintelligent, and dependent” (1997, 2-3). Charles Ramírez-Berg adds that Hollywood has produced six stereotypes: “the bandido, the harlot, the male buffon, the female clown, the Latin lover, and the dark lady” (2002, 66). Rosa Linda Fregoso gives a specific example of how Hollywood uses cinematic techniques to manipulate the images of Mexicans in the 1915 film, *Martyrs of the Alamo*. Fregoso states that through “mise-en-scène, editing, and shot composition...Mexicans are caricatured as dark, ominous, and physically aggressive. Medium close shots depict the psychological depth of Anglo characters, whereas the camera remains distant from the Mexican characters...Mexicans are portrayed as a mass of bodies with faces that are indistinguishable from each other” (2003, 327). Further, Fregoso explains how this limiting representation of Mexicans made her understand the shame she felt as a thirteen-year-old girl when she listened to the one-sided lesson plans of her Anglo Texan teacher when she learned the history of the Alamo. Representations of Mexicans in Hollywood and in history lessons are created by the people in power and sometimes these representations induce notions of shame and produce internalized racism that can blind young people to their own history.

<sup>ii</sup> I first came to the works of Gloria Anzaldúa and Cherríe Moraga as an eighteen-year-old college student. *This Bridge Called My Back: Writings By Radical Women of Color* (1981) offered me a place to see in writing that I was not alone. I felt a passion to stand up for myself, my family, and my community. Serros’ work echoes the messages of self-love, appreciation for differences, and reclaiming of our humanity that I first read in *Bridge*. I think it is no accident that Serros only reference to Chicana feminists is through *Haciendo Caras: Making Face, Making Soul*, Anzaldúa’s second anthology of writers by women of color.

<sup>iii</sup> On Wednesday, February 21, 2001, Michele Serros performed a reading of *How to Be a Chicana Role Model* at the Varsity Theatre in Davis, California. The reading was part of the Women’s Center Lecture series at the University of California, Davis. During the reading, Serros told the audience that she had written the book from the memories of her personal experiences. However, her editor strongly encouraged her to publish the book as fiction. Serros’ writing falls under the tradition of

some Chicana writers that used their autobiographical experiences to write memoirs, *testimonios*, and even fictional works. For a more detailed analysis of this phenomena, see Norma Klahn (2003).

<sup>iv</sup> Michele Serros' first book was titled *chicana falsa*. This title refers back to what her peers used to call her when she was a young child growing in Oxnard, California. She has talked about this in interviews.

<sup>v</sup> MTV produced a show called *Laguna Beach*, which supposedly shows the lives of typical Californian teens. However, all the teens in the first season of the show were white, wealthy, blue-eyed, and drove expensive cars. California was homogeneously constructed as self-obsessed: white, middle class, and obsessed with body image, as well as romantic problems, and completely isolated from everything and everyone.

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