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Chicana/o Dreaming : The American Dream and Education in Chicana/o Narrative

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Chicana/o Dreaming: The American Dream and Education in Chicana/o Narrative

A dissertation in partial satisfaction of the requirements for the degree Doctor of Philosophy

in

Literature

by

Violeta Alejandra Sánchez

Committee in charge:
Professor Jorge Mariscal, Co-Chair
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Professor Gloria Chacón
Professor Thandeka Chapman
Professor Stephanie Jed

2015
The Dissertation of Violeta Alejandra Sánchez is approved, and it is acceptable in quality and form for publication on microfilm and electronically:

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Co-Chair

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Co-Chair

University of California, San Diego

2015
DEDICATION

For Ryan, my partner in love and so much laughter

For Isaac and Viviana, the best son and best daughter “I ever had”

Y para Lorena—mi madre y la más grande de todas mis maestras.
EPIGRAPH

**Dreaming**

I write about dreams
For years now
Dreams of mi gente
Sueños también míos
And I feel so close to the end of
This dream
Of making it reality

I can feel the weight off my back
Lifting
Of the anchor on my chest that
Used to sink to my stomach
Disappearing
Making me
Ligerita
Como cuando era escuincla

And now I dream of other things
Of my own classroom
Of no longer being a student
But still learning
Of being la maestra
De muchas y muchos como yo

Tal vez hoy me siento optimista
Tal vez mañana me sienta diferente
But for now
I am light
And dreaming.
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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I was always a kid who loved school. It was the place where I was confident and strong, despite my size. It was where I recited poetry at school assemblies, performed dances at school functions, and where I got the highest grades of my entire class from first through fifth grade. It was where, in one way or another, I always excelled.

But in the middle of sixth grade, I left my school. On my twelfth birthday, I left my home. About a week later, I became a U.S. sixth grader, and school was no longer a place I loved. I became quiet and lonely. I came home with daily headaches from listening to people speak English all day long. My mother would then make me watch reruns of *Full House* and *Family Matters* to help me with vocabulary and pronunciation. I remember once telling her that I would never learn to speak English because everyday it seemed I knew less and less. She very wisely told me that this was not true, that I was just realizing how much I had yet to learn. In many ways—and in spite of not having mastered the language herself—she became my first and most significant English teacher. Like many Mexican parents, my mother knew that English fluency would be the first step to my success in the United States. But I don’t think either of us had any idea where school would take me.

My mother, Lorena Torres, has been one of many teachers who inside and outside the classroom have taught me how to teach, what to write, and how to live. My family, my professors, my colleagues, and my friends have all been wonderful teachers and supports throughout my journey in the U.S. educational system. The words that follow cannot accurately convey how thankful I feel for their love and support throughout the years.
I want to thank Lynne Dozier, my junior English teacher, for teaching me to find my voice as a writer. Thank you for believing I would write again—I am so happy you were right. I want to thank Guadalupe Cortina and Gabi Baeza, for teaching classes (at Texas A&M University and the University of Houston, respectively) that made it easy for me to call myself a feminist and a Chicana. Both of you are two of my ejemplos a seguir. I also want to thank María C. González at the University of Houston for giving me the opportunity to teach an undergraduate course of hers for a couple of days. Teaching Anzaldúa’s Borderlands/La Frontera was my first experience teaching in a college classroom, and it was a great one. I also want to thank mis colegas at the University of Houston—Laura Zubiate, Carolina Villarroel, Ana María Touza-Medina, and Luziris Turi Pineda—gracias por su apoyo desde tan lejos.

I am so thankful for my dissertation co-chairs—Jorge Mariscal and Nicole Tonkovich. Nicole, I don’t know if you will ever understand how much taking that one course from you changed my academic life, and how thankful I am for it. Your kindness, your guidance, and your support have meant so much to me in the last few years. Dear Jorge, you’ve given me so much in my time at UCSD. You made me unafraid of Cervantes, you introduced me to Summer Bridge, and then you gave me great year of teaching at DOC—I only wish I’d gotten there sooner! Thank you for believing in me when I couldn’t. I hope to make you proud in what’s to come. To Stephanie Jed, Gloria Chacón, and Thandeka Chapman—the rest of my dissertation committee—thank you for lending your support and expertise to this project. I also want to thank all previous committee members for their support at earlier stages in this process.
I am grateful that at the end of my first year at UCSD, I found a home in OASIS Summer Bridge. For six nonconsecutive summers, I had one of the best jobs of my life. I want to thank the professional staff at OASIS for showing me a roomful of educators each summer who cared immensely about their students’ learning and well-being. To the facilitators each year—thank you for teaching me how to be a good lecturer and a good leader, but mostly, thank you for being such wonderful teachers to your students. To my fellow lecturers Angie Kong, Marilisa Navarro, and Josen Diaz—thank you for being such wonderful colleagues and for letting me learn so much from you. To Patrick Velasquez—thank you for giving me one of the most wonderful opportunities I’ve ever had. It has shaped my academic, pedagogical, and personal life in countless ways. Thank you for all of your support (and the music!) throughout the years. And to all of my Summer Bridge students—thank you for inspiring this project, but mostly, thank you for giving me the energy, the drive, and the inspiration to earn this degree.

Thank you to all of my employers and supervisors at UCSD—Beatrice Pita, Carrie Wastal, Marion E. Wilson, Jeff Gagnon, and Jorge Mariscal for giving me the opportunity to teach courses that made me a stronger teacher and a stronger writer. I also want to thank the Department of Literature for awarding me a dissertation fellowship that allowed me to focus on my writing in the 2013-2014 academic year.

I want to thank every family member, friend, and babysitter who helped us take care of our children in the past five years. Special thanks go to my mother, Holly Wicks, and Allyson Osorio for caring for Isaac and Viviana at crucial times in my academic career. Thank you for keeping our children safe and happy when their parents could not be with them.
I want to thank the incredible family I’ve made in my time in San Diego. I am thankful for the wonderful colleagues and friends who have either shared an office with me, or a table at a café while writing. I am especially grateful for Josen Diaz, Zulema Diaz, Jodi Eisenberg, Ted Falk, Roberto Hernández, Anita Huizar-Hernández, Joo Ok Kim, Angie Kong, Lenna Odeh, Davorn Sisavath, and Niall Twohig for their encouragement, support, and advice throughout my time in San Diego, but especially throughout the writing process. I also want to thank the most recent additions to my San Diego family—Ekhas Fajardo, Megan Horton, and Megan Strom—for supporting me, encouraging me, and teaching me so much in the past year. To my friends Anita Huizar-Hernández, Jennie Daniels, Ryan Lepic, and Lisa Thomas—thank you for our Family Dinners. Those nights were wonderful because the food was ridiculously delicious, but the company and conversation were, amazingly, even better. A mi querida Zulema: Estoy tan agradecida de contarte como amiga. Thank you for the laughs, the love, and the support in the past few years. Te quiero mucho. To my dear Anita: state lines mean nothing to our friendship. Thank you for the love and support you’ve given me since I met you. You are one of the best gifts San Diego has given me.

To the family I’ve made since I met my husband, thank you for welcoming me into your world since I was a fifteen-year-old girl. Thank you for your love, support, and patience throughout the last few years. Thank you for understanding when we cannot visit and for giving us such a good time when we finally see one another. A mi familia en Monterrey y en Texas—no saben cuánto los extraño. El apoyo de todas y todos ustedes es todo. Ustedes me han enseñado lo que es el trabajo y lo agradecida que debo de estar de lo que tengo. Los quiero un ch…orro. También quiero agradecer de una manera especial
a dos mujeres en mi familia que ayudaron a criarme—mi abuela Consolación Ruiz de Sánchez y mi tía Virginia Cosme. Ellas han sido mis otras madres.

My mother left México when I was six to work en el otro lado. Although I always missed her, I never judged her. It hurt to live apart for six years. As her daughter, I knew and understood that hurt. But it was not until recently, in seeing my relationship with my five-year-old son, that I even came close to imagining what it must have felt like for her. Madre, siento tanto lo que te ha de haber dolido. Pero te quiero tanto por haberlo hecho. Gracias por el apoyo que me has brindado y por la fuerza que me has heredado.

Finally, I am immensely grateful for the support and love of three lovely people. Thank you, Ryan Anderson, for being such a patient and hilarious partner. I cannot imagine earning this doctorate without your sense of humor and without your support; in many ways, this achievement is ours. I love you so much. We’ve been married for almost eleven years, and in those eleven years, one or both of us has been in school. Here’s to what’s next! And to my wonderful children, Isaac and Viviana: I don’t think you’ll remember much from these years, but I want you to know this—yes, sometimes it hurt to leave you so that I could go to work. But I am glad I did it, because when I was off writing and teaching, I was dreaming. Dreaming not only of my success, but that of yours, and that of mi gente. Everyday you teach me to dream to make this place better. I hope to teach you the same dream.

Los quiero.

“Until we dream of life and life becomes a dream.”

Siempre.
VITA

2004  Bachelor of Arts, Texas A&M University, College Station
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MASTER’S THESIS


FIELDS OF STUDY

Major Field: Literature

Studies in Chicana/o and U.S. Latina/o Literature
Professors Jorge Mariscal and Nicole Tonkovich
In this dissertation, I examine contemporary Chicana and Chicano narratives that promote, complicate, and contest the ideology of the American Dream and its relationship to the U.S. educational system. I argue that these narratives expose the contradictory nature of an ideology that claims that education is the key to upward mobility for young children of all backgrounds, even as U.S. educational institutions
are unequal. I suggest that those works that characterize the United States as a meritocracy and blame individual people and their cultures for their academic underachievement uphold the hegemonic ideology of the American Dream, as well as the master narrative that ignores the histories, experiences, and epistemologies of Chicanas/os and other people of color. Other Chicana/o narratives, however, problematize the contradictions in the ideology of the American Dream by exposing the sociostructural problems that make the American Dream inaccessible by those in the margins.

Although educational institutions are critical sites in which an ideology of the American Dream is perpetuated and maintained, schools can also have a dialectical function that allows Chicanas and Chicanos to imagine an American Dream that includes the diversity in their realities; issues of bilingualism, assimilation, acculturation, gender education, and citizenship figure in the narratives I analyze in this project. I argue that the study of these works is critical because narrative allows us to confront the contradictory nature of the ideology of the American Dream, a powerful contradiction that often remains invisible or unchallenged in our everyday lives.
**Introduction**

*Narratives may have the most power over us when they are most invisible: that is, infinitely repeatable but unnoticed and unanalyzed. The American dream is actually—whatever else it may be—such a narrative.*

--Margaret Morganroth Gullete, "The American Dream as a Life Narrative"

Almost fifty percent of all Chicanas/os in the United States drop out of high school. As this segment of the U.S. population continues to grow, the statistic shows no signs of changing for the better, which is why Chicana/o community activists and educators have not only fought to bring to light such devastating educational outcomes but have tried to find ways to rectify them. It was community activism which spurred the Tucson city council to set up a task force that would investigate and address the high drop-out (or push-out) rates of Chicanas/os in their city. The results of their investigation led the school board to approve the creation of a Hispanic Studies Department that would eventually be known as Raza Studies, a curriculum that consisted of literature, history, and government taught from a social justice perspective. These programs proved to be effective in improving the test scores and grades of the TUSD Chicana/o population—in fact, in the last few years that this program had been in place, 93 percent of these students actually graduated from a TUSD high school.

As chronicled in Ari Palos' documentary *Precious Knowledge* (2011), these courses would be banned thanks to the work of nativists like the Arizona State School Superintendent of Public Instruction, Tom Horne. Horne claimed that ethnic studies courses actually segregate public instruction and create unnecessary division among different racial and ethnic groups. Disregarding the results the courses had on Chicana/o
test scores and graduation rates, and misunderstanding (or perhaps mischaracterizing) the goals and methods of these courses, Horne and his supporters sought to vilify teachers and students for reading, thinking, and writing critically in the classroom. Despite the fact that they succeeded in banning these courses, the film depicts how activism from teachers and students still challenged the status quo, and that in practicing a critical pedagogy inside and outside the classroom, it is possible to disrupt structures in the educational system that produce racialized academic outcomes.

*Precious Knowledge* is a striking example of the many aspects of the Chicana/o educational experience that allow us to see the marginalization of this population by the dominant U.S. culture. In order to understand the educational inequities experienced by Chicanas/os, as well as to understand how a critical pedagogy and a curriculum that reflects their histories, cultures, and knowledge can promote a space in which students are educated and empowered, the theoretical framework of this dissertation draws upon intersectionality, critical race theory (CRT) and Chicana/o critical theory (LatCrit). In my project, I examine Chicana/o narratives about education in conjunction with the ideology of the American Dream by taking into account the multidimensional lives of Chicanas/os through their immigration status (or that of their families), their gender, class, and racialization in U.S. society.

Education is an important site for the ideology of the American Dream because the classroom, often seen as the place where socioeconomic differences can be overcome or even erased, can be the place where these differences become more pronounced. So how do U.S. Chicana/o authors define the ideology of the American Dream and how do they see themselves as people who have an equal opportunity to partake in it? How does
education enable or restrict the ways Chicanas/os can achieve the socioeconomic success that is often equated with the American Dream? I contend that there are multiple answers to these questions and that they depend on the degrees to which these cultural texts seek to maintain and/or challenge the status quo.

In this dissertation, I examine narratives in contemporary Chicana/o literature and other cultural production in which hegemonic U.S. ideologies of the American Dream and meritocracy are at play at all levels of the educational system. I argue that the narratives with which I engage in this project that often privilege the culture(s) and values of dominant group(s) in U.S. society endorse ideologies of the American Dream that justify the inequities in the U.S. educational system, place blame on individuals and their respective cultures for their underachievement, and ultimately marginalize the experiences and epistemologies of Chicanas/os (along with other populations of color). Less well-known Chicana/o narratives (that are usually not consumed by a mainstream audience) can often problematize the dominant ideology of the American Dream, expose the structural and systemic issues that keep out and push-out Chicanas/os from educational institutions, and propose alternative ideologies of the American Dream that validate their experiences, their histories, and epistemologies.

**The Importance of Counterstories**

Since the ideology of the American Dream is at the core of the U.S. master narrative, counterstories or counternarratives can provide a “counter-reality” that challenges the structures and ideologies that create, maintain, and reproduce hegemonic power (Delgado 2412). In his article “Storytelling for Oppositionists and Others: A Plea
for Narrative,” Richard Delgado proposes that storytelling from the margins can actually contest and even subvert the status quo. Because the group in power also tells stories to justify its dominant position in relation to those it marginalizes, Delgado argues that counterstories can actually help expose and contest the “the mindset by means of which members of the dominant group justify the world as it is” (2413). According to Delgado, counterstories can function in two very significant ways. First, counterstories allow us to imagine or construct new realities that are not possible through conventional discourse because they “can open new windows into reality, showing us there are possibilities for life other than the ones we live” (2414). Second, counterstories also possess a “destructive function” because “[t]hey can show us the way out of the trap of unjustified exclusion. They can help us understand when it is time to allocate power. They are the other half—the destructive half—of the creative dialectic” (2415). In other words, counterstories highlight the tension between those in power and those in the margins and provide opportunity, through said tension, to create sociostructural change.

Tara J. Yosso refers to “majoritarian storytelling” as “a method of recounting experiences and perspectives of those with racial and social privilege” (Counterstories 9). In the pages that follow, I discuss cultural texts from a literary analysis perspective that at varying degrees reaffirm and contest majoritarian storytelling. Although most of the texts I examine could be classified as counterstories or counternarratives because they present alternative realities to the dominant discourse concerning the ideology of the American Dream and education, they do not always expose or contest the structures that enable the significant leaks along the Chicana/o educational pipeline. Additionally, I contend that two of the cultural texts I examine—Richard Rodriguez’s Hunger of Memory and the
film adaptation of Josefina López’s *Real Women Have Curves* actually function as “minority” majoritarian stories because they significantly reinforce a master narrative that characterizes Chicana/o culture as deficient (in the case of Rodríguez’s text) or that Chicana/o parents do not value education (in the case of *Real Women Have Curves*). In discussing all of these works, I emphasize the strength and perseverance of the ideology of the American Dream and how the educational system can both serve as a space in which we perpetuate or contest this ideology.

In my first chapter, I examine the ideology of the American Dream. I define this ideology and trace its origins to James Truslow Adams, a historian who is often believed to have coined the term. I discuss how this ideology has changed since the founding of the United States and how it specifically relates to Chicanas/os. In this chapter, I explore the contradictory nature of this powerful ideology—that while there is evidence that there are significant gaps in income and wealth across racial and ethnic groups, we still believe the United States to be a meritocracy. A focus of this chapter is the theme of upward mobility and how education is perceived as the key to making it come true. While Chicana/o literature has explored the ideology of the American Dream, it has often contested it, even going as far as turning it into the “American Nightmare.” The stories of Mexican immigrants going to *el Norte* in the literature of the “*México de Afuera*” and early Chicano novels confront this powerful ideology by claiming that the dream of a better life in the United States is not possible for most Chicanas and Chicanos. In this chapter, I also talk about Chicana/Chicano Educational Pipeline and how a Critical Race Theory (CRT) framework can help us understand, confront, and change racialized academic outcomes.
In my second chapter, "To Hyphen or not to Hyphen: Dreaming a Mexican American Identity," I juxtapose the autobiographical works of two Mexican Americans, who, despite similar cultural backgrounds, found opposing ways to navigate a U.S. educational system that did not cater to them. I examine Hunger of Memory: The Education of Richard Rodriguez (1982), an autobiographical work by the Mexican American writer of the same name, and contrast it with the autobiographical essay "From the Barrio to the Academy: Revelations of a Mexican American Scholarship Girl" (1992) by Laura I. Rendón, whose scholarship, although not as well-known as Rodriguez's literary body of work, is significant in education studies. I argue that Rodriguez's Hunger of Memory is a minority majoritarian story that not only advocates for the linguistic and cultural assimilation of Chicanas/os (and all U.S. Latinas/os) but also blames this group's academic and socio-economic underachievement on their so-called resistance to assimilation. By advocating for the assimilation of first and second generation Chicana/o and Latina/o immigrants, Rodriguez narrowly defines American identity and perpetuates and ideology of the American Dream in which students can succeed in the academy by adopting "American" ideals such as meritocracy and individualism. Rendón's "From the Barrio to the Academy," on the other hand, proposes a much more complex identity for the Chicana/o student. In her autobiographical essay, Rendón articulates a counterstory to Rodriguez's in which she holds educational institutions of higher learning accountable for the underachievement of women and people of color. She proposes that the lesson in her story is that students can achieve academic success by embracing a bicultural (or multicultural) ethnic identity that validates the heritage, histories, cultures, experiences, and languages of her or his cultural background(s). Furthermore, she argues that higher
learning institutions must adapt themselves to address the needs and knowledge of all students, rather than just the students whose culture reflects that of the status quo. Rendón challenges, with what Dolores Delgado Bernal calls a critical raced-gendered epistemological perspective, the Eurocentric epistemological perspective put forth by Rodriguez's narrative.

Unsurprisingly, Rodriguez's literary and public-speaking career has found mainstream and long-term success; *Hunger of Memory* has found its way into the canon of Mexican American authors despite Rodriguez's reluctance to be an American with a hyphen, and despite Chicana/o critics who believe his arguments threaten the advancements made by the Chicana/o and Civil Rights movements on behalf of people of color. What has made *Hunger of Memory* and the public personality that is Richard Rodriguez so successful is their investment in maintaining the status quo; *Hunger of Memory* is a majoritarian and assimilationist text from a "minority" writer who does not consider himself as such, and serves as a powerful tool for conservatives to wield when confronted with racialized inequities. According to the dominant narratives, if someone like Rodriguez has found success by embracing a hegemonic American identity that is confined to Anglo-Protestant values and English fluency, every other Chicana/o or even Latina/o should be able to do the same. As a counterstory to the majoritarian storytelling that justifies the socioeconomic inequities in the U.S. educational system and advocates for the (sometimes impossible) assimilation of people of color, Rendón's essay (which is informed by both her autobiography and scholarship) is known among her peers in education but unknown or unappreciated by the mainstream. That her work's success is limited to education studies despite an expertise and insight that makes her an important
counterpoint to narratives like Rodriguez is not surprising; to declare that the problem in the underachievement of Chicanas/os in the U.S. educational system, especially at the higher education level, is *systemic* and that as a society we are responsible or complicit in such inequities is at odds with the dominant ideology of the U.S. meritocracy.

In my third chapter titled “*Sin la migra y en la madre*: Erased Immigrant Stories and Villainous Mothers,” I examine how the play *Real Women Have Curves* (1996) by Josefina Lopez is transformed from a counternarrative to a majoritarian narrative through its adaptation to film. Lopez's play dramatizes the interactions of five Mexican immigrant women working in a garment factory as they race to complete a very important and difficult order in a week of September, 1987. In their conversations, the playwright explores themes relevant to many a Chicana, such as that of body acceptance, the Mexican patriarchy, the threat of *la migra*, and labor exploitation. Although these themes may not always be explored in the depth they deserve, the play attempts to counter a master narrative that obscures the many facets of the Mexican immigrant experience. The play centers on Ana, a young woman who dreams of pursuing higher education to become a writer, whose short experience as a garment worker enables her to understand that the women she perceives as antiquated and uneducated have a lot to teach her. *Real Women Have Curves* has been one of the most produced Chicana/o plays in recent years, and its prominence in contemporary Chicana/o theater has offered a perspective on the Chicana and Latina experience that is often marginalized by the mainstream.

The film, which was directed by Patricia Cardoso and co-written by George LaVoo and Josefina Lopez herself, oversimplifies and even erases much of what was discussed in the play. In seeking a mainstream audience, the film adaptation changed
significant plot points and characterizations. The threat of deportation that the women experience, even though most of them have recently acquired legal status thanks to the Immigration Reform and Control Act of 1986, is prevalent in almost every scene of the original work. This narrative thread is completely erased in its adaptation in order to make the film more palatable for a mainstream audience. The film focuses on an individual's narrative, Ana's, as a young Latina feminist who dreams of socioeconomic success through higher education, and whose main obstacle to achieve it is her own mother, a stand-in for Mexican American culture. By erasing the plot points that highlight the plight of immigrant women, and by making her mother (as a representative of her culture) the impediment to her socioeconomic success, the film erases the social or economic challenges that a young immigrant like Ana might face when dreaming of pursuing a college education. The film centers on an individualized narrative that oversimplifies a young Chicana's quest for her independence from an oppressive culture and socioeconomic status via higher education. It is intent on vilifying Carmen, who serves as a stand-in for the antiquated and undereducated Mexican culture that is holding Ana back. Like Richard Rodriguez’s *Hunger of Memory*, the film *Real Women Have Curves* can be read as assimilationist work. Although neither the play nor the film deal with issues of language, the film proposes that a young woman like Ana will succeed socioeconomically the moment she decides to "Americanize" herself.

Both the film and the play can be characterized as feminist works—both attempt to challenge dominant definitions and constrictions of female beauty and sexuality, but it is the film's feminist critique that characterizes Mexican culture as the villain in the story, while American feminism serves as its hero. According to the film, Ana is held back by a
culture (represented by her mother) that fat-shames her and does not value a traditional education. By leaving the confines of her home and her barrio by attending a prestigious university in New York City, Ana fully assimilates and can therefore escape the fate of many other Chicanas. What the film neglects to problematize is that going to a four-year college, much less one that is out of state and that will provide a full scholarship, is an impossibility for most young women like Ana. The film proposes that failure to achieve the American Dream can be blamed on individuals—on young people who are either not smart or hard-working enough to get into college, and on the parents who do not value an academic education. By omitting a discussion of the contextual factors that make it a dream more than a reality for young Chicanas to become college-educated, the film reinforces a master narrative that obscures the structural racism and sexism that ensures educational inequities that Chicanas experience. The film's subsequent success—it even became the launching pad of a young America Ferrera prior to her network nighttime soap *Ugly Betty*—is significant because the film created and produced by U.S. Latinas/os does not seek to disrupt the status quo but rather perpetuates an ideology of the American Dream tied to individualism and meritocracy in order to achieve mainstream success.

In my fourth chapter, "They ARE Americans: Undocumented Students and American Identity,” I examine William Perez’s *We ARE Americans: Undocumented Students Pursuing the American Dream* (2009)—a text that argues for the legal and social incorporation of undocumented students in mainstream U.S. society. Through twenty narratives inspired by the interviews Perez conducted with young people at varying stages of the process of applying, attending, and recently graduating from four-year universities, Perez attempts to counter the negative stereotypes of the undocumented
immigrant often used to argue for the direct and indirect deportation of the many people who reside, study, and/or work in the United States "illegally." He counters these static representations of undocumented youth with an overall positive, yet also static and problematic one of the (academically and extracurricularly) exceptional undocumented student. By countering the negative stereotype of the undocumented student with an exceptionally positive one, Perez relies on the good immigrant-bad immigrant binary that not only neglects to represent a large number of undocumented youth, but also does not explicitly challenge the structural forces that affect the educational experiences of undocumented students. This text adds the lens of immigration status to the discussion of Chicanas/os and Latinas/os in education that either was not a factor for some of the writers, such as Rodriguez and Rendón, since they are second-generation, or that was erased in the case with the adaptation from play to film of Real Women Have Curves.

In discussing the challenges undocumented students face as they attempt to pursue higher education, We ARE Americans obscures some of the other factors that, along a student's immigration status, contribute to the poor college enrollment and graduation rates of all U.S. Latinas/os. By arguing that the young people he has interviewed ARE Americans, Perez attempts to expand the definition of U.S. citizenship to include young people who have otherwise been ignored, marginalized, and exploited. But in limiting his argument to high-achieving students, Perez is still conceding to the dominant ideologies of meritocracy and the American Dream as he indirectly argues that those worthy of "legalization" must want or even be able to pursue a college education and eventually become working professionals. Although Perez attempts to counter the mainstream narratives that are intent on criminalizing and demonizing the undocumented,
his work still keeps many stories in the margins. Perez still narrowly defines what it means to be a U.S. citizen, or "American."

In producing a sympathetic counternarrative Perez, rather than challenge the legal and social limits of U.S. citizenship, merely stretches them to include those exceptional young people who still adhere to the hegemonic ideologies of meritocracy and the American Dream. Although these students represent a significant segment of the undocumented student population, the narratives in We ARE Americans only allude (and do some sometimes rather negatively) to the stories of the many others who have not persevered in the U.S. educational system. By focusing on these exceptional narratives, Perez reduces the identities of undocumented students into a nonthreatening, exceptionally positive image whose incorporation into mainstream U.S. society is more easily accepted than that of a group whose educational experiences, achievements, and life experiences are more complex and heterogeneous. By highlighting the individual stories of "hardworking" and exceptionally talented people, Perez obscures the systemic issues that lead to the struggles of undocumented students and further promotes the idea that the talent and work ethic of individuals prove their legitimacy as U.S. citizens.

In my epilogue, "Dangerous and 'Precious Knowledge,'" I begin with a brief discussion of how the Arizona ban on Ethnic Studies is portrayed in the documentary Precious Knowledge, and how the film highlights the ways a critical education of Chicana/o and Latina/o students disrupts racialized academic outcomes and how this disruption threatens the power of hegemonic group(s). I am interested in this film because I believe an important component in addressing the leaks in the Chicana/o or Latina/o educational pipeline is to create change at the systemic level, and the film shows us how
critical pedagogy and student activism can disrupt the disparities in student engagement, achievement, and graduation rates among various ethnic groups. Because a mainstream high school education privileges the histories, cultures, languages and epistemologies of the Anglo-Protestant experience, *Precious Knowledge* proves that in creating and teaching ethnic studies programs, activists, educators, and students create a dialectical space that educates and empowers its participants. This film is about the power of knowledge—so threatening to the status quo, that the power majority, afraid of its potential in challenging the existing structure, sets out to eliminate it. Interestingly, while the ban is still in effect in Arizona, in Los Angeles, California new legislation has made it a requirement for students to take ethnic studies. The contrast between the two states' approaches to this subject highlights not only its controversies, but provides an alternative vision to the one Arizona officials propagated—in calling for these courses to be a requirement, the implicit argument is that the content of these courses should not be seen as additional or even marginal, but as integral to everyone's education because of our diverse population.

In examining the works of U.S. Chicanas/os that deal with the subject of education, I have proposed that they are inextricably tied to the ideology of the American Dream and its contradictions. When narratives or stories perpetuate a hegemonic ideology of the American Dream invested in individualism and meritocracy, they are rewarded with mainstream success, since they help maintain the racial and socio-economic status quo. But there are a few narratives, like those of Rendón or Palos' *Precious Knowledge*, that challenge the hegemonic ideology of the American Dream and struggle to propose a new one—a more complex “dream” that attempts to democratize
educational institutions and consequently democratize U.S. society. By countering assimilationist narratives that erase the multiplicity of histories, cultures, languages, and epistemologies of a diverse U.S. population in favor of dominant group(s), Chicana/o counternarratives disrupt the status quo by advocating for the legitimacy of the histories, cultures, languages, and epistemologies of those in the margins. By putting the Chicana/o experience at the center, counternarratives argue that Chicanas and Chicanos also dream a more inclusive American Dream. Studying these and other counternarratives from marginalized groups can help us imagine that dreaming in any language—and from the multiple experiences that are often ignored and suppressed by a master narrative—is possible.
Chapter 1

The Ideology of the American Dream

*It’s called the American Dream because you have to be asleep to believe it.*

--- George Carlin

The coinage of the term “American Dream” is attributed to American historian James Truslow Adams, who in his book *The Epic of America* (1931), claimed the United States delivers a “distinctive and unique gift to mankind”:

But there has been also the *American dream*, that dream of a land in which life should be better and richer and fuller for every man, with opportunity for each according to his ability of achievement […] It is not a dream of motor cars and high wages merely, but a dream of a social order in which each man or woman shall be able to attain to the fullest stature of which they are innately capable, and be recognized by others for what they are, regardless of the fortuitous circumstances of birth or position. (374)

According to Adams, this gift of equal opportunity “regardless of…the fortuitous circumstances of birth or position” is unique to the United States because in this country one’s socioeconomic background need not limit his or her achievements. A person’s achievements, according to this ideology, are dependent on his or her work ethic and “innate” abilities. It is perhaps here that we first find the link in print between the ideologies of the American Dream and the U.S. meritocracy. Of course, by calling the circumstances of one’s birth or position “fortuitous,” Adams (along with the most ardent believers of this hegemonic ideology) negates the possibility that one’s socioeconomic status can be attributed to society’s intersecting hierarchies. Chance is to blame for one’s starting position in the “social order” and individuals are the ones to blame if they do not achieve upward mobility in their lifetimes.
Although we cannot completely attribute the birth of the ideology of the American Dream to Adams, we can trace its proliferation to the publication of his book. While Adams writes with certainty that the United States provides this gift for its inhabitants, this ideology, at least in name, did not possess the hegemonic power that it does today. In his book *The American Dream: A Short History of an Idea that Shaped a Nation* (2004), Jim Cullen asserts that Adams’ publisher talked him out of titling his book *The American Dream*: “While it’s not clear whether he actually coined the term or appropriated it from someone else, his publisher’s reluctance to use it suggests ‘American Dream’ was not in widespread use elsewhere” (4). Whether he actually coined this term or was the first to define it, Adams’ work was indeed one of the first to engage with this ideology in the U.S. mainstream and likely helped it become “our national motto” (5).

While tracing a history of this ideology, Jim Cullen claims that no one has truly attempted to define or to historicize it. He hypothesizes that those who write about it (always in conjunction with another theme like “the novel” or “education”) assume that the American Dream is something that need not be defined, since it is a “term everyone presumably understands” (5). For Cullen, today’s current and unspoken definition of this dream is that “in the United States anything is possible if you want it badly enough” (5). In attempting to trace a history of the ideology of the American Dream, Cullen goes as far back to “The Puritan Enterprise” to situate the origins of this ideology. He claims that the Pilgrims “may not have actually talked about the American Dream, but they would have understood the idea” because “they lived it as people who imagined a destiny for themselves” (5). But the Puritan American Dream is not the dream of today, for the American Dream has continued to evolve since “America’s” inception. As a “major
element of our national identity” (6), Cullen traces the meaning(s) of this ideology through the American Revolution (he refers to the Declaration of Independence as the “Dream Charter”), the country’s founding (he refers to Benjamin Franklin as one of the founders of this ideology), the Civil War and the Emancipation Proclamation, the Civil Rights Movement (which he calls the “Dream of Equality”), the “Dream of Home Ownership” throughout the twentieth century (which he believes is the American Dream most “widely realized”), and finally contends that the most recent incarnation of the American Dream ends up geographically as the “Dream of the Coast”—a dream of heading out west to reach fortune (and today, perhaps fame).  

Although the Dream of Equality as discussed by Cullen primarily concerns the Black Civil Rights Movement, the Dream of Equality is one that can apply to Chicana/o narratives and the ideology of the American Dream. It is not surprising that in this version of the dream, Cullen focuses his discussion on the history of African Americans in the United States (slavery, the Jim Crow Era, the Black Civil Rights Movement), especially since Martin Luther King’s “I Have a Dream” speech has been used to write multiple (and sometimes competing) ideologies of the American Dream. However, Cullen’s focus neglects to acknowledge there have been other groups in the U.S. population that have fought for the Dream of Equality, such as women or Chicanas/os. Although Cullen is right to highlight this history as an integral component of the ideology of the American Dream, to ignore how other groups like Chicanas/os have been othered.

1 The claim that the “Dream of Home Ownership” is the dream that has been the most “widely-realized” can be contested if one takes into account home ownership rates across race. According to the U.S. Census Bureau, while the home ownership rates in the United States between 2010-2014 were in the mid-60s, and the rates of “Non-Hispanic White Alone” rates were in the low
and therefore subjugated to lower positions in the multiple U.S. hierarchies reinforces a mainstream discussion on race that reflects a white-black binary that, although significant, does not account for the diversity of the U.S. population. When discussing the importance of a case like *Brown v. Board of Education* (1954) for instance, he examines how racial segregation in education impeded the realization of these young black students dream of equal opportunity. But an important precedent for *Brown* was the case of *Mendez, et al v. Westminster* (1947). In this decision, it was ruled that segregating Spanish-speaking Mexican and Mexican American students from the rest of the student population was in fact unconstitutional. It was through the Mendez lawsuit that Chicana/o families fought for their children’s equal opportunity for a U.S. public education and consequently the realization of their American Dream.

**Contradictions in the American Dream Ideology**

It is the dream of Upward Mobility, which interests me most for this project, because this dream is often linked with the life and educational experiences of Chicanas/os in the United States. The ideology of a U.S. meritocracy, as well as the perceived role of education as the means for socioeconomic ascension, are integral to understanding why the ideology of the American Dream is alive and well. Educational institutions promote the ideologies of the American Dream and meritocracy but also function as the space that promises to level the socioeconomic playing field for young people. What these ideologies neglect to acknowledge is that there are other factors that positively or negatively affect students’ academic, professional, and economic dreams. In her book *The American Dream and the Power of Wealth* (2015), Heather Beth Johnson
agrees with Jim Cullen’s assertion that the ideology of the American Dream has “evolved in various ways over time” but contends that one of its most significant evolutions has been its “literal interpretation” (2). According to Johnson, the advancements made through social movements as well as important legislation and court decisions in the last fifty years have created the impression that the American Dream is more reality (and inevitability) than dream.

Johnson characterizes the ideology of the American Dream as an “unproblematized contradiction,” since its most ardent believers fail to take into account an important factor in American life that is at odds with the ideology of a U.S. meritocracy—wealth (3). Through her work, Johnson wants to highlight the contradiction between the dominant ideology of the United States as the so-called land of opportunity and the legacies of inherited wealth (4). For Johnson, it is imperative to talk about wealth when addressing disparities in socioeconomic success. In previous studies, “class has been measured almost exclusively by education, occupation, and income,” but inherited wealth (or lack thereof) and family monetary gifts actually help perpetuate economic inequities because “while we typically equate money with earned income, many American families acquire a substantial portion of their financial portfolios through nonmerit sources, mainly in the form of intergenerational assets” (6). These financial advantages contribute to people’s success and yet, most Americans—at all points of the economic spectrum—believe that success comes solely from merit.

The racial wealth gap in the United States is vast and produces significant differences in day-to-day life, and affects decisions and opportunities with long-term repercussions. According to the data from the Survey of Income and Program
Participation (SIPP), “in 2011 the median white household had $111,146 in wealth holdings, compared to just $7,113 for the median Black household and $8,348 for the median Latino household” (Sullivan, Meschede, Dietrich, and Shapiro). Home ownership is another important factor that contributes to both the racial wealth gap and educational inequities. There are great differences in home ownership rates across race. In 2011, “73 percent of white households owned their own homes” while “only 47 percent of Latinos and 45 percent of Blacks were homeowners.” Additionally, Black and Latino homeowners accrue less wealth through home ownership:

[F]or every $1 in wealth that accrues to median Black households as a result of homeownership, median white households accrue $1.34; meanwhile for every $1 in wealth that accrues to median Latino households as a result of homeownership, median white households accrue $1.54.

These disparities have grown steadily since the 1970s and have widened the racial wealth gap even as the ideology of the American Dream continues to promote that upward mobility from one generation to the next is a certainty, especially through higher education. But since there are great racial disparities in the educational pipeline at all levels of the U.S. educational system, the idea that a college or graduate degree will address the income and wealth disparities when it comes to race seems impossible.

If meritocracy is at the heart of the ideology of the American Dream and people of color disproportionately acquire, grow, and transfer wealth to their families, how do we reconcile this contradiction? If the United States is truly the land of equal opportunity, how do inherited wealth and the difference in home ownership and college graduation rates figure into the American Dream ideology? Johnson argues that the contradiction between meritocracy and inherited wealth in this ideology needs to be problematized:
In some ways, the American Dream of meritocracy may be true, but it is glaringly false in at least one way: inherited wealth is not earned through the beneficiary’s individual achievement, and many individuals in wealth-holding families (disproportionately white families) inherit wealth. One cannot “earn” something that he or she inherits. (11)

U.S. educational institutions are supposed to provide one of the first instances of equal opportunity to young Americans, regardless of their socioeconomic background. A family’s wealth and monetary gifts, as well as earned income(s), affect the schools to which children have access, as well as other resources that can contribute to their education and overall well being (Johnson 6). Johnson points out that “[w]ealth gives parents the capacity to provide stable homeownership, safer neighborhood environments, better educational experiences, and more expansive opportunities to their children,” which ultimately can affect their academic and economic futures (11). As Johnson asserts, “schooling plays a crucial role in the socialization and life trajectories of children,” the school they have access to or can choose can affect “life chances, their future prospects, […] their identities,” as well as their everyday lives (13). And yet, young people are taught throughout their upbringing at home, but especially in the classroom that education will be the key to their success, regardless of their socioeconomic background:

Education is, ironically, the arena in which our beliefs about meritocracy are perhaps the strongest. Education is the institution that is supposed to perform the ‘great equalizer’ task in our society; where, regardless of background, all children will be given equal opportunity for success based on their own individual achievement and merit. It is a site where ideology and inequality fully converge. (14)

The American Nightmare in Early Chicano Novels
The Dream of Upward Mobility is a key component for the immigrant and sometimes, subsequent generations of the Chicana/o population. In “The Brave New World of Immigrant Autobiography,” William Boelhower claims “the rhetoric of the American Dream plays out its paradigmatic role in the narrative model of immigrant autobiography” (6). Although his discussion concerns European immigrants, I would argue that Boelhower’s claim can be extended to include the Mexican immigrant and even some second-generation narratives. In Mexican and Chicana/o literature in the United States, the (unsuccessful) pursuit of the American Dream is a common one, especially in works written in the United States after the Mexican Revolution.² In “The American Dream and the Chicano Novel,” Antonio Márquez claims that “[t]he most compelling portrayals of ‘the promise of America,’ both in historical and literary accounts, have centered on the experiences of immigrant groups that came to American shores to forge their destinies” (4). In his history of the ideology of the American Dream, Cullen suggests that people in the United States have a “Dream of the Coast” in which they seek out riches by going west, but for many Mexican people, the dream is actually of going north, by crossing the México-U.S. border. This tradition of confronting the ideology of the American Dream in Mexican and Chicana/o lives in literature has continued, for as Márquez points out, “the theme of a people seeking America, finding it,

² Some of these texts were written by cronistas who published serialized novels in “Hispanic” newspapers as part of the Spanish language print culture of the “México de afuera” of the early twentieth century in the U.S. Southwest. Daniel Venegas’ picaresque novel Las aventuras de Don Chipote, o cuando los pericos mamen (The Adventures of Don Chipote; Or, When Parrots Breastfeed) is an example of this literature. As we witness the protagonist’s (Don Chipote) failed attempt at succeeding in the United States, the novel concludes with the line “[Don Chipote] concluded that Mexican people will become rich in the United States when parrots breastfeed”—which means, never (Venegas 159). For further reading on cronistas in the “México de afuera,” see Nicolás Kanellos’ “Cronistas and Satire in Early Twentieth Century Hispanic Newspapers.”
achieving the dream, or conversely suffering disillusionment and exploitation, has produced extraordinary works that have enriched American literature” (4). Márquez believes, in fact, that in many Chicana/o novels in the second half of the twentieth century the quest for the American Dream has turned into an American Nightmare.

The “transformation of the dream into nightmare” is one that Márquez explores in his analysis of early Chicano novels. He defines the American Dream “concept” for Chicanas/os as one “which centers on aspirations of economic and social parity, the promise that an individual can reap the fruits of his labor and achieve social and economic advantages and opportunities” (5). He examines how in Chicana/o cultural production (lore and literature), there has often been a confrontation between the “myth” and the reality of the American Dream. While he begins his analysis of the ideology of the American Dream through a close reading of Rodolfo “Corky” Gonzales’ poem *Yo Soy Joaquín (I am Joaquín)*, he declares the novel as the most appropriate genre “in measuring and assessing the literary treatment of the American Dream” (7). The novels he examines are José Antonio Villarreal’s *Pocho* (1959), Raymund Barrio’s *The Plum Plum Pickers* (1971), Richard Vasquez’s *Chicano* (1970), Edmund Villaseñor’s *Macho!* (1973), and Miguel Méndez’s *Peregrinos de Aztlan* (1974). In a novel like *The Plum Plum Pickers*, for instance, this conflict between dream and reality is highlighted through “the caustic irony that the people who labor to bring forth an abundant wealth of food for the American nation and the world are excluded and denied a morsel of that great wealth and abundance” (12). When a character in the novel expresses hope of ever “finding a piece of the dream” by owning a small home with a plot where she could plant an avocado tree, she is characterized as a ‘*tonta*’ (an idiot), or as a ‘*loca*’ (a crazy person)
because the dream is really not a possibility for Chicanas and Chicanos. While they dream of even the “most minimal economic advantage,” the Chicanas/os in these novels are often stuck in the lowest strata of racial, social, and economic hierarchies.

**Chicanas and Chicanos Dreaming through Higher Education**

*I was buying into this whole thing about the American Dream. Get an education. You can be whatever you want to be and, you know, read all these books and listen to the teachers. Even though at the back of my mind I was saying, ‘Something is going on here, you know, the reality that I see is different from what you’re saying.’*

--Carlos Montes, original Member of the Brown Berets

According to Márquez, the arrival of the ideology of *Chicanismo* in the late 1960s offered alternative American dreams (and nightmares) for Chicanas/os. Márquez defines *Chicanismo* as “the cultural, social, and political movement that brought raza consciousness and profoundly influenced the modern Chicano experience” (10). High school and college students would become a significant part of the Chicana/o movement of the late 1960s and early 1970s as they organized walkouts and protested educational inequities in high schools and universities in states like California, Arizona, and Texas. Although *el movimiento* would not be the first time Mexican and Mexican Americans would challenge the status quo, this movement did “usher in a new era” in which young people would develop a political consciousness that countered the U.S. mainstream (Rosales xv). Education inequities at the primary, secondary, and higher education levels would become a significant factor in the Chicana/o movement, because many Chicanas/os felt “betrayed by the American Dream” since it did not seem to be available to them (174). Although Mexican and Mexican Americans were no longer segregated in
schools by law, in cities with large Mexican and Mexican American populations, they were still segregated in practice. Prior to the movement the “Mexican American generation...had chased an all-American status” by encouraging their children to assimilate into U.S. culture by giving them “American” names, by adopting the English language, and by embracing mainstream “American” culture (174-5). What they experienced was that despite their attempts at assimilation, they would always be perceived as an “other” by the very mainstream society to which they hoped to belong.

According to F. Arturo Rosales in *Chicano! The History of the Mexican American Civil Rights Movement* (1996), the beginnings, or “the first major rumblings of the Chicana/o youth movement were heard in California in 1967” (175). He argues that although there were other instances in Texas and Arizona in which students organized, they still did not have a Chicana/o consciousness. Because the 1960s were a decade in which increased numbers of Mexican Americans attended U.S. colleges (due to the President Johnson’s Equal Opportunity Programs (EOP) and the GI Bill), college campuses were a fertile site for an emergent Chicanismo to flourish. By the end of 1967 in Southern California alone, there were thirty-five organizations for Mexican American students that were comprised of nearly two thousand members (177). But it would be at the National Chicano Liberation Youth Conference in Denver in 1969 where the ties between the movement and education would become obvious through the drafting of *El Plan Espiritual de Aztlan (The Spiritual Plan de Aztlan)* (181). In this document, Chicanos propose that nationalism is the “common denominator” for their cause when they state that “EDUCATION must be relative to our people, i.e., history, culture, bilingual education, contributions, etc. Community control of our schools, our teachers,
our administrators, our counselors, and our programs.” One of this document’s central goals is to make the U.S. educational system work for the Chicana/o population.

Higher education and its relationship to el movimiento would become strengthened by *El Plan de Santa Barbara: A Chicano Plan for Higher Education* (1969), in which Chicanas/os outlined a plan for creating and instituting Chicana/o studies and support programs in colleges and universities, discussed the importance of the relationship between the university and the Chicana/o (off-campus) community, and emphasized that Chicana/o self-determination was key to this population’s success in higher education. Its authors directly linked their manifesto to the ideology of the American Dream, questioning its plausibility for the Chicana/o people:

> For decades Mexican people in the United States struggled to realize the “American Dream.” And some—a few—have. But the cost, the ultimate cost of assimilation, required turning away from el barrio and la colonia. In the meantime, due to the racist structure of this society, to our essentially different life style, and to the socio-economic functions assigned to our community by anglo-american society—as suppliers of cheap labor and a dumping ground for the small-time capitalist, entrepreneur—the barrio and colonia remained exploited, impoverished, and marginal. (9)

Despite the fact that enrollment rates of Chicanas/os at the university level were rising slowly in the late 1960s, the American Dream remained a dream rather than a reality for the majority of the Chicana/o population.

> At a time when Chicanas/os saw a “renaissance” or “renacimiento” in their culture, they saw an opportunity to tackle education as an important site for the advancement of their community. They understood that higher education could be used strategically in order for Chicanas and Chicanos to “realize [their] destiny” (8-9). Higher education has been seen as the key to the upward mobility of Chicanas/os and other U.S.
Latinas/os. A college degree has often afforded greater employment and housing opportunities to those who have obtained it; research has shown that there are tremendous economic disparities between those with a college education and those without it. In the U.S. master narrative, educational institutions have been portrayed as the site where all young people, regardless of their “circumstances of birth and position,” as Truslow Adams put it, could lift themselves up by their bootstraps and move up the socioeconomic ladder. The reality for Chicanas/os is that less than one in ten has a college degree, and if this trend continues along with the increasing privatization of higher education, we will have a significant segment of our population in the U.S. Southwest that will be undereducated and underemployed, unable to achieve the American Dream that their parents or even grandparents dreamed for them when they crossed the treacherous México-U.S. border.

The ideology of the American Dream is particularly strong among immigrant populations. Forced to emigrate due to political or economic oppression, many immigrants come to the United States with the dream that they will be able to achieve a better life than in their countries of origin. The pursuit of education is considered one of the most obvious ways children of immigrants can realize their American Dream of

3 Patricia Gándara and Frances Contreras’ *The Latino Education Crisis: The Consequences of Failed Educational Policies* (2009): “As has been thoroughly documented, a college degree is increasingly a prerequisite for a middle-class job and middle-class income; the gaps in earnings and opportunity between those with college degrees and those without have widened dramatically since [the National Commission of Educational Excellence was created in] 1983” (1).

4 “The Center for Public Policy and Higher Education has projected that if California does not immediately begin preparing more underrepresented students for higher education, by 2020 the state will experience an 11 percent drop in per capita income, resulting in serious economic hardship of the state’s population.” Also, “Arizona, Texas, and other states with high percentages of Latinos are also projected to see declines in per capita income over the period” (Gándara and Contreras 5).
upward mobility. As Antonia Darder notes in the 20th anniversary edition of *Culture and Power in the Classroom: Educational Foundations for the Schooling of Bicultural Students* (2012), "Historically, public education in the United States has been the only legitimate hope for escape for poverty for those from racialized communities" (1). What the dominant discourse neglects to address about education is that not all communities the same educational experience in U.S. academic institutions. Residential segregation creates differences among schools at the primary and secondary levels—differences in property taxes indeed help ensure that not all schools are created equal. Funding inequities lead to differences in the quantity and quality of school resources, faculty, and curriculum. Differences occur within schools as well, with academic programs guiding some students into academic "tracks" and others into vocational ones. As early as elementary school, students are tested and consequently evaluated whether they are or they are not "college-bound." It should not surprise us that Chicanas/os are deemed "college-bound" in much smaller numbers through these academic programs. Education then, instead of being "the great equalizer" that will erase racial and class differences is instead a system that reproduces the racial, social, and economic inequalities so deeply ingrained in U.S. society.

In her introduction to *Critical Race Counterstories Along the Chicana/Chicano Educational Pipeline* (2006), Tara J. Yosso examines the demographic data that demonstrate the importance of the Chicana/o educational pipeline. Because “Latinas/os comprise the largest and fastest growing racial/ethnic ‘minority’ group in the United States” and Chicanas/os “represent the youngest, the largest, and the fastest growing Latina/o population subgroup,” examining the educational achievement of Chicanas/os is
of crucial importance (2). According to data from the 2000 U.S. Census, less than half of all Chicana/o elementary school students (44 percent) actually graduate from high school, which means that more than half—56 percent—drop out. A little over half of the high school graduates enroll in college, with most of those students (about 70 percent) enrolling in community college. About 6 percent of the Chicana/o community college students will successfully transfer to a four-year institution. A little over a quarter of all Chicanas/o students who enroll in college will actually graduate with a baccalaureate degree. These numbers are alarming—if higher education does indeed help people achieve a higher quality of life (economic or otherwise), then we have a growing population that will be less educated and less successful than other racial/ethnic groups.

In The Latino Education Crisis: The Consequences of Failed Educational Policies (2009), Patricia Gándara and Frances Contreras argue that an overhaul of the U.S. educational system is imperative if we want to improve the socioeconomic status of the U.S. Latina/o population:

> Education is the single most effective way to integrate the burgeoning population into the U.S. economy and society. Thus, if the high dropout rates and low educational achievement of Latino youth are not turned around, we will have created a permanent underclass without hope of integrating into the mainstream or realizing their potential to contribute to American society….This book suggests how we might choose the brighter path, challenging our schools, our politics, and our society at large to envision a more inclusive American Dream. (13-4)

Because Chicanas are the youngest, the largest, and the fastest growing Latina/o subgroup, examining their “educational attainment and academic progress” is key if we want to prevent this group from becoming that “permanent underclass” Gándara and Contreras describe in their book. Legal and educational scholars have employed Critical
Race Theory (CRT) in order to understand educational inequities for U.S. Latina/o students along the U.S. educational pipeline. Daniel G. Solórzano, Tara J. Yosso, and Dolores Delgado Bernal are among those who have found CRT a helpful analytical tool to examine the structures that enable and perpetuate unequal educational outcomes across racial and ethnic groups. As explained in “Educational Inequities and Latina/o Undergraduate Students in the United States: A Critical Race Analysis: A Critical Race Analysis of Their Educational Progress” (2005), CRT has “at least five defining elements that form [its] basic assumptions, perspectives, research methods, and pedagogies”: 1) the centrality of race and racism in American society, and consequently in higher education 2) it challenges dominant ideologies such as meritocracy and “colorblindness,” 3) a commitment to social justice and praxis, 4) a centrality of experiential knowledge of people of color, and 5) the importance of historical context and of approaching the subject with an interdisciplinary perspective (274-5).

In a Latino Issues & Policy Brief entitled “Leaks in the Chicana and Chicano Educational Pipeline” (2006), Yosso and Solórzano trace structural obstacles at each level of the U.S. educational system that impede equitable outcomes for a U.S. Chicana/o population. Chicanas and Chicanos start at a disadvantage from the moment they begin public schooling. Because Chicana/o students often attend segregated educational institutions, they experience “unequal conditions” at the primary and secondary levels. Chicanas and Chicanos attend schools with poor resources, and are often taught by inexperienced, under-trained, and temporary faculty in overcrowded classrooms. They also lack mentorship in the form of Latina/o educators because although Latinas/os were almost half of all students in California public primary and secondary schools in the
2004-2005 school year, “only 15% of their teachers were Latina or Latino (3). Because educators often track Chicanas and Chicanos out of a college path at these levels, many of these students do not even try to pursue a college education.5

Additionally, the current U.S. educational system at the primary and secondary level focuses on standardized testing to measure educational outcomes and favors a curriculum and pedagogy that marginalizes Chicana/o epistemologies (along with those of other racial/ethnic groups) which further contributes to half of all Chicanas and Chicanos being pushed-out of high school. Because most Chicanas/os who do graduate high school and pursue higher education begin their academic careers in community colleges, and the transfer rates to four-year institutions for those who desire it are so low, this only increases the gap in educational attainment at this educational level. In California, for example, 40% of Latina/os who enroll in community colleges aspire to transfer to a four-year college or university. However, less than 10% of these students reach their goal of transferring to a four-year college. This mismatch between aspiration and attainment indicates a problem with the basic transfer function at most institutions. Improving colleges’ transfer function begins with optimal academic conditions, such as access to courses that accrue transfer credit, financial resources, transfer counselors, and other student support services. Too many institutions provide less than optimal academic conditions for Chicana/o students and therefore curb the transfer function in community colleges. For the few who are able to transfer to four-year universities, enrolling in these

5 “Academically rigorous enrichment programs and courses (such as Gifted and Talented Education [GATE], Magnet, Honors and Advanced Placement [AP]) disproportionately underenroll Chicana/o students” (Yosso and Solórzano 2).
institutions does not guarantee an easy path to graduation. Many encounter a negative campus racial climate in which both faculty and fellow students see them as undeserving of their place in the institution. In these institutions, they lack even more mentorship opportunities because there are few faculty members of color, let alone Chicana or Chicano professors, especially in STEM fields. In graduate or professional schools, the experiences of Chicanas/os can be even more isolating, which can help explain the even lower numbers at the graduate and doctorate levels.  

Conclusion

Although many early and mid-twentieth century Chicanas and Chicanos confronted the ideology of the American Dream by turning it into nightmare, contemporary Chicana/o narratives have a more complex relationship to this powerful ideology. After the Chicana/o movement, Chicanas and Chicanos imagined an American Dream that could come true for them. The movimiento allowed many of them to imagine that it would come true through educational institutions, especially universities. The Dream of Upward Mobility would be made possible because the United States is a meritocracy. But many contemporary Chicana/o narratives point out the limits of the American Dream through education—must Chicanas/os assimilate linguistically and culturally to be able to dream? Is a young Chicana’s educación more about behaving like a proper young woman than acquiring knowledge or conocimiento? Can you dream the American Dream when the law says you are not “American”? The Chicana/o narratives

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6 For further reading on the experiences of Chicanas and Chicanos at these varying educational levels, see Tara J. Yosso’s Critical Race Counterstories Along the Chicana/Chicano Educational Pipeline (2006).
examined in what follows ask these and many more questions about how Chicanas and Chicanos perpetuate and complicate (sometimes simultaneously) the ideology of the American Dream that permeates our daily lives.
Chapter 2

To Hyphen or not to Hyphen: Mexican American Identity and the American Dream

There is no Americano dream. There is only the American Dream created by an Anglo-Protestant society. Mexican Americans will share in that dream and in that society only if they dream in English.

--Samuel P. Huntington in “The Hispanic Challenge” (2004)

Can one dream the American Dream in Spanish? Might one dream it in Spanglish? Can the American Dream be imagined in any language other than English? What does it mean when scholars like Samuel P. Huntington propose that the ever-growing Latina/o population must assimilate linguistically and culturally in order to become "American" and consequently see their American Dream realized? Will this linguistic and cultural assimilation happen? Should it happen? And if it were to happen, will it guarantee the academic, economic, and social success many immigrants want for themselves and their children as they leave their country of origin behind and cross the figurative and literal border between Mexico and the United States?

According to a study conducted in late 2011 by the Pew Hispanic Center, 82 percent of all Latina/o adults in the United States speak Spanish and "nearly all say that it is important for future generations to do so." As the "largest and fastest growing racial/ethnic 'minority' group in the Unites States," Latinas/os comprise 13 percent of the U.S. population, and it is estimated that this number will grow to 18 percent by 2025 (Yosso 2). About a fourth of the students in the U.S. public school system are Latina/o.
Despite being a significant numerical subpopulation within the U.S. educational system, Latinas/os often leak out of the U.S. educational pipeline in much higher numbers than their white counterparts. And though Latina/o students themselves, as well as their parents, place value on their mother language, culture(s), and values, the educational system fails to recognize that the histories and experiences these students have learned in their homes and communities can contribute to their formal education. Because the current state of the U.S. educational system privileges a Eurocentric epistemological perspective, it compromises the potential for Latina/o students to succeed at all educational levels.

In this chapter, I am interested in juxtaposing the autobiographical works of two Mexican Americans, who despite similar cultural backgrounds, found opposing ways to navigate a U.S. educational system that did not cater to them. I examine Hunger of Memory: The Education of Richard Rodriguez (1982), an autobiographical work by the Mexican American writer of the same name, and contrast it with the autobiographical essay "From the Barrio to the Academy: Revelations of a Mexican American Scholarship Girl" by Laura I. Rendón—whose scholarship, although not as well-known as Rodriguez's literary body of work, is significant in education studies. Using a theoretical framework based on critical race theory (CRT) and Latina/o critical theory (LatCrit) theory, I argue that Rodriguez's Hunger of Memory represents a majoritarian story that not only advocates for the linguistic and cultural assimilation of Chicanas/os (especially those of the first and second generations) but blames this group's academic and socio-economic underachievement on their so-called resistance to assimilation. By advocating for the assimilation of first and second generation Latina/o immigrants, Rodriguez
narrowly defines American identity and perpetuates an ideology of the American Dream in which students can succeed in the academy by adopting "American" ideals such as meritocracy and individualism. Rendón's "From the Barrio to the Academy: Revelations of a Mexican American Scholarship Girl" (1992), on the other hand, proposes a much more complicated identity for the Latina/o student—especially one from a Mexican American background. In her autobiographical essay, Rendón articulates a counterstory to Rodriguez's in which she blames educational institutions of higher learning for the underachievement of women and people of color. She proposes that the lesson in her story is that students of color, specifically Mexican Americans, can achieve academic success not by denying their heritage, histories, cultures, experiences, and languages, but by embracing a bicultural ethnic identity. Furthermore, she argues that institutions of higher learning must adapt themselves to address the needs and knowledge of all of its students. With what Dolores Delgado Bernal calls a critical raced-gendered epistemological perspective, Rendón challenges the Eurocentric epistemological perspective put forth by Rodriguez's narrative.⁷

Critical race theory (CRT) is a theoretical framework that began in the field of law to address the so-called race-neutral laws and policies that have perpetuated the social and economic inequities that oppress and subordinate women and people of color (Delgado Bernal 913). Latina/o critical theory (LatCrit), for its part, is a framework that complements CRT because it promotes a panethnic coalition among Latinas/os and

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⁷ Delgado Bernal defines critical raced-gendered epistemologies as "systems of knowledge" that "emerge from the experiences a person of color might have at the intersection of racism, sexism, and classism" (912). For Delgado Bernal, critical raced-gendered epistemologies offer a blend of what White feminisms and ethnic nationalisms (such as Black nationalism or Chicano nationalism) omit in their perspectives—accounting for issues of race and sexism and their intersection in the oppression of women and people of color.
addresses other issues such as language, immigration, ethnicity, and sexuality ignored by critical race theorists. These two frameworks have been employed by educational theorists (such as Delgado Bernal, Daniel Solórzano, and Tara J. Yosso) to examine how and why Latinas/os leak out of the U.S. educational pipeline. With CRT and LatCrit, educational scholars have addressed how Latinas/os have been racialized and consequently marginalized by a system that devalues their epistemological perspectives. Because CRT and LatCrit emphasize "the centrality of race and racism and their intersectionality with other forms of oppression," as well as "a commitment to social justice" (Solórzano, Villalpando, and Oseguera 274-5), I consider them the ideal frameworks through which to examine the works of Rodriguez and Rendón.

In the introduction to her book *Critical Race Counterstories Along the Chicana/o Educational Pipeline*, Yosso defines a majoritarian story as one that:

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Implicitly begins from the assumption that all students enjoy the access to the same educational opportunities and conditions from elementary through postsecondary school. From this premise, and utilizing seemingly neutral and objective formulae, the majoritarian story faults Chicana/o students and community cultural traditions for unequal schooling outcomes. (Yosso 4)
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Using this definition, I classify Rodriguez's *Hunger of Memory* as a majoritarian story, despite Rodriguez's Mexican heritage. In fact, Yosso goes on to affirm, "although Whites most often tell majoritarian stories, People of Color often buy into and even recite majoritarian stories. Often 'minority' majoritarian storytellers receive social benefits for recounting these stories" (9). In Rodriguez's case, his economic success and mainstream notoriety stems from the fact that he is a minority majoritarian storyteller. Since his initial success with an essay that first made public his critique of affirmative action policies in
education, Rodriguez has gone on to achieve success in publishing, public speaking, and journalism. In 1993, he was a finalist for the Pulitzer Prize for his book *Days of Obligation: An Argument with my Mexican Father* and earned both an Emmy and a Peabody for his journalism work on television.⁸

I classify Rendón's autobiographical essay as a counterstory since, as Yosso affirms, it "begins with the understanding that inadequate educational conditions limit equal access and opportunities in Chicana/o schooling" and "addresses the structures, practices, and discourses that facilitate high drop out (pushout) rates along the Chicana/o pipeline" (4). In her essay "From the Barrio to the Academy," Rendón uses her own personal story to humanize the research she conducts for her academic career, which is a primary function of counterstorytelling.⁹ In revealing her own arduous path along the Chicana/o educational pipeline, Rendón exposes the many leaks through which many Mexican American students fall at each level of the U.S. educational system. Although initially a response to Rodriguez's own essay "Going Home Again: The New American Scholarship Boy" (1975), Rendón's essay does not merely react to Rodriguez's work, it recenters the dominant cultural narrative to expose the legacy of racism in education and offers an argument for how to resist it. In her work, Rendón not only proposes that embracing a bicultural ethnic identity can help Mexican American students succeed in the academy but also exposes how colleges and universities inflict pain on women and students of color. By proposing educational reform that goes beyond a more

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⁸ All of Rodriguez's biographical information comes from either his own work or the biographical essay by Gary Layne Hatch.

⁹ In its many forms, a primary function of counterstorytelling, versus traditional fiction or nonfiction, is to examine "theoretical concepts and [humanize] empirical data" (Yosso 12).
democratized admissions process, employment of more faculty of color, and a more inclusive curriculum, Rendón is in fact arguing that we need to rethink the way higher education functions so that instead of its students changing for the institution, it is the institution which should change to better serve its students.

**Hunger of Memory: An American Story without a Hyphen**

In *Hunger of Memory*, Richard Rodriguez writes “a book about language” and an “intellectual autobiography” in which he justifies his linguistic and cultural assimilation into mainstream U.S. society via the educational system. It is this assimilation, which he credits with his personal and academic success. Although he purports to only write about his own individual story, Rodriguez uses his experience in the educational system to argue for the linguistic and cultural assimilation of first and second-generation Latina/o students. In writing about how education shaped his identity and the relationship between himself and his family (and consequently, his parent culture), Rodriguez writes an assimilationist narrative in which giving up one’s parent language and culture is key in mastering an integral component of the ideology of the American Dream—education. While he romanticizes the relationship he had with his family via the Spanish language and laments having forsaken it, he does not regret it and even sees it as a necessary step in order to fit into mainstream American society. In forsaking his relationship with his family and his native language, and by advocating that others in his position do the same, Rodriguez writes a majoritarian story in which he adopts and promotes a simplistic American identity, where English fluency and ideologies of meritocracy and individualism are paramount. As he argues for the assimilation of immigrants in the U.S.
educational system, Rodriguez defines the American Dream for this population as one in which social and economic success is determined by embracing a public identity as an "American" that can only be achieved by adopting the English language and Anglo-Protestant culture at the expense of the Spanish language and Mexican American culture into which he was born.

The Americanization of Richard Rodriguez

Rodriguez advocates for the strict "Americanization" of first and second-generation immigrants because of his own experiences in the U.S. educational system. Despite his strong stance for the assimilation of second generation Mexican Americans like him, he details his own linguistic assimilation as a painful one. In his memoir, he romanticizes the Spanish language and those who spoke it in his home, describing his Spanish-only childhood as one of "intense family closeness" and "extreme public alienation" (1). His teachers grow concerned for this "extreme public alienation" and they prescribe a fix—for Rodriguez' family to speak English (exclusively) in their home. It is there that we witness a key moment in this intellectual autobiography as his parents "in an instant...agreed to give up the language (and the sounds) that had revealed and accentuated [his] family's closeness" (19). With that decision, the space in which he feels at home becomes alien, and the space in which he feels alien becomes home. Spanish becomes a private language he rarely speaks and English becomes the language of his public life.

Rodriguez claims that a side effect of his Americanization was that he "grew up a victim to a disabling confusion. As [he] grew fluent in English, [he] no longer could
speak Spanish with confidence" (27). His linguistic assimilation came at a cost—his newfound American identity did not allow for the two languages to coexist and English won out. His fluency in English and his deficiencies in speaking Spanish made it so that his extended family called him “Pocho" and found it a "disgrace that [he] couldn't speak Spanish, 'su propio idioma."¹⁰ Instead of growing up bilingual and bicultural, Rodriguez allowed the English language and mainstream U.S. culture to dominate all aspects of his life, to the point where he no longer saw the Spanish language and Mexican American culture as his own. At the beginning of *Hunger of Memory*, he refers to his mother and father as "no longer [his] parents in a cultural sense" and pronounces his own last name as "Road-ree-guess," as a native English-speaker would (2). Throughout his book, he reminds the reader that he does not see his identity or his work as "Hispanic," but rather as "American." His story is "an American story" that should not be mistaken by a "gullible reader" as a "typical Hispanic American life" (6). By denying the Hispanic or Mexican label to be affixed before the word American, Rodriguez refuses to adopt a hyphenated American identity that reflects more than one culture and more than one language. For Rodriguez, adopting a strict American identity that does not reflect his heritage is the primary way he negotiates the discomforts he felt in the educational system. By fully assimilating, Rodriguez became "American" and, in his eyes, this seemingly uncomplicated public American identity is what afforded him the academic and economic success he would enjoy in his adult life.

¹⁰ “Pocho" is a pejorative term that refers to Mexican Americans who do not speak Spanish fluently or “correctly." "Su propio idioma" translates to "his own language."
Rodriguez was born in San Francisco in 1944. His parents, both Mexican immigrants, met and married in the United States and held jobs that offered their family a middle-class life in California. His pressure to assimilate, rather than to acculturate into mainstream U.S. society, might be attributed to this middle-class upbringing in a mostly affluent and Anglo-populated neighborhood. He recalls in *Hunger of Memory* that it was "an accident of geography [that] sent [him] to a school where all [his] classmates were white, many the children of doctors and lawyers and business executives" (9) and that his family's "house stood apart" because it was "a gaudy yellow in a row of white bungalows," indicating that they "were the foreigners on the block" (11). Rodriguez's own description of his home and his family in an otherwise affluent and white neighborhood highlights how he saw himself and his family as people out of place, as alien despite the fact that his parents lived most of their lives in the U.S. and their four children had been born and raised there. It was language and culture that separated the Rodriguez family from their neighbors, so at an early age, Rodriguez believed that adopting the "American" language and culture would be the key to not just belonging in mainstream U.S. society, but the key to his success in the classroom—a site crucial to the existence and promotion of the ideology of the American Dream.

**A Monolingual and Monocultural American Identity**

Language is often a crucial component defining an imagined national identity. For Rodriguez, his linguistic assimilation is what finally allowed him to see himself as "American," despite having been born in the U.S. "At last, seven years old," he expresses in *Hunger of Memory*, "I came to believe what had been true since my birth. I was an
American citizen" (22). English fluency and an abandonment of the Spanish language is what finally allowed Rodriguez to imagine himself a part of U.S. mainstream society. It is why "thirty years later" he can "write this book as a middle-class American man. Assimilated" (1). Despite the trauma that he experienced at having lost the comforts and intimacies that the Spanish language provided him as a child in his family home, Rodriguez saw his linguistic assimilation as necessary in order to master a public identity that allowed him to excel as a student and as a person. As a young child, Rodriguez internalized the racialization and consequent subordination of the Spanish language and believed his linguistic assimilation a necessary act in order to succeed in school. As Tove Skutnabb-Kangas points out in *Bilingualism or Not: The Education of Minorities* (1981):

> Minority languages often have low status by comparison with majority languages. This may often lead members of minority groups to minimise or even deny their knowledge of and identification with their mother tongue, to be ashamed of their origins, and correspondingly to exaggerate their knowledge of the majority language in an effort to identify with it as quickly as possible. (16)

Merely attaining English fluency was not enough—for Rodriguez his loyalty to the Spanish language and Mexican American culture had to be renounced in order for him to become fully American. His parents then, whose thick accents often shamed the young Rodriguez, are never really American in his eyes or in the eyes of the rest of the U.S. mainstream. Their accents, a linguistic characteristic out of their control, signaled to "Americans" like Rodriguez that they were *Other*. Despite having lived in the U.S. most of their lives and having raised four children who achieved impressive careers of their own, Rodriguez's parents were not "American" because linguistically and culturally they remained "loyal" to their Mexican American roots.
By dividing public and private, as well as English and Spanish, Rodriguez claims that one can only identify with one culture and one language, creating a monolingual and monocultural American identity that cannot have "loyalties" to other languages and other cultures. Like Rodriguez, Samuel P. Huntington defines a simplistic American identity in terms of language and culture. In his essay, "The Hispanic Challenge" (2004), Huntington expresses his concern about how a growing U.S. Hispanic population will affect "a country with a single national language and a core Anglo-Protestant culture."

For Huntington, American identity is monolingual and monocultural, despite the current linguistic and cultural diversity of the U.S. population. In his perspective, American identity has come under assault by such things as "the doctrines of multiculturalism and diversity," identity politics, "the impact of transnational cultural diasporas," and "the expanding number of immigrants with dual nationalities and dual loyalties." The focus of his essay is that a growing Hispanic population, aided by steady immigration from Latin America, especially from Mexico, threatens an otherwise unified "American" nation. According to Huntington, American identity is in peril if the social and cultural consequences of "the Hispanic challenge" remain ignored and uncontested. Huntington sees the U.S. as a nation with a single language and a single culture and to ignore the threat that the Hispanic population is to U.S. society is to "acquiesce [its] eventual transformation into two peoples with two cultures (Anglo and Hispanic) and two languages (English and Spanish)."

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11 According to the 2011 American Community Survey from the United States Census Bureau, although English is the most spoken language in the U.S., over 21% of the U.S. population over the age of 5 speaks a language other than English in their home. It also concluded that "over 300 languages [were] spoken in the United States" (4).
In *Hunger of Memory*, Rodriguez defines American identity primarily in terms of language. Language is a key theme in his memoir and the thread that strings together so many aspects of his life—his family life, his education, his identity, and of course, his writing. But his relationship to his respective native and adopted languages is akin to a torturous love triangle; the Spanish language being the naïve first love he eventually leaves for the real thing—English. In his memoir, Rodriguez characterizes Spanish speakers as quiet, timid, and ignorant, while he elevates English speakers as confident, proud, and intelligent. He sees Spanish as a private language, one that is to be spoken at home, with family. On the other hand, he sees English as the language people can speak in public, especially in the academy. Although he writes that as a child he “wrongly imagined that English was intrinsically a public language and Spanish intrinsically a private one” (18-9), his book does argue that it was his acceptance of speaking English in the classroom and in the rest of his “public” life what lead him to identify himself as American and ultimately what allowed him to succeed in the academy and beyond.

It is Rodriguez's insistence on classifying the English language as the language of "public" life that allows him to justify his own linguistic assimilation and advocate for a monolingual and monocultural public identity he defines as "American." Growing up in Sacramento, he remembers thinking how "the speech in public seemed to [him] very loud booming with confidence...By being so firm and clear, the sound his voice made said he was a gringo; he *belonged* in public society" (my emphasis, 12). His exaltation of the English language and romanticization of the Spanish designates those who belong and those who remain in the margins. In fact, for Rodriguez, belonging or not belonging to mainstream American society is a matter of choice; in his eyes, subordinated groups
marginalize themselves from the mainstream by not embracing a public, monolingual and monocultural American identity.

"Accented versions of English" are also an issue for Rodriguez because they challenge his simplistic version of an American identity that only represents an Anglo-Protestant heritage. As a child, he felt embarrassed by his parents' accented English, despite their fluency. As an adult, he claims the accents of Japanese tourists and Eastern European immigrants make no great impression in his ear, but the accented English of "black ghetto teenagers" stand out to him as "the sounds of the outsider" (33). He exoticizes their dialect at the same time as he denigrates it because "black English" for him is one of the ways these young black people refuse to adopt a public American identity:

They annoy me for being so loud—so self-sufficient and unconcerned by my presence. Yet for the same reason they seem to me glamorous. (A romantic gesture against public acceptance.) Listening to their shouted laughter I realize my own quiet. Their voices enclose my isolation. I feel envious, envious of their brazen intimacy. I warn myself from such envy, however. I remember the black political activists who have argued in favor of using black English in schools. (Their argument varies only slightly from that made by foreign-language bilingualists.)...

What makes black English inappropriate in the classrooms is not something in the language. It is what lower-class speakers make of it. Just as Spanish would have been a dangerous language for me to have used at the start of my education, so black English would be a dangerous language used in the schooling of teenagers for whom it reinforces feelings of public separateness. (33-4)

For Rodriguez, "black English" is a "romantic" symbolic protest from "lower-class" African Americans that feel disenfranchised by 'the system.' He finds their speech

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12 "In public my father and mother spoke a hesitant, accented, not always grammatical English" (11). "I was not proud of my mother and father. I was embarrassed by their lack of education" (55).
glamorous and intimate because he sees it, like Spanish, as a private language and is astounded at its use in public settings. He sees "black English" in the classroom as "dangerous" because he sees it as a way in which students separate themselves from the mainstream. What Rodriguez chooses to ignore is that speech is not what places young African Americans as outsiders of American society. When American identity is so narrowly defined, and when educational and governmental institutions cater to the needs and desires of the dominant segment of the American population, young African Americans and other people of color will continue to be marginalized, no matter what language they speak and no matter how "unaccented" their English is.

His obsession to keep Spanish and other languages or dialects as private, and to keep "standard" English as the public language for all, can be seen in Rodriguez's use of the word "alien." After his exotization and denigration of the speech patterns of African American teenagers, he declares, "in recent years there have been attempts to make the language of the alien public language" (33). In his majoritarian story Rodriguez racializes the Spanish language, exclusively assigning it as the language of "foreigners," even though in U.S. history, it has been the language of the conquered and colonized (García 102, 109). When Rodriguez is offered a summer job in construction, he becomes elated that "at last" he will get to know what it is like "to become like a bracero" (Rodriguez 140). Again, he exoticizes what he considers "alien" since this is work that in his eyes is typically performed by Mexican immigrants. Despite it being hard work, he enjoys it very much since he finds tremendous "physical pleasure in the labor" (140). Although he eventually understands how problematic it is to assume that this temporary job will give him a clue as to what it is like to be a bracero full time, his experience only reaffirms
how alien Mexican people and the Spanish language are to his definition of the American experience. When he is surprised with the fact that most of the people employed in this project are middle-class and formally educated like him (which perhaps should not come as a surprise from a contractor who is a Princeton graduate), he makes sure to assert that "they certainly didn't constitute an oppressed society" and "were not los pobres my mother had talked about" (143).

Los pobres, or the poor people, were not a group with which Rodriguez would ever identify. Rodriguez struggled with the fact that the color of his skin often had people assuming he was as disadvantaged as the "Mexican aliens" that ended up working in that same construction job that summer. Employed only for a few weeks "to cut down trees and handle debris" for compensation that did not equal his own, Rodriguez would describe his interaction with these men as more than awkward. They are never "introduced" to him or the rest of the crew, although Rodriguez does not say if he ever tried to introduce himself to them. He refers to them as "aliens" and "anonymous men" whose work ethic and silence (at least in English) confuses him. When he is asked by the contractor to give instructions to the Spanish-speaking crew, Rodriguez struggles to find the words to speak to these men. He relays the instructions, broken up in phrases, and when he is done he hopes to say more but cannot find a way to make small talk with them, or to relate to them. When the contractor unapologetically explains that he pays the workers "collectively" and how the exchange from dollars to pesos works in their benefit, Rodriguez feels sorry for them. He does not see them as oppressed, but rather as silent and vulnerable. And instead of recognizing how issues of race, language, or immigration status contribute to their subordinate position, he claims that what "made [him] different
from them was an attitude of mind, [his] imagination of [himself] (147). For Rodriguez, these "aliens" were responsible for their "disadvantaged condition." What made him different from these men was his education:

My long education would favor me. I could act as a public person—able to defend my interests, to unionize, to petition, to speak up—to challenge and demand. (I will never know what real work is.) I will never know what the Mexicans knew, gathering their shovels and ladders and saws. (148)

Rodriguez is right to recognize that due to his middle-class upbringing and his education, he will never know what those men had to endure in their work and their daily lives. What Rodriguez fails to recognize is that his education, his upbringing, his fluency, and his citizenship are part of what makes him, despite being a person of color, someone who is privileged. He does not see himself as "disadvantaged," but neither does he see himself as privileged. To Rodriguez, these men "remain profoundly alien" because they are silent, because "they lack a public identity" (150). If these men were only smart, or educated, or articulate, or confident enough (qualities and attributes that perhaps they could "earn" by assimilating culturally and linguistically into "American" society), then perhaps they too could achieve the success Rodriguez has so effortlessly acquired. But they remained silent in the eyes of Rodriguez. Despite the fact that they spoke to one another, as long as Rodriguez could not hear what they were saying or the words they were not speaking were not in English, then the men could only be characterized as silent and therefore lacking a public American identity.
How a Scholarship Boy Separates From his Family

As Rodriguez distanced himself from his parent culture and his parent language, there was another significant separation that he would experience—that of himself and his family. As he became more confident as a student, he became less attached to his family, his parents in particular. That "intense family closeness" he experienced as a child, would become full of uncomfortable silences due to his family's decision to start speaking English at home for Richard's benefit: "Matching the silence I started hearing in public, was a new quiet at home...as we children learned more English, we shared fewer and fewer words with our parents" (22). His confidence in the classroom, as well as his distance from his parents can be attributed to the new identity he acquired as he became English-fluent—the scholarship boy. While avoiding research for his dissertation, Rodriguez read educational theorists in the British Museum, hoping to find a description of a student like himself on their pages. It was not until he read Richard Hoggart's *The Uses of Literacy* (1957) that he began to understand: "For the first time I realized that there were other students like me, and so I was able to frame the meaning of my academic success, its consequent price—the loss" (47-8).

Through Hoggart, Rodriguez is able to rationalize distancing himself from his family and his Mexican heritage. He sees the loss of the intimacy and closeness he felt with his family as necessary, as the means to the end of academic success. So as he becomes a better student, he becomes a "troubled son" who can no longer "afford to admire his parents" and "permits himself embarrassment at their lack of education" (49-50). As he grows more confident as a student, he begins to see his parents as inadequate. He says, "I was not proud of my mother and father. I was embarrassed by their lack of
education. They were not like my teachers" (55). He feels ashamed that his parents do not measure up to the educated mentors he admires in his new home, the classroom. Since his parents are no longer his parents in the cultural sense, his new parental figures become his teachers. Teachers are the people he wants to emulate now that he speaks English and can navigate the difficulties he previously experienced as a student. Since the scholarship boy "cannot afford to admire his parents" (55), he actually wants to "be like [his] teachers" and "to assume a teacher's persona" as an adult (57). But perhaps an even more significant break between Rodriguez and his parents occurs when he goes off to college. This distance is such that at the beginning of his memoir, he identifies is at one of the central components of his book:

What preoccupies me is immediate: The separation I endure with my parents in loss. This is what matters to me: the story of the scholarship boy who returns home one summer from college to discover bewildering silence, facing his parents. This is my story. An American story. (3)

Rodriguez acknowledges his problematic relationship with the Hispanic community and his resistance to claim a Hispanic identity. He knows that because of his very public and well-known stance on bilingual education and affirmative action, the Latina/o community has labeled him a “brown Uncle Tom” (3). He sees no problem with this; for him, "America's Ethnic Left" (2) is who has it all wrong: his story is not "ethnic" nor does it belong to "minority literature." In Rodriguez's eyes, his story, despite his ancestry and upbringing, is not Mexican American. His story is an "American story" without a hyphen (4). Rodriguez's linguistic and cultural assimilation does not allow him to celebrate, much less acknowledge his Mexican ancestry as an important component to his identity. Perhaps a dig to the Mexican Americans or Chicanos who have identified as
living the hyphenated lives that their two cultures have afforded them, he says, "Aztec ruins hold no special interest for me. I do not search Mexican graveyards for their unnameable ancestors" (3). With this we know that Rodriguez is not someone who would call himself a Chicano or who would refer to Aztlán as his metaphorical homeland. But his resistance to the "Mexican American," "Hispanic," or "minority," labels go beyond lacking a strong bicultural and political identity as a Chicano in the United States.

Rodriguez's rejection of his ancestry and of his parent culture can be compared to those "'white' Mexican Americans" his parents "scorned" for trying "to pass themselves off as Spanish" (123). As he describes how his parents' "scorn" towards "white Mexican Americans," he neglects to draw a parallel between those people and himself. He says, "My parents would never have thought of denying their ancestry. I never denied it: my ancestry is Mexican, I told strangers *mechanically*" (123, the emphasis is mine). But in telling strangers "mechanically" that his ancestry is Mexican, is he not expressing his disdain, if not shame of it? Is Rodriguez trying to "pass" as "American" (in the narrowest sense of the term)? Acknowledging his Mexican heritage seems more an admission than a mere statement; it is as though he is forced to recognize an ancestry he wishes were not his own. His detachment of the language and culture that were once his only ones is such that we can only read his self-identification as an American without a hyphen as a rejection of the Spanish language and the Mexican American culture into which he was born.

As Rodriguez separates himself from his family while going to college, he distances himself even more from his Mexican heritage. As he grows older, his relationship with his parent culture grows more strained, and his idealized American
identity grows stronger. Though his complexion betrays him and outs him as a person of color to others, Rodriguez refuses to identify as Hispanic, or Mexican American, or as a "minority student." He says this last one "was a label [he] bore in college at Stanford, then in graduate school in Columbia and Berkeley: a nonwhite reader of Spenser and Milton and Austen" (152). In the late 1960s, as other undergraduates and graduate students of similar backgrounds were fighting for young people in their communities to have equal access in higher education, Rodriguez seemed more confused as to why fellow students or his professors were so intent on labeling him as anything other than American:

In college one day a professor of English returned my paper with this comment penciled just under the grade: 'Maybe the reason you feel Dickens' sense of alienation so acutely is because you are a minority student. Minority student. It was the first time I had seen the expression; I remember sensing that it somehow referred to my race. Never before had a teacher suggested that my academic performance was linked to my racial identity. (153)

Rodriguez is extremely bothered by the professor's suggestion that his feeling of alienation may have to do with his identity as a person of color. He is bothered because he finds this observation preposterous, since he can only see himself as unhyphenated American even though at the beginning of his memoir he expresses an "extreme public alienation" that could be attributed to a "minority" language and culture. While a graduate student at Berkeley, as only one of the few graduate students of color, Rodriguez felt uneasy about how his fellow graduate students, as well as undergraduates, identified with him:

In my department that year there were five black graduate students. We were the only nonwhite students in a department of nearly three hundred. Initially, I was shy of the black students—afraid of what they'd discover
about me. But in seminars they would come and sit by me. They trusted the alliance of color. In soft voices—not wanting to be overheard by the white students around us—they spoke to me. And I felt rewarded by their confidences. (172)

His uneasiness stemmed from the fact that what they would "discover" about Rodriguez was that he did not see himself as a minority at all, that there was no "alliance of color" from his end. Although he did not see himself as white, his affinity towards "majority" literature, such as that of Austen, Spenser, and Dickens, made him see himself like the white, middle class students he came of age with and later taught. When undergraduate students of color at Berkeley thought to ask him to teach a literature course that focused on the work of people of color, they were in for a rude awakening:

They wanted me to teach a 'minority literature' course at some barrio community center on Saturday mornings. They were certain that this new literature had an important role to play in helping shape a consciousness of a people lacking literary representation. I listened warily, found myself moved by their radiant youth. When I began to respond I felt aged by caution and skepticism...that I really didn't agree with them. I didn't think there was such a thing as minority literature. (172-3)

But Rodriguez does not see himself as one of them. He is American and not “Hispanic,” much less a “Chicano.” He cannot identify with people of color or with their cause. He does not understand the importance of Chicana/o or Latina/o literature or that this literature even exists. He does not see himself as Chicana/o or Latina/o, even as people of all backgrounds see him that way. Ironically, Hunger of Memory is often classified as a Chicana/o work, despite his protestations in the text that his story is not representative of the “Hispanic” experience, but that it is, in fact, American.
Laura Rendón as the New Mexican American scholarship girl

Estás loca. ¿Cómo piensas ir al colegio si nadie de nuestra familia ha ido? Eso es para los ricos. (You're crazy. How can you think of going to college if no one in the family has? That's for the rich.)

Her mother thought her crazy. And yet, Laura Rendón went on to conquer every level of the U.S. educational system. As a community college transfer, Rendón was and is an anomaly in the U.S. educational pipeline. She is an exception, one of the few. Although she understands her exceptionalism, Rendón refuses to contribute to a majoritarian narrative that solely attributes merit for academic success. As a scholar whose research includes the role of community colleges in the education of people of color, Rendón argues that the current model of the U.S. educational system not only excludes them by limiting their access to four-year institutions—it actually inflicts pain on them once they get there. For Rendón, people of color, such as Mexican Americans, struggle to attend and stay in institutions of higher education because the system itself does not acknowledge the experience and the knowledge these students bring with them. When Mexican American students enter institutions of higher education, many feel a pressure to assimilate into the mainstream by rejecting their past culture(s), values, and/or languages, as Rodriguez's memoir demonstrated. In the end, so many of them end up feeling alienated by the institutions that are supposed to educate them, falling through the numerous cracks of the U.S. educational pipeline. Through her first-person narrative, Rendón proposes that although people of color are often expected to change when they enter institutions of higher learning, it is the educational institutions themselves that have to change in order to better serve its student population.
Rendón's essay "From the Barrio to the Academy: Revelations of a Mexican American Scholarship Girl" (1992) is a direct response to Rodriguez's work, specifically "Going Home Again: The New American Scholarship Boy" (1975), an essay which would later become a part of *Hunger of Memory*. As Rendón reads Rodriguez's essay in a dark library room during her first year of graduate school at the University of Michigan, she begins to draw parallels between her experiences and those of Rodriguez, empathizing with his description of himself as a "scholarship boy." She describes how "both of us had Mexican American parents who wanted their children to have a better life than they did" and who despite not having a "firm command of the English language...understood that learning English was essential for social advancement" (56). In both cases, however, their parents would not fully understand how higher education functioned or how their relationships with their respective children would change because of it. As Rendón looks back at her own educational experiences in that dark library room, she recognizes some of Rodriguez's own struggles in academia as a person of color (despite Rodriguez's insistence on not considering himself a part of this group), and questions whether she, too, is destined to be a "scholarship girl" who must break away from her past in order to succeed. Ultimately, Rendón concludes that she does not have to renounce her Mexican heritage to succeed in the academy. Rendón's own personal story (as well as those of students she has studied for her research) has taught her that the pressure to assimilate is an unnecessary pain inflicted on people of color whose epistemologies are being dismissed as irrelevant to their education. She ultimately advocates for changes at the institutional level where colleges and universities see their students as holders and creators of knowledge who do not have to give up their past in
order to succeed in the academy. For Rendón, it is not assimilation, but rather a process of acculturation from the part of the institution as well as of its students, that can guarantee an education that is more humane for a diverse student body population.

**A Hyphenated American Identity**

Like Rodriguez, Rendón sees her personal story as one with many revelations that can aid the study of "underachievement" of Mexican Americans in higher education. She sees her story as proof of what Rodriguez so ardently argues against, which is that "academic success can be attained without total disconnection" from one's past culture(s), values, and/or language(s) (60). Because Rendón challenges Rodriguez's insistence on the linguistic and cultural assimilation of Mexican American students, her narrative presents a more complex American identity than that of Rodriguez. According to Rendón, a Mexican American student should be able to pursue higher education with a hyphenated identity which encompasses the values, cultures, and languages of both a Mexican and a mainstream American identity. To Rendón, Mexican American students should be able to embrace a bicultural ethnic identity that places equal value on the histories and epistemologies of both their parent and adopted cultures in order to succeed in the academy. And since their success in the academy is key in the realization of their American Dreams—perhaps because academic success could often guarantee upward mobility—Rendón offers the possibility of sueños americanos that can reflect the realities of students whose identities and epistemologies represent a much more complicated heritage than what Rodriguez or Huntington label as American.
In "Traveling on the Biliteracy Highway: Educators Paving a Road Toward Conocimiento", María E. Fránquiz addresses how teachers and students can take advantage of the "hidden literacies" bilingual and bicultural students can contribute to the teaching and learning that happens in the classroom.¹³ Although her work focuses on primary education classrooms, her understanding of how the epistemologies of bicultural students are often ignored and even devalued, can easily apply to Rendón's argument for an education that caters to a more diverse student population. For theorists like Fránquiz, teachers should be a "bridge rather than a wall and provide [for bilingual students] an invitation to travel on a biliteracy highway rather than demand travel on a parallel English-only thoroughfare" (96). What Fránquiz argues is that by taking advantage of the funds of knowledge the students possess, such as their mother tongue, and by seeing it as a resource rather than an impediment to teaching and learning, educational institutions and educators can provide a more productive and more compassionate classroom experience. By being bridges rather than walls schools can capitalize on the epistemologies these students possess and are able to create.

But Fránquiz is not alone in examining how or why the epistemologies of students of color are ignored and marginalized in classrooms at every level of education in the United States. As Ofelia García notes in "Racializing the Language Practices of U.S. Latinos: Impact on their Education":

Ignoring the Spanish that these children speak at home robs educators of the ability to build on the children's strengths and use an important pedagogical tool—the language spoken at home. It also removes from

¹³ In this context, "conocimiento" refers to a "reflective consciousness" as explained by Gloria Anzaldúa in many of her writings, among them Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza.
immigrant Latino parents the possibility of helping their children with homework. And yet, Spanish is excluded from most U.S. classrooms. (106)

While the dominant majoritarian narrative as expressed by influential people like Rodriguez and Huntington denounce the use of Spanish in educational (and other) institutions, going as far as citing it as a major impediment of the academic and economic success of Latinas/os in their first and subsequent immigrant generations, it refuses to acknowledge the value of the Spanish language in the classroom. By refusing to acknowledge bilingualism as a negotiable resource in the education of many of its students, the U.S. educational system is complicit in the racialization of the Spanish language and its construction "as the language of poverty." When students, especially in primary and secondary education are labeled as "limited English-proficient" or "English language learners" they are being denied their potential as "emergent bilinguals."

Although Rendón did not suffer the trauma of a linguistic assimilation as the one recounted by Rodriguez—perhaps because of her upbringing in a border town heavily populated by Mexican and Mexican Americans—Rendón acknowledges in her work that the Spanish language figures prominently in her identity, and that her Mexican heritage contributes to her knowledge and knowledge-production. Unlike Rodriguez, Rendón chose to confront the alienation she experienced in the several institutions of higher education she attended by acculturating. Although acculturation is definitely not a seamless process, Rendón sees it as a more productive and more compassionate alternative than the assimilation young students of color are expected to adopt:

Certainly, there are many times now when I feel alienated from the world from which I came. What keeps me separate are my education, where I live, who my new friends are, my career, my values, and my command of
the English language...But I have never been totally separate, and I never really will be or want to be...
What connects me to my past is what gives me my identity—my command of the Spanish language, the focus of my research, my old friends, and my heritage. What makes Laura Rendón as an individual is not only who she is now but what happened to her along the way. (60)

With this as one of the "revelations" we can gain from her personal narrative, Rendón proposes that educators need to recognize that students of color need not disconnect from their past in order to succeed. Unlike Rodriguez, Rendón sees the experiences from her past as valuable resources that have helped her become the person and scholar she turned out to be. For Rendón, to deny students of color the opportunity to contribute the knowledge they have acquired in their homes and within their communities is an immoral and unproductive practice. When these students' funds of knowledge are not validated by the academy, the education of the overall student body is compromised.

The Scholarship Girl and the “Pull of the Academy”

One of the most significant tensions expressed by Rendón is that of the “pull of the academy” and her perceived family obligations. Like Rodriguez, Rendón would experience tension and distance between herself and her family as she pursued higher education. While in Rodriguez’s case the tension stemmed more from language (English versus Spanish, academic versus everyday language), Rendón’s conflict also concerns issues of class. For Rodriguez, going to college seemed the inevitable next step after high school, but for Rendón, the dream of going to college is not as inevitable or as accessible. Rendón does not grow up, like many middle-class children in the United States, believing that college is in her future. It is not until the eighth grade that Rendón understands that a
college education is the key to her dream of being a teacher, so she places herself on the college track:

    I still remember the first time I actually made a decision to attend college. I was thirteen and in the eighth grade when a counselor came to my English class and announced that on that day we had to make a decision to be on the academic or the vocational track… I had always dreamed of being a teacher, so the choice was an easy one for me. (57)

She comes home excited to share this dream with her mother, who brings her back down to her family’s economic reality. Going to college is costly and a privilege for the elite; according to her mother, going to college is “not an option” for someone like Rendón, and “it never had been and never would be.” After graduating from high school, Rendón was supposed to get a full-time job to help with the family’s finances, but instead she “promptly enrolled in [her] local community college.” She could not let go of her dream.

According to various studies, the tension between Rendón and her mother is not representative of the attitudes of Latina/o and Mexican American parents and their children’s education. In a Pew Hispanic Center survey “95 percent of Latino parents say that it is ‘very’ important to them that their children go to college” (Ballón 93). This number is actually higher than the 88 percent of Latino students who believe “that it is necessary to have a college education to get ahead in life.” Both of these statistics are significant because they contest the cultural deficit thinking that has helped characterize Mexican American parents as uninterested in their children’s education in mainstream narratives (12). The deficit model also aids in blaming Mexican American students for their own academic underachievement, despite the fact that most of them value education and wish for the opportunity to continue it after high school:
Deficit thinking has been used to portray people as abnormal, substandard, and the cause of their own inferior status in society. Though the deficit model focuses on individual weaknesses, it has also been linked to assumed group weaknesses, in particular, a focus on the alleged weaknesses of racial/ethnic minorities and the poor […] Early deficit research went so far as to examine the possibility that racial minorities were not human. Additionally, pseudoscientific craniology studies sought to link the alleged larger brains of Whites to their superiority as a race. While these early forms of deficit thinking may seem far-fetched and outlandish by contemporary sensibilities, forms of deficit thinking continue to influence dominant narratives around Mexican Americans and low achievement in school. (12-3)

These dominant ideologies racialize Mexican American students as deficient in the U.S. educational system, rather than examine the structures that cause and perpetuate racialized academic outcomes.

In Rendón’s case, however, her dream of pursuing a college degree to become a teacher is not only affected by how she is racialized at every level of the U.S. educational system. Rendón has to also face resistance in her own home. Rendón’s mother continues to express her frustration regarding her daughter’s pursuit of a college education because this pursuit means sacrifices (economic and otherwise) for the rest of the family:

I knew that my mother was feeling angry and frustrated with my tenacious desire to go to college, although we never really talked about it. It was a subject that was broached in different ways. She would explain that she was tired of being a waitress. She would be irritable that she had to work night shifts in order to sustain the family (my two sisters and me). I knew that for her the ideal daughter would promptly, after graduating from high school, get a job so that her mother would not have to work anymore. Even today I often find myself trying to make up for the fact that I did not fit this ideal vision. (58)

Because of their working-class background, Rendón is expected to get full-time employment as soon as possible, but in persisting with the dream of going to college, she challenges "the ideal vision" of a dutiful daughter who does as is expected for the good of
the family. This tension is rather different than the one that exists between Rodriguez and his family, whose pursuit of education seemed inevitable in order to achieve his own individual success. Like many Mexican American students, Rendón’s strong ties to her family made her desire to go to college all the more difficult—not only because attending college is a financial burden, but because it limits her own financial contributions to her family.

In *Hunger of Memory*, Rodriguez does not seem to struggle with similar economic dilemmas. Despite the pain he feels for separating from his family as he becomes a “scholarship boy,” in his memoir there is never a mention of how his education created financial sacrifices in his household. He never discusses an expectation from his family to contribute financially at any stage of his academic career, while as of her essay's publication, Rendón still expresses guilt over not meeting her mother's expectations. This difference in their family dynamic reflects a fundamental difference in their narratives—while Rodriguez's memoir focuses on his education as an individual, Rendón's essay even as it narrates the autobiographical, concerns itself with what this individual story means to those around her, such as her family, the Mexican American community, or other people of color. In her pursuit of an academic career, Rendón had to put her individual needs ahead of the immediate financial needs of the rest of her family, but in achieving her academic pursuits, Rendón was eventually able to contribute to the betterment of her family, as well as that of her community.

Despite the pressure she felt to abandon her own academic dreams to help out her family, Rendón made the conscious decision to physically separate herself from her family as she struggled to make her way to a four-year institution. When her local
community colleges no longer could aid her in completing this transition, she transferred to one in San Antonio, Texas. It was in this move that she would experience a familial separation similar to the one Rodriguez describes in his memoir; the change in the family dynamic that a college education can create between a student and her parents. Despite describing the "pull of the academy" as "overwhelming," she would find herself "not only alienated from [her] family but...being perceived differently by them. Living away from home was, indeed, changing me" (58). Like Rodriguez, Rendón found comfort in her schoolbooks, but reading Sartre and Plato only distanced her even further from any of her family members because "these new ideas seemed to belong only within the confines of the collegiate environment. Subconsciously, I must have felt that the language of college did not belong in my family life. These two were separate and incompatible" (58). Like Rodriguez, Rendón begins to distinguish from the language of the academy and the language of home and like Rodriguez, Rendón and her family become aware of the academy's effect on their relationship. In acquiring a traditional academic education, both Rodriguez and Rendón achieve the dream of upward mobility that in turns separates them from their parents. Rendón describes this painful separation between herself and her mother as follows:

I sensed that deep in my mother's soul she felt resentful about how this alien culture of higher education was polluting my values and customs. I, in turn, was afraid that I was becoming a stranger to her, a stranger she did not quite understand, a stranger she might not even like. (59)

Despite the change in their relationship, Rendón's parents, like Rodriguez's, feel proud of their child's academic and professional achievements "even when they don't fully understand" them (63). This is one of the great contradictions in the experience of many
Mexican American parents. While they may not understand the U.S. education system and what it might entail to get through each of its levels, most understand that education as an institution might be the key in their children’s upward mobility and feel immense pride at their children’s academic accomplishments.

Community Colleges: The "Windows" to Higher Education

Rendón’s socioeconomic status, like that of many Mexican Americans, determines the starting point of her academic career. Even if not entirely accurate, her mother’s insistence that a university education is for the rich displays an awareness of how higher education (especially through four-year institutions) is out of reach for many Mexican Americans. The prohibitive cost of four-year universities make it so that most Mexican Americans who pursue higher education have no other choice but to enroll in community colleges. Designed to provide low-cost college coursework to those who cannot afford or are not “adequately” prepared for four-year institutions, community colleges often serve as the first (and sometimes only) access point to higher education for many Mexican Americans and other people of color. As evidenced by Rendón’s own experiences and those of many others, community colleges do not always succeed in terms of their transfer function and as such, most Mexican Americans who enroll in them, do not go on to transfer to four-year institutions or graduate with a baccalaureate degree. For students like Rendón, the dream of a college education has to begin at a community college because “Mexican American students are less likely to have the financial resources to support their college education” (Ballón 97). They may also choose community colleges because their affordability as well as the proximity to their home
allows them to work to contribute to their families’ finances. Because many of these students work, they have less time to devote to their schoolwork or to attend school events and participate in student activities and organizations that aid in their retention. While many of these students work to pay for their tuition, their employment can affect their attendance and grades, which can consequently affect their ability to transfer and graduate from a four-year institution (98).

Although Rendón notes in her essay the many parallels between herself and Rodriguez, her path through higher education differs greatly from his own academic journey. Rendón's academic success story is one that begins at an unlikely place for a PhD, but likely place for a Mexican American—at her local community college. While Rodriguez's academic career begins as an undergraduate at Stanford, sends him to Columbia for his Master's, takes him to London as a Fulbright Fellow, and ends with his doctoral candidacy at Berkeley, Rendón struggles to begin her undergraduate career by attending three community colleges until she is able to transfer to the University of Houston, a public four-year institution. And though for Rodriguez attending college and graduate school seemed like a guarantee from the moment he embraced his assimilation, for Rendón, the idea of pursuing higher education was an unrealistic aspiration given her family's background. When Rendón declares her desire to go to college to become a teacher, her mother's reaction is extreme because as her mother sees it, Rendón is crazy to think that going to college is a possibility for her. A college education is not for people like Rendón and her family. In her mother's eyes, a university education is a dream and a reality that exists only for the elite in the United States.
Though Rendón appreciates the community college system for providing her and many others the opportunity to access higher education, she acknowledges that this access point can often perpetuate educational inequities:

People like me...are not likely to enter higher education through the front door. We do not apply to wealthy liberal arts colleges or to institutions whose prestige is questioned...I believe that most students like me enter higher education through its windows, only to find that all around us are walls that keep us secluded and marginalized (57).

By describing community colleges as “the windows” of higher education, Rendón highlights the marginalization of people of color at the higher levels of the U.S. educational system. Through the use of this metaphor, Rendón emphasizes how difficult it is for underrepresented minorities to access four-year institutions, much less, prestigious universities. In calling community colleges “the windows” to higher education for people of color, and by claiming that these students do not get to access higher education through its front doors, Rendón proposes that people of color are not welcome at four-year and selective higher education institutions. This image of people of color going through the windows of higher education implies that they are breaking into a space that is not theirs. Through this metaphor, she also argues that the community college system can confine and separate the very students it is trying to serve. In her study of Mexican Americans and the higher education system, Ballón offers other metaphors for the community college system that point out its contradictory function in Mexican Americans’ pursuit of a college education. According to Ballón community colleges can function as an “open doorway” that provides otherwise limited or nonexistent access to higher education institutions, and they are often not equipped (through counseling, coursework, and other resources) to assess the needs of Mexican
American students (103). Like Rendón, she sees community colleges as institutions that can further marginalize Mexican American students and characterizes these institutions as a "dead-end" to many of the students they attempt to serve.

Rendón's anecdotal experiences as well as her research informs her assertion, "that despite its self-proclaimed magnanimous goal of being 'a people's college,' the community college has also served to ghettoize people of color" (Rendón 57). Although Rendón's essay was originally published in 1992, Latina/o high school graduates still enroll in higher numbers in community colleges than in four-year universities. And according to a 2013 Pew Research Center report, despite a growing rate of college enrollment that has surpassed that of whites, Latinas/os "are less likely to enroll in a four-year college, attend a selective college, and enroll full-time" and "continue to lag other groups when it comes to earning a bachelor's degree." In her own narrative, Rendón points out that poor counseling as well as limited coursework are what led her to go from one community college to the next. Although Rendón is ultimately successful, community colleges are often the entrance and endpoint for the postsecondary education of most Mexican American students.

**Rendón's "Academic Shock"**

The fact that the majority of Mexican Americans begin their higher education journey in community colleges is not only a matter of affordability. In *Mexican Americans and Education: El saber es poder* (2015), Estela Godinez Ballón highlights
that desire alone cannot guarantee access to and success in higher education institutions.\textsuperscript{14} Because of current residential segregation patterns, Mexican Americans are more likely to attend primary and secondary schools with poor or limited resources, which means that:

\begin{quote}
As high school graduates...Mexican American students are less likely to have taken the coursework necessary for college admission, less likely to have developed the kinds of study and cognitive skills necessary for the college classroom, including critical and analytic thinking and problem solving. (Ballón 97)
\end{quote}

These structural disadvantages not only help dictate the disproportionate numbers of Mexican Americans who enroll in community colleges, but also affect that small percentage of students who actually transfer or began their education at a four-year institution. If Mexican Americans are less prepared for college coursework due to the educational inequities that they experienced at the primary and secondary levels, it only makes sense that they are less likely to transfer to and graduate from four-year colleges. Educational inequities at the college level only exacerbate the educational experiences of Mexican American students, so it should not come as a surprise that more often than not, students like Rendón are pushed out of each educational level, while only a select few can make it all the way through.

Born and raised in Laredo, Texas, Rendón did not suffer through the initial alienation Rodriguez went through as a young student. Perhaps because she lived in a Mexican American neighborhood and grew up bilingual, Rendón does not experience an academic alienation until she begins her journey in higher education at Laredo Junior Community College (LJCC). And though Rodriguez's feeling of alienation in school

\textsuperscript{14} Ballón’s title translates to “Knowledge is power.”
centered on language, for Rendón, the alienation she experienced in the academy had to do with culture. She calls this "academic shock," and she defines as "a feeling alienation that moves the student from concrete to abstract experience and that takes the student from an old culture that is vastly different in tradition, style, and values to a new world of unfamiliar intellectual conventions, practices, and assumptions" (56). Although LJCC was her "first access point to the world of higher education," and she is an institution that serves many students of color, it is here that first feels the divide from her home culture and the academy:

It is […] in this illusory intellectual oasis of the Laredo community that I experienced some of the sensations of academic shock, as I faced new academic demands and tried to reconcile my new world with my old culture. (57)

She noticed that these feelings of alienation and inadequacy she was experiencing in higher education were not unique to her, since her friends "not only shared my family's experience of economic hardship but they also seemed lost in this new world of abstraction" (58). These students, who had not been adequately prepared in their primary and secondary education, were expected in their first year as college students to be able to handle the demands and expectations of their schools without the proper guidance from the faculty or staff on campus. Their success in this environment, then, rests on their ability and willingness to disassociate from their past and embrace this new foreign culture. As she describes her struggles at the beginning of her higher education journey, she explains that she "did not know at the time that the barometer the academy uses to differentiate the academic elite from the mediocre is precisely the measure of how well
young scholars negotiate academic shock” (56). And thus begins her critique of higher education, be it in community colleges or highly-ranked four-year universities:

If the student, like Rodriguez silences the past and humbly waits to be confirmed into the community of scholars, the academy swiftly offers its greatest rewards. If the student persists in using past experience to affirm himself or herself, not only do rewards become more difficult to attain but the student is also riddled with the guilt, pain, and confusion that arise from daring to live simultaneously in two vastly different worlds while being fully accepted in neither. (56)

How do we reconcile Rendón’s argument that one should embrace a bicultural ethnic identity in order to achieve success when she claims that the academy does not reward those who resist assimilation? What Rendón does not sufficiently explore in this narrative is how assimilating into the academy does not always guarantee “great rewards,” and that assimilating or struggling to assimilate can be detrimental for people of color, because it forces them to negate integral parts of their identities. What is not sufficiently discussed is that research indicates that though students of color can struggle as they experience what she calls “academic shock,” it is through these counterspaces on campus that students can find a way to navigate, rather than assimilate into, the academy successfully (Yosso 119-25).

**Conclusion**

Although Richard Rodriguez and Laura I. Rendón are both Mexican Americans who in varying ways succeeded in the academy, they each chose opposing ways to deal with the cultural shock that they would experience in educational institutions. While Rodriguez experienced this shock during his primary education, Rendón would not face this challenge until she embarked on her journey in higher education. Rodriguez chose to
assimilate, to leave behind his culture and his family to become a “scholarship boy” who could dream to live a better life than that of his parents. For her part, Rendón would choose an alternate path, one that was not always easy—to embrace a bicultural ethnic identity that would allow her to navigate the academic world without giving up her Mexican American identity. Both experiences are common among Mexican Americans, and many more experiences fall between both extremes—but in expecting Mexican Americans to assimilate into a culture that is not their own, into a culture that privileges the dominant groups in the multiple U.S. hierarchies, we are marginalizing histories and epistemologies that can contribute positively and significantly to the education of all students, not just Chicanas and Chicanos.
Chapter 3

Sin la migra y en la madre: Erased Immigrant Stories and Villainous Mothers

When Ana, the protagonist of Patricia Cardoso’s film Real Women Have Curves (2002), steps out of a subway station and onto the streets of New York City, we see the beginning of her American Dream realized—she has left a poor community in Los Angeles where she worked in her sister’s garment factory to attend a prestigious university on a full scholarship. As she struts through Times Square, we see an independent young woman who has left her past, family, and culture behind in pursuit of an education that will enable her to succeed socioeconomically, despite her mother’s irrational protestations. But Ana’s success story is hers alone; it is the narrative of an individual who, through hard work and determination, can make her dreams of financial and sexual independence come true.

Before Real Women Have Curves became an audience favorite at the Sundance Film Festival in 2002,\(^\text{15}\) it was a big hit on the Chicana/o stage.\(^\text{16}\) Written by Josefina López, Real Women Have Curves is a two act play with an all-female cast, a majority of which takes place during a week of September in the year 1987, as a group of women who work in a small garment factory to complete a back-breaking order of one hundred

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\(^\text{15}\) The film won the “Dramatic Audience Award” at the Sundance Film Festival.

\(^\text{16}\) In Chicano Drama: Performance, Society, and Myth (2000), Jorge Huerta claims that López’s Real Women Have Curves was “the most produced play written by a Chicana or Chicano for several years” (126).
dresses for a manufacturing company that supplies them to high-end department stores like Bloomingdale’s. Although not always discussed or explored in the depth they deserve, the topics that are at the core of the play concern traditional gender roles, feminism, body acceptance, the threat of *la migra*, and the exploitation of workers in the garment industry. Although Ana is the play’s protagonist, her fellow workers and family members have stories and journeys of their own. For instance, Ana’s sister Estela is the owner of the small garment factory in which they all work, but she struggles to pay her workers because the costs of owning the factory and paying her employees overwhelm its profits. She is also an undocumented immigrant, and though the other women have recently acquired their temporary residence/employment permits, they constantly feel threatened by the possibility that *la migra* will raid the factory, which at the very least will cost them their jobs, if Estela’s secret is discovered. At the end of the play, when Estela’s business has morphed into a small but successful boutique that sells clothes for “real women”—meaning, women of all sizes—all of the women get to strut onstage wearing Estela’s dresses having overcome many of the challenges they faced months earlier, making their success story a collective one.

Although the play and film both center their narrative on the story of Ana, a young woman who thinks higher education will be key in her socioeconomic success, *Real Women Have Curves* endures some significant losses in its film adaptation. With a screenplay written by George LaVoo and Josefina López herself, the film erases the plot

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17 *La migra* is Spanish slang that comes from the word *inmigración* (immigration) and referred to U.S. Immigration and Naturalization Services (INS) agents. In 2002, the Homeland Security Act established the Department of Homeland Security with a “primary mission” to “prevent terrorist attacks within the United States.” Through this act, the U.S. Immigration and Naturalization Services agency was transferred to this newly-formed department, and *la migra* received a new name—the U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE).
points that highlight the plight of immigrant women and employs Carmen as the core impediment to her daughter’s education and eventual socioeconomic success. In doing this, the film adaptation erases the structural, social, and economic challenges that a young Chicana like Ana might face when pursuing a college education. Since the film is intent on showing that her mother is the only obstacle to her daughter’s pursuit of a college degree, while all the men in her life—her grandfather, her father, her teacher, her boyfriend—can see that Ana is smart enough to realize this dream, the film oversimplifies the socioeconomic circumstances of many young Chicanas. By vilifying Ana’s mother Carmen in direct contrast with the supportive and loving men in her life, as well by eliminating the constant threat of la migra for the women, the film takes the easy way out; through this narrative, it ultimately argues that the education and subsequent financial success of young Chicanas are limited by a patriarchal and antiquated culture (represented ironically by a woman) that does not understand or see the value in an academic education.

In order to understand how adapting the play *Real Women Have Curves* into a film turns a collective women-centered story to an individual one where Mexican culture (as represented by its matriarch) is antiquated and anti-feminist, and American culture is characterized as feminist and progressive, we first have to understand the context in which the play originated. López dedicates her first play to the founder of the Teatro Campesino, or Farmworkers Theater, Luis Valdez “who showed [her] that theater belonged to all people” (López *Simply María* 3). Founded a couple of decades before López began her career as a playwright, and with the purpose to both “educate and entertain the farmworkers” during the Delano Grape Strike, the Teatro Campesino went
on to be internationally recognized for its sociopolitical critiques of the condición Chicana (Huerta Chicano Theater 1). Considered “a people’s theater,” the works of the Teatro Campesino and those of the other Latina/o theater groups it inspired, produced works that often privileged social justice content over form, placing “politics over aesthetics” (3). The Farmworkers Theater focused on denouncing the plight of the Chicano, in terms of the exploitation, discrimination, and abuse endured in the fields and even in the classroom. Playwrights like Valdez “developed theater with a political function, exposing social injustice, recuperating history, raising consciousness, and carrying the message of political activists to new audiences,” although often with a narrow focus on the Chicano heterosexual male (Rossini 11). Since “Chicano identity as part of a radical unified political movement was established initially on a relatively limited conception of identity, not accounting for gender and sexuality as important political elements,” it should come as no surprise that plenty of Chicanas would resist this narrow Chicano identity through their activism and their creative work (13). So while López credits the Teatro Campesino as an important influence, it is clear that her work departs from the Teatro’s focus on the marginalization of the Chicana/o people within an Anglo-dominant U.S. society, but on the Mexican patriarchy that made its way to el norte, intent on containing its women to the domestic space and its traditional gender roles.

In the 1960s and 1970s, Chicana feminists challenged the traditional gender roles perpetuated by the nationalist and often patriarchal ideology of Chicanismo. Although this ideology “emphasized cultural pride as a source of political unity and strength capable of mobilizing Chicanos and Chicanas into an oppositional political groups within
the dominant political landscape in the United States,” the movement that espoused it became a fertile ground for a feminist consciousness (García 3). Chicana feminists recognized that while the *movimiento* sought to fight racial oppression within a U.S. political, racial, and economic hegemony, the Chicanas had to fight another kind of oppression within their own movement—that of gender oppression. Through a dominant ideology that constructed the Chicana in a subordinate position in the family unit and by employing the symbol of *la familia* as an integral component of Chicano nationalism, Chicanas often found themselves “relegated to secondary roles” within their families and within the *movimiento* itself (4-5). While *la familia* aided Chicanas/os in affirming an ethnic consciousness within the margins of U.S. society, it sometimes did it at the expense of their own gente (people)—*las mujeres* (the women). Chicanas that dared to openly question the *movimiento*’s sexism were met with accusations of betraying *la causa* (the cause). Chicana women who “eschewed feminism or were ambivalent about organizing as feminists” saw Chicanas as “sell-outs” and by Chicano males who felt threatened by the disruption of traditional gender roles. They believed Chicana feminists were a threat to the *movimiento* for putting their cause over that of the group as a whole. Chicana lesbians found themselves scrutinized even further—their sexuality providing

18 These Chicanas were often labeled “*malinchistas*” or “*agringadas*” for their feminist critique of the Chicano movement of which they were part. “Malinchista,” of course, is a term that derives from Malinche—Hernán Cortés’s slave and translator, who is portrayed as a traitor in the Mexican history master narrative. Someone who is a “*malinchista*” is betraying his or her culture. “*Agringada*” is derived from the word “gringo”—a pejorative term that in this context refers to European-Americans. When someone is “*agringada/o,*” they’ve made themselves “*gringo,*” which means they are a cultural “sell-out” or “*vendid/a/o.*” Because of the influence of the (predominantly white) women’s liberation movement, they were seen as “*agringadas*” or “*vendid/adas.*” The women’s liberation movement, however, was not their only influence, since they found commonality with other feminists of color, believing that “their feminist movement involved a confrontation with both sexism and racism” (García 4).
another challenge to the traditional *familia* unit that was at the core of the *Chicanismo* ideology (6-7). It is from this tradition, or Chicana feminist legacy, that Josefina López begins her career as a playwright. It should come as no surprise that starting with her first play, López strongly critiques the Chicano patriarchal system and its dominant ideologies.

**Josefina López – A Chicana Playwright**

First produced in 1988 by the California Young Playwrights Project in San Diego, California, Josefina López’s first work, *Simply Maria, or the American Dream* is a drama that bears tremendous similarities to *Real Women Have Curves* (both the play and film) in terms of their protagonists (López *Simply María* 4). In all three works, young women see higher education (via a prestigious four-year university in New York, most likely a nod to the playwright’s biography) as the key to their upward mobility, as well as the means to escape from the traditional gender roles prescribed by a patriarchal Mexican culture. In *Simply Maria, or the American Dream*, López imagines a protagonist whose parents want her to grow up to be a dutiful wife and mother, while she dreams of pursuing a college education and a career as an actress. Theirs is a generational and ideological clash; her parents, being first generation immigrants still strongly tied to Mexican culture (and its apparent inescapable patriarchy), believe that the only education she needs is that which will prepare her for a life of being a mother and a wife. From their

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19 For a more thorough discussion of Chicana resistance within the Chicano movement, as well as a generous sampling of Chicana texts written during and post-Chicano movement, see Alma M. García’s *Chicana Feminist Thought: The Basic Historical Writings* (1997).
perspective, Maria’s pursuit of an academic education, especially to become an actress, is a serious transgression to the traditional roles of dutiful daughter, wife, and mother she is expected to play. Her parents equate her career choice with prostitution, which further emphasizes their antiquated misogynist perspective against a mainstream U.S. culture. In this drama, her dream of an education and a career as an actress is identified with American culture (since she is an assimilated *mexicana* who has little to no ties to Mexico) and is contrasted with the ultimate “Mexican nightmare”—becoming the wife of the most *macho mexicano* imaginable and by becoming a literal baby-making machine to many young girls, which makes her a failure of a wife for her less than understanding *marido* (husband).

López’s feminist critique of the Mexican patriarchy from the beginning of her career as a playwright is obvious; she often characterizes Mexican culture as patriarchal and antiquated, intent on perpetuating traditional gender roles, while an “American” culture provides young Chicanas the opposite—the opportunity to become women that need not be defined by the men in their lives—their fathers, their husbands, their sons. If women like Maria or Ana remain tied to their Mexican culture, they will be restricted to the domestic; they will be narrowly defined and only validated due to their ability to reproduce children, especially sons, for their *machista* husbands. Although a feminist critique is necessary when discussing traditional gender roles in Mexican culture, López’s work tends to characterize Anglo-American culture as one that is no longer defined by
patriarchal ideologies—as the more enlightened of the two cultures that educates the 1.5 and second generations through their linguistic and cultural assimilations. 20

Lopez’s plays are an interesting departure from the protest theater that inspired them. Although her works incorporate a necessary self-critique of Mexican and Chicana/o culture, her contrast of this culture against one that is primarily Anglo-American is problematic because it essentializes both cultures and places them in two political extremes. This departure in political content can be explained by its historical context. Jon D. Rossini explains in *Contemporary Latina/o Theater: Wrighting Ethnicity* (2008) that as the term “Hispanic” is introduced in the 1980 U.S. Census and Latinas/os are officially recognized as an ethnic group by the mainstream, Latino theater becomes professionalized, and we begin to see “a shift away from radical politics to a platform of inclusion and assimilation” (Rossini 14). This shift occurs “not only because of demands from within the movements to recognize the plurality of experience but also because of the emerging power of a Hispanic middle class intent on maintaining a positive mainstream representation connected to a politics of assimilation.” So as some Latinas/os benefited from the activism of the Civil Rights and Chicana/o movements of the 1960s and 1970s, they became less preoccupied with protesting the hegemonic structures that still subordinate Latina/o people in general, and they are more comfortable with being incorporated by the mainstream than to contest it. Rossini also points out that often in its intent of “crossing over” there can be a depoliticization of Latino theater as “ethnic

20 The 1.5 generation refers to those young people who immigrated to the United States by age 12. For a more thorough discussion on first and second immigrant generations (and the one in between), please refer to Ruben Rumbaut’s “Ages, Life Stages, and Generational Cohorts: Decomposing the Immigrant First and Second Generation in the United States.”
knowledge and cultural production [are seen] as supplements to a mainstream agenda rather than as sources of creativity and power” (15). When the difference that Latina/o playwrights bring into their work as members of a marginalized group is “safely consumable by mainstream audience members, allowing them a safe visit to the exotic and an unquestioned assumption of cultural understanding instead of an experience that forces them to reevaluate the very terms through which they engage with the world,” Latina/o theater loses its contesting power, and becomes an assimilationist work that reaffirms the status quo.

López’s work is also a departure from Chicana/o literature that preceded it. Since the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo of 1848, Mexican writers have written about their people’s attempts to succeed socio-economically in the United States. These works often characterized these failed attempts, as the “American Nightmare” because they believed Mexican immigrants would never be fully incorporated into U.S. mainstream society. According to Raymund Paredes, these writers articulated how the “American promises of prosperity” through the pervasive ideology of the American Dream, “did not extend to Mexican Americans” (Paredes 71). Paredes argues that Mexican Americans have been excluded from the American Dream because they are marginalized as a racialized group in the United States, but also because most dreamed not of achieving fame, fortune, and prosperity in the United States, but because they dreamed to achieve enough wealth to go back to their homeland where they could not ever achieve “steady work at a fair wage” (72-3). These works, however, do highlight a tension that becomes the core of the work of playwrights like López, which is the ideological clash between the first and second generation Chicanas/os. While the first generation dreams of making enough money to go
back home, their children (who were either brought to this country while very young, or were actually born in the United States), dream of making it in the United States—the country they see as their home.

Real Women Have Curves – The Play

La educación de Ana (Ana’s Education)

Ana’s pursuit of higher education is integral to the development of her character in López’s drama. Although the play takes place at her sister’s sewing factory, the audience knows that Ana is working because of her desire, as well as her financial limitations, to attend a four-year college. At the beginning of the play, she feels conflicted about her job in the factory because she believes she deserves better opportunities. For Ana, working at Estela’s factory feels like “going backwards” because instead of continuing her academic education like some of her old classmates, she is doing “the work that mostly illegals do (4).” Unlike Carmen, who works at Estela’s factory out of financial necessity and because she feels responsibility to help out her eldest daughter’s struggling business venture, Ana initially believes factory work to be beneath her because it does not directly advance her educational goals or help her move up the U.S. socioeconomic ladder.

Significantly and in direct contrast to the film adaptation, Carmen does not oppose her daughter’s pursuit of a college education. While in the film, Carmen is the

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21 These words are not spoken by the character on the stage, but are the words in her journal—a notebook that she has hidden in the factory’s bathroom. Although she initially writes “illegal aliens,” she crosses out them out and changes it to “undocumented workers”—knowing that the outdated term dehumanizes these people, describing them as if they were “from Mars” (López Real Women 10).
primary obstacle between Ana and a full-ride scholarship to Columbia University, in the drama it is assumed that Ana will be able to attend college once she is able to afford it. It is her family’s socioeconomic status, rather than her mother’s opposition, that truly prevents her from attending college immediately after high school. In fact, it is her job at Estela’s factory that provides her with the finances to attend college the following year—first by providing her with a steady paycheck once her sister’s factory stabilizes, and second, by winning a contest with an essay based on her experiences at the factory.

Although Josefina López’s most well-known and oft-produced play does not share with its film adaptation the central tension between mother and daughter regarding higher education, the play does focus on a type of education that affects Ana’s pursuit of a college degree and her eventual upward mobility—that of “appropriate” female behavior. Although there are no male characters in the drama, and the Chicano patriarchal structure does not explicitly impede Ana’s academic education, it is through the mother-daughter relationship that we witness how a “traditional” Chicano family might educate its female children. In discussing the hegemonic power of the Mexican/Chicano patriarchy in Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza (1987), Gloria Anzaldúa argues that women help perpetuate the very patriarchy that constrains them:

Culture forms our beliefs. We perceive the version of reality that it communicates. Dominant paradigms, predefined concepts that exist as unquestionable, unchallengeable, are transmitted to us through culture. Culture is made by those in power—men. Males make the rules and laws; women transmit them. (38)

As one of the family’s (and patriarchy’s) most powerful instruments, Carmen “transmits” an ideology of Chicano male supremacy as she raises, or educates her daughters. In
Spanish, the word *educación* can refer to a traditional academic education, but it can also refer to one that teaches people how to behave properly. When one has a *buena educación*, it can refer to that person’s good upbringing, while a person with a *mala educación* or who is *mal educada/o* has not been taught (or was inadequately taught) how to behave in certain social situations. Throughout López’s play, Carmen attempts to teach her children how to be proper Chicana women; she attempts to *educate* them in her image, but her daughters remain *mal educadas*, much to her dismay. They resist Carmen’s attempt at, as Candace West and Don Zimmerman would say, “doing gender.” Carmen believes they “have to be taught” proper feminine behavior (Lorber 57). But Ana and Estela resist this education; they refuse to *learn* how to behave like “good” Chicana women.

As a first generation Mexican immigrant, Carmen believes that a woman’s role is to be a dutiful wife and a selfless mother, and throughout the play we witness her many attempts to raise her daughters in her wifely and motherly image. But as a member of the 1.5-generation, Ana resists the shackles of her traditional Mexican upbringing. Through López’s play, we see Carmen’s daughters (but in particular Ana) as young immigrant women challenge a patriarchal culture through the adoption of another, with the

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22 West and Zimmerman claim that “doing gender involves a complex of socially guided perceptual, interactional, and micropolitical activities that cast particular pursuits as expressions of masculine and feminine ‘natures’” (126). Gender is a *social* construction and not just a matter of the behaviors of individuals, however—it is “the outcome of and a rationale for various social arrangements and as a means of legitimating one of the most fundamental divisions of society.”

23 In her essay “‘Night to His Day: The Social Construction of Gender,” Judith Lorber argues that gender is a process that “creates the social differences that define ‘woman’ and ‘man.’” Because gender is a social construction, it has to be taught and learned by those who wish to “do it.” And because women as “primary parents…significantly influence children’s psychological development and emotional attachments” they can help reproduce the construction of gender by teaching their children what is “appropriate” masculine or feminine behavior.
assumption that this adopted culture does not share the same patriarchal ideologies. In the
eyes of López, assimilating into mainstream American culture is the means through
which young Chicanas can begin to achieve the freedoms not afforded to them by their
antiquated and anti-feminist mother culture. This is problematic, of course, because this
assumption relies on the notion that a mainstream U.S. society is not patriarchal, that it
does not distinguish between what men and women are or what being masculine or
feminine is. People in the United States “do gender” in a way that privileges masculinity.
What makes this “doing” so significant in terms of Chicanas is that the U.S. hegemony
also “does” race, and as it does it, it privileges whiteness.

This tension between Carmen and Ana and between the play’s characterizations
of Mexican and American cultures is at its most obvious through the juxtaposition of
their perspectives on the female body and female sexuality. As its title indicates, Real
Women Have Curves tackles how young Chicanas see their bodies, how this relationship
to their bodies affects their sexuality, and ultimately, how their bodies and sexualities are
inextricably tied to their identities as Chicana women. The heteronormative pressure to
posses an attractive figure that will attract a future husband is at the core of Carmen’s
criticisms of her daughter’s appearance. As her mother, Carmen believes she is helping
Ana, that being critical of her daughter is for her own good because it will help her fulfill
the inevitable roles of wife and mother that a traditional (and conservative) Chicana is
supposed to fulfill once she reaches adulthood (4). Perhaps reproducing the interaction
she had with her own mother, Carmen perpetuates a patriarchal ideology in which women
are valued by their physical appearance and consequently, their ability to land a husband.
When Ana points out to her mother that she is just as heavy-set as her own daughters,
Carmen responds that her own physical appearance no longer matters because she already has a husband:

CARMEN. Why don't you lose weight? Last time you lost weight you were so thin and beatifuller.
ANA. I like myself. Why should I?
PANCHA. Doña Carmen, Ana is very pretty. She looks good the way she is.
ANA. Thank you, Pancha.
CARMEN. It's because she's young. At this age young girls should try to make themselves as attractive as possible.
CARMEN. But I'm already married.
ANA. Is that it? Make myself attractive so that I can catch a man?
ESTELA. (sarcastically) Ana, listen to them, learn now, "or you'll end up like Estela."
ANA. Amá, I do want to lose weight. But part of me doesn't because my weight says to everyone, "Fuck you!"
CARMEN. ¡Ave Maria Purissima!
ANA. It says, "How dare you try to define me and tell me what I have to be and look like!" So I keep it on. I don't want to be a sex object. (58)

In this conversation, the clash between mother and daughter indicates the generational, cultural, and ideological tensions between them. While Carmen places tremendous value on her daughters’ marriageability, Ana and Estela refuse to define themselves through their ability (or lack thereof) to land a husband, thereby resisting their patriarchal educación. Carmen considers Estela a cautionary tale for Ana because she remains unmarried at the young age of twenty-five. Even though Carmen’s eldest daughter has started (however tenuously) a business of her own, this accomplishment cannot make up for the fact that she is an “old maid” who has not made an abuelita (grandmother) out of her. The fact that Ana is even more vocal than Estela in her critique of a traditional Mexican upbringing is all the more disappointing for Carmen. Keeping “her curves” is an act of resistance for Ana—she sees herself as more than her body, as
more than a woman whose value can only derive from being someone’s wife and
someone’s mother. In refusing to lose weight, Ana resists learning to be a sexual object,
and therefore resists a patriarchal society’s narrow gendered norms and definitions of
womanhood.

As Carmen attempts to instill in her daughters the traditional gender role she must
have been taught to play in her own upbringing—that of a woman who remains a virgin
until marriage and who remains ignorant or at least less-knowledgeable than her husband
about her sexuality—she attempts to teach “traditional” and “appropriate” behavior that
they must exhibit as young Mexican/Chicana women. While she expects them to know
little of their own sexuality, she simultaneously expects them to become as sexually
available to their eventual husbands want them to be—and to go through with all the
pregnancies that may result from that “availability.” As “good” or “well-educated”
women, they should be willing to get pregnant and raise as many children as their bodies
can physically handle—despite the fact that Carmen herself has struggled with this
particular aspect of her expected “womanhood.”

Ana’s knowledge of female sexuality threatens the patriarchal status quo. The fact
that she knows so much about sex makes her mother very uncomfortable—in educating
herself about her body and her sexuality, Ana resists the buena educación Carmen is so
adamant about imposing on her youngest. When the women look through a “porno book”
that Carmen found in her son’s belongings, she does not question or criticize why he
might have had it in his possession—after all, “boys will be boys” as they say—and yet
she wants to hide it from her Ana because she and the other women do not want to
“pervert” her (26). Ana is not scandalized by the book’s content or the fact that the
women are looking and laughing at its images. When the know-it-all proudly claims that she must know more about women’s sexuality and sex in general than the other women at the factory, her mother and a fellow factory worker try to warn her that such knowledge can be a problem for many men:

CARMEN. Can you believe her? Girls nowadays think they know so much that’s why they end up panzonas.
ANA. No. They end up pregnant because they don’t use contraceptives.
PANCHÁ. Are you sure all you do is read a lot?
CARMEN. Your husband’s not going to like you knowing so much.
PANCHÁ. A girl shouldn’t know so much.
ANA. I’m not a girl, I’m a woman.
PANCHÁ. Uuy, uy, la Miss Know-it-all. (27)

Ana has unlearned or resisted learning the traditional gender female behavior Carmen has attempted to teach her. For these traditional Chicanas, Ana’s knowledge about her sexuality is dangerous because it challenges the traditional gender education she has been taught. When a young woman like her “knows too much,” she complicates the virgin/whore dichotomy, in not clearly fitting into one category or the other, she questions the validity of this dichotomy. Problematizing this dichotomy threatens Ana’s chances at a traditional Chicano marriage. A traditional Mexicano or Chicano male may not want to marry a Chicana who (in his eyes) is farther from the label “virgin” and closer to that of “whore.”

Although Ana does eventually realize at the end of the drama that she has much to learn from the women she works with at Estela’s garment factory, she does seem to know more about women’s sexuality than her mother. In the play’s second act, Carmen believes she is pregnant, unaware that the symptoms she is experiencing are actually signs of menopause. Carmen’s faux pregnancy gives way to a discussion about how
motherhood is an integral component of a woman’s identity. While Carmen mistakenly confesses to the women that she might be pregnant, Ana’s response again highlights the differences between mother and daughter. As a young feminist, Ana immediately asks her mother if she is “going to keep it”—a brief but significant allusion to abortion as a choice for a woman who does not want to have a child. Although for Carmen abortion does not seem to be an option, she feels rather negatively about the possibility of being a mother again:

CARMEN. No. It seems all I do is have children. One after another. I'm tired of this! I can't have this baby. I'll die. Last time I was pregnant the doctor said I almost didn't make it. (57)

Although Carmen pushes a life of marriage and motherhood upon her two daughters, it is clear that Carmen has not enjoyed all aspects of this narrow female identity. Having and raising many children has been a tiring job for Carmen, the second shift she has performed (without pay) along with those that have helped her contribute to her family’s finances. So in trying to get her daughters ready for marriage and motherhood, Carmen is teaching the same ideologies of gender she learned throughout her own upbringing.

Although she no longer holds herself to the physical standards that she tries to impose on her daughters, she is still subject to the gendered norms of her patriarchal culture.

Not only is her womanhood defined by her ability to have and raise children, but she is also expected to perform sexually for her husband even if she does not want to.

When she is asked if she ever said, “No” to her “persistent” husband, Carmen explained:

CARMEN. I was always scared of him. And I let myself get fat after you were born hoping he would be disgusted by me and not touch me anymore.
ANA. Why didn't you just say "No"?
CARMEN. Because, M'ija, I was never taught how to say no. (57)

Here we actually see a link between mother and daughter. When Ana explains that she wants to keep some extra pounds to resist being a sexual object, we see that Carmen also attempts a similar strategy in her marriage, although it is one that unfortunately does not work. Because her role as a dutiful wife in a patriarchal culture is to serve the sexual needs of her husband, Carmen feels she had no option to assert herself in the relationship. When she admits that she “was never taught to say no,” Carmen is actually alluding to her own upbringing, unaware of how she is attempting to reproduce the same knowledge and behavior in her daughters. Ana and Estela, however, perhaps because they are born into a different context (in terms of time and geography) are able to resist some of the patriarchal ideologies that as a mother Carmen has tried to impose on them. Carmen serves as an agent of the patriarchy, as its primary “transmitter,” attempting to reproduce the same traditional gender role that she has been unhappy to perform.

Erasure of Immigration and The Threat of la migra

While one of the play’s central tensions concerns the mother-daughter relationship between Carmen and Ana, another significant component of Real Women Have Curves is the constant threat of la migra. Along with their bond over their bodily

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24 The depiction of Ana’s father in this play, although he is not a character that is literally on the stage, highlights the presence of the Chicano patriarchy in Carmen’s life. The man does not have to be physically present in the play for us to see his power over Carmen. This is a big contrast to the same character in the film adaptation, as it is discussed later in this chapter.

25 But Carmen is not the only woman who is confined by a patriarchal system. Pancha also feels defined by her inability to have children. When Carmen thinks she is pregnant, an incredulous and saddened Pancha is later seen praying to God in an aside, asking why God could not make her a “real” because she cannot become a mother.
imperfections (as depicted in the play’s most well-known scene), these women also shared commonality based on their identities as immigrants. This part of the narrative was erased as the play was adapted to film and in erasing this narrative thread, it not only lost part of what made it a story about a group of women, but lost part of its transgressive quality. In erasing how the women feared that la migra would raid the factory and get Estela deported, the play lost a critique of the hegemonic structures and ideologies that subordinate undocumented and documented immigrants. Perhaps in an attempt to make the story more palatable to a mainstream audience, the filmmakers erased the immigrant narrative from the original, consequently eliminating the challenge to the political, social, and economic structures that might impede Chicanas’ position in the U.S. socioeconomic hierarchy. By placing the blame squarely on an individual who just does not understand the value of education, the work no longer problematizes the U.S. hierarchies that operate based on various systems of oppression; it establishes the education problem as individual rather than one that is tragically systemic.

Despite the fact that the women (except Estela) have recently acquired temporary work permits due to recent legislation, the threat of deportation figures strongly in López’s play. While Real Women Have Curves premiered in 1990 at the Teatro de la Esperanza in San Francisco, California, the play itself is set in the year of 1987, soon after a significant immigration statute. In 1986, the Immigration Reform and Control Act, or IRCA (also known as the Simpson-Mazzoli Act) was enacted, and it provided amnesty to undocumented immigrants who had entered the United States prior to January 1st, 1982 if they had not been guilty of any crimes and could demonstrate a basic knowledge of U.S. civics and history, as well as the English language (IRCA). This legislation is central
to López’s drama since all the women but Estela have recently received such amnesty
and have been awarded temporary employment permits. Estela, who is in the middle of a
lawsuit because she owes payment on the factory’s sewing machines, is afraid to apply
for the amnesty and is therefore still an undocumented immigrant as of the play’s
beginning. As for the rest of the women, because the change in their legal immigration
status is so recent, they work under the constant threat of an INS (now ICE) raid, making
la migra an additional yet unrecognized character that is simultaneously absent and
present throughout López’s drama.

An important narrative thread of the play is a mysterious van parked close to
Estela’s garment factory. Afraid for her daughter Estela’s potential deportation, Carmen
constantly monitors the van as well as any suspicious people and activity surrounding it,
afraid of a raid that will inevitably result in the closing of the factory.26 When the van is
first sighted, the women all hide out of habit, their new immigrant status so recent, that
they are still afraid of what la migra might do to them (14). When they all laugh at their
initial reaction and express relief at the fact that they no longer have to fear la migra,
Estela admits the truth of her immigration status and explains how the factory itself is the
reason she did not apply for amnesty. In the middle of a vicious circle in which she is not
paid because the orders cannot be completed on time, and they cannot complete the

26 The treatment of the immigrant narrative in the play is not without its flaws—although the
threat of deportation seems very real throughout the play, the van ends up being there for a
different reason—as part of an undercover drug bust. Additionally, once the women triumph as
they finish the one hundred dresses by the end of the week, and Estela ends their relationship with
the Glitz manufacturing company, the immigration story is not explicitly resolved. A few months
later, when Ana returns home from college to celebrate Estela’s boutique opening, we are not
privey to Estela’s change, if any, to her immigration status. As one of the greatest sources of
tension in the play, it is disappointing that this plot point remains unexplained.
orders on time because she cannot pay her employees, Estela struggles throughout the drama afraid of financial and legal repercussions to her dilemmas. Although the threat of la migra feels very real to the women as they work, the women often turn to humor to mask the fear for Estela’s deportation and the closing of the garment factory. Carmen, who would undoubtedly be devastated in more ways than one if Estela were deported, cannot help but joke:

CARMEN. Wouldn’t it be funny if the migra came and instead of taking employees like they usually do, the take the patrona.
ESTELA. Don’t laugh! It could happen. (18)

The threat of la migra does not solely come from the van parked outside of the factory. When Estela calls the manufacturing company to ask for payment for their past order, we find out that the woman on the other end of the line makes an indirect threat to Estela by asking her for a copy of her “papers.” With this question, Mrs. Glitz attempts to shut down the discussion of payment. She even tells Estela that if there is a raid, she can forget about receiving any of the money she is still owed for previous orders. In this drama, Estela’s immigrant status is a central obstacle for the completion of their 100-dress order. In the play’s second act, Carmen dreams about the possibilities that will open for them, but especially for Estela, once she becomes “legalized”:

CARMEN. It's true. And once you get the card you can do anything you want. Tengo fe…Estela. I've been thinking…You know what we could do? We could copy the patterns for these dresses, make the dresses ourselves, and have a fashion show. Maybe we could model them ourselves. (The WOMEN laugh at the thought.)
ANA. No, that's a great idea! Why don't we make them in larger sizes too?

27 “I have faith…”
PANCHÁ. Está loquita\textsuperscript{28}, but sometimes she makes sense. We could probably sell more if we made them in larger sizes.

ROSALÍ. You know what we could also do? Jaime could sell them in the flea market. If they sell, little by little we could grow…

ESTELA. \textit{(jumping in).} And from there, if we make a lot of money, more money than what we're making now, maybe we can rent a place downtown on Broadway and start a boutique!! (61)

For the women in the play, to become “legal” U.S. residents can allow them to dream of their own upward mobility. Estela might not have the chance (or the desire, we do not know) to pursue higher education like her younger sister, but to become “legal” would enable her business to evolve into a boutique for “real women.” Estela’s individual narrative concerning immigration, her business, and her own realization of her American Dream is sacrificed in the film adaptation in order to privilege Ana’s individual(ist) narrative. While in the play Estela begins to dream of opening up her own boutique by making a dress for herself, in the film, Estela makes a dress for Ana. This change symbolizes how from play to film, the story is no longer a collective one, but an individual one that as a mainstream audience, we are supposed to identify as our own.

\textit{Real Women Have Curves – The Film}

The immigration status of the women ceases to be a major plot device in the \textit{Real Women Have Curves} film adaptation. In the film, no one’s immigration status or story is explicitly stated, in fact, the only time it is alluded to, is when Ana’s high school English teacher visits Ana’s home to let her and her family know that she has been admitted (in the middle of the summer!) to Columbia University with a full scholarship. Mr. Guzmán (played by George López) pleads with Ana’s father to understand that leaving their home

\textsuperscript{28} “She’s crazy.”
in California for a dorm (or apartment) in New York City will afford Ana a “better” life than he could have dreamed of while living in Mexico. While Carmen looks on disapprovingly, Mr. Guzmán reminds him that he “left [his] country for a better opportunity…and now it’s Ana’s turn” (Real Women). The only way an immigrant storyline fits in with this film’s narrative is to remind both Ana’s father and the audience that as part of the ideology of the American Dream, an immigrant leaves their country of origin for an inevitable better opportunity in the United States to succeed socioeconomically.

Erasing Education Inequities in Ana’s Narrative

The idea that Ana's upward mobility will come true via an academic education is clear before she even attempts to apply to Columbia because, despite her lack of college plans, she attends a “competitive” high school in Beverly Hills. One of the film's early scenes shows that she takes a long walk to a bus stop and takes at least two busses to get to school. What is confusing about this premise is that a bright student like Ana goes through the trouble to apply and attend a Beverly Hills High School (along with the sons and daughters of the Los Angeles elite) and yet has no college plans whatsoever as of the last day of her senior year. It is not until then that Mr. Guzmán notices that she has not completed a single college application. She explains that due to her family's economic situation, her dream of going to college is not a possibility. Mr. Guzmán is quick to dismiss Ana's financial worries—because in the film's reality, "There are scholarships, grants, [and] financial aid" that a young Chicana like Ana can easily obtain. This is the set up for the true obstacle of Ana's education eventual upward mobility—that of her
mother, Carmen.

Mr. Guzmán’s plan for Ana’s education obscures the realities of the Chicana/o high school and college graduation rates. It is not so easy for Chicanas and Chicanos to graduate from high school, let alone attend and graduate from four-year universities. As the 2000 U.S. Census data examined by Daniel Solórzano and Tara J. Yosso indicates, less than half of all U.S. Chicanas/os graduate from high school and only half of that group go on to pursue higher education. Of the 26 percent of all Chicanas/os that enroll in college, 65 percent of them are attending community colleges—17 percent of all Chicanas/os. Less than 6 percent of those community college students will transfer to a four-year university. Only 8 percent of all Chicanas/os will graduate from college, versus the 26 percent of college graduates from their white counterparts. In *Latino Education in the United States: A Narrated History from 1513-2000*, Victoria-María MacDonald cites “anti-immigrant backlash and anti-affirmative action sentiments of the late 1980s and 1990s,” “unequal school resources,” as well as financial reasons as well as the as some of the possible explanations of these educational inequities (284-5). These are only some of the issues that a Chicana like Ana might face as she attempts to pursue higher education.

When Mr. Guzmán first attempts to convince Ana's parents that she should pursue a college education at the graduation party in her family's backyard, he (and the filmmakers) attempt to erase the class issues that may be an impediment for Ana's dream of going to college—especially to a school in New York City. While her parents explain that she must immediately get a new job to continue to contribute to her family's finances, Mr. Guzmán dismisses their financial worries by claiming that "there are all kinds of scholarships" that she will inevitably get because "Ana's a very special young
woman.”29 By never addressing how Ana's pursuit of a college education might negatively affect her family economically (through tuition and room and board costs, as well as her lack of financial contributions to her family from a full time job), the film constructs a narrative where the true antagonist of Ana's upward mobility story is the mother culture for not understanding that Ana deserves to achieve individual socioeconomic success, no matter the cost to her immediate and extended family. When Mr. Guzmán inevitably comes with the good news of Ana's acceptance to Columbia (after all, he knows the Dean of Admissions, who so generously allowed Ana's late application) and her full scholarship, the only obstacle remaining is the ultimate representative of Chicana/o culture—la familia—a unit so villainously represented by a matriarch that reminds Mr. Guzmán that Ana's academic future (or lack thereof) is a "family matter."

**The Men in *Real Women Have Curves***

There is an interesting contradiction that occurs as this work is adapted from play to film. While López's earlier work emphasizes what Anzaldúa argued about the hierarchical relationship between men and women in Chicana/o culture (where men get to "make laws" and women are the ones who “transmit them”), this hierarchy is obscured through Carmen's vilification. If Carmen is transmitting the Chicano patriarchy’s gender norms that hold Ana back, why are all the men in this family the ones who give constant support to Ana’s dreams of higher education? While Carmen is supposed to be the

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29 Inexplicably, she quit her fast food job as soon as school let out—as if upon graduation, she became *better* than that job—she claims that quitting is something "she had to do." She is more than annoyed that her mother makes her take a job at her sister's garment factory.
representative of the antiquated Chicana/o culture and family that undervalues an academic education and that expects a young woman like Ana to stay home until her inevitable marriage, the men in the film do everything to support Ana's dream of upward mobility by way of New York City. How can Carmen transmit the ideologies of a Chicano patriarchy that she does not seem to experience in her own home?

Ana’s father and grandfather—the men we expect will be the most ardent proponents of the Chicano patriarchy—are two of the most supportive of Ana’s pursuit of her American Dream. While Carmen’s husband in the original play was depicted (despite his literal absence in the drama) as a man who expected Carmen to adhere to a traditional gender role, the same man in the film does nothing but support the women in the family. Although he “speaks for the family” when Mr. Guzmán advocates for Ana going to college in New York, it is clear that he is only voicing Carmen’s concerns. He is the one who tells Mr. Guzman, the English teacher, that they do want Ana to go to college, but that the family really needs her to stay home and work. Although a college education would mean financial sacrifice for Ana’s family, this is a sacrifice that all members of the family are willing to go through—except for Carmen. Her behavior when in contrast with her husband only serves to amplify her portrayal as an unreasonable, stubborn, and antiquated woman; she is unwilling to let go of her youngest seemingly for no good reason. For his part, Ana’s grandfather (a character that was never alluded to in the original play), the Mexican patriarch who we might expect to be most traditional of the group (due to his age or that he is a first generation immigrant), is actually one of the film’s most progressive characters when it comes to his granddaughter—when Ana goes on her first date with an old classmate, it is her abuelito who serves as her alibi by
pretending to take her out to a movie. Once Ana has decided that she cannot stay in Los Angeles to simply appease her mother, it is these two men—her grandfather and her father—who drive Ana to the airport for her flight to New York City.

Fulfilling the quintessential supportive teacher role in a film about education is the aforementioned Mr. Guzmán—a man who will not stop until Ana enrolls in a prestigious university far away from home. It is this man who sees Ana’s “true” potential, a Latino man who has an academic education that allows him to understand what Ana’s family cannot—that going to college will afford Ana a better life than that of her parents, her sister, and her cousins. When he first attempts to convince Ana’s family of this at Ana’s graduation party, he is portrayed as a reasonable man against a mother who cannot see this situation logically. By demanding that Ana begin working at Estela’s factory immediately upon graduation when so many other recent high school graduates are dreaming of moving into dorm rooms in the fall, she is portrayed as an unreasonable woman who is getting in the way of her daughter’s bright future. When Carmen’s mother explains to Mr. Guzman that Ana is going to begin working at the sewing factory the next day, Ana says to her teacher, “See, I told you,” and the audience is left feeling as though Ana’s intelligence is being wasted while doing manual labor. It is Mr. Guzmán’s persistence, along with the women’s completion of the back-breaking dress order to the Glitz company, that motivate Ana to leave for college despite her mother’s protests and manipulative pleas.

Another important male figure that contrasts the vilification of Carmen in the film is Ana’s summer romance—Jimmy. A classmate from her Beverly Hills high school, Jimmy is a young white man who is affluent enough to vacation in Europe. Another
character that did not exist in the original play, Jimmy serves as a representative of the “American” culture to which Ana is trying to assimilate. He is a young man who attempts to connect with her culturally (such as by playing some computer program or application that can “speak” curse words in Spanish), but ultimately serves as a vehicle through which Ana will begin to assert her independence from her mother. When she sleeps with Jimmy, her behavior and attitude confronts an audience’s expectations of what a young woman like her might be like before and after “her first time.” It is through this relationship that we are able to see a young woman that is supposed to be a departure from the Chicana woman stereotype—she buys condoms, she decides to have sex for the first time when she is ready, she asks him to see her naked with the lights on, and she behaves as though what they had just done was no big deal. Jimmy is a huge contrast to Carmen—a young, white, educated and affluent man who thinks of Ana as intelligent and beautiful woman.

The Vilification of Carmen

From the start, Carmen is characterized as the film’s villain—as an older, antiquated, melodramatic, judgmental, manipulative mother who cannot understand her youngest daughter’s more contemporary views. Although the Carmen in López’s play is overbearing and critical towards her daughters, she is not a villain—she is the transmitter of the Chicano patriarchy to which she has been subject. The depiction of Carmen as a villainous character in the film adaptation is worthy of analysis because in rewriting this character, the filmmakers reduce Ana’s plight to one source, rather than to carefully problematize the circumstances a young Chicana might face in her pursuit of higher
education. This rewriting of Carmen from play to film was deliberate. In the “Cast and Crew Bios” in the film’s DVD extras, it is explained that among the most important changes that Josefina López and the rest of the filmmakers “needed” was that “of a true antagonist for the film” (*Real Women*). In making Carmen the “true antagonist” of Ana’s dream of a college education and eventual upward mobility, the filmmakers obscure the structural and financial obstacles for a young Chicana like Ana. In making the mother-daughter its central conflict and by providing no other impediment for Ana’s dream of going to Columbia, the filmmakers use Carmen (as a stand-in for other Chicana/o families) as the perfect scapegoat that allows for the racial, socioeconomic hierarchies in modern U.S. society to go unexamined.

Carmen is threatened by Ana’s pursuit of higher education because in wanting and actually going to college, her daughter is challenging the traditional gender role education Carmen has worked so hard to impart. Carmen expects Ana to adhere to the norms and expectation in a patriarchal system; leaving home at eighteen years old and unmarried, really disrupts the rigidity of traditional gender roles. Carmen resorts to emotional manipulation throughout the film in order to establish control over her youngest daughter. When the family finds out she has been accepted to Columbia University, the possibility of Ana’s dream of a college education far away from home might come true, Carmen pulls at Ana’s heartstrings:

CARMEN. What about Estela and the factory?  
ANA. What about it?  
CARMEN. What about abuelo? You want to abandon him?

Carmen uses Ana’s concern over these two family members to manipulate her into staying in Los Angeles. She makes her feel as though she is “abandoning” them all by
pursuing her dream. Again, this is a moment where the film makes it clear to the audience which side to be on—by portraying Carmen as a manipulative person who is looking out for her own interests instead of Ana’s, the movie condemns her and we are left thinking that by staying home, working in the factory, getting married and having children as her mother so desperately wants, will be the wrong choice for Ana. And the person to blame for this choice is Carmen. Carmen, however, is quick to spread the blame on the whole family when she ushers Mr. Guzman out of her home by telling him, “Thank you very much, Mr. Guzman…but this is a family matter.”

Like the Carmen in López’s play, Ana’s mother is overwhelmingly invested in her daughter’s gender educación and how a formal academic education in the United States may endanger her teachings. In attempting to go to a prestigious university away from home, Ana is disrupting the traditional gender role her mother is expecting her to fulfill since she will leave her family’s home unmarried and with no future plans to remedy it. Carmen expects her daughter to follow in her footsteps, to be a traditional woman whose ultimate jobs are being someone’s wife and someone’s mother, without any regard to her own needs or desires. What is not fully contextualized is why Carmen behaves this way. The way the movie portrays this character’s point of view, the audience has no choice but to see her as unreasonable. What is never addressed or explained is why a woman of Carmen’s age, class, culture and overall background would adhere to a traditional female role and expect her daughters to do the same. One could explain Carmen’s traditional views by attributing them to the patriarchal structures of both Mexico and the United States, since Ana’s parents are first generation immigrants. When Carmen’s husband tries to advocate for Ana’s dream, Carmen is portrayed as being
jealous of Ana’s opportunities and of the fact that she may get to escape the cycle of the traditional mujer. She says, “No es justo [that Ana may get to skip going to work by going to school]. Ahora le toca a ella.” By surrounding Carmen with men like her husband and her father-in-law who are characterized as calm and understanding, Carmen’s behavior makes little sense to the audience—if the men in her family do not oppress or repress her, why does Carmen want to repress and oppress her own daughters?

Although Ana dreams of going to college to achieve a better life than her family and the rest of the women in Estela’s factory, Carmen clings to the idea that Ana’s true education will not be learned in the classroom. After Mr. Guzman crashes Ana’s graduation party, Carmen and her husband discuss the possibility of Ana going to college. As Ana’s father tries to convince his wife that they can make the sacrifices necessary for Ana’s education, Carmen responds, “Yo la puedo educar. Yo le enseño a coser. Le enseño a criar a sus hijos, a atender a su marido. Esas cosas no le van a enseñar allí en el colegio. [I can educate her. I can teach her how to sew. I can teach her to raise her children, to take care of her husband. She will not be taught these things in college.]” Ana’s education, for the future Carmen foresees for her, is one that will take place in Estela’s factory and at the family home. Because she is her mother, Carmen sees herself as Ana’s primary teacher. When Carmen tells Estela the plot of an episode of the Brazilian soap opera Los pobres lloran más, she describes an anecdote about the soap’s cross-eyed protagonist who gets pregnant and runs away with the baby’s father and is

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30 “It’s not fair. Now it’s her turn.”

31 “The poor cry more.” The title seems to be a humorous allusion to a very popular Mexican telenovela in 1979 called “Los ricos también lloran” or “The Rich Also Cry.”
punished for “betray[ing] her mother’s wishes” when an incoming bus cuts her head off. While Ana rolls her eyes and laughs at the absurdity of the story, Carmen concludes, “Ana, you better listen. That's what happens to people who don't listen to their mother.” Because Ana does not listen to her mother when it comes to her future, she is an hija mal educada (a miseducated daughter).

Like the Carmen in the play, the Carmen in the film is threatened by Ana’s knowledge of her own sexuality, so she attempts to guide her daughter into behaving like a “proper” young Chicana. A Chicana bien educada (well-behaved) is trained to believe that her identity is rooted in being a mother and a wife. Because Carmen believes that her daughters’ physical appearance can affect their marriage prospects, Ana’s weight becomes an integral component (as well as a source of tension) of this mother’s education of her daughter. Although Carmen herself shares the same body type as her two daughters, she criticizes them for being “gordas” (fat) when they have not even “landed” a husband yet. Almost every time food is present or the subject of weight comes up, Carmen feels the need to remind Ana she is overweight and should feel ashamed of her appearance. Carmen justifies this constant criticism as a life lesson—a necessary one, in her eyes, if her daughter wants to attract a future husband. She clings to the idea that a woman’s worth stems from how men see her and consequently, if they find her “suitable” for marriage. When the women take off their clothes and compare their female battle scars in the form of cellulite and stretch marks, Carmen is the only one of the women

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32 Many Chicana writers and artists have problematized traditional gender roles in Chicana/o culture. The writer Sandra Cisneros, for instance, has done this through her fiction, nonfiction, and poetry. But it was in the 1991 edition of her most well-known work to date, The House on Mango Street, where her “author’s biography” famously read that she was “nobody’s mother and nobody’s wife”—making it one of her most explicit and empowering critiques of the Chicana/o and U.S. patriarchies.
who does not undress. This is another significant departure from the same character in López’s play—in one of the work’s most pivotal scenes, Carmen cannot let go of the constraints of a traditional *mexicana* and stand in her underwear alongside the other women. While the other women seem to be influenced by Ana’s confidence, Carmen watches them in disgust, her facial expressions deeming the women’s behavior inappropriate. Ultimately, Carmen cannot embrace her physical appearance or her sexuality and cannot comprehend why the other women are able or willing to do so.

Ana resists her mother’s teachings most openly when it comes to her sexuality. Though the play and film both share that significant line about how men do not like their women “knowing so much,” the film’s screenplay furthers elaborates this tension between mother and daughter concerning female sexuality. Carmen worries that Ana’s sexual knowledge and confidence threatens her *educación* because, as she says, “A man wants a virgin.” In a scene that is original to the film, Carmen confronts her daughter as she admires her own body in the mirror, because (supposedly) through Ana’s demeanor, she can tell she has lost her virginity:

*CARMEN:* You tramp! You’re not only fat, now you’re a *puta!* *Por qué no te diste tu valor?*\(^{33}\)

*ANA:* Because there’s more to me than what’s in between my legs!

[Carmen slaps her.]

Carmen reacts strongly to Ana’s defiance of her gender *educación*. In the eyes of Carmen, by having premarital sex, Ana is “doing gender” wrong. What makes this exchange even more poignant is that as her mother insults her, Ana does not defer to her. She does not internalize her mother’s words and instead defies them with an honesty that

\(^{33}\) “Now you’re a whore! Don’t you know what you’re worth?”
her mother reads as vulgarity. Carmen’s harsh lessons about Ana’s weight and sexuality render Carmen extremely unlikable for the film’s audience and therefore, justify the audience’s belief that she is being unreasonable about everything else—including her stance on Ana’s dream of pursuing higher education. By losing her virginity, embracing her physical appearance and ultimately, leaving home to live a life independent from her family in New York, Ana rejects the education Carmen has tried to instill in her and goes out in search of an education of her own.

**Conclusion**

Although Josefina López’s body of work offers a valid critique of the confines of a Chicana/o patriarchy when it comes to gender, the film adaptation of *Real Women Have Curves* marked a significant departure from the original drama—in vilifying a Chicana mother and using her as the central impediment in her young daughter’s pursuit of higher education, and by erasing the immigrant stories of female factory workers from the narrative, the film neglects to examine the social, financial, racial, and sexual hierarchies that might contribute to the low high school and college graduation rates of young Chicanas. In using a character like Carmen as the scapegoat to the Chicana/o education problem, the film relies on damaging stereotypes that claim Chicana/o parents do not care about or do not value an academic education. In erasing the immigrant stories of a group of women as depicted in the original drama, the film neglects to tackle the struggles of Chicana/o people in the U.S. educational pipeline through an intersectional lens that might account for the multiplicity of the experiences of Mexican and Chicana women as they navigate a reality that is neither solely Mexican or American. In privileging Ana’s
story over all of the other women, and by making her a second-generation Chicana, the filmmakers cater to a mainstream audience that might be uncomfortable with a work that confronts their beliefs about the ideologies of meritocracy and the American Dream. In catering to a mainstream audience that may not be comfortable with the idea that Chicanas struggle their way to and through higher education due to systemic problems in the United States, the film misses an opportunity to depict the complexities of the Chicana experience. In making the mother-daughter relationship the central tension of the story while doing away with any other realistic obstacles someone like Ana might face in the pursuit of her American Dream, the film is shortchanging the very audience it is trying to please. In trying to give the film’s audience what they want—a “relatable” and palatable story with an easy antagonist or complication, and therefore, an easy fix—the filmmakers are not giving its audience what they need—a work that can give them a glimpse of the structures that impede the socioeconomic success of young Chicanas and what they may do disrupt or challenge those structures.

In the works of Josefina López, but especially in the film Real Women Have Curves, the American Dream is possible for a young Chicana via higher education. Attending a prestigious four-year university will give a young woman like Ana the opportunity to escape the clutches of a Mexican patriarchy and enable her to become a successful woman who is not defined by motherhood or marriage. How she will be able to afford attending an out-of-state institution and live in a place like New York City is either not discussed or is easily resolved, since apparently a Chicana needs only her talent and perseverance to get what she wants. Tuition is somehow magically paid by sheer determination or the easily attained full-ride scholarship. Structural inequities at all levels
of the U.S. educational system, residential segregation, lack of social, human, or financial
capital will not factor in a Chicana’s success or lack thereof. It is the first generation; it is
the parents (and often the mother), who hold young Chicanas back—they are the true
villains to blame for the devastating low number of Chicanas who graduate from high
school, let alone a four-year university. In the world of *Real Women Have Curves*, if only
Chicana/o parents (and particularly mothers) understood that women can be more than
wives and mothers, and if only they understood the value of an academic education, all
Chicanas could strut on the streets of Times Square, realizing their own versions of the
American Dream.
Chapter 4

They ARE Americans: Undocumented Students and American Identity

Appellants argue at the outset that undocumented aliens, because of their immigration status, are not "persons within the jurisdiction" of the State of Texas, and that they therefore have no right to the equal protection of Texas law. We reject this argument. Whatever his status under the immigration laws, an alien is surely a "person" in any ordinary sense of that term. Aliens, even aliens whose presence in this country is unlawful, have long been recognized as "persons" guaranteed due process of law by the Fifth and Fourteenth Amendments.

--From the U.S. Supreme Court Decision Plyler v. Doe (1982)

I wasn't asked to be brought here. I didn't choose to come here. I didn't ask for my situation. I feel like it's a punishment. I did everything I was told to do. I stayed out of trouble. I stayed out of gangs. I didn't get pregnant at sixteen. I am a great member of society. I know more of civic duty than most U.S. citizens. I know more about politics than most U.S. citizens. So why am I being punished?

--Lucia, from William Pérez's We ARE Americans

"Hello, everyone. My name's Gustavo. I am undocumented, and I am unafraid."

Gustavo proudly says these words into a microphone. He stands in front of a large crowd at a rally, wearing a green graduation gown and golden sash and cords that indicate he was probably in the National Honor Society and graduated high school with an impressive class rank. From the moment his story begins as one of "The Boys" featured in The Graduates, a two-part documentary by filmmaker Bernardo Ruiz that aired on PBS in the fall of 2013, we know Gustavo is an incredibly bright young man. Gustavo, along with five other young Latinas and Latinos are featured in this bilingual PBS documentary to explore how the Latino population experiences the U.S. educational system. Among the obstacles they face are pregnancy, violence (at school and in their neighborhoods), gang life, and homophobia. Gustavo’s main struggle is his undocumented status, although he also struggled with English acquisition when he first
arrived in the United States. Because of his status, he cannot pursue a college education right after high school, so he ends up working full-time (about 80-90 hours a week). Although his “illegality” seems like an insurmountable obstacle, he cannot escape the pull of academia. "School was such a big part of my life," he says. "I could not imagine doing anything else." When he, along with other "Georgia Dreamers" are banned from attending the state's top five universities, he finds the opportunity to attend Freedom University—an organization that provides college-level courses "to all academically qualified students regardless of status" (Freedom University). Among its advisors, are well-known writers and academics, such as Junot Diaz (MIT), Jean Franco (Columbia University, Emerita), and George J. Sánchez (University of Southern California). While a student at Freedom University, he is finally given a chance to attend a selective four-year institution. As he gets ready begin this journey, Gustavo is shown packing a suitcase full of books. Among these books, are Paulo Freire’s Pedagogy of the Oppressed, Gloria Anzaldúa’s Borderlands/La Frontera, and Junot Díaz’s The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao. In the film Gustavo is depicted as a good student. A good person. A good immigrant.

In Reform Without Justice: Latino Migrant Politics and the Homeland Security State (2014), Alfonso Gonzales refers to a “good immigrant-bad immigrant" binary to describe the static representations in narratives and mainstream media that either criminalize or idolize undocumented immigrants (6). While the “good immigrant” is "the poster child image of the palatable assimilated kid who came to the United States," the "bad immigrant" is the one "who, based solely on a few 'exaggerated, simplified, and naturalized characteristics,' deserves to be detained and deported and in which the
traditional opposition attempts to counter with more simplified images of the immigrant who deserves to stay” (7). According to Gonzales, those who fit the "good immigrant" image "may potentially stay [in the United States] at the expense" of those who are characterized by the anti-migrant rhetoric as "bad immigrants.” Gustavo’s story in PBS’s The Graduates is meant to represent the plight of the bright undocumented student who is American in every way except in name; his “illegality” is a matter of chance rather than a measure of his character. But his story, though significant and impressive due his academic talent and perseverance, is not the story of every undocumented student, much less of every undocumented immigrant. Stories like Gustavo's are often the answer by liberal advocates to the negative stereotypes of undocumented people so often cited by conservatives. By countering one extreme image of the indocumentado with another, the debate about their "legalization" sets up the good immigrant-bad immigrant binary that oversimplifies the realities and the identities of undocumented immigrants. In advocating for a federal Development, Relief, and Education for Alien Minors (DREAM) Act, migrant advocates propose immigration reform that will benefit exceptional young people, the "good immigrants," like Gustavo—but leave behind many of the other undocumented people who do not fit that idealized image. By pushing for legislation that benefits only those who can pursue a college education or are willing to "volunteer" for the Armed Forces, politicians, academics, and activists are limiting the reach of The Dream to a select few.

The Development, Relief, and Education for Alien Minors Act, or DREAM Act is a bipartisan “common sense legislation” that, if passed, would provide a path of legalization for undocumented young people “by serving in the U.S. armed forces or by
pursuing higher education” (“White House Fact Sheet”). The name of this legislation, of course, is a deliberate appeal of a U.S. mainstream that believes in the hegemonic ideology of the American Dream. Because of the name and its tie to what is perhaps America’s most powerful and embraced ideology, the undocumented students who through their individual and group efforts have fought for their rights in the United States are known as the DREAMers. Appealing to the commonly-held belief that in the United States everything is possible through hard work, talent, and determination—this legislation argues for the “legalization” of the “best and brightest young people” who “know no other home” but the United States “through no fault of their own.” In a “White House Fact Sheet” that explains the DREAM Act, its proponents argue to a skeptical U.S. mainstream that providing a path to a legal immigrant status for these exceptionally young people is actually “good for our economy, good for our security, and good for our nation.”

In *We ARE Americans: Undocumented Students Pursuing the American Dream* (2009), William Perez argues for the incorporation of undocumented youth as legal U.S. citizens. *We ARE Americans* attempts to counter the negative stereotypes of the undocumented immigrant often used to argue for the direct and indirect deportation of the many people who reside, study, and/or work in the United States "illegally."\footnote{Indirect deportation here refers to the policies that are proposed and enacted in order to make undocumented people to go back to their home countries "voluntarily," such as the Real ID Act of 2005, which, among other edicts, changed the requirements for the issuance of state driver's licenses and identification cards. Among the new requirements, the applicant must provide a valid social security number and documentary "evidence of legal status" such as a U.S. birth certificate or a permanent resident card.} He counters these static representations of undocumented youth with an overall positive, yet
also static and problematic one of the (academically and extracurricularly) exceptional undocumented student. By countering the negative stereotype of the undocumented student with an exceptionally positive one, Perez relies on the good immigrant-bad immigrant binary that neglects to represent a large number of undocumented youth, but does not explicitly challenge the structural forces that produce the educational inequities experienced by all U.S. Latinas/os.

**We ARE Americans: A Sympathetic Counternarrative**

Perez’s *We ARE Americans* is comprised of twenty narratives from interviews Perez conducted in the spring of 2006. He organizes these narratives into five sections that explore the experiences of undocumented students throughout their primary, secondary, and postsecondary education, as well as the stories of four people who are no longer undocumented. The first section consists of students at the end of their high school careers, the second section highlights students attending community colleges, the third section features students who have transferred to four-year universities, and the fourth consists of undocumented students who are now college graduates. The fifth group of narratives depicts the stories of college graduates and working professionals who no longer have an undocumented status. Through this progression, Perez shows his reader how the pressures, fears, and challenges of being undocumented intensify as these students navigate the multiple levels of the U.S. educational system. Despite an enviable optimism—which wanes for the recent college graduates who cannot take advantage of their degrees—these young people's only possible relief for their social and financial struggles, as illustrated by the last group of narratives, is a change in their immigration
status. Hence, Perez argues that the legalization of undocumented students is the only appropriate response to this problem. For Perez, it is in all of our best interests to document the undocumented. According to him and many other scholars, establishing a path for legalization via a federal DREAM Act would not only allow undocumented students to realize their dream of going to college but would allow them to dream of using their degrees in careers that benefit their local communities and the general U.S. public.

According to legal scholar Richard Delgado, majoritarian narratives are those "told by the ingroup [that] remind it of its identity in relation to outgroups, and provide it with a form of shared reality in which its own superior position is seen as natural" (Delgado 2412). These stories help justify the hierarchies (racial, ethnic, economic, etc.) that prevail in U.S. society by assigning blame to the oppressed groups themselves for their place in those hierarchies. Those who belong to the outgroups have used counterstorytelling as a way to contest the so-called realities presented by those in power and to further create alternate realities that take into account the experiences and histories of those who are often ignored or misrepresented by the mainstream. Perez’s text, therefore, attempts to counter a master narrative that defines them as outsiders due to their undocumented status and essentializes them as a drain on social and economic resources despite their many contributions to their communities.

As a marginalized group, undocumented Latinas/os are othered by the U.S. mainstream as their "voice[s] and perspective[s]" and overall consciousness "[are]" described as...
suppressed, devalued, and abnormalized” (Delgado 2412). In mainstream film and television, for instance, the representation of Latinas/os does not correspond their numerical representation in the U.S. population and where they are represented, their characterization relies on stereotypes that more often than not cast U.S. Latinas/os in a negative light. In their article "Latino Representation on Primetime Television," Dana E. Mastro and Elizabeth Behm-Morawitz assert that Latinos are often confined to a few key stereotypic characterizations in mainstream media, which "include the criminal, the law enforcer, the Latin lover, the Harlot, and the comic/buffoon" (11). It is the comic/buffoon stereotype that is often associated with immigrant characters in film and television, often "characterized by a heavy accent, laziness, secondary status, and lack of intelligence.” More specifically, the figure of the Latina/o immigrant is often ridiculed; his or her accent exaggerated, as well as his or her language proficiency highlighted for a supposed comedic effect. Latino actor Wilmer Valderrama famously played a character on the sitcom *That 70's Show* (1998-2006) whose characterization stereotyped the Latino immigrant as a combination of buffoon and Latin lover. The mystery of his identity served as a running joke throughout the series, as his real name and nationality were never identified. His identity was reduced to the nickname of "Fez," which derived from his defining characteristic as a "Foreign Exchange Student."

Perez's work aims to counter prevailing stereotypes like this one that dehumanize, demonize, and/or ridicule Latina/o immigrants. He begins his sympathetic counternarrative with an introduction that sets out to begin to dismantle the common misconceptions surrounding undocumented people. According to Perez, the three most common misconceptions—especially in mainstream media—are their negative impact on
the economy, their exploitation of social services, and their engagement in criminal activity. Perez argues that undocumented immigrants actually affect the U.S. economy in positive ways by contributing "more to public coffers in taxes than they cost in social services" and that through their labor, undocumented immigrants "[bring] down the costs of goods and services for all" (xxi-xii). Rather than "draining state resources, undocumented immigrants are in some cases subsidizing services that only documented residents can access." Through their work in important U.S. labor sectors such as farming, the restaurant industry, and childcare, as well as through their financial contributions via the sales tax and social security, undocumented people not only keep costs down for legal residents and citizens, but contribute financially to the social services they either do not or cannot access due to their own immigration status. According to Perez, undocumented people do not exploit social services and actually "use services less and are...younger and healthier than the average person" (xxiii). When they seek medical attention, they often pay out-of-pocket rather than rely on governmental assistance. As for their presumed heightened criminal activity, Perez counters again that the research shows that they are less likely to commit crimes and that "high rates of immigration are not associated with higher rates of crime." As for the so-called illegality of their immigration status, Perez argues that "violations of U.S. immigration laws are actually civil infractions, not criminal acts, and most violators are guilty only of seeking to improve their welfare, and that of their families, by taking jobs that few Americans want" (xxiv).
Humanizing the Undocumented Subject

Perez humanizes his subject by naming its chapters after each of his interviewees. By titling each of his narratives by name, rather than by themes, Perez highlights his subject—which is not a topic or an image but an actual human being. By emphasizing their names, Perez allows the reader to easily associate the specific experiences in each chapter with a person, with an individual, who has struggled to complete an education and attain employment "worthy" of their intellect and work ethic. This makes the reader easily link an experience and a name; it creates a connection between subject and reader that can make the overall argument of the text even more effective. If the reader can remember that Lilia was the 10-year-old who was able to transition to mainstream classes in a month, that Lucila volunteered for the Red Cross to help the efforts in Louisiana after Hurricane Katrina, or that Raul was valedictorian of his graduating class, then perhaps the reader will more readily accept Perez's argument for the legalization of these impressively high-achieving young people. By humanizing the often-unknown stories of undocumented students, Perez makes the "problem" of the undocumented all the more real for the average "American" whose knowledge of the undocumented is based on well-known and problematic stereotypes.

Under each person's name, Perez includes a quote from each student that is integral to her or his narrative. These quotes aid Perez's mission to humanize his subject. Some of these quotes speak to the students' talents or qualities, such as when Penelope credits her academic success to her "relentless determination" (3) or when Daniela says that she's "always had a passion for community service" (33). Sometimes these quotes reflect the daily challenges these students' face such as when Paulina says, "I catch the
bus at 5:15 a.m. I literally sleep with my clothes on," and sometimes they recall the
discrimination they are up against, like when Sasha remembers how one teacher told her
that "You'll never get an A in my class because you're a dirty Mexican" (63). Several are
powerful images that illustrate the pain or limits of being undocumented, when they liken
it to being "tied to the ground with a ball and chain" (Jaime 11), having a car with no gas
(Jeronimo 19), or it being "like a wound that never heals" (Michael 93). These last
powerful images especially aid, not only in the readers' understanding of what the
undocumented experience might be like, but also in the effectiveness of Perez's overall
argument. These specific stories allow an audience, that enjoys the privileges that come
along with their (taken for granted) citizenship to sympathize with the narratives and
consequently understand that these young people's "legalization" is the only answer to
their and our problems concerning illegal immigration.

At the core of Perez's argument for the legalization of high-achieving
undocumented students, is recognizing them as human subjects. Since their identities are
often ignored or at best mischaracterized in mainstream narratives, Perez wants to portray
the undocumented subject in the most positive light. He counters the invisibility and the
unfair characterizations of the undocumented in the dominant discourse by refuting
common stereotypes and misconceptions of this population and constructing an identity
of the undocumented student that centers on the hegemonic ideology of a U.S.
meritocracy. The stories that Perez tells to humanize his undocumented subject describe
young people who work long arduous hours to be good students and good citizens. Of
course, as he attempts to document and humanize the subject that is often ignored,
dehumanized, or demonized, he constructs an idealized identity of the undocumented that does not account for the actual diversity of experiences and realities of this population.

They ARE American

Perez attempts to expand the definition of an American identity that goes beyond legality and accounts for a person's language, culture, and self-identification. In a narrative from one of the high school students, Perez begins with the assertion that his subject is indeed American as he explains that, "Jeronimo's story is one of an amazing young man with a Mexican heritage but an American identity" (19). Soon, Jeronimo declares his American identity in his own words as he shares with Perez:

I feel American. I mean, I cannot feel Mexican when I don't know anything about Mexico...I think that labeling someone just because [of] where they were born rather than what they know and what they feel, I don't think it's right. (19)

According to Perez, despite having been born in Mexico, Jeronimo sees himself as American rather than Mexican because the life he has lived and the life he has known can only be described as American. He knows and feels a connection to American culture that he does not know or feel for Mexico. Perez thinks that Jeronimo's life is so legitimately American that others around him, without knowing of his undocumented status, see him as one of their own and "feel free to criticize" undocumented people: "The negative sentiment most Americans feel toward immigrants due to media influences is a part of Jeronimo's existence. Unknowingly, people around him often voice their negative feelings toward undocumented immigrants without realizing he is one" (20). Jeronimo's invisibility as an undocumented person ironically affirms his American identity. He is so
"American" that is peers do not suspect his immigration status. And while the constant negative discourse surrounding the undocumented affects Jeronimo's everyday life, perhaps the most significant transgression against Jeronimo occurs as his status is used to challenge his American identity. He "feels very silenced in these types of situations" because despite being undocumented, the life he knows and feels is American. According to Perez and Jeronimo, an American identity is one that cannot be ascribed by someone else and cannot be determined by an official piece of paper. Only an individual can claim an American identity for his or herself based on his or her linguistic and cultural practices.

Lucila is another one of the undocumented students featured in Perez's work who identifies herself as American despite her immigration status. According to Perez she "dreams of being recognized as a full-fledged U.S. citizen" and in fact wanted to join the military because she saw military service as a way to "assert her American identity" (45-6). Like Jeronimo, Lucila does not identify as Mexican because she came to the United States at a young age and has few ties to Mexico. She claims an American identity because she has "always been here" and the United States "is the only place [she] know[s]" (46). In order to emphasize how someone like Lucila is deserving of U.S. citizenship, Perez discusses how Lucila left her home state before her eighteenth birthday in order to volunteer with the Red Cross in Louisiana after Hurricane Katrina. When she told other volunteers that she was undocumented, their reactions provided her the opportunity to counter the common stereotypes associated with people like her. She recalled to Perez, "I remember telling these people, 'Look, we don't come here to take your money. I'm just trying to get an education and succeed in life'" (47). By highlighting
how Lucila aided in post-Katrina rescue efforts, Perez displays Lucila's patriotism for her adopted country to argue for her legal citizenship. Furthermore, her (unpaid) efforts as well as her engagement with "legal" U.S. residents and citizens challenge the negative characteristics often associated with documented and undocumented immigrants. Like the rest of the young people featured in this book, Lucila dreams of an education and a better life. When Lucila claims that by engaging with those volunteers who were previously ignorant of her status she gave them "a new image of what an immigrant was like," she mirrors the core purpose of *We ARE Americans*.

**U.S. Latinas/os and American Citizenship**

Latinas and Latinos are perceived as outsiders even when they have been born in the United States, and even if their families have been living here for multiple generations. The common use of the terms "illegal" (instead of "undocumented") and "alien" (instead of "immigrant") in mainstream media and everyday life affect how all U.S. Latinas/os are seen and treated by the mainstream and by governmental, educational, economic, and social institutions. These terms criminalize and racialize all Latinas/os; communicating the perceived cultural threat they represent to the status quo. Although Latinas/os who are U.S.-born or permanent legal residents do not face deportation or some of the other obstacles their undocumented counterparts encounter everyday—such as limited employment options and low wages—the reality is that the legitimacy of Latinas/os in the United States is questioned despite their place of birth, immigration status, values, or cultural practices. As Renato Rosaldo explains in *Latino Cultural Citizenship*:
A significant number of people in the United States, for example, have come to question the citizenship of Latinos by declaring undocumented workers to be 'alien' or 'illegal.' By a psychological and cultural mechanism of association all Latinos are thus declared to have a blemish that brands us with the stigma of being outside the law. We always live with that mark indicating that whether or not we belong in this country is always in question. (31)

The perceived illegality or alienness of Latinas/os in U.S. society prevents them from being identified as American even when their values, primary language, place of birth, or hybrid culture might indicate otherwise.

Although in theory citizenship "is often understood as a universal concept" in which "all citizens of a particular nation state are equal before the law," in reality, citizenship has never been awarded equally in the history of the United States (Rosaldo 27, 29). Despite the advancements brought upon by social movements and legislation that have deemed it unacceptable or illegal, systemic discrimination across race, gender, and class have been at the core of the United States "social fabric," making people of color, women, and the poor second-class citizens. The undocumented, who often possess markers of class and gender along with race on their bodies, are not only treated as second-class citizens but as noncitizens of this country despite their daily economic and social contributions to its society. Simultaneously visible and invisible, the undocumented are shunned for being supposed economic and social drains—becoming the easy scapegoats conservatives can point to when the economy is weak or when unemployment rises—and ignored for the ways their underpaid labor or tax contributions help keep the costs down of various products and consumer and social services.

The so-called “Hispanic threat” in the U.S. master narrative that immigrant and nonimmigrant Latinas/os pose to the cultural and economic well-being of this nation has
often been challenged by academics and cultural workers alike. In their introduction to *Latino Cultural Citizenship: Claiming Identity, Space, and Rights* (1997), William V. Flores and Rina Benmayor claim the essays in their collection challenge the notion that “immigrant and nonwhite communities” threaten to disrupt the American “social fabric,” and that in fact, “the United States has thrived not because of its efforts at cultural homogenization, but despite them” (5). They argue that “difference produces new cultural forms that, in fact, help define America—and have done so throughout its history.” By defining the concept of cultural citizenship and by centering a scholarly project around it, Flores and Benmayor suggest that Latinas/os—whether legal or illegal, whether as immigrants or U.S.-born citizens—can claim American citizenship. Accordingly, citizenship should not be solely defined by legality and/or through a narrow definition of the American experience:

The traditional legal definition of citizenship, a status conferred upon individuals by place of birth or by decree of the state and implying membership, with all its accrued rights, benefits, and responsibilities, was too narrow for our purposes. Instead, we found the sociological and political notion of citizen as political subject a broader and more useful concept to describe the current realities of Latino communities. (11)

For Flores, Benmayor, and the other scholars featured in *Latino Cultural Citizenship*, what makes a person an American citizen is not legality or place of birth, but one’s labor and contributions “to the economic and cultural wealth” of the United States (11). As such, people who reside in the United States, legally or illegally, should be “recognized as legitimate political subjects claiming rights for themselves and their children, and in that sense as citizens.”
Flores and Benmayor define cultural citizenship “as a broad range of activities of everyday life through which Latinos and other groups claim space in society and eventually claim rights” (15). Because they see agency as a critical component of cultural citizenship, Flores and Benmayor believe that Latinas/os have an opportunity to resist and contest hegemonic structures through social movements as well as through quotidian actions (13). In claiming cultural citizenship, Latinas/os can effect change in their individual lives and those of their communities because “cultural citizenship allows for the potential of opposition, of restructuring and reordering society” (15). Undocumented students and their supporters have shown through their activism in the last few years that despite their so-called “illegality,” they too can assert their rights as human beings and as Americans. Although the immigration debate is not new, the DREAMer movement has definitely transformed it. In asserting a cultural citizenship in the United States, undocumented immigrants have “come out of the shadows” to proclaim proudly their past, present, and future contributions to the very society that has kept them in the margins.

Through *We ARE Americans*, Perez and the DREAMers featured in this book attempt to contest the narrow definition of American identity as dictated by the U.S. hegemony, advocating for the inclusion of undocumented U.S. Latinas/os. Although the U.S. government and mainstream society imagines Americans only as U.S.-born or naturalized citizens, Perez and his subjects imagine an American identity that does not take immigration status into account but instead centers on one's culture and values. Although these students are not “legally” Americans, Perez argues through his work that they are a part of the American nation, that despite their undocumented status, they
belong to an imagined American community.\textsuperscript{36} Perez argues that the subjects of his narratives \textit{ARE}, in fact, American, because they have lived most of their lives in the United States, speak predominantly in English, and identify themselves as Americans. If these three characteristics define American identity, Perez' text then expands, albeit narrowly, a U.S. citizenship or American identity that goes beyond legality.\textsuperscript{37}

\textbf{Citizenship and Education}

In 1982, the United States Supreme Court recognized undocumented people as political subjects in \textit{Plyler v. Doe}. This case stemmed from a statute that attempted to withhold Texas school district funds from institutions that admitted undocumented students, and authorized local schools “to deny enrollment from such children” (\textit{Plyler v. Doe}). According to the Supreme Court, the plaintiffs could claim protection under the Fourteenth Amendment’s Equal Protection Clause because despite the argument from the appellants that these students’ undocumented status prevented them from being “‘persons within the jurisdiction’ of the State of Texas,” the Court argued that these young people are indeed “persons.” The Court also argued that statutes such as this one would actually “[impose] a lifetime hardship on a distinct class of children not accountable for their disabling status.” Further, the Court’s argument that undocumented young people were not to blame for their “illegality” was significant because it is one of the first (if not the

\textsuperscript{36} The term imagined community comes from Benedict Anderson’s \textit{Imagined Communities} (1983).

\textsuperscript{37} From his project's inception, Perez saw his subjects as "American": "When I began interviewing undocumented students in the spring of 2006, I wanted to better understand their educational experiences. My goal was to learn about their experiences growing up 'American'" (xvii).
instances this argument was uttered not only in the mainstream, but by a governmental institution. Additionally, the Court expressed that “the record does not show that the exclusion of undocumented children is likely to improve the overall quality of education in the State,” or that their exclusion from the public educational system (at the primary and secondary levels) would actually affect their likelihood to return to their country of origin. Consequently, this statute was declared unconstitutional.

Once the U.S. Supreme Court declared the Texas statute unconstitutional through *Plyler v. Doe*, undocumented children could enroll and attend public primary and secondary schools with the protection of U.S. law. This ruling became an important precedent for undocumented people’s rights within and beyond the educational system.

As Patricia Gándara and Frances Contreras elaborate in *The Latino Education Crisis: The Consequences of Failed Social Policies* (2009), despite the *Plyer v. Doe* ruling, other states, such as California and Arizona, proposed and even passed legislation that attempted to limit or eliminate the rights, protections, or services available for undocumented people. Examples of such legislation were California’s Proposition 187, which included provisions that banned “any nonemergency state services” from undocumented Californians, as well as several Arizona ballot measures that aimed to deny many rights and services, such as the one to “post bail, bring a civil lawsuit, and take education courses” (Gándara and Contreras 34-5). One even went as far as proposing to institute English as the state’s official language.

As monumental as it was, the *Plyer v. Doe* decision has not been able to guarantee that undocumented students will navigate the U.S. educational system with ease. As Gándara and Contreras explain in *The Latino Education Crisis*, undocumented students
and their parents face discrimination and legal obstacles in the primary, secondary, and postsecondary levels. For instance, at the primary and secondary levels of education “some schools districts illegally advise parents that their children cannot be enrolled without showing evidence of legal residency,” while at the postsecondary level “many students are denied access to public universities because Plyler did not address the issue of higher education” (35). Even when students have been admitted to institutions of higher education, they have been categorized as international students, a designation which has made them ineligible for financial aid and has required them to pay exorbitant tuition rates and fees. At least eighteen states have either passed legislation or instituted provisions that have given in-state tuition eligibility to undocumented students who meet certain requirements, with California and Texas as the two states that first passed such legislation.

Undocumented youth have come out of the shadows and claimed a narrative that, until recently, was dominated by nativists who articulated damaging stereotypes of “illegal aliens.” But in 2010, some DREAMers claimed their cultural citizenship in very public ways; they occupied the offices of leading politicians, such as Arizona Senator (and prior presidential candidate) John McCain. DREAMers argued for their “legalization” online and in prominent print publications, “lobbied senators and White House officials,” and courted the support of labor unions and other important organizations to pressure the U.S. Senate to pass the DREAM Act (Nicholls 1). In The DREAMers: How the Undocumented Youth Movement Transformed the Immigrant Rights Debate (2013), Walter J. Nicholls traces the “coming out” of DREAMers as political subjects to 2010 because it was then that they “[entered] the national public
stage” (4). In his investigative work on this movement, Nicholls explains that the movement has deliberately articulated a narrative that labels these young people as “American” and emphasizes their accomplishments and contributions to the United States to argue that they are deserving of that label. According to Nicholls, this strategy is what has challenged the previous dominant narrative concerning the undocumented and what might actually alter their legal status:

Demonstrating national identification strengthens the argument that they are not a threat to the nation but an exceptional group that deserves an exemption from exclusionary immigration rules. Natives can thus begin to recognize that these exceptional immigrants are human beings who may deserve the right to reside in the country legally. Once the strategy of national identification reveals their humanity, support may broaden and the group of undocumented immigrants can transform a narrow opening into a real and sustained political opportunity. (12)

As President Barack Obama sought reelection in 2012 and knowing that he would be courting (and needing) the Latina/o vote, the DREAMers saw an opportunity to put pressure on an administration that had “achieved record high levels” of deportations, with “the Obama administration rate at twice of that” of President George W. Bush (Nicholls 153, 203). When decades earlier, politicians, academics, and pundits articulated great hostility towards immigrants, labeling them a threat to the national security and national identity of the United States (Nicholls 21), on June 15 of 2012 President Obama addressed the nation from the Rose Garden and talked about the DREAMers:

These are young people who study in our schools, they play in our neighborhoods, they’re friends with our kids, they pledge allegiance to our flag. They are Americans in their heart, in their minds, in every single way but one: on paper. They were brought to this country by their parents—sometimes even as infants—and often have no idea that they’re undocumented until they apply for a job or a driver’s license, or a college scholarship.
Put yourself in their shoes. Imagine you’ve done everything right your entire life—studied hard, worked hard, maybe even graduated at the top of your class—only to suddenly face the threat of deportation to a country that you know nothing about, with a language that you may not even speak. ("Remarks by the President")

In this address, not only did President Obama reinforced the rhetoric that immigrant rights groups and DREAMers have articulated in the immigration debate, but it was through this address that President Obama introduced the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA), a policy that would aim to “lift the shadow of deportation” for the DREAMers by “[granting] temporary status and work authorization to eligible immigrants” (Nicholls 153). This measure did not offer a path to citizenship or provide amnesty, and did not make governmental “services and privileges” available to these eligible immigrants, such as the Affordable Care Act. There were many limits in this measure and President Obama himself expressed that it would not be a permanent solution to the immigration problem as far as the DREAMers were concerned—he called Congress to action, asking them to pass a DREAM Act that year to make sure that these young people could live a life knowing they will never be forced to leave the only home they have ever known—the United States.

**Meritocracy and the American Dream**

At the center of *We ARE Americans* is the idea that undocumented young people are deserving of U.S. citizenship because of their academic exceptionalism. Most, if not all of the students in these narratives, graduated in the top ten percent of their high school graduating class, with a significant number of them actually graduating within the top
five percent. These students, then, are exceptional not only within the undocumented population, but among all high school students. Many of Perez's narratives describe students who had been a part of the honor roll at each school they attended or had participated in their high school's Academic Decathlon teams. Some excelled in standardized tests, like Lilia who not only graduated with a class rank of 15 in a graduating class of 300, but also scored a perfect exam on the California High School Exit Exam (CAHSEE). Sasha "won a spelling bee competition even though she had only been in the United States for two years" (64). Most, if not all, were tracked into academic programs like California's Gifted and Talented Education (GATE) Program, and despite the initial language barrier, became fluent in English quickly. In detailing the students' academic accomplishments despite the discrimination and deportation threats they face, Perez intends to convince his audience of an untapped potential that could very well contribute to the betterment of U.S. society.

The young people in Perez's narratives are, ironically, some of the biggest believers in the hegemonic ideologies of meritocracy and the American Dream. Their faith in both ideologies is what drives them to maintain high grade point averages, stay involved in extracurricular activities, and take pride in volunteering in their communities. Despite their undocumented status, these young people believe the American system will eventually reward their talent and hard work with socioeconomic success. Perez highlights this irony throughout his book, incorporating into most of the narratives how despite all the hard work inside and outside the classroom, these young people are marginalized by the very society to which they so proudly contribute. When Perez points out that "Isabel did everything she was told to do" and yet is limited by her
undocumented status, Perez is challenging the dominant ideology of the U.S. as a meritocratic space (41). When Perez says that "not being eligible for financial aid despite an excellent academic record" is an insult for a student like Angelica, Perez emphasizes how the ideology of meritocracy does not apply to all—that all the hard work and talent of the undocumented cannot guarantee them any sort of socioeconomic success. Despite all of their efforts, their status confines them to a life of menial work, low pay, and the fear of being sent back to a country they do not know as their own.

At the core of the ideology of meritocracy is the belief that the public education system is the one site through which everyone, regardless of background, can achieve socioeconomic success. For the children of poor and working class parents, education often represents an opportunity for the upward mobility their families and communities dream of achieving. Their faith in the ideologies of meritocracy and the American Dream only grows deeper since the public education system is where these ideologies are promoted. Challenging the gospel of the American Dream in education can be transgressive, as it puts into question the meritocratic and egalitarian characterization of the United States. In her first chapter of *The American Dream and the Power of Wealth*, Beth Johnson discusses her students' reactions to the wealth gap between whites and blacks:

The concept of an increasing black-white wealth gap in the present-day United States is a hard pill for students to swallow, not because it reveals that inequality exists—they know that it does—but because it implies a failure in the American Dream, a recognition of real advantage and disadvantage being passed along categorically to each new generation. (1)
For her students, inequality itself does not put into question "American" values—after all, U.S. hegemonic discourse has explained inequities by placing blame on individuals. The dominant discourse has justified people's socioeconomic failures on their supposed lack of merit, further confirming meritocracy as "truth." But when scholars like Johnson actually analyze the statistics and contextualize the numbers that reflect inequality, they problematize ideologies that are so ingrained in U.S. culture they are often characterized as "natural" or as "common sense." When putting the black-white wealth gap into a historical context, Johnson is actually challenging the ideology of the American Dream so tied to an education system that indoctrinates us to believe that a successful socioeconomic future is solely in our hands. As Johnson points out however, educational institutions, institutions that are partly responsible for the propagation of the ideologies of meritocracy and the American Dream, are actually sites that help perpetuate the very inequities people seek to erase as they attend them.

**Audience and Purpose**

Perez’s *We ARE Americans* is not alone in presenting a sympathetic counternarrative that chooses to focus on the positive end of “the good immigrant-bad immigrant” spectrum. As Nicholls explains in his account of the DREAMer movement in the last decade, relating the story of the exceptional DREAMer who proudly identifies as American is a political strategy deliberately employed by the immigrant rights activist organizations in order to change the immigrant rights debate that either previously ignored or demonized the undocumented. The 1990s proved to be a rather “hostile political and discursive” climate that characterized the undocumented as an economic and
cultural threat to the United States (Nicholls 23). But in 2001, when “professional rights
associations identified a niche for well-integrated undocumented students and launched a
campaign to pass the DREAM Act,” they gave birth to the DREAMers as a political
entity (13). Because of their exceptional characteristics, the DREAMers became easy
“poster-children” of the undocumented rights movement.

Although the DREAMers are the public faces of their movement, the DREAM
campaigns (especially the early ones) were crafted by leading immigrant rights
associations who sought “to convince liberal and conservative audiences alike” of the
deserved legalization of undocumented youth (Nicholls 49). These organizations learned
from activism of earlier decades that constructing a strong, compelling, and unifying
message would be the key in changing the immigration rights debate. Nicholls describes,
for instance, how “the immigrant rights demonstrations in 1994 were a messaging
debacle” because while protesting California’s Proposition 187, people displayed flags of
various countries in an attempt to show their cultural pride (49-50). However, this display
was “seen as defiantly foreign” to nativists. In the 2000s, immigration rights activists
“looked to craft a message…that stressed assimilation over distinction and conformity
over difference” in order to appeal to both liberals and conservatives (50). There has been
a deliberate effort from the part of these associations and sometimes the DREAMers
themselves to change their “representational strategy.”

In naming the act as well as the undocumented youth as DREAMers, these
activists were “[establishing] a connection between undocumented youths and core
American values…associated with the American dream” to “gain support from
conservative and liberal publics alike” (Nicholls 50). According to Nicholls account of
the DREAMer movement, there are three key themes in their campaign (50-53). The first of these themes is the importance of American symbols and the emphasis of American values and attributes. In marches and protests, for instance, DREAMers and their supporters are encouraged to display American flags in order to assert their American identity despite their legal status. In telling their stories, they are supposed to show that they are just like their (legally) American peers by sharing how “they love the Lakers, they speak perfect English, and they dream of becoming middle class, just like any ‘normal’ person” (51). Second, they believe that another important aspect of their message is the portrayal of DREAMers as exceptional students and overall exceptional people. They believe that in drawing attention to those who are ‘the best and the brightest’ not only counters the damaging stereotype of the “deviant and delinquent” immigrant, but also emphasizes that DREAMers “stand to make an important contribution to the country” (52). In focusing on “the crème de la crème,” they are “staying on message” about the legitimacy of their argument—these young people are deserving of a legal immigrant status. Finally, the third component of the DREAM campaign is absolving undocumented youth of the blame for their “illegality” and shift its onto their parents. Since they were brought to this country as children, this aspect of the DREAMer discourse emphasizes that the DREAMers were not the ones to break the law (52). Since they were brought here through “no fault of their own,” DREAMers can be absolved of the crime that might otherwise make them undeserving of a legal American identity. These three themes were all emphasized in President Obama’s remarks earlier in the chapter and are articulated by other White House documents (such as the DREAM
Act’s “Fact Sheet”), so we can see that the DREAM campaign has successfully made its way into governmental policy attempts.

It is the first and second themes of this campaign central to Perez’s strategy in *We ARE Americans*. Considering the hostile context of the immigrant rights debate in the 1980s and 1990s, and the lack a unifying message that could appeal to both liberals and conservatives, it is no surprise that Perez’s would highlight the exceptional DREAMers (and their potential contributions) to make a case for their “legalization.” As Nicholls explains in *The DREAMers*, “the media likes…and wants” the exceptional representation of the DREAMer (59). When DREAMers or their allies provide more complex stories of undocumented youth, the media loses interest—they want the valedictorian because they believe that is the story that will sell to an average audience. The image of the exceptional DREAMer that was so carefully crafted in the early 2000s “has constrained the messages and representations of a newer generation of activists and advocates” (59).

Perez is not alone in crafting stories that follow the DREAMer campaign formula. DREAMers themselves are trained in telling their own stories as undocumented youth. As part of crafting that strong and unifying message about the DREAMers as American and as exceptional, they have been coached to tell their stories in way that will convince a varied audience. It is believed that these strategies have been instrumental in the visibility of the DREAMers in the national immigration debates in recent years because storytelling “is the most important way of getting [their] message across, in organizing, lobbying, in media outreach, in everything” (63). Immigrant rights associations have developed template stories that DREAMers can personalize in sharing their experiences with the American public (63). They are trained to not personalize these stories too much
so that they can “stay on message.” Aside from serving as a strategy for their campaign, these training sessions with the DREAMers also allow for them to process their experiences while being undocumented. In sharing these stories with each other, they are able to see that others have shared similar experiences, which empowers them to “come out” as DREAMers to a larger audience.

Perez’s We ARE Americans is a sympathetic counternarrative that attempts to persuade mainstream U.S. society, as well as influence what Alfonso Gonzales terms "the homeland security state." Using the work of Antonio Gramsci and Nicolas de Genova, among other scholars, Gonzales defines the homeland security state “as the most recent configuration of a national security state that seeks to control migrant labor in the United States that includes the traditional institutions of governance, such as the Supreme Court, Congress, and the presidency, together with the bureaucracy, including [the Department of Homeland Security] among other military and police institutions" (13). Gonzales adds that unlike those scholars, he sees the homeland security state as "an integral state, which exists in a state-civil society nexus with other strategic sides of ideological production in civil society (such as the media, think tanks, academic experts, art, religion, and entertainment) and with fractions of capital that depend on undocumented migrant labor and the policing of migrants and people of color” (13). Although Perez advocates for the legalization of undocumented youth, he softens this transgression by presenting as evidence stories of idealized undocumented students. Perez appeals to an otherwise hostile reader (who perceives undocumented immigrants as “illegal aliens”) by employing the dominant ideologies of the American Dream and meritocracy. However, in limiting his choice of subjects to young people who can easily be termed as "good
immigrants," Perez oversimplifies the experiences of undocumented migrant youth because the narratives in his work do not represent the diversity of the realities of this population. By focusing on exceptional students—whose academic and nonacademic achievements are all the more impressive by their impoverished neighborhoods and schools, the daily discrimination they face by educators and employers, as well as the financial and legal issues that come with their immigration status—*We ARE Americans* neglects to include the more complex stories of those who succumb to the social and financial poverty of their homes and communities and who cannot even graduate high school, let alone attend a college or university.

In his introduction, Perez enumerates the ways high-achieving undocumented students navigate secondary and postsecondary education as well as their struggles in their day-to-day life to participate in a society that is intent on "shun[ning] them socially and politically" (xvii). His goal is to convince his audience that these students excel inside and outside the classroom *despite* the challenges and discrimination they suffer due to their immigration status. Perez highlights how these young people resist the ways they are oppressed—especially in educational institutions—through an impressive work ethic and perseverance. Through their narratives, he emphasizes how the limited educational and employment opportunities for these students ultimately become economic and social loses for the rest of "America."

Perez's work attempts to counter the common misconceptions about undocumented students that the general U.S. population believes and which help inform their stance on immigration matters. Perez attempts to engage the average reader who is misinformed about who undocumented people are and what they actually contribute to
U.S. society. By highlighting their lack of legal rights as well as the multitude of services and opportunities they are denied, Perez begins to inform an audience that is woefully ignorant of the many challenges undocumented students face due to their status. What makes his narrative more compelling is that he contrasts the students' marginalization from society with the countless and impressive contributions that they make to it. Despite the students' lack of recognition as universal citizens by the government and society they have implicitly and explicitly supported with their labor and service, their participation as volunteers, mentors, educators, and activists prove an agency and perseverance that remain unparalleled by most average U.S. "legal" residents and citizens. Through their tales of optimism and determination "despite all odds," Perez is intent on proving that these young people are just as deserving of the same opportunity to dream of a better life for themselves, their families, and their communities. According to Perez, their legalization and consequent education and employment are paramount in their students' realization of their American Dreams, and ultimately in the prosperity of the United States as a nation.

Undocumented youth are very much aware of the good immigrant-bad immigrant binary in national narratives. The organization 67 Sueños, a youth-led organization that attempts to document the stories and advocate for the struggles of undocumented young people with varying levels of academic success, describes its origin as being “born out of the recognition that the majority of migrant youth were not being included in the debates about OUR future that were and are happening nationally” (67 Sueños). They adopted the name after a statistic presented in a brief by the Migrant Policy Institute that pointed out that the majority of the “potential beneficiaries” of a federal DREAM Act would actually
fail to obtain permanent resident status (Batalova and McHugh 1). This organization seeks to give voice to the youth whose stories are ignored by both extremes of the national immigration debate that characterizes them as “angels” or “demons,” and to incorporate their needs in local and national legislative efforts. According to 67 Sueños, when “liberals, democrats and even the immigrant rights movement [are] likely to offer a ‘sympathetic’ counter narrative that highlights the most exceptional individuals in [their] community,” they are ignoring and marginalizing the stories the majority of the U.S. undocumented youth. This tension between the characterization of immigrants as criminals or valedictorians ensures that “the same 67% missing from the national narratives is the 67% left out of legislative efforts.” The attempt to counter the master narrative that characterizes the undocumented as a cultural and security threat to the nation with a narrative that focuses on exceptional students, is one that obscures the structures that impede the academic advancement of most undocumented youth. The students themselves are troubled with these narratives because they neglect to accurately represent the diversity and complexities of their experiences:

Most of us are not presidents of the student body or drug runners. Some of us get good grades but it is very hard for us to be academically competitive given our socio-economic realities and the underfunded school systems we rely on. The poverty that runs deep through our community does, unfortunately lead some of us to crime. We are also often excessively policed and criminalized regardless of our guilt or innocence. Things like racial profiling in the form of ganging injunctions in Oakland CA, and laws like SB1070 in Arizona, Georgia and Alabama along with

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38 Using the 2010 U.S. Census data, the updated statistic of the percentage of “potential beneficiaries” that would fail to obtain a permanent legal status is now actually 62 percent and not the 67 percent that inspired the name of 67 Sueños for the organization (Batalova and McHugh 1).
excessive police check points in our communities make us more likely to have involvements with law enforcement than our peers. *A true picture of our community would include some crime and some exceptional students but the vast majority of us are not so easily sorted into these two categories.* (My emphasis)

**A Critical Reading of We ARE Americans**

Perez does not sufficiently challenge majoritarian narratives. Because *We ARE Americans* limits its portrayal of the former and current undocumented Latina/o immigrant as an exceptional student, Perez continues to perpetuate some hegemonic ideologies that further exclude the majority of undocumented people. His text then, rather than serve as a counternarrative to the majoritarian narratives or stories in the media, literature, or popular culture that "other" the undocumented, actually serves as a sympathetic counternarrative that attempts to court the support of those who produce, perpetuate, and believe much of the hegemonic discourse surrounding the undocumented.

Many of the students in *We ARE Americans* operate under the belief that education *is* the great equalizer that will eventually erase the mark of their undocumented status. But as the literature across many disciplines indicates, the U.S. public education system can actually perpetuate the racial and socioeconomic disparities that already exist. In her book *Education and Inequality: A Theoretical and Empirical Synthesis* (1977), Caroline Persell counters what have been common arguments used to explain the “underachievement” of certain groups at all levels of education. While others have attempted to explain the inequities across racial or ethnic groups through theories that blame individual people such as students, their parents, or their teachers, these theories have neglected to take into account the historical context that at the societal and
institutional levels have affected student academic performance. Although Persell agrees that the way teachers interact with their students can affect the education imparted, and that students can internalize if they are “good” or “bad” students from their interactions with educators and others around them, she argues that we must examine how the structures of dominance affect educational institutions and contribute to the underachievement of underrepresented students.

The experiences of undocumented students are affected at all four levels of analysis that Persell provides in her work (at the societal, institutional, interpersonal, and intrapsychic levels), but *We ARE Americans* focuses so much on how their individual perseverance, how their *merit*, despite all odds is what has made them succeed and one day make their respective American Dreams come true. In emphasizing their academic accomplishments and reinforcing the “good immigrant” image, Perez gives credence to the old-fashioned theory of IQ deficit that Persell challenges in her work. When Perez writes the stories of DREAMers who succeed despite their status, this success is portrayed as the inevitable outcome of talent, intelligence and persistence, when perhaps a more complex reading of this success might be to see it as exceptional, considering the sociohistorical context surrounding the lives of these students due to their immigration status and their racialization as Latinos.

The DREAMers in Perez’s work endure challenges and indignities at each level of the educational system hoping that legislation will rectify their subordinate position in U.S. society, that this perseverance will be rewarded with employment opportunities that correspond with their *merit*. But Perez never questions how mainstream U.S. society defines merit; he endorses and values the test scores and grade point averages that
measure social, cultural, and economic capital that cannot be equally accessed by a socio-economic and racially diverse U.S. population. These numbers, which are supposed to objectively measure students' intellectual capacities, determine young people's academic and economic futures; as early as second grade, California students are tested to determine their so-called academic abilities, and from that moment on, they are placed on academic tracks that deem some as worthy of higher education and the socio-economic rewards that may come with undergraduate, graduate, and/or professional degrees. In *We ARE Americans*, Perez uses a narrow definition of merit to argue for the legalization, and therefore inclusion, of the undocumented. High GPAs, test scores, and membership to groups like the National Honor Society or the Academic Decathlon make these students worthy of the label "American," in Perez' eyes, as if these numbers and memberships accurately measured or represented someone's intellect, and as if intelligence and a strong work ethic were uniquely American values.

Although Perez does not challenge the hegemonic definition of merit, he does complicate the dominant ideology of a U.S. meritocracy because of its exclusion of the undocumented. In his work, he often explicitly and implicitly asks of its audience to wonder why these young people work so hard at "being American" only to be ignored or marginalized by a mainstream that does not care to recognize them as such. He relates the story of Sasha, for instance, who “has grown up believing in the American ideal of meritocracy” but “feels a sense of betrayal” because students who are “less-deserving” receive financial support and other resources because of they do not share her undocumented status (69). Through narratives like Sasha’s, Perez attempts to court an audience that ardently believes in the ideologies or meritocracy and the American Dream.
If the United States is really a place where people can achieve academic, financial, social, and political success through their merit, how can we explain the failures in these students' narratives? If an ideology of the American Dream makes us believe that if one works hard enough, anything is possible, how can we explain the underemployment, discrimination, and persecution of these exceptional young people? The contradiction between these students' accomplishments and their position in U.S. society highlights the contradiction between the concepts the U.S. mainstream claims to celebrate (such as multiculturalism and meritocracy) and the people and ideologies it actually rewards.

In her book *Achieving Equity for Latino Students* (2011), Frances Contreras points out that "while the country has historically touted...diversity as a strength, underrepresented communities of color in this nation have not had full and equal participation in all facets of American life" (2). At the core of her argument for changes in U.S. educational policy is "the discrepancy between the dramatic increase of Latinos as a proportion of the population and the significant gap they experience in educational achievement, access, and integration into the social and economic fabric of the United States" (2). She terms this contradiction "the Brown Paradox." The stories of high-achieving undocumented students in Perez's *We ARE Americans* painfully reflect Contreras' "Brown Paradox." Although Contreras refers to the marginalization of all U.S. Latinas/os when speaking of this concept, the reality is that due to their status, undocumented people (and in this case, especially undocumented students) are perhaps the most vulnerable segment of the overall Latina/o population. When their lack of rights as well as their educational and employment opportunities, along with the constant fear of their criminalization and deportation is contrasted with their impressive achievements in
their education and community involvement, Perez emphasizes the contradictory relationship between undocumented students and U.S. society. The drive, determination, and optimism they possess despite their mistreatment in educational institutions and throughout U.S. society is indicative of their ardent belief in the ideology of the American Dream.

The Classroom - A Site of Oppression and Resistance

In *Teaching to Transgress: Education as the Practice of Freedom* (1994), bell hooks argues that learning, at its most powerful, can be a liberating experience for people (4). But in her experiences as a student and as a teacher, the classroom can also serve as a site of oppression and domination. The experiences of students featured in Perez's *We ARE Americans* painfully reflect this contradiction. For these students schools are spaces that have the capacity to offer them refuge from the poverty and violence that plague their homes and neighborhoods, as well as inflict pain on them through the actions of educators and the institutional policies that continuously marginalize them for being undocumented people of color.

When Raul was playing soccer as a young child in his neighborhood, he witnessed a drive-by shooting. "That is when I realized that I need to get myself and my family out of here," he tells Perez, "and education is the way...I knew that college was the only way" (77). This traumatic experience propelled Raul to believe that his way to escape the violence in his community, the way to survive it, would be through his education. A college degree for Raul means a possibility to evade the fate to which so many others in his neighborhood are tied—a life of crime, a life of poverty, or even a life
that is tragically cut short. For Isabel, school offered her a haven from the violence of her neighborhood, it became her "sanctuary, a place that was safe and gave her a sense of purpose" (39). Although she was perceived as "nerdy" by other young people in her community, she believed that the time she spent in school kept her from being involved in gang activity and offered her a safe space that offered her other possibilities. Perez, however, in telling the stories of students like Isabel, neglects to discuss in depth the young people who do fall victim to gang life. This lack of discussion contributes to the dominant narrative that solely blames young people's lack of academic success on individual choices rather than on the institutional structures that make some and not others bound for an academic track.

The discussions on these communities in Perez's text, however integral in these students' lives, remain superficial—they only serve to emphasize the magnitude of these students' achievements. Through Perez's account, violence and poverty in Latina/o communities are challenges to students' academic success, but they are never addressed as possible consequences of the racialization and subjugation of the Latina/o peoples in the United States. Though in his introductory and concluding sections of his text he attempts to contextualize the push-and-pull factors that lead to the numerous significant migration of Latin American people in the U.S., he does not address the inequities that exist in this country beyond the ones that result from a difference in immigration status. Some of the students interviewed (or at least in the way the interviews are edited and consequently represented) believe these "societal ills" can only be blamed on the actions of individuals, rather than on the structural racism or classism that exists in the supposedly democratic society in which they live. Penelope, for instance, lives in a so-
called bad neighborhood where "most children...'gave up' on school and life" (9). Rather than examine, however briefly, the reasons why young people in "bad neighborhoods" might "give up" on their futures, such as the disparities among educational institutions or the fact that living in the midst of violence might have an effect on students' learning, Perez portrays these situations as cautionary tales or motivating forces "to not end up like most kids [they go] to school with" (9).

Educators, and the role they play in their students' futures, are featured in almost every narrative of Perez's text. One of the most egregious examples of a teacher whose racist behavior obviously affected her students was the experience recounted by Sasha. This teacher actually told her she would never get an "A" in her class because she was "a dirty Mexican." She had such little faith in Sasha's abilities that she had her tested by the Department of Education believing that her Mexican nationality must have meant that she was "mentally challenged." Ironically, getting Sasha tested placed her in the magnet program at her school. This teacher-student interaction leads Sasha to prove this teacher wrong, and in Perez's words, "sparked her academic success." The racist interactions between teachers and students in We ARE Americans are all discussed in similar fashion—rather than examine the structures that make these dysfunctional teacher-student relationships possible, or highlight the potential trauma and disastrous academic consequences an experience like this could lead to in the life of the average student, Perez describes these experiences as the driving force in students' academic success. The message then, is that these undocumented students (the really smart and hardworking ones!) ought to take these experiences in stride and overcome them. What is still missing
from Perez's text then is an examination, let alone an indictment, of the educational system which makes these negative experiences possible for so many Latina/o students.

But not all educators in Perez's narratives function as the villains of the students' heroic stories. Some teachers directly influence these young people in a positive manner. In Raul's case, for instance, he had several teachers throughout his primary and secondary education who were incredibly supportive: his second grade teacher "was always very helpful," his third-grade teacher bought him a laptop when he started college, and one of his math teachers in middle school who "encouraged him to set higher expectations of himself" (78). Finally, it was a high school teacher who was not only supportive of his academic work, but who helped him research how to apply to college with an undocumented status. This type of support enabled Raul to ultimately become a student at "a prestigious four-year university" (80). By highlighting individual teachers' roles in their students' education, however, Perez favors individuals' actions over an in-depth analysis of the structural obstacles that students like Raul face as undocumented Latina/o students. And in the eyes of Perez, this type of teacher support is not a given; it is actually earned by students like Raul who—despite the poverty, violence, and discrimination they live with everyday—possess the "determination," the "diligence and dedication to succeed" (77-8). In this particular narrative, it is briefly acknowledged that inequities across educational institutions exist when describing an Academic Decathlon competition, but Perez neglects to sufficiently examine them. Raul is especially proud of the fact that his team performs so well despite their lack of resources. The emphasis of this anecdote is that the students' merit propelled them to do even better than some of the teams from "better" schools. Perez neglects to examine why Raul's Academic Decathlon
had no chance in winning first place, or why their hard work alone could not overcome the economic disparities among the schools competing. Because these structural inequities are not sufficiently challenged, *We ARE Americans* argues that students who succeed academically and who deserve to legally become the "Americans" they have proven themselves to be, are the students who despite the very institutional challenges that exist against them, overcome them through their merit.

**The Language Barrier**

Although Perez acknowledges there is a language issue that most students featured in *We ARE Americans* had to experience in their schooling (since Spanish was their native language), he does not sufficiently examine the diversity of experiences undocumented young people face in terms of language acquisition and bilingualism. Though mentioned as a common thread in these students’ narratives, the experiences Perez relates can hardly be described as representative. Though Julieta felt like an outsider in school because her classmates made fun of her accent and “it took [her] three years to be able to speak in complete sentences” (100), her experience is an exception in the text. An overwhelming majority of the students featured in *We ARE Americans* do struggle with the English language initially, but they quickly assimilate linguistically and consequently assimilate into mainstream or even advanced placement or “gifted and talented” classrooms. When describing Lilia’s struggle with becoming fluent, for instance, Perez asserts that despite being “more academically advanced than her classmates, she still had a very difficult time adjusting to the American school system. The hardest part of the adjustment was the language barrier” (26). This description is not
surprising, what is surprising is how long Lilia’s “struggle” with the language lasts because “within a month’s time, [she] was close to fluent and ready to join mainstream classes” (27) Lilia’s story is not treated as an exceptional case, though it is not representative of the many young people who struggle for several months or years not only learning to speak and write in English, but to be deemed proficient or fluent by testing and classroom placement at all educational levels. And yet Perez presents Lilia’s story, and that of other students like her, as a model or as an example to follow if one wants to become “American.” The constant narrative in We ARE Americans is that students like Lilia are American because of English-fluency, and a quick one at that, makes one worthy of the benefits and privileges of U.S. citizenship. To me this language issue is representative of a bigger one—in Perez’s text, the linguistic assimilation of these young people is imperative to their “Americanization.” Whether by the students themselves as they tell their story to Perez or by Perez himself as he chooses the words of these young people, the Spanish language—whether as a subject of discussion or as a way for the students to articulate their stories—is ignored. I think the omission of Spanish in this text is deliberate—that in producing a text that is monolingual (or English-only, so to speak) and does not even discuss the subject of bilingualism is an attempt at courting the readership and approval of a mainstream audience.

Conclusion

Perez chooses to write about the academic success stories of high achieving students to complicate the well-known and well-believed ideology of the United States as a meritocracy. If his audience believes that a person's merit should dictate his or her place
in society, these stories should effectively contribute to Perez's argument for the legali-

zation of undocumented students and their families. With the exception of one, all of these young people achieved impressive grades, awards, and extra-curricular involvement (along with family responsibilities) as students in primary and secondary educational institutions. Most of these students excelled academically soon after they quickly achieved English-fluency, with quite a few of them being placed in the college track through programs like GATE. Most eventually graduated with impressive class ranks despite the many hardships they had to face due to their social, economic, and immigrant status.

In arguing that the young people he has interviewed ARE Americans, Perez attempts to expand the definition of U.S. citizenship to include young people who have otherwise been ignored, marginalized, and exploited. But in limiting his argument to high-achieving students, Perez is still conceding to the dominant ideologies of meritocracy and the American Dream as he indirectly argues that those worthy of "legalization" must want or even be able to pursue a college education and eventually become working professionals. Although Perez attempts to counter the mainstream narratives that are intent on criminalizing and demonizing the undocumented, his work still keeps many stories in the margins. Perez still narrowly defines what it means to be a U.S. citizen, or "American." In producing a sympathetic counternarrative Perez, rather than challenge the legal and social limits of U.S. citizenship, merely stretches them to include those exceptional young people who still adhere to the hegemonic ideologies of meritocracy and the American Dream. Although these students represent a significant segment of the undocumented student population, the narratives in We ARE Americans
only allude (and sometimes rather negatively) to the stories of the many others who have not persevered in the U.S. educational system. By focusing on these exceptional narratives, Perez reduces the identities of undocumented students into a nonthreatening, exceptionally positive image whose incorporation into mainstream U.S. society is more easily accepted than that of a group whose educational experiences, achievements, and life experiences are more complex and heterogeneous. By highlighting exceptional and individual stories of "hardworking" and exceptionally talented people, Perez obscures the systemic issues that lead to the struggles of undocumented students and further promotes the idea that the talent and work ethic of *individuals* prove their legitimacy as U.S. citizens. Through his narratives, Perez is not attempting to dismantle the structures that exclude the undocumented, instead, he is attempting to incorporate at the top of the U.S. hierarchy a select group of DREAMers whose talent and merit—as defined by the mainstream—are worthy of the label "American."
Epilogue

Dangerous and “Precious Knowledge”

Once social change begins, it cannot be reversed. You cannot uneducate the person who has learned to read. You cannot humiliate the person who feels pride. You cannot oppress the people who are not afraid anymore.

--Cesar Chavez

In the last few moments of the film Precious Knowledge, the students and teachers of the Raza Studies Program tearfully say goodbye to one another. Their farewells have less to do with the end of a school year and more to do with the fact that the Arizona ban of ethnic studies has passed. The course content and pedagogy from which they have benefited will not be available to the younger students. It is seemingly a devastating end to the student and teacher activism that we have seen on film.

But this is not meant to be a sad ending. When the screen turns black, the words of Cesar Chavez in the epigraph above come on the screen. Despite the sadness depicted in its final moments, Ari Palos is intent on ending the film on an empowering note. If the ban of ethnic studies in Arizona has successfully eliminated programs like Raza Studies, it has not been successful in erasing the “precious knowledge” their students have learned from their teachers and one another. This ban cannot take away the pride they feel in their histories and in their cultures. This Arizona legislation does not have the power to undo the work the students and the teachers accomplished inside and outside of their classrooms. They have acquired an education that cannot be unlearned.

Although the 2010 ban on ethnic studies continues to marginalize students and teachers of color in Arizona, it has also brought to the forefront a conversation about the importance of ethnic studies content and pedagogy throughout the United States. In late
2014, the Los Angeles Unified School District (LAUSD) actually passed a resolution that will require students to take ethnic studies classes in order to graduate from high school. What do we make of the fact that while Arizona high school students are banned from studying the histories and cultural production of marginalized communities, students in Los Angeles will be required to learn them? The Arizona ban directly affects students within its state lines, but activists and educators from around the country understood that the Arizona decision could affect their students. When offered as electives, educators argue that ethnic studies courses are legitimate sources of knowledge, but in making ethnic studies courses a requirement for all high school students, LAUSD is arguing that these legitimate sources of knowledge are essential to their students’ education.

The students and teachers who strive for an education that does not privilege the histories, experiences, and epistemologies of the dominant group over all others face plenty of challenges and Precious Knowledge provides a glimpse of them. From the start of the film we learn of the program’s inception—that it is born out of trying to change the rates at which Latina/o students are graduating and dropping out of high school. By instituting programs like this one, students learn that their cultures—often characterized as deficient by the mainstream—are actually valuable. When students learn about their histories and are able to contribute to the classroom with their own knowledge, they are validated in the very classrooms in which they often feel voiceless. In seeing themselves in the curriculum and in their teachers, these students become confident and engage with school and knowledge in ways in which they have not been able before.

When we are privy to a faculty training session at a Tucson high school in the film, we can see how a history teacher’s attitude toward his students reveals a dominant
narrative that blames students for their disengagement with education. Instead of examining how the education system might contribute to students’ disinterest or underachievement in high school, this teacher says the following:

What I notice, especially in regular history classes is, students really just don’t give a shit about what they’re studying historically. I mean their relationship to learning is just kind of dysfunctional in general. And it’s just not of a particular ethnicity. They are lazy. They are unengaged. They really are. Learning has become irrelevant to their lives, completely. They’re just damaged. They’re culturally damaged.

While this teacher makes it a point to say that he is not racializing the students’ behavior, he does essentialize them as culturally deficient, or in his words, damaged. What he neglects to recognize is his and the educational system’s contribution to this pedagogical situation. He places the blame of what happens in the classroom solely on the students. Instead of asking how educators can improve the relationship between students and learning, this teacher is more interested in characterizing the engagement of young people as hopeless. This teacher’s narrative reinforces the ideology of meritocracy to some extent—if the students only cared, if they only worked hard enough, they would do well in school. A fellow faculty member reacts to this teacher’s statement:

The way you’ve cast kids is so funny because if you read the literature historically, it’s exactly the way they talked about you when you were a kid, and it’s exactly the way they talked about me when I was a kid. We were apathetic, we were disengaged. The same narrative about the deficiency of our children has run the history of public schooling in the United States, right? And we just change the way we explain our inability to engage kids, right? There’s nothing wrong with kids. I’ve never met a kid with a dysfunctional relationship to learning. I’ve met a lot of kids with a dysfunctional relationship to school.

With this response, this educator recognizes the lack of student engagement as an institutional problem, rather than one that can be attributed solely to the students.
According to this teacher, high school students are not predisposed to dislike educational institutions or to be bored by them. He sees student disengagement as a failure of the educational system, rather than as a failure of individuals. By adopting a kinder pedagogy than the one the history teacher practices, and by acknowledging that what teachers teach and how they teach is important, he argues that it is possible to engage students in the classroom. This is why programs like Raza Studies can be so successful; 93 percent of the students in the program graduated from high school—which is almost double the national U.S. Latina/o average. The Raza Studies Program shows that when educational institutions address the needs of the multiple identities and cultures of its student body, students’ relationship to knowledge can change for the better.

But knowledge, as precious as many of us believe it to be, can also be a threat to the status quo. As the saying goes, “knowledge is power.” If U.S. Latinas and Latinos graduate from high school at higher rates, feel pride about their families and communities and develop a social consciousness that allows them to see history critically, who stands to gain power? Who stands to lose it? Although ethnic studies courses do not advocate for the “overthrow of the U.S. government” as many in the ban debate claimed, these courses do empower students from marginalized communities. When students resist the internalized racism that the majoritarian narratives perpetuate through theories of genetic or cultural deficits, they threaten the status quo. They are a threat to those in power because, as Chavez said, “you cannot oppress those who are not afraid anymore.”

Although schools often reproduce hegemonic ideologies that keep racial, ethnic, gender, etc. hierarchies in place, narratives like Precious Knowledge show us that the classroom can also be the space in which these ideologies and these hierarchies are
disrupted. One of this country’s integral and most powerful ideologies is that of the American Dream, and education is believed to be the site through which one can achieve it. But to believe that education can level the inequities that exist in our society is to ignore that the U.S. education system in itself is unequal. Education is supposed to be one of the means through which Chicanas and Chicanos can achieve upward mobility, and educational institutions are sites where this ideology is taught and perpetuated, despite the fact that schools—in the primary, secondary, and postsecondary levels—are unequal. The dominant ideology of the American Dream is often employed to justify the inequities that experienced across racial and ethnic groups; a lack of talent and drive is then blamed when the American Dream remains a dream. And therein lies one of the biggest contradictions of this nation—how can we believe the United States to be a meritocracy when our schools do not have the same material, economic, and human resources?

The narratives that I examine in this dissertation at times uphold the ideology of the American Dream even when their authors belong to marginalized groups. These minority majoritarian stories, like Richard Rodriguez’s *Hunger of Memory* or the film *Real Women Have Curves*, at times perpetuate ideologies of genetic and cultural deficits of Mexican Americans. In proposing that linguistic and cultural assimilation is the key to the success of Mexican Americans, Rodriguez’s work upholds a narrow American identity and devalues the Mexican identity with which many Chicanas/os still identify. As for *Real Women*, in reducing a narrative with multiple female stories into an individualized narrative of a young woman who must escape the confines of the family home and the grasp of an overbearing mother, the film perpetuates the dominant ideology that young Latinas can achieve the dream of upward mobility through a college education
once she escapes the Mexican culture. These two are the most commercially successful of the narratives in this study, and it should not surprise us, for they reinforce dominant (and therefore, mainstream) ideologies.

On the other hand, many Chicana and Chicano narratives also seek to contest the hegemonic ideology of the American Dream that excludes women, people of color, and the undocumented. A text like William Perez’s *We ARE Americans* is transgressive because it argues that young people who have entered the United States “illegally” are actually American citizens in every way but in name; it challenges conservatives and liberals who criminalize and racialize the undocumented without acknowledging the circumstances that create the immigration “problem.” However, even as it challenges narrow notions of American identity, *We ARE Americans* reinforces the ideology of a U.S. meritocracy. By focusing on the stories of exceptional students, Perez neglects to incorporate into his argument the diversity of experiences of undocumented youth. This approach, however, is not an anomaly in terms of counternarratives about the undocumented. One of the strategies of the DREAMer movement has been to highlight the valedictorians and the AP and Honors students to appeal to a mainstream audience that ardently believes in the U.S. meritocracy and the ideology of the American Dream.

Narratives like Rendón’s “From the Barrio to the Academy” contest the master narrative that argues for the assimilation of women and people of color into an academy that values Eurocentric histories and epistemologies. By arguing that Mexican Americans should embrace a bicultural ethnic identity, Rendón imagines an American Dream that is more inclusive and that problematizes the inequities that are at work in U.S. institutions. Although she recognizes that to embrace a bicultural ethnic identity is a challenge in
higher learning institutions, she suggests that institutions are the ones that should adapt to the cultures of the students they attempt to serve.

Narratives allow us to examine the society invested in the students from marginalized communities and allow us to dream of what our society should be. By studying the works of Chicanas and Chicanos we can confront the ways this population is excluded from making their American Dream come true. How do we imagine a more inclusive American Dream? By recognizing a fundamental contradiction in U.S. society—we continue to believe in a U.S. meritocracy while surrounded with blatant evidence that our society is unequal. This is why these narratives are important—by writing them, by reading them, by examining them, and by sharing them, we can confront and understand a contradiction that we live with everyday, but that we seldom question.
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