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Hybrid latina identities: critical positioning in-between two cultures
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In her elaboration of the “Methodology of the Oppressed,” Chela Sandoval theorizes strategies of resistance that intervene in the postmodern patterns of objectification and oppression, advocating use of any tools at one’s disposition to sustain survival and assert resistance. Appropriation of dominant ideological forms and their application in political struggle allows for subversion of oppressive protocols of subjugation and exploitation while ensuring social transformation. The significance of this political proposal lies in the possibility of transformation of existing material conditions into sources of liberating strategies. Sandoval emphasizes that it is necessary “to comprehend, respond to, and act upon” economic, political, and cultural forces affecting consciousness and identity (“New Sciences” 408), understanding that these forces create “particular subject positions within which the subordinated can legitimately function” (“Feminist Forms” 57). As she recognizes cultural hybridity as an effect of postmodern conditions of cultural transnationalization, she theorizes it as a “differential postmodern form of oppositional consciousness” and a strategy of survival that has emerged out of postmodernity (“New Sciences” 409).

Relating her argument to Gloria Anzaldúa’s concept of “mestiza consciousness” and Donna Haraway’s “cyborg skills,” Sandoval identifies hybridity’s potential for an oppositional political stance as it undermines master narratives of sociopolitical forces—racism, colonialism, patriarchy, etc.—with its principles of mobility, partiality, non-essentialism, and cyborg forms. Challenging singularity, homogeneity, and totality of social reality, the positioning in hybridity generates agency and consciousness that counter objectification and oppression without reproducing the hegemony that such positioning strives to overthrow. This is why Sandoval places hybrid positioning as the basis of “differential consciousness”: emerging out of “correlation, intensities, junc
tures, crises,” hybridity enables a continual movement between and among different oppositional ideological positionings (“Feminist Forms” 59).
In addition, validating the impossibility of wholeness and exposing the limitations of essentialism, the hybrid mode of being generates coalitional forms of social positioning that insist on an alignment of different social subjects and theories around affinity rather than difference. Such lines of affinity, asserts Sandoval, occur through “attraction, combination, and relation carved out of and in spite of difference” (“New Sciences” 413). This is the political/critical stance articulated in both U.S. third-world feminism and Haraway’s cyborg manifesto, political philosophies invested in “affinity-through-difference” for the sake of individual and social transformation. Sandoval sees urgency of coalitional positioning precisely in the conditions of postmodern globalization that work across difference and essence in “techno-human” space.

As proponents of U.S. third-world feminism, both Anzaldúa and Sandoval advocate new subjectivities, strategic and multiple, that are grounded in differential and oppositional movement. Sandoval emphasizes them as “tactical and performative” and with “the capacity to de- and re-center depending upon the kinds of oppression to be confronted, depending upon the history of the moment” (“Feminist Forms” 60). As Chandra Mohanty points out, this form of agency is generated from the material conditions and the lived experience of women of color: “[T]his is a notion of agency born of history and geography” (37).

The two Latina texts that I analyze in this article present “tactical and performative” subjectivities that emerge at the interstices of different cultural domains and out of conditions of multiple oppression. The Mixquiahuala Letters (1986) by Ana Castillo and Getting Home Alive (1986) by Rosario Morales and Aurora Levins Morales employ the differential and politicized concept of mestizaje as a transformational source of female self-affirmation and emancipation. Teresa, a young Mexican-American in The Mixquiahuala Letters, embraces her double-voiced, hybrid identity as she attempts “to find a place to satisfy [her] yearning spirit” (52) and declare independence from “society’s tenets of heterosexist stereotypes” (45). In Getting Home Alive, Morales and Levins Morales mobilize their multiple cross-ethnic identities to assert affirmative forms of hybrid being that resist exclusion and subjugation. In their “Ending Poem” they weave their voices together to reaffirm the mestiza selfhood: “I am what I am./ A child of the Americas./ A light-skinned mestiza of the Caribbean./ A child of many diaspora, born into this continent at a crossroads” (212).

Exploring the formation of female subject-positioning in the polyvalent and ambiguous space of biculturalism, these Latina texts expose different meanings of bicultural experience. Often thought of in terms of cultural synthesis and postmodern exoticization of difference, the representations of biculturalism in the selected texts depart from this unidimensional, celebratory image: they portray biculturalism as a location of probable gender oppression and as a site of potential transformation and emancipation.

The Mixquiahuala Letters: Feminist Strategies of Resistance and Emancipation

Ana Castillo’s Mixquiahuala Letters dramatizes a female quest for identity and self-affirmation through a number of lyrical and introspective letters that the main narrator, Teresa, writes to her friend, Alicia. The letters are centered on Teresa and Alicia’s adventurous trips to Mexico and depict a development of the women’s friendship as they fight for the same cause—indepedence from social limitations and freedom of self-definition. Castillo employs the first-person narrative voice to reflect female selfhood in an intimate and direct way, as well as to grant agency to woman’s subjectivity and self-exploration. The
self-reflexive style of the letters provides insight into the inner struggle of woman’s self-definition caught between personal desires and repressive demands of the social order. In this way, the epistolary form of the novel allows the female subject to be the central consciousness in the textual narration and the individual self-evolvement, connecting the discursive agency with the self-defined subjectivity.

The main protagonists, Teresa and Alicia, engage in a cross-national movement between the U.S. and Mexico in search of a new cultural space that would allow them a liberating sexual agency instead of the submissive objectified roles they hold in both cultures. In this process of perpetual and subversive crossing, the women experience patriarchal abuse and objectification, but they also develop cross-cultural practices and alliances that help them ensure survival and resistance in the cultural domains governed by the forces of patriarchy and racism.

In the opening letter, the patriarchal concept of machismo is immediately exposed as Teresa humorously describes her relatives: her uncle Fermín, who likes to flirt with women although he is married; her aunt, who does not go anywhere without her husband; and another uncle, who “cannot see a woman driving for anything in the world” or who cannot tolerate “a woman gallivanting around without her man” (17–18). This humorous tone, however, is not for the sake of a light and charming ethnographic lesson—right away it rings a satiric note that will grow into a direct and sharp criticism as the letters begin describing Teresa’s and Alicia’s experiences of patriarchal oppression.

Mapping out the protagonists’ trips back and forth between Mexico and the U.S., Ana Castillo discloses that the ways in which women are confined are similar in both cultures. In Mexico, the two women are immediately categorized as “loose” because they travel alone, and in the U.S. their sexuality is labeled “homo” for they oppose marital conventions. Castillo also asserts that marriage stereotypes are strongly present in both cultures: “Stones of silent condemnation were thrown from every direction; relatives and friends who believed that ‘bad wives’ were bad people” (29).

Subjected to patriarchal stereotypes and norms in both cultures, Teresa and Alicia’s quest for self-definition becomes further complicated as they experience a double weight of oppression and subjugation. Encountering the competing and contradictory forces of biculturalism, they experience an intensified form of patriarchal gender ideology and find themselves entrapped between two cultural domains. As Alvina Quintana notes, this text defines a woman’s experience while she is maneuvering between opposing realities that fail to acknowledge her existence. This tactical maneuver reveals that although cultural realities in Mexico and the U.S. are distinct and often opposing, they have similar protocols and norms of female subjugation. Patriarchy is thus unmasked as a cross-cultural phenomenon: although its articulation may vary in specific sociocultural conditions, its patterns of oppression invariably target women as the subordinate sex.

Criticizing patriarchy as a cross-national practice, The Mixquiahuala Letters also exposes institutionalized forms of gender oppression. Throughout the narrative, the traditional Catholic church is portrayed as another system of patriarchal control, governed by limiting and contradictory norms that define women only in relation to men while condemning them as sinful for being in this relation. Being an integral part of the Latino experience, traditional Catholicism acts as an arbiter in social regulation of gender roles in U.S. Latino communities. The author unmasks the patriarchal logic of the church morals in Letter Four, where Teresa remembers her first confessional with the priest who did not trust her sexual innocence:
He began to probe. When that got him no titillating results, he suggested, or more precisely, led an interrogation founded on Gestapo technique. When I didn’t waver under the torment, although feeling my knees raw, air spare, he accused outright: *Are you going to tell me that you haven’t wanted to be with a man? You must have let one do more than...than what?* (30)

The passage shows the religious myth of female purity colliding with the social stereotype of female sinfulness. Constituted by male desire, women are condemned as the sole guilt bearers, although men apparently participate in the same “sinful” act. The dichotomy of *la virgen/la puta* (virgin/whore) reveals its dynamic labeling of womanhood in relation to male expectations. While woman faces the impossible demands of the patriarchal order, requiring her to be saintly, she is at the same time morally accused for the impossibility of this task. Her very physicality and humanity become regarded as her failure, or, conversely, her lack of complicity with male sexual desire is seen as a frustration of man’s libidinal energy.

Constructing Teresa and Alicia’s trips as a search for emancipation and a process of self-exploration, the novel advocates a rebellion against female victimization by patriarchy. Experimenting with different sexual encounters in Mexico, Teresa and Alicia take control of their sexuality. They refuse male definitions of womanhood and assert agency and freedom of self-definition. Teresa clearly articulates this when a Mexican man mistakes woman’s liberation for sexual promiscuity. She corrects him: “What you perceive as ‘liberal’ is my independence to choose what I do, with whom, and when. Moreover, it also means that I may choose not to do it, with anyone, ever” (79). When insisting on freedom from men’s restrictive rules, woman becomes marked again as a transgressor—an immoral and worthless person: *Liberal: trash, whore, bitch* (79).

Situating gender and sexuality in a cross-cultural context, this scene points out a clash of signification: women’s struggle for self-determination and sexual emancipation receives a different signifying context in the two cultures. In Mexico, it still denotes transgressive, nonpermissible behavior that places woman in the stigmatized and outcast position of a prostitute: “In that country, the term ‘liberated woman’ meant something other than what we had strived for back in the United States. In this case it simply meant a woman who would sleep nondiscriminately with any man who came along” (79). Determined to continue their feminist struggle in Mexico too, Teresa and Alicia consciously assert their emancipated subjectivities against the patriarchal stereotype of a (married) woman that supposes her to be de-sexed, de-physicalized, and domesticated: they adopt counter action, leaving the domestic space and openly asserting their sexuality and physicality in the public domain.

The narrative places feminist resistance in both the private and public spheres, underlining that the two realms have the same protocols of oppression and regulation, governed by the culturally encoded concept of female inferiority and submission. The letters trace Teresa’s and Alicia’s assertion of critical opposition in the sites of marriage, heterosexual relationships, traditional religion, familial connections, and artistic expression. As the female protagonists renounce limiting and objectifying roles designed for women in the patriarchal order, they adopt what Chela Sandoval defines as “methodology of the oppressed,” methods of survival and resistance under the postmodern conditions of objectification and subjugation.8

Castillo’s narrative protagonists consciously confront stereotypical concepts of womanhood in both cultures through deconstruction and critical opposition: they
de-mythologize **marianismo** and **machismo**, traditional concepts of gender roles in Latino cultures, by exposing these social norms as oppressive protocols of male control. Teresa’s introspective letters disclose distinct norms of conduct for men and women, condemning a double standard that allows freedom to men while denying it to women. Also, they illustrate that machismo exists across cultures, as a patriarchal system that assigns to a woman the role of a sacrificing and submissive caregiver without granting her individual freedom:

A woman takes care of the man she has made her life with, cleans, cooks, washes his underwear, does as if he were her only child, as if he had come out of her womb. In exchange, he may pay her bills, he may not. He may give her acceptance into society by replacing her father’s name with his, or he may choose to not (sic). He may make her feel like a woman, or rather, how she has been told a woman feels with a man—or he may not. (118)

By emphasizing the women’s awareness of these patriarchal codes and their refusal to conform to them, Ana Castillo demonstrates their capacity to read cultural signs below the surface and assert an agentic subversion of male ideology. It is interesting to note that in order to convey the characters’ subversion of feminine gender roles, the author allows them to also borrow from masculine ideology. Teresa and Alicia use the “male code” of behavior—which includes sexual freedom, personal independence, the decision to travel alone, drink, smoke, etc.—in order to reclaim their own freedom. This practice of metaideologizing, of using the very tools that confine women to free them, de-essentializes gender⁹ and allows an appropriation of patriarchal practices as tools for transformation and emancipation. Castillo affirms Sandoval’s claim that a strategic appropriation of dominant ideological forms may engender some form of liberation. It is important to emphasize that this is a temporary solution, but it nevertheless serves as a potent criticism of the dominant social structure.

By engaging her protagonists in a feminist resistance through practices of critical opposition, deconstruction, semiology, and metaideologizing, the author criticizes and rejects cultural and sexual stereotypes created in both Mexican and Anglo-American culture. However, she does not completely discard and break away from these cultures. By allowing her narrative protagonists to find liberating concepts in the available cultural material, Castillo advocates a new hybrid consciousness, an awareness of multiple cultural self-definitions and inclusiveness of different cultural traditions. As they adopt a critical stance towards Anglo-American and Mexican cultural traditions, Teresa and Alicia also embrace both cultures through a strategic hybridity. They enjoy the greater agency that women have in the U.S., but they also need the close connection with family and community experienced in the Mexican tradition. They choose to define themselves at the crossroads of two cultures, resisting cultural hegemony and patriarchy while at the same time synthesizing a plurality of liberating positions and possibilities.

As a Mexican-American, Teresa experiences Mexican culture as an intimate part of her identity. For her, the journey to Mexico becomes a way of reconnecting with her primordial being: “There was a definite call to find a place to satisfy my yearning spirit, the Indian in me that had begun to cure the ills of humble folk distrustful of modern medicine; a need for the sapling woman for the fertile earth that nurtured her growth. [i] searched for my home... [i] chose Mexico” (52). Castillo posits that the reconnection with Mexican culture and people gives Teresa a sense of belonging to the
originary place while affirming her double-voiced self: “i too was of that small corner of the world. i was of that mixed blood, of fire and stone, timber and vine, a history passed down from mouth to mouth, since the beginning of time ...” (101). Teresa needs this affirmation of belonging and origins as an antidote to patriarchal and racial discrimination that she encounters as a woman of color. Paradoxically, she seeks affirmation in the culture that provides her with a source of desired self-identification and at the same time denies her agency of free female identification by its patriarchal protocols. This tension points back to her ambivalent need to be “accepted back into society” and yet be independent of its “patriarchal tenets,” the condition that is frequently denied to her but that she nevertheless struggles to accomplish.

Alicia is an Anglo-American of Spanish/European descent, and Mexican culture becomes a catalyst for the definition of her own identity: The journey to Mexico allows her to be distant from the Anglo milieu and makes it possible to perceive the limitations and advantages of her native culture. With Teresa, Alicia experiences Mexico from the inside—she gets to know intimately its people, customs, places, and history—and finds life there a source of affirmation and inspiration. By fusing different cultural experiences, she creates a space of greater personal freedom and creativity: “The idea of the journey that would lead from ruin to ruin offered your creativity new dimensions ...” (52), writes Teresa to Alicia in one of the letters. Castillo shows that cultural hybridity may be used as a strategy to make connections to one’s deepest feelings and sense of self. At the same time, this self-knowledge may offer an entry into the knowledge of the Other, transcending difference and creating cross-connections.

Both female protagonists challenge paradigms of unicultural and national self-definition by fusing different cultural horizons and grounding their identities in polyvalent spaces of cultural hybridity. Castillo demonstrates that this synthesis of different cultural aspects does not represent a mere assembly but a creative selection and combination that is used as a strategy of resistance and critical positioning. The questioning of tradition does not signify a complete rejection of the traditional ways, she conveys in her narrative, but rather a critical contestation and deconstruction of the systems of control and power. Teresa and Alicia break paradigms of patriarchal regulation and cultural prejudices but also explore new ways by being multiply heterogeneous, mobile, and hybrid. Their perspective is oppositional and yet synthesizing, for they develop new strategies of self-creation through a constant movement between conflicting essentialist definitions of womanhood and ethnic identity. This movement is symbolized in their geographical border-crossings through which they develop and affirm their fluid and multiple subjectivities.

In Alarcón’s analysis of The Mixquiahuala Letters, Teresa and Alicia’s opposition is discussed as unsuccessful. Alarcón claims that, although they act as free agents in their expression and practice of sexuality, the women still remain imprisoned by heterosexist ideology. It is true that Teresa and Alicia often adopt heterosexist ideology as they explore different sexual experiences. Even when they face male manipulation and humiliation, they are sometimes unable to break away. Many times, Teresa goes back to her husband when she feels lonely, and Alicia looks for comfort in other men when her boyfriend leaves her. Also, when the novel is read, as Carl Gutiérrez-Jones suggests, through the lesbian erotic register, Teresa and Alicia’s relationship and position are undoubtedly frustrated by heterosexuality (115). Gutiérrez-Jones, too, sees their transgression undercut by their persistent desire to connect with men; but, as he points out, this “failure” is critically connected to larger forces that determine social interrelations (117).

Teresa herself begins to understand this connection, becoming aware of the
patriarchal manipulation via heterosexual norms: “We were not free of society’s tenets
of heterosexist stereotypes to be convinced we could exist indefinitely without the
demands and complications one aggregated with the supreme commitment to a man”
(45). Therefore, what distinguishes these women as oppositional to instead of simply
“imprisoned” by heterosexuality is their awareness of being entrapped. Castillo asserts
that this need for approval illustrates how difficult it is to find affirmation in the soci-
ety that denies female agency and self-determination. In fact, this need for man’s
approval points to the “larger forces,” to the social order that exploits and solidifies the
social marginalization of women. In addition, these very moments of subjugation and
objectification act as transformative forces in their continual struggle, for an impetus
for transformation and resistance arises in the moment of oppression. Teresa’s and
Alicia’s experience of marginalization and confinement by patriarchy initiates their
quest for liberation. This is why I argue that they do demonstrate agency and differ-
tential consciousness in their quest for self-determination as they actively and often
effectively employ some forms of resistance and subversion.

In addition, Castillo underscores that women’s alliances do not have to base their
strategy and unity on the premise of essentialism—rather, their coalition and method-
ology should be based on political affinity and agenda. Teresa and Alicia unite not only
because they are women, but also because they share the experience of marginalization
and oppression and are determined to transform it. As postmodern subjects, they
embrace their particularized conditions but sustain the possibility of shared knowl-
edge and experience through which they can initiate a joined transformation of indi-
vidual and social identity.

It has to be emphasized that even though The Mixquiabuula Letters portrays female
experience of patriarchy in sometimes different racial and ethnic terms, it underscores
that the feminist alliance and methodology of resistance are grounded on solidarity
and unity. This is why it cannot be said that this text addresses the concerns of only
Chicanas and other women of color. What is crucial here is the experience of oppres-
sion that is not exclusively racialized or ethnicized. The narrative shows that Alicia is
abused and threatened by patriarchy although she is not a “woman of color.” Even
though they are not related through ethnic or racial “essence” Ana Castillo unites these
women in a struggle for the same cause—resistance to oppression and the “New
Woman’s Emergence” (35)—foregrounding the shared ideological positioning and
what Chandra Mohanty emphasizes as the “common context of struggle rather than
color or racial identifications” (7).

Getting Home Alive: Feminist Cross-National Consciousness

Getting Home Alive, co-authored by Rosario Morales and Aurora Levins Morales, is
an autobiographical work of the mother and daughter, who lyrically explore their iden-
tity defined by a multiple and heterogeneous ethnic heritage. While they claim a
belonging to “many diaspora” (50), they also delve into the meaning of gender, class,
age, and ideology in the context of their cross-ethnic consciousness. The narrative
itself is a collage of poems, journal entries, vignettes, stories, and photographs, depicting
multiple definitions and articulations of the women’s cross-national identity that
embraces Afro-Caribbean, Anglo American, East European, and Jewish traditions.

Although an autobiographical piece, Getting Home Alive transcends individual
self-definition to speak of the potential and the problematic of mestiza selfhood in
any multiply defined self-construction. As its representation of individual posi-
tioning translates into a portrayal of collective existence, it can be argued that the
particularized self of the poet ("I") translates into a collective voice of her community ("we") even though this is not a conventional testimonio. On the other hand, any claim on the universality of the mestiza experience is immediately undermined as both Morales and Levins Morales choose to map out hybrid identity in distinct and sometimes conflicting voices. Their polyphonic narration, however, seeks to uphold an oppositional consciousness that leads to coalitional positioning across difference, as Chela Sandoval proposes, and allows a continual movement between different self-representations and positions.

The struggle to define the self within multiple cultural streams is articulated in the need to identify where one belongs. Rosario Morales’ piece titled “Puerto Rico Journal” begins with Rosario’s journal entries on the plane headed for Puerto Rico: “Home. I’m going home, I thought, and the happiness bubbled in me and spilled over” (76). The next entry already states a negation of the long-awaited experience—“But this was never home!” (76)—as she realizes that the noisy and crowded urban setting of the Caribbean island does not quite feel like a familiar and intimate environment. She concludes that she is more at home with the vegetation of the countryside. However, even after several visits to the interior, Rosario repeats “This is not home” (79), adding that the eleven years of her stay in Puerto Rico could not make her parents’ native place a “home.” The significance of the temporal insufficiency is identified primarily in the different gender positioning that Rosario claims in the North American culture: “Maybe it has to do with not having been a little girl in this place. I was shaped on Manhattan island.” She asserts that “it has to do with the kind of woman I am. Nothing so crude as docile, catholic womanhood...” (79). Similar to Ana Castillo’s construction of female agency in The Mixquiahuala Letters, Morales employs bicultural experience as a critical position towards the patriarchal ideology of Puerto Rican culture, juxtaposing the island’s traditional concept of womanhood to the more liberal female positioning in the U.S. She identifies a Catholic influence in the construction of womanhood, perceiving the traditional norm of female submissiveness and docility in connection to the patriarchal authority of the church and its religious doctrine of hierarchy and male superiority. By distancing herself from such definitions—“nothing so crude as docile, catholic womanhood”—Rosario not only prefers the womanhood she inhabits—more emancipated and U.S. based—but also denounces the patriarchal authority in any cultural context.

Morales’s narrative highlights the discrepancy between the gender norms in the private and the public sphere. While she emphasizes that in her family’s domestic space in the U.S. the patriarchal conduct was still prevalent, Rosario understands that the more liberal gender culture of the public space allowed her to rebel against her parents’ pressure. Now, as an adult woman revisiting the island, she recognizes the similarity between her family and the people on the island “nagging, harping, pushing you into line, into feminine behavior...” (79). She is annoyed not only with the communal expectations of specific gender conduct but also with the lack of individualism and privacy, of one’s independence from intrusive and demanding community. As she juxtaposes this lack to U.S. ideals of privacy and individualism, the ambivalence and contradiction of her identification with the island are reflected in her need to keep her privacy and at the same time reconnect with the community. However, this ambivalent identification reveals the positioning in strategic hybridity, which allows both refusal and acceptance of particular cultural practices depending on their nature. Resisting patriarchal practices while embracing communal support, Rosario exhibits “mestiza consciousness,” the differential positioning that validates multiple subjectivity while rejecting oppressive forms of self-definition.
Continuing to examine the problematic of finding a place of belonging, Morales problematizes the sense of selfhood that is traditionally conceived in terms of territorial identifications, principally the place of one’s origins. Initially enthusiastic about the countryside, Rosario comes to realize that “only the landscape is home” (80), making a clear distinction between nature and culture of the interior. The diary records the strong presence of patriarchal conduct in the rural environment, where women define lack of their freedom by the law of the husband— Mi marido no me deja (79)—and accept this regulation as the absolute authority in women’s lives. Rosario learns to redeploy this law when she wants to justify her voluntary decline of something and assert her own choice: “And when somebody nagged at me and wouldn’t take no for an answer, I’d say it too. It was unanswerable, everyone understood that El no me deja (79).” Ironically, she adopts the prerogative of male decision-making to grant autonomy to her own decisions. Although she understands the pervasiveness and logic of patriarchal ideology, Rosario also criticizes the women’s obedient compliance and their lack of resistance, commenting that female passivity further perpetrates gender oppression: Pero tu lo dejas que no te deje! (79). With this critical posture, she reasserts her oppositional gender positioning and at the same time demands such consciousness of her female friends.

As in The Mixquiahuala Letters, the multiple and cross-ethnic positioning of the female protagonist in Getting Home Alive allows an awareness of the difference in the gender norms of distinct cultures and initiates the emergence of a differential gender consciousness that advocates female emancipation. Morales states that Puerto Rican culture provides “little freedom of thought and action, freedom to expand, grow, dare to do something different, to change” and is full of “predatory males who punish you for being female” (80). It is precisely this lack of freedom that constructs the absence of her homelike experience of the Caribbean island: “The U.S. is home now. None of this is home” (80). Clearly, in this scene home is identified as a place where one has freedom of thought and action as a woman, and this meaning determines which country or culture is home to her. In this way, Morales challenges the notion of home if one is confined in its space, insisting not on the romanticized or privileged conception of home as a private place of security and harmony but on the notion of freedom in the space that one inhabits, whether that be the private or public sphere. Unlike Ana Castillo’s protagonist Teresa in The Mixquiahuala Letters, who needs to feel and experience Mexico as her home, Rosario cannot claim a belonging in the culture that denies this freedom.

Morales emphasizes that hybrid identity is an ambiguous and contradictory condition. In spite of her initial disappointment, at the end of her stay in Puerto Rico Rosario feels sad about leaving, realizing the ambivalence of her emotions and the fact that Puerto Rican culture signifies to her many contradictions and ambiguities. In this instance, her feelings are closer to Teresa’s: while she questions and refuses its patriarchal tradition, Rosario still feels connected to the island. Although she did not grow up there, she associates it with her childhood defined by her mother’s and her grandparents’ stories about “the old country.” The idealized imagining of the primordial home during her childhood reveals its residue in her descriptions of the perpetual nostalgia: “Nostalgia for Puerto Rico. I grew up with it, felt it even before I first visited there the summer I turned ten” (87). However, reflecting the ambivalence of her emotions, the opening sentence of her first entry in the Puerto Rican journal replicates itself again on the plane, but this time heading to the U.S.: “I’m going home” (83).

Rosario’s journal entries challenge the traditional meaning of home, and by extension a territorially defined sense of self. Using the female experience to construct the
meaning of where one belongs, Rosario’s self-reflexive exploration asserts woman’s refusal of the domestic confinement and, at the same time, one’s resistance to the singular cultural definition. Rosario does not negate Puerto Rico as her home, and she does not deny its cultural influence on her self-definition. As an emancipated woman, she refuses to accept its patriarchal oppression; and as a cultural “border-crosser,” she refuses to define herself only within its boundaries.

In Aurora Levins Morales’ vignette “Puertoricanness,” the Caribbean island carries a different signification. Primarily defined by Aurora’s nostalgia and romanticized memories, Puerto Rico becomes experienced as her internalized being “waking up inside her” and exposing the duality of her womanhood: “There was a woman in her who had never had a chance to move through this house the way she wanted to, a woman raised to be like those women of her childhood, hardworking and humorous and clear” (86). This memory of Puerto Rican women on the island is present in Morales’ journal piece, too, as she writes: “Lots of women here are strong and independent,” but she immediately adds, “And yet …,” (79), questioning their acceptance of patriarchal patterns of oppression. Levins Morales focuses more on what she sees as the positive element of womanhood in Puerto Rico, perceiving the domestic chores of cooking and grocery shopping as meaningful rituals of “clockless” and “uncluttered” life, as opposed to the U.S. daily routine based on “appointment books” and “digital clocks” (85–86). Although this is a romanticized perception of gender positioning in the domestic sphere, it nevertheless validates the traditionally unrecognized female labor. Juxtaposed to the entrance of women into the professional public sphere, it seeks to recuperate the meaning of womanhood that has been not only exploited by patriarchy but also suppressed by (post)modern capitalist society and its oppressive work ethic.

While Rosario Morales writes about her preference for the island’s nature over its culture, represented by patriarchy, Aurora Levins Morales reveals in her writing that she identifies with both. She remembers “the perpetual food pots of her childhood” and “the overwhelming profusion of green life that was the home of her comfort and nest of her dreams” (84). Her nostalgic memory identifies Puerto Rico as home—“yes, this is still home” (79)—through the images of food and nature, the symbols of physical and mental nourishment. And although Aurora’s image of the kitchen invokes gender positioning in the domestic space, it does not convey Rosario’s criticism of the island’s patriarchal culture. Instead, it provides again a romanticized idea of the domestic, which in her childhood years was not perceived as oppressive. Later on, in her adult years, Aurora recognizes the confining and suffocating meaning of the domestic space as she re-imagines her grandmother’s life and her longing “for New York or some other U.S. city where a woman can go out and about on her own, live among many voices speaking different languages, out of the stifling air of that house, that community, that family” (23). Aurora’s conceptions of home project her own struggle for the sense of self. Dissatisfied with the meaning of (post)modern womanhood, she longs for the past simplicity of the domestic lifestyle. However, she realizes that such life does not entail less female confinement.

In her piece on “kitchens,” Levins Morales reasserts the notion of the domestic as the work space of women: “[…] when I lift the lid from that big black pot, my kitchen fills with the hands of women who came before me, washing rice, washing beans, picking through them so deftly…” (97). The kitchen also becomes a space where she connects not only with her idyllic childhood but also with the island women: “It’s a magic, a power, a ritual of love and work that rises up in my kitchen, thousands of miles from those women in cotton dresses who twenty years ago taught the rules of its observance
to me, the prentice, the novice, the girl-child…” (38). The affirmative image of women’s work marks Aurora’s initiation into womanhood and celebrates female community as the source of knowledge and empowerment. It also defines her feminist solidarity across cultures and generations, providing her with consciousness of female selfhood that embodies creativity and power in spite of marginalization and objectification.

Even though Rosario and Aurora approach gender construction in Puerto Rican culture quite differently and come from different generations, they both arrive at the point of feminist consciousness through their cross-national passage, a perpetual movement between and among different cultures. As Jacqueline Stefanko argues, both Morales and Levins Morales affirm the power of mestizaje through their polyphonic writing/speaking and through their subjectivity that emerges in the process of their fluid and heterogeneous positioning, their “shifting among many worlds [they] inhabit and altering them in the process.” Recognizing her multiple identity, Rosario insists on its hybridity and the impossibility of suppressing any part of it: “I am what I am I am Puerto Rican I am U.S. American I am New York Manhattan and the Bronx... I am what I am I am Boricua as Boricuas come from the isle of Manhattan and I croon sentimental tangos in my sleep and afro-Cuban beats in my blood…” (138). Aurora, too, claims her hybridity as an internalized history of several generations of immigration and as a memory of the primordial places and cultures that converge in her body: “I am not african. Africa is in me, but I cannot return./ I am not taína. Taíno is in me, but there is no way back./ I am not european. Europe lives in me, but I have no home there” (50). Both poets seek self-meaning and completion in the recognition of their multiple identities, rooted in the history of the Americas and in a continual process of reinvention.

Inspired by Gloria Anzaldúa’s Borderlands/La frontera, Morales and Levins Morales use Anzaldúa’s “To live in the borderlands” at the beginning of their autobiography. This poem-epigraph functions as a means of introducing their own work and philosophy of multiple and hybrid positioning. For them, like for Anzaldúa, “living in the borderlands” signifies both multiple oppression and potential transformation. Anzaldúa’s description of the condition of survival under oppression— “you are wounded, lost in action/fighting back, a survivor”(14)—is articulated in Rosario Morales’ powerful poetic account of “living in ghettos” and surviving to “get home alive.” Hybridity in their narration and subject-formation is foregrounded as a strategy of individual positioning and communal existence, with the border-zone as a physical and psychological terrain that must be claimed and explored as “the meeting of so many roads.”

**Gendered Hybrid Identities**

As they reveal manifold aspects and meanings of bicultural conditioning, the Latina texts in this article expose not only the multiplicity and intensification of female oppression in the site of biculturalism but also different possibilities of transformation and emancipation. Placing selfhood at the interstices of distinct cultures and traditions, they present, in Donna Haraway’s words, “transgressed boundaries, potent fusions, and dangerous possibilities” (154) of an in-between positioning as a strategy of survival and liberation. The authors of these texts engage their female protagonists in tactical differential movement in (between) divergent cultures and traditions in order to demand oppositional agency against patriarchal subjugation and against unitary paradigms of self-definition. They advocate feminist struggle against abuse and objectification by mapping out their protagonists’ critical maneuver between essentialist and confining positions and depicting their strategic positioning in cultural hybridity.
Ana Castillo traces an evolvement of self-enunciative and differential subjects who assert their agency against the patriarchy of Mexican and Anglo-American cultures in their struggle for liberal self-definition. She demonstrates that in the conditions of oppression and subjugation hybrid identity becomes a politicized mode of existence at the intersection of distinct cultures and values. Basing their differential consciousness in the hybridity of their ethnic origins, Rosario Morales and Aurora Levins Morales seek self-realization through the recognition of multiple and inclusive identities. While they advocate a female resistance of patriarchy in multiple cultural domains, they also recognize the inspiration and affirmation of womanhood that is defined across distinct cultures.

Becoming, as Homi Bhabha puts it, a “terrain for elaboration of new strategies of selfhood” (i) in the context of female experience, the ambiguous and polyvalent space of biculturalism is transformed in these texts from an initial condition of entrapment into a site of emancipation and self-affirmation. It is constituted as a locus where one culture contests the other and thus reveals alternative and critical modes of cultural practice and subject positioning. As they situate their female protagonists in this shifting and unstable terrain, both texts demonstrate that an effective subversion of oppressive and subjugating aspects may be forged through a creative synthesis of empowering possibilities and a critical opposition to patterns of subjugation. In addition, they reaffirm that the survival in the space of biculturalism may engender hybrid, fluid, and multiple subjectivities that engage in the transformation of postmodern social reality through “unity-across-difference.”
NOTES


2 See Donna Haraway’s “A Cyborg Manifesto: Science, Technology, and Socialist-Feminism in the Late Twentieth Century,” in Simians, Cyborgs, and Women.

3 Biculturalism refers here to the coexistence of Latin American tradition and dominant Anglo culture in a U.S. context. However, it also implies that within these two cultures there are multiple cultural influences and traditions.

4 Difference has become one of the key concepts of the postmodern discourse, finally becoming legitimized in the mainstream ideology as it is celebrated through the trend of global heterogeneity fostered by the free flow of capital, labor, goods, and people. However, this is not a humanist or liberalist incorporation since difference becomes just another commodity that sells well on the market and assists further development of consumerism in the postmodern age. Stuart Hall alertly explains: “[I]n order to maintain its global position, capital has had to negotiate and partly reflect the differences it was trying to overcome. It has had to constitute a world in which things are different. Some seem to take pleasure in that, but, for capital, differences do not matter.” Hall is aware that the seeming inclusion of difference is governed solely by economic forces and that capital has had to negotiate and incorporate difference not because of the populist pressure for inclusion but because the new profitable commodity was needed on the market saturated by sameness. Symbolized by ethnic food and music, promoted as pluralism, and advocated by multicultural trends, difference ultimately becomes divorced from its humanist referent—the marginalized, post-colonial subject. For an excellent discussion, see Hall’s article “The Local and the Global: Globalization and Ethnicity” in Dangerous Liaisons: Gender, Nation, and Postcolonial Perspectives. Ed. Anne McClintock et al. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997. 173–187).

5 One of the frequently posed questions by literary critics in regards to the epistolary form of this novel addresses the absence of Alicia’s voice, as the letters go in only one direction, from Teresa to Alicia. I interpret this absence through the novel’s emphasis on self-reflexivity. The letters represent Teresa’s dialogues with her own self, and the narration of the past events is her reconstruction of the quest for self-meaning. Alicia is the other from whom Teresa distances herself and at the same time identifies with in her process of introspective self-examination and projection.

6 It has to be emphasized that machismo is not limited to Mexican culture only, since its patriarchal code of traditional gender roles is present across cultures. For a detailed analysis of machismo and its different and shifting meanings, see, for example, Matthew C. Gutmann’s anthropological study The Meanings of Macho: Being a Man in Mexico City (Berkeley: University of California, 1996).

7 See Quintana’s analysis in Home Girls, 83.

8 In her article, “New Sciences: Cyborg Feminism and the Methodology of the Oppressed,” Sandoval distinguishes specific methods: 1) semiology, or sign-reading; 2) deconstruction; 3) meta-ideologizing; 4) democratics, which drives the previous three technologies; and 5) differential movement, which directs the other four technologies. These five technologies together comprise “the methodology of the oppressed,” which leads to “differential mode of oppositional social movement.” For a detailed discussion, see the article.

9 In her book Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity (New York: Routledge, 1990), Judith Butler theorizes gender as performance, demonstrating the performative
character and ideological construction of gender roles.


11 Alicia’s racial identification is presented in ambiguous and shifting images. Although she has darker skin (her grandmother supposedly was a Spanish Roma) and can pass in Latin America as a non-gringa—“couldn’t they see by our coloring that we were not gringas” (69)—Teresa identifies her as “the privileged white girl of the suburbs,” (48) or “WASP chick or JAP from Manhattan’s west side” (50), seeing Alicia’s high-class and European origin as “white, privileged, and unjust.” (50) Initially thinking that they “could not possibly relate” (50), Teresa changes her perception after they become friends. “You were partially white” (50), Teresa concludes, realizing that they share, in spite of differences, a common experience of patriarchal oppression and female solidarity. Clearly, rather than a racial concept, whiteness is presented as the symbol of economic privilege and of the removal from multiple oppression in American society. Coming from a higher economic stratum and an Anglo family, Alicia is privileged, or “white”; yet it is a relative privilege since, as a woman, she is exposed to patriarchal oppression, which makes her “partially white” and closer to the social marginalization experienced by Teresa as a “woman of color.”

12 While Aurora’s parents had grown up and lived most of the time in the U.S., she was born in Puerto Rico, where the family had temporarily relocated. She arrived in the U.S. for the first time when her family returned home after eleven years. This is why she says in her poem “Child of the Americas” that she is “an immigrant and the daughter and granddaughter of immigrants.”

13 See Stefanko’s analysis in “New Ways of Telling,” 58.

14 Getting Home Alive was published in 1986, while Borderlands/La frontera came out of press in 1987, and the writers apparently read and shared each other’s works before the publication.

15 A line from Aurora Levins Morales’ piece “Old Countries” used as the title in the second section of the book.
REFERENCES


