

## THE REYES FAMILY OR HOW TO DEVOUR A GIRL'S SELFHOOD IN SANDRA CISNEROS'S *CARAMELO*

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### **ABSTRACT**

Sandra Cisneros's poetic prose depicts the Chicano family as a powerful loudspeaker whose deafening din stifles Celaya's individuality and her ability to articulate herself. The girl struggles with self-expression in a household where solitude, possession and individuality are unattainable because the family is built upon the concepts of communalism and unity. As a result, Celaya devotes her word to the narration of the family's history, forsaking her own voice.

The trauma of the frontier accompanies the Chicanos throughout their lives as American citizens; consequently, the Reyes constant clamor functions as a distraction from the inevitable epiphany of estrangement. The border operates as a reminder of their immigrant selves that cannot be overshadowed by their noise and loud talk. Therefore, only in that dispossessed space their thoughts remain unvoiced. Sandra Cisneros employs the opposite symbols of silence and tumult to depict the duality of the Chicano family's identity.

**KEYWORDS:** Sandra Cisneros, Chicano Literature, frontier, family, voice, silence, identity.

### **RESUMEN**

La prosa poética de Sandra Cisneros retrata a la familia chicana como un poderoso altavoz cuyo estruendo ahoga a Celaya en los momentos en los que intenta definir su individualidad a través de la comunicación verbal. La niña lucha por su derecho a la expresión personal en un hogar donde la soledad, la propiedad y la individualidad resultan inalcanzables pues la familia está construida exclusivamente sobre los conceptos de comunidad y unidad. Por lo tanto, Celaya usa su palabra sólo para narrar la historia familiar; abandonando de este modo su voz propia.

Una vez que el chicano ha atravesado la frontera, queda marcado por este trauma durante toda su vida como ciudadano americano. Así, el clamor constante de los Reyes representa un intento de evadir la inevitable revelación del extrañamiento que acompaña siempre al inmigrante. Únicamente en la frontera permanecen los Reyes en silencio pues el ruido y los gritos no evitarían que aquella les recordase su pasado. Sandra Cisneros utiliza los símbolos opuestos de silencio y tumulto para describir la doble composición de la identidad de la familia chicana.

**PALABRAS CLAVE:** Sandra Cisneros, literatura chicana, frontera, familia, voz, silencio, identidad.

Sandra Cisneros expounds in her novel *Caramelo* the struggle to attain self-expression of a Chicano female subject, Celaya, through her formative years, while resisting the imposing agency of her relatives. This paper argues the overshadowing effect of the familiar unit over the girl's articulacy in parallel with the signification of the border as a space dispossessed of the possibility of ownership. This imperious lineation induces a silence that stifles the words of the frontier-crosser in the same way that the protagonist's household determines her identity formation and verbal expressiveness. Sandra Cisneros surrounds the character of Celaya with the Reyes family's bedlam. Its members overpower Celaya's voice. She is unable to construct an identity independently from her relatives.

Lala has been dragged from one side of the border to the other. Mexico and the USA are her family's destinations, but she has never chosen her own target towards which she may conduct her efforts. Both nations become loudspeakers that broadcast the Reyes's speeches. The only period of time in which every single member of this clan is overcome by lull is when they are crossing the frontier. This instant could have become Celaya's room for personal and open expression as a separate and autonomous entity. However, the border is a place of inarticulacy. The girl does not own that space, and thus it cannot be used as a mediator for communication. Lala's body, mind and voice are caught in the border. This blank area is out of reach for possession. The Reyes acknowledge this fact and remain without words to fill the emptiness of the dividing line. As a consequence, Celaya occupies her thoughts with the household's issues and devotes the energy of her say to her family's memories, past, lies and secrets. In the Meanwhile, she forsakes her own word.

The novel recollects remembrances that draw the timeline of the family. Celaya narrates and builds the structure that would support the honor of the family. She decides what section of privacy is going to be shared. Nonetheless, Lala pursues, simultaneously, to build her own identity by means of this research into her ancestors' confidences. This quest comes to surface as the most relevant one for the narrator. In fact, the first reminiscence selected in the book is a moment in her childhood. During a vacation in Acapulco with her family, everyone participates in a picture, except for Celaya, who is away building sand castles: "Then everyone realizes the portrait is incomplete. It's as if I didn't exist" (4). The recapture in her mind unveils

a trauma. Lala does not receive a treatment from her family that creates a sense of inclusion. On the other hand, the girl recognizes the status of invisibility entailed in not being defined as part of the kindred. If they do not point out her existence she disappears. Within the clan, she represents the weakest will because "the tension between subjectivity and female identity is exacerbated by the fact that woman's voice in patriarchal culture is not heard or listened to and is often as good as lost" (Paloge 154). Celaya's individualism is still in process of formation in this moment of the story. This immature status enhances her imperceptiveness together with the superior presence of her male siblings. Among the boys' demands, fights and brawniness, Lala disappears at times.

As a girl whose foundations in terms of family structure are based on mutual, unavoidable dependence, she extends this perception to all the members of the household. Their roles determine their oneness with the others. For this reason, Zoila's threat to leave by herself when she discovers her husband's past and Candelaria's real origins cannot be processed as a real possibility by Celaya: "But where can mother go? She doesn't have any money. All she's got is her husband and kids, and now she doesn't even want us" (83). Zoila is no longer an objective being without them. She only exists as the mother and wife. No actuality occurs outside the family.

A person's presentation to the world begins with his/her name. It exemplifies another element that complements someone's character, but it is given instead of chosen. The Reyes lose their birth names for sobriquets. These function as the actual performative term to address each other. Lala comprehends no other method to interact with a loved person but by labeling him. When she falls in love with Ernie she asks: "' So what's your real name? [...] What do they call you? [...] I mean, haven't you got a nickname or something? What do they call you at home? [...] I'll call you Ernesto'" (367). She is already entering her adolescence and waking up to sexual intercourse, but in this new terrain she has to apply the same rules used in her home.

She has been marked since early childhood by the Reyes's occluding tendency. They embody an unbreakable chain. Celaya revives her painting activities in the first grade: "I could never draw myself without drawing the others" (393). She stares at the white page in the same manner she perceives the duration of a day in her house. Solitude is unobtainable within those walls. Her body is never the only one filling the space. Once she turns her head she finds one of her relatives, and behind that one there would be the others. Norma Williams concludes: "the definition of independent individuals that is so romanticized in U.S. culture, and often accepted as a reality by many social scientists, does not conform to empirical reality" (140). If this perfect model of the absolutely autonomous human being cannot be implemented on an American citizen, it could be even less functional for an immigrant coexisting with social demands that do not correspond to his original schemes about communalizing every aspect of his self.

The malfunction in the Reyes clan resides in the fact that communalization turns into dispossession. Celaya is deprived of her precious belongings, elements encompassed in her singularity. This destitution begins once they have crossed the border. Her father gives away her doll, then the Awful Grandmother orders her to cut her braids and, finally, they take her brother away to military school. The three robberies turn Lala into an image she cannot recognize in the mirror; something she has never seen before. A girl without the doll marked by her teething period, a “pelona” threatened by the “snip-snip” of barbaric scissors (22), and a girl without one of the members of the inseparable group.

These components enabled Celaya to approach and relate to the world. They served as her social limbs. Even if they are cut off, she would still feel their absence. Consequently, Lala would suffer from phantom limbs: “Amputation does not change the body’s habitual adjustment [...] When an arm has been amputated, almost every movement that is attempted entails a hitch. Important in this connection is the fact that the arms are organs of emotional and also intellectual affection” (Feldman 591). When her braids are taken away, the awful Grandmother scolds her for making a drama out of that by crying: ““As if they’d cut off your arms!”” (24). Soledad would never be able to understand Celaya’s pain. However, Soledad has felt the same suffering when her father gave her away to her aunt in Mexico City as a child. He was Grandmother’s referent to structure around him her naïve world. Anyhow, she lost him: “So that her own body by extension reminded her of that other body, that other home, that root, that being whom she could not help but think of whenever her body tugged her for affection” (101). Two women of the same lineage who are stolen their most valuable possessions. It is a repetitive pattern in their family.

Soledad is perceived by Celaya as the origin of their kin. Celaya as a child blames her for her past afflictions. Lala compares her to a witch who can “swallow [them] all, if you let her” (21). The Grandmother’s attitudes towards her offspring portray the conventional ethos of the Mexican American household organization because “probably the most significant characteristic of the Chicano family is its strong emphasis on familism. While the impact of the family may have eroded somewhat by urbanization and acculturation, it is still a central institution for the individual” (Mirandé 751). This woman embodies the center in which everything converges. Yet, her matriarchal predisposition is altered due to a disturbance caused by a past filled with experiences of abandonment and rootlessness.

Soledad was first forsaken by her father, but her sense of isolation was not soothed with marriage. She still lacked the power of proprietorship. She underwent a pregnancy that made her aware of the male control over the sanctification of the child-bearing phase. From her perspective it meant to lose control over the only dominion she had, which was her body: “She prayed the baby would hurry and be born so that she could have her body back [...] How could she explain to her husband it was more than a loss of her body, but also, her life” (190-91). This testimony

demystifies the magic and the elevation traditionally conferred to pregnancy. She feels “like a piece of machinery” (191) during labor. In this sense, she stands for the female communal distress. This is one of the purposes of Sandra Cisneros, because the author tries with her writing “to give voice to the voiceless, to represent the lives of Chicanas, working-class Mexican-American women” (Tokarczyk 97).

The Grandmother's anxiety to gain control over her progeny results from a fear of forsakenness and a vital necessity for ownership. She discovers the existence of these apprehensions first in the chaos of Aunt Fina's house and later with her first incursion in the Reyes family:

Even with all those empty bedrooms, Soledad found herself without a real room of her own. She was given a cot in the pantry off the kitchen [...] the door couldn't be shut entirely without scraping against the tile, but at the slightest grating sound Señora Regina would begin to howl that she was suffering from migraines [...] after a while she [Soledad] found it easier just to leave it open. (114)

These misappropriations of belongings can either be performed by the patriarchal force in the house or, as in the case of Regina, Soledad and Zoila, they can be carried out by the matriarchal body. These women have overcome humiliations, losses, abandonments, betrayals and hard labor. Their understanding of education and punishment execution is founded on their harsh experiences. They want to be respected, state clearly their superiority and authority. The persona they expose is that of a perfect model of faultlessness, which is the explanation for the lies and secrets that surround them. Catherine Clement deals with the sacred connotations attached in history to women in her correspondence with Julia Kristeva:

Mary is in possession of a power, both recognized and denied, that holds up a reassuring mirror to women. As the Mother of God, the Virgin is more spoiled than her son, since she does not endure the calvary, passing rather through the intermediary of the very flattering Dormition and Assumption, before being enthroned as Queen of Heaven and of the Church. A superb canvas by Piero della Francesca depicts her as majestic, protecting under her skirts the kings and bishops who manage current affairs, whereas she is content to rule! What a fate! What an astute configuration, don't you think? On the one hand, she satisfies women's aspirations to power: I told you, she flatters our latent paranoia—every woman who finds her reflection in the Virgin is implicitly destined for the same glory [...] But, at the same time and on the other hand, she bridles them when she does not bully them: on your knees, ladies, you are only a place of transition, look after the children and the sick, no sex or politics, the ear and understanding are worth more than a sexed body, you can never be told often enough. (8-7)

In the same way, the daughters of these Reyes women admire their power but this awareness does not encourage them to become rebellious against limitations and injustices, because the daughters observe that the command of their female superiors is reduced to the household and, with the exception of certain bursts of

rage and desperation, they follow quietly the directions corresponding to their given roles. Conversely, Celaya does not want to be a mere “place of transition”. She feels imprisoned within these familiar boundaries: “I go down to the courtyard, wedge the tip of my black patent leather shoes onto the bottom lip of the gate, pull myself up to open square where the mailman drops the letters, and into this frame squeeze my face” (62). This is the minuscule hole through which the girl sees life out of her home. In the previous passage, she is waiting for the arrival of a family friend who has promised to grant her a treasured chattel. Her height limitation and the effort to reach the gate reinforce her need to attain what she has been assured and desires more than any other material prize: space, a room of her own.

A girl growing up without a territory to claim is a recurrent motif in Sandra Cisneros’s literary production. Esperanza in *The House On Mango Street* encounters the same struggle, and it limits her acquisition of ipseity. Analyzing this fight in the novel, the critic Kuribayashi clarifies the following: “Owning and controlling her [Esperanza’s] space is to own her self. One cannot become oneself without having one’s own place” (167). She would only leave her family behind in exchange for personal space. However, Señor Coochi is just ridiculing Celaya when he offers her her “very own room” (52). Thus, her hopes are the objective of adult mockery. This same avidity that Lala expresses after Coochi’s offer is perceived again in the later scene when the family moves to Texas. She is promised, for the second time, a room of her own, but it is a place of transit between other compartments. Henceforth, Lala thinks: “All this traffic, and never any privacy, and noise all the time, and having to dress and undress in the bathroom, the only room with a lock on the door except for the exit doors” (301). The claustrophobic description of her night in this crowded house underlines the lack of personal space and privacy: “Brothers snoring beside me. Mother and Father in their room far away, whispering. Elbows and warm knees. Keep off my side of the bed, or I’ll clobber you” (302). The character’s battles for her right are a direct reference to Virginia Woolf’s *A Room of One’s Own*:

Here, then, Mary Beton ceases to speak. She has told you how she reached the conclusion—the prosaic conclusion—that it is necessary to have five hundred a year and a room with a lock on the door if you are to write fiction or poetry [...] Intellectual freedom depends upon material things [...] My belief is that if we live another century or so—I am talking of the common life which is the real life and not of the little separate lives which we live as individuals—and have five hundred a year each of us and rooms of our own; if we have the habit of freedom and the courage to write exactly what we think; if we escape a little from the common sitting-room and see human beings not always in their relation to each other but in relation to reality [...] Then the opportunity will come.

Celaya and the rest of the Reyes women do not produce poetry, but they equally need a tactic to communicate. Instead of writing, they need a voice, and they would not have it until they can enjoy privacy, defining themselves as individuals and not

members of a clan. For this reason, Lala is the only one who does not regret separation from the family when her older brothers stay in Chicago while they move to San Antonio. As she matures during her adolescence, she confronts her parents and announces her intention of being “sola”: “It’s just that I want to be on my own someday” (359). The familiar bond consumes her singularity, which has become essential to embrace happiness as part of her life. Father resorts to threats regarding concepts like shame, social expectation, acceptance, expulsion from the household and solitude: “Only your family is going to love you when you are in trouble, ‘mija’ [...] If you leave alone you leave like [...] ‘como una prostituta’” (360).

A biographical reference to the author’s girlhood shows a parallelism with the main character’s development. Celaya fancies going “to the public school on the other side of the freeway” (312). The road would function as a barrier against her brothers’ intrusions in her life. Conversely, in an interview with Tokarczyk, Cisneros explains why she wanted to attend Loyola: “I wanted to be close to my brothers. My brothers went there. I’d gone to the same elementary school as they did. I’d been close to them all along” (214). The familism unraveled in both the real and the fictional girls have obvious opposite effects. The positive connotations that load Cisneros’s recollection about siblings’ perpetual union are received by Lala as a genetic curse from which she cannot escape.

Her enclosure has unconsciously spread out the Reyes house. Celaya cannot accept independence in her social relations. She rejects Viva after she announces her engagement to Zorro. Later, her trauma would affect her interactions in an opposite way; her father’s presence occupies her mind during sexual intercourse with Ernesto. When he is about to kiss her the following image prompts: “Whenever Father eats anything specially delicious, he always force-feeds me a bit. –‘Prueba’, try it, he says, holding something so close to my face I can’t see. Ernesto’s like that, pushing himself so close to me, I can’t stand it” (382). With Viva, Lala cannot endure to release her friend. On the other hand, Ernesto’s proximity provokes restlessness in her. She has been personally invaded repeatedly by her relatives, and now she could not allow that to happen from an outsider. In both cases, the relationships are truncated by the wounds caused by her constant strivings for freedom.

In this intimate situation with Ernie, Celaya cannot help a coming thought. She wonders about the misery that led women to jump out from bell towers. She compares herself to them and delights in her luck. Ironically, it will end with Ernesto’s rejection. As a consequence, she would have to come back to her house, the epicenter of her anxieties. Paradoxically, these suicidal women went into the core of a deafening din in order to escape from the roar that was destroying their lives. Lala lives within a pandemonium to which she returns with her hopes of change shattered. The bedlam created by the Reyes diminishes her possibilities of self-development, enrichment and expression: “I’ve got no privacy to hear my own thoughts in this stupid house, but I can hear everyone else’s” (332). The girl covets silence. Weldt-Basson explains that her main desire is empty air that she could fill

with herself (219). She becomes the basin to pour everyone's stories, lies and secrets. They occupy her mind and leave Celaya with no capacity for hers.

None of the two nations to which she belongs offers quietness. When Chicago surrounds Celaya, she hears "outside, roaring like the ocean [...] Inside, another roar; in Spanish from the radio, in English from TV cartoons" (6). In Mexico, Aunty Licha's house exuberates showy decorative objects. The owners try to expose their knowledge of trends. Their concept of trendy is "'lo chillante', literally the screaming" (7). Prosperity is understood as overloading the tenure with signs of consumerism. Taken to the extreme, this intention leaves them without space for the individuals constructing the household, as is the case at Aunty Ninfa's house: "Whenever someone wants to pass, someone else has to sit down; when someone wants to open a door, someone else has to stand up" (12). Consumption brings them closer to thriving, while it abates interaction within them and personal space. Improvement was the reason for crossing the border, and it entailed complex adaptations. According to Rafael Pérez Torres:

The borderland can be configured in numerous ways, as geographic or cultural, political or economic. However their specificity may be defined, the borderlands represent a state of liminality, a passing (to use Victor Turner's oft-deployed phrase) "betwixt and between" one state and another. That passing from one nation state to another, or from one economic, linguistic, social, or political state to another [...] The process of a cultural and personal identity based on being neither zero nor one, neither this nor that but both represents a form of mixing, of miscegenation, of mestizaje. This process demands different conceptualizations, different enactments, different discourses. (820)

"Lo chillante" is the consequence of mingling the boisterousness of the two nations in an attempt to adjust without erasing the roots. The aftermath is a rumpus that annihilates all delicate details. Everything fragile dies under their chaos. The Reyes's adornments embody stridency. It is a crowdedness of single attempts to beautify that result in the opposite: "florals, florals, florals at war with each other" (15). Not even a traditional symbol of beauty emanates stillness, because, as Celaya explains: "In our flat, things of beauty are not forever" (12). They are broken, lost, or they crack their heads on them. They have not been told how to manipulate the small, pleasant and frail. This family has evolved in translocation, which implies change, noise, stress, rush, effort and tiredness. All this disables them for halting to observe and listen. They are accustomed to a constant clattering against each other's words and screams.

Hollering substitutes the regular conversational tone of voice in the family: "The Reyna sisters, always loud. Making so much noise in English, so much noise with their crooked Spanish" (225). The 'mestizaje' has translated into a stage of verbal communication that shares the tumult experienced by these immigrants in both nations. Bilingualism is not diverted, in this case, for different modulations

of their speech. They just have one; basically because they have a relish for roar. Yet, once again, Celaya is the exception:

You couldn't get me to sing that corny old song [*Cielito Lindo*] if you paid me. Not my family, they love corn. Especially the *ay-ay-ay-ay* parts, which they screech like a cage of carrots. The words thunder out the windows, thud over the trailer hauling the Grandmother's walnut-wood armoire, and roll down the bleached desert hills of northern Mexico, startling the vultures in the scrub trees. (237)

This scene occurs on their way to Chicago from the South. Their manner to link both countries is to generate this uproar. However, the narrator is not reliable, during this passage because Lala differentiates herself from the rest of her relatives and that is only partly true. The character of the girl is reserved and quiet. Nonetheless, her mother accuses her of being a 'metiche' just like her father, "a born liar". Surprisingly, she does not refute the statement; instead, she calmly admits: "Talk is all I got going for me" (253). Left with no personal scope and no opportunity to cultivate self-reflection, she adopts a survival strategy, which is to fill in any empty instant with irrelevant talk. This does not uncover her identity to her family, neither helps to deepen it; still, it produces a sense of belonging.

One of Celaya's last statements shows her maturing process. Whining has been replaced by acquiescence. This change does not imply defeat. It is a recognition of similitude that unloads part of the blame from her family: "And I realize with all the noise called 'talking' in my house, that talking is nothing but talking, that is so much part of my house and my past and myself you can't hear it as several conversations, but as one roar like the roar inside a shell" (424). The shell is their household and genealogical history; the roar is their linkage. This last quotation comes towards the end of the novel, when the narrator approaches womanhood. Esperanza in *The House on Mango Street* undergoes an atypical voyage of bildungsroman. The traditional imperialistic stages of this original format do not fit properly in the setting chosen by Sandra Cisneros. Nonetheless, the girl matures, and, through her voice, truth is revealed in manners unexpected for this type of character; that applies to Celaya as well:

With a child's words and playfulness, she tells a sophisticated story of Esperanza's journey into adulthood. By using a child's voice, the author is speaking to the developing child, the adolescent. Yet, the child's voice becomes a beguiling tool. As a child Esperanza can get away with her critique of patriarchy. The wisdom she imparts to women seems more like a grandmother's wisdom. (Sandoval 22)

Celaya has fought for her necessities and has imparted lessons to older women as she did with her Grandmother, who is reprimanded for her impatience and for trying to manipulate the past, not wanting to accept the ugly aspects of their history.

Nonetheless, there is a moment in which not a single member of the family dares to break an absolute quietness. It is when they cross the border. They are moving from one rumpus to another, but the line that divides them remains empty: “But crossing the border, nobody feels like singing. Everyone hot and sticky and in a bad mood, hair stiff from riding with the windows open, the backs of the knees sweaty, a little circle of spit next to where my head fell asleep; ‘good lucky’ Father thought to sew beach towel slipcovers for our new car” (16-17). Their consumerist American selves have to contemplate a regression in their obsessive race to prosperity. They own the car, the commodity, but it carries tiredness and is crowded. It is unavoidable to admit their limited success in transformation into Americans. The family returns to a stage of struggling immigrants by a process of empathy. These recognitions leave them without energy to sing out loud their habitual chaos. Antonio Luna Moreno concludes: “Al cruzar por los caminos fronterizos nos miramos de reojo, temerosos de vernos frente a frente por nuestras mutuas traiciones involuntarias. Con la vergüenza en la cara mordemos silenciosamente los más amargos nombres: ‘pocho y gringo prieto’ contra ‘mojado y surumato’” (99-100). The Reyes fear this moment of epiphany that comes with silence. Thus, their continual noise prevents them from facing names they do not want to hear. Being Chicanos, they do not want to be called ‘mojados’ or ‘gringos’. These are labels that restrict the full development of their genuine citizenship. This is the explanation for the permanent presence of noise in the novel. It is the story of a family who does not want to stop and risk confronting national deixis. To convey this unease in the characters there is a prevalent use of onomatopoeias in the descriptions of the two cities at each side of the frontier. In Mexico, Celaya hears “tán-tán-tán”, “pic,pic,pic” or “clip-clop” (17). While in Chicago, she listens to “click” or “honk” (17).

The crossing of the border immobilizes them. The weight of the governmental branding in people and the concerns about the valuable passport increase in this ghostly space. It turns them into social abjects, blurring their righteous nationality. That is what happens when they encounter the border again: “A silence in the car. A silence in the world. And then... The rising in the chest, in the heart, finally” (25). Once they step on Mexico, the sense of safety returns and there is place for joy. Nevertheless, previous experiences do not eliminate the tension: “Father drives without saying a word. It’s too hot to talk. Same as always, whenever we’re near the border, no one feels like moving” (276). It is a moment of communion in the family because they share their dual origins, and, thus, they share the same disquietude. Astrid Fellner states that “it is hybridity that constitutes one of the central characteristics of border existence, where the border itself becomes a political terrain of struggle. Hybridity challenges the global structure of domination which shapes the lives of subordinate groups and creates a space for new formations of cultural identity to take hold” (70). The Reyes have built an identity that is neither American nor Mexican. Even the oldest generation, represented by the Grandmother, who is also the last one to arrive to the U.S, is shaken from nostalgia to appreciation of

the American Dream that is embodied in their eyes in characters like Mars, who has expanded his 'taquería' business.

However, the trauma of the border can haunt the immigrant even when he has settled a life in the arrival nation, even after having obtained a passport, a legal permit and a life. Arturo Aldama reflects upon the consequences of the crossing of the frontier on Mexican immigrants, and one of the possibilities he argues is the following:

[O]nce crossed, the border is infinitely elastic and can serve as a barrier and zone of violence for the Mexican or Latino/a who is confronted by racist and gendered obstacles—material and discursive—anywhere he or she goes in the United States. This means that the immigrant continually faces crossing the border even if he or she is in Chicago [...] a continual shift from margin to margin. (23)

This is exactly what Inocencio and his family experience when the INS summons him after being reported for a suspicion on his immigrant status. He is humiliated when he sees himself struggling to prove his legal stay in the country after having been in the U.S army in the past. The proof is found but he gets no apologies from the officials. The border has threatened them from the distance, shaking their lives: "We drive back home in silence, the 'chicharras' droning in the pecan trees, the heat a wavy haze that rises from the asphalt like a mirage. Father looks straight ahead like a man cut out of cardboard" (377). The presence and invasion of the frontier leaves them, once again, speechless. No words can be used when they take away the land on which you stand and the air you breathe. Not belonging to any nation and being called illegal make your identity smear.

In another of Celaya's attempts to reach freedom and fight for her selfhood, she crosses the border without her family. It is a romantic escape with Ernesto, but her real amusement is the hotel room. A whole precious chamber for her own delight. Silence, privacy and space. She goes back in time to understand Viva's necessity to escape and gain independence with love. On the contrary, Ernesto is not ready to confront their relation due to the pressure exerted by religious shame and family honor. Thus, he forsakes her. It is a definitive turning point for Lala because for the first time her rejection of her relatives diminishes. The room is no longer a place of comfort. Silence in solitude and pain is not a source of liberty anymore. Her reaction is to stroll along La Villa and embrace her Grandmother's spirit: "I get dressed, tie the Grandmother's 'caramelo rebozo' on my head like a gypsy, and start sucking the fringe. It has a familiar sweet taste to it, like carrots, like 'camote', that calms me" (388). She is literally sucking from her origins, from the maximum representation of motherhood she knows. And what soothes her pain is the recognition of the existence of an anchor, her family.

In order to reach this conclusion she has had to try to get control over a space and modulate her character according to the experience, which, according to Salah

el Moncef bin Khalifa, is the only path that leads to identity formation: “[The] new border voices find their highest manifestations in the hybrid and transitional identifications through which they shape the spaces they occupy – real spaces (hybrid urban topoi) as well as figural spaces (hybrid fields of aesthetic and philosophical expression)” (178). Celaya has to experience this transition in order to shape a clear picture of her relation to her family and towards her origins. In this case, she needed the occupation of both a real space, the room of the hotel, her first property, and the figural space of La Villa in order to conquer its streets as a symbol of her love for her household. However, the hybrid identity permanently marks her perception of human relations. This can be perceived in her conclusion about the break up with her boyfriend: “Ernesto. He was my destiny, but not my destination. That’s what I’m thinking” (399). He was an event that had to take place to learn a greater lesson which is to determine her destination: her family. Claudia Sadowski-Smith emphasizes the use of “border tropes and genre-crossing aesthetics” (33) in Sandra Cisneros’s production. In this former example, Lala is talking about her love ties and splits in terms of migration, departures and arrivals.

Even though Celaya has learnt an important lesson by crossing the border, that does not imply that ‘La Frontera’ would not be present in crucial moments of her life. The interstate would function as a border that, once crossed, would add to the definition of her oneness. She is bullied by Cookie Cantù and his friends who “start throwing words at her and end up throwing rocks” (356). She has to run, crossing the wide road, jeopardizing her safety by placing herself in the middle of heavy traffic. Once she gets to the middle point, she explains: “I just bust up like a little kid, puking up tears, my chest heaving and heaving them up [...] fear freezing me” (357). Lala has just described in this passage a naïve version of the panic felt by illegal immigrants crossing the frontier. They escape from harassing, they zigzag through danger, their strength weakens, and, once again, the border blocks them.

Fortunately, she makes it to the other side, but the interesting thing about this scene is the fact that the girl obtains the courage to cross from the same person that has been limiting her individuality and whom she blames for her sorrows and traumas, the Awful Grandmother. When she is paralyzed, Celaya hears Soledad’s voice calling her name. It is the drive that pushes her to the safe side. Not only that, the echo of that sound provokes an instant of self-recognition: “Celaya. I’m still myself. Still Celaya. Still alive. Sentenced to my life for however long God feels like laughing” (357). On the one hand, this consideration unravels the importance of singling out her identity by the repetition of her name, but, on the other hand, she is underlying her separate self from that of her grandmother, because she still assigns responsibility to her for these pathetic moments she has to overcome in her life. After all, Soledad makes it obvious, right from the beginning of the creation of the Reyes family, that all she wants is to listen to herself and the rest to remain silent: “She talked and talked as she had never talked, because it’s the stories you never talk about that you have the most to say. The words came out in a dirty stream

of tears and snot; fortunately for Soledad, Narciso was a gentleman and offered his handkerchief and silence" (109). Her repressed sorrows are released, and since then, her character changes and would never stop talking and imposing silence on the interlocutor. Although Celaya repudiates her Grandmother's ways, during a fight Lala insults Soledad, who answers back simply adding: "'Well, that's fine, because I'm you'". Lala receives it as a dictum that she would never be able to ignore, and it causes pain to assimilate because "[l]ooking in the mirror and meeting her mother's face [considering in this case Soledad as the maternal figure], then, is not only the way a woman knows she is growing older, but also the way she rediscovers that she is her mother's reflection [...] it is actually to see that they are no longer children" (Paloge 137).

This duplicate creates a knot that will link them in time. Nonetheless, it is a heavy responsibility and load for Celaya. In effect, when Soledad has to cross the last border of her existence, it would be Lala the one to carry her grandmother's ghost to the other side, because, as Soledad explains to her granddaughter: "'You're the only one who can see me. Oh, it's terrible being a woman. The world doesn't pay attention to you until you grow 'tetas', and then once they dry up, you turn invisible again. You're the only one who can help me, Celaya. You've got to help me. After all, I'm your grandmother. You owe it to me'" (408). Celaya denies her help in the beginning, but these journeys into the past through her conversations with the ghost of the Awful Grandmother are necessary to bring her closer to ipseity. Astrid Fellner exposes this topic in the following terms: "Articulating the multiple parts of the self and linking them together as well as with different elements of the past to create a story, involves making connections and reconnections with the past and moving back and forth between various discourses" (72). This is the final goal of the novel: to bestow on Lala the codes that enable her to understand and decipher the bedlam of her family, to reach a stage of empathy with her elders and make peace with her rancor. If she succeeds in these quests she will arrive at a state of individuality.

On the other hand, the mirror exposes again her future in front of Lala. She cannot help but observe in Soledad the aging, solitude and invisibility that may form part of the Reyes women's fate. They have all been marked by oppressing silences. As an illustration, Soledad pities Eleuterio after he is left mute. Nonetheless, she realizes that she is even more inarticulate than him, because he had his capacity of self-expression through his music on the piano. Soledad had nothing. She has to find some handcraft to communicate, at least, with herself, and her solution is "the 'caramelo rebozo', whose fringe she plaited and unplaited, which was a kind of language" (151). This inarticulacy seems to be a curse on the family, and their only escape is that "the body is compelled to speak its truth at night" (201), because, as Aunt Light Skin tells Celaya: "we talk too much in the day, and we can't hear what the heart is saying. And if you don't pay attention then it talks to you through a dream" (272). The body and the unconscious are the spaces left for

verbalizing emotions. That is why Lala confesses that dreaming is “a way of being with yourself, of privacy in a house that doesn’t want you to be private, a world where no one wants to be alone and no one could understand *why* you would *want* to be alone” (364).

The education that she has received has impeded her endeavors to break the uncommunicativeness around her family. Her attempts have all turned into failures and that is what led her to rely only on dreams. An instance of these struggles takes place when Father tells a story about how he was once taken advantage of, advantage of, stolen of his money and left stranded on a park. Celaya asks a genuine and logical question that challenges the adventurous and dramatic tone of the tale: ““Did you ever think about making a collect phone call? ”” (280). Everyone scolds her for the interruption, and she is accused of being always “blabbing”. Conversely, she is rationalizing a narration; she is developing a critical attitude. Elena Garcés writes about her own experiences as a Latino woman and is concerned with the deprivation of voice present in women already from early ages. She establishes different strategies to impose silence on a young girl: to ignore her by not answering her questions, and insisting that she has no right to question anything; to make her internalize that good behavior means to be quiet and still; to shout her down before she is old enough to create the questions herself (47). Celaya is disregarded, hushed and told to remain silent. It is up to her to rebel against that education.

Nonetheless, these pedagogical mistakes do not discard the existence of love in the family, but they just can count on their bodies to get it across. Consequently, when the death of Lala’s father approaches, their laconic nature gets in the way of mutual love exchange:

I had thought Father had come to comfort me. But it’s me who has to hold him up, who has to say, *I’m sorry. I love you, Father. Please don’t cry. I didn’t mean to hurt you.* But I can’t say stuff like that. I don’t say a word. My mouth opens and closes and the only thing that comes out is a thin, slippery howl, like raw silk unspooling from my belly. The body speaking the language it spoke before language. More honest and true. (395)

They rely on sensations to solve their inarticulacy.

The only soothing element for the frustration caused by the isolation the members of the Reyes family feel due to an incapacity to enunciate their affections and perturbations is the ‘caramelo rebozo’. Celaya wonders about what has been left unsaid in their past: “There is nothing I can do but stare it in the eye. I bring the tips of the ‘caramelo rebozo’ up to my lips, and, without even knowing it, I’m chewing on its fringe, its taste of cooked pumpkin familiar and comforting and good, reminding me I’m connected to so many people, so many” (428). Like the history concentrated in an Afro-American quilt, their ‘rebozo’ becomes a genealogical tree, not only containing names but also stories about familial love. In fact, “*Caramelo’s*

most central cultural symbol, the 'caramelo rebozo' [...] is developed within a bilingual description that illustrates not only the construction of bilingual gaps, but also how non-verbal cultural objects, such as the shawl, function as a communicative language for women" (Weldt-Basson 215). Also Soledad has calmed her pain braiding the shawl, which means that through time there is an indestructible bond between two generations of Chicana women fighting to defend their selfhood and escaping from seclusion.

As a conclusion, the 'caramelo rebozo' resolves into "the big black X at the map's end" (26). The object stands for mutual female understanding in a repressive environment of opposites. A roar defeats the women's will to expose themselves, and an empowering silence limits the development of identities flourishing in contact with the border. The shawl helps these characters to contact their origins and to establish their roots. This review of the family history has led Celaya into the entrance of womanhood. Her maturity shows in her understanding of the past mistakes her elders committed. The large scope of the trauma caused by border crossing is carried as a perpetual tag. Nonetheless, the inner strength present in Lala foretells the complete development of an individual and free identity.

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