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Whose American Dream?:

Identity and Citizenship in Latinx Literature

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DEDICATION

To my Mom and my Grandparents,
for always making my goals a priority.

With a special thanks to the Lit Squad:
Leanza Rodriguez, Lindsey Heale, and Savannah Hill
for inspiring me and creating a community of empowerment.

And a special thanks to Drew University,
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I will forever be thankful for my time here.

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- Sofia A. Amorim

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INTRODUCTION

Redefining ‘American’:

Identity and Citizenship in Latinx Literature

The construction of ‘American’ national identity is dependent upon its relation to the language that defines citizenship in government documents. The Declaration of Independence lays the rhetorical roots of this national identity. Following the preamble, it opens with “We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal” (US, 1776). Within the opening lines of the document, there’s the foundation of certainty in regards to philosophical principles that promote equality. However, equality on the page does not reflect equity amongst the governed. Take into consideration how ‘all men’ were written to be equal, even as the population was divided between citizens and non-citizens. The legal definition of citizenship has shifted over the course of the years, and as a result, so have the conceptions of citizenship that extend beyond the realm of law. In popular discourse, citizenship is framed as a reward for loyalty to the nation state, as well as one’s contributions to the nation state, complicating the very notion of citizenship as granted by the legal structures of the United States. Similarly, conceptions of ‘America’ are derived and constructed from material and socioeconomic realities—who literally “built” the nation—as well as democratic philosophies and legal boundaries. It is important to know that national identity is tied not just to legal citizenship and physical geography of the United States but also to a state of being, and feelings of loyalty. Moreover, the definition of ‘America’ itself is difficult to pin down; its construction is inherently biased towards those who created the language of its inception. Due to that ambiguity, the distinction made by ruling whites between ‘American’ and ‘non-American’ creates a ‘borderland’ where the division

between the two is transformed into a liminal space where citizenship and identity are defined as much by contribution and participation, as by legal recognition.

Historically, the right of citizenship is a privilege protected by the governing classes in order to maintain the illusion of democracy veiled as promise of opportunity under 'American' ideology. The legal framework of citizenship in the newly founded United States protected the rights of its citizens: property-owning white men. By this narrow definition, a large portion of the population of the United States was excluded from the privilege of citizenship. In the two-hundred and forty-two years since the Declaration, American citizens have come to include women, African-Americans, Native-Americans, and other nationalized peoples. Despite being able to vote, these American citizens are often persecuted for their participation in the practice of citizenship and marginalized for their cultural difference. Ediberto Román presents a critique of citizenship that provides a framework for understanding the construction of citizenship as a power structure in American society. As he explains, marginalized citizens are held to stricter standards of national performativity because they do not fall under the traditional label that had defined American citizens and citizenship. To be accepted, these marginalized citizens must perform their commitment to the nation state more explicitly than those for whom inclusion in the nation state is taken for granted. Román writes, "the paradoxical nature and dialectic of citizenship embody both a norm of universal inclusion and one of exclusionary particularism" (Román, 4). The fact that the United States' founding document reads "all men are created equal" in an era of slavery and other forms of exclusion embodies this contradiction. The disconnect between the language and the practical recognition of citizenship reveals an ideological divide between the philosophy and its practice, exposing that which complicates the normative understanding of what it means to 'be American'. Given the position of the Latinx

community as an oppressed group in America, it is important to be able to understand how their work is shaped by the influence of white institutions and culture. I intend to argue that works of Latinx literature expose the exclusiveness of normative 'American' identity. The texts explored in this thesis presents 'American' identity as something that is negotiated; in order to be considered a part of a community, one must inhabit a space outside of it. The hyphen attached to the Latinx-American self creates a distinct impression of the national collective, so long as the distinction between 'American' and the 'other' is made.

In this thesis I will argue that works of Latinx-American literature, as represented by Ernesto Quiñonez's *Bodega Dreams*, Cristina García's *Dreaming in Cuban*, and Esmeralda Santiago's *When I Was Puerto Rican*, explore the complex nature of multicultural citizenship and identity by illuminating these liminal spaces and malleable borders. The novels present the tension between complex individual experiences and the idea of a singular 'American' national identity. The American individual can be considered a part of the national self only if they satisfy the traits that exemplify the ideals that are deemed to represent the country. The notion of a homogenous cultural identity is perpetuated by the gap between the language of the law and its interpretation. The novels discussed in this thesis each expose the ways in the gap between citizenship and experiential citizenship. Just as there is a tendency to ignore the context of "all men created equal", there is a tendency to partition legal citizens from non-citizens.

The negotiation of the Latinx identity in literature in relation to a homogenous national identity, raises questions about the meaning of 'Americanness' within the Latinx community and the ways in which self-identification and expression create a space within the canon that negate a homogenous cultural 'American'. Quiñonez's *Bodega Dreams* exposes the way in which the Puerto Rican community is left in a nebulous place as citizens who are denied recognition of

their ‘Americanness’. The title refers to the character of Willie Bodega whose idea of ‘American’ is shaped by the elusive promise of social mobility. The success of the United States has often been associated with the economic promise of social mobility for immigrants who seek to be a part of the collective national identity. García’s *Dreaming in Cuban* complicates Latinx participation in this collective identity by illustrating the divide it creates within the Latin American community. Lourdes is a Cuban-American whose desire to acculturate creates tension in her relationship with her daughter who is trying to establish her own identity in relation to her Cuban heritage. Santiago’s *When I Was Puerto Rican* complicates the establishment of a singular identity, exposing the conditions in which her identity has been perceived, assigned, and rewritten by various groups (Puerto Ricans, Americans, and Puerto Rican-Americans).

What I suggest in this thesis is that national identity in the United States is not relegated to those who have acquired citizenship and afforded the legal duties of it but rather refers to the participation in the ideas that are used to define ‘America’. The Puerto-Rican and Cuban communities have particular and complex histories within the United States. Both countries have distinct political histories that have been shaped by United States policies. Puerto Rico is a commonwealth whose citizens dance the line between marginalized citizens and ‘other’. Similarly, many Cubans hold onto cultural heritage of the island but reject the communist influence of their country. For both communities, once settled in the United Sates, the negotiation of their identity is what ultimately decides their sociopolitical fate. The discrepancy between the democratic principles of this nation’s foundation and the reality on the ground exposes what is problematic about a homogenous model of citizenship. If othered communities are to be considered a part of the national collective, they are marked with an identifier which distinguishes what kind of ‘American’ they are. For Latinx-Americans, ‘American’ serves as the

noun, while the ‘Latinx’ is the descriptor. The adjective form of ‘American’ is not in fact, inclusive, and therefore creates a specific identity that is not so easily assimilated as prototypic ‘Americanness’. If the American collective/national identity was as inclusive as we would believe it to be, then there wouldn’t be a need to hyphenate.

Given the position of the Latinx community as an oppressed group in America, it is important to be able to understand how their work is shaped by the influence of white institutions and culture. In reading literature written in the nexus between two cultures, it is important to consider the role of the spaces these cultures inhabit and interact in as well as the construction of the dominant culture’s space. This thesis analyzes the construction of narrative in relation to the place inhabited in society and politics by the community from which the texts comes from. Mestiza critic, Gloria Anzaldúa combines a theoretical understanding of multicultural identity and language in her work in order to consider the cultural consequences for the Latinx communities, allowing readers to synthesize the various components in the establishment and construction of identity. In *Boderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza*, Anzaldúa defines the ‘borderlands’ as being “physically present wherever two or more cultures edge each other, where people of different races occupy the same territory…this place of contradictions” (Anzaldúa, i). Rather than distinguishing ‘American’ from Latin American as an opposition, Anzaldúa’s argument repositions the two in a shared space where one informs the other. Toni Morrison’s *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination* also addresses the distinction between an accepted concept of a more nuanced cultural identity that recognizes the way language shapes the boundaries of identity. Morrison argues that,

> The formation of the nation necessitated coded language and purposeful restriction to deal with the racial disingenuousness and moral frailty at its

> heart…through significant and underscored omissions, startling contradictions, heavily nuanced conflicts…one can see that a real or fabricated…presence was crucial to their sense of Americanness (Morrison, 6)

To understand the 'othering' of the Latinx community, one must first understand how that 'othering' defines the power differential in the structure that oppresses it. For the purposes of this thesis, the politics of cultural negotiation are imperative to understanding the way 'American-ness' and social mobility are withheld in order to protect homogenous power groups in the United States, and how the literature of these communities problematize the 'American' national identity by raising questions as to its implied social definition.

Yet the members of this community, while unified under this label, have widely varied experiences and perceptions of their own place within American society. The Puerto-Rican community faces different sociopolitical struggles than the Cuban community. Mexican and Mexican-American communities face similar struggles but in different regards, and so on. The individual's experience of multicultural identities informs a shared experience of marginalized citizenship, which complicates their relation to a homogenous collective national identity. Latin-American literature exists within this nexus of liminal spaces with malleable borders, exploring the conflicting nature of multicultural citizenship and identity. The authors I discuss, create narratives that expose the complexities of identity construction, in a society where the language of its construction is so effective that the problems with its foundations are made invisible. These authors reveal the experience and the internalization of structures that perpetuate an exclusionary 'America'. They thus expose and complicate the way literature serves as way for citizens to explore their own identities. Ideals of social mobility, economic opportunity, equity and discrimination are made possible by the institution, but are taken for granted until a narrative is

presented that exposes the issues that the invisible structures perpetuate. The literature that emerges from the Latinx community is written as a direct response to the exclusiveness of being 'American' as defined by language of citizenship that has made the power structures that police citizenship visible. As a result, the literature written by Latin Americans in the United States is forced to create and inhabit spaces beyond those which are defined by a national identity, raising questions as to how we discuss and understand the idea of 'America'.

Ernesto Quiñonez's *Bodega Dreams* explores relationship the Latin-American communities have with the ideals of 'America' through the story of Chino and his involvement with kingpin Willie Bodega. Quiñonez is the son to a Puerto Rican mother and Ecuadorian father, whose family emigrated to the United States when he was a little over a year old. His family lived in El Barrio, a community very similar to the neighborhood in *Bodega Dreams*. The novel's title is not a reference to the local bodega and its cultural significance to the community, but a recreation of that place as it becomes personified through Bodega's titular character. Willie Bodega is written much like a contemporary Nuyorican Gatsby, a wealthy man with political capital who seems to operate beyond the law in order to accomplish his own goals. Quiñonez's rewriting of a book regarded as one of the foundational American texts of the twentieth century is controversial, as it labels the Latin-American struggle for sociopolitical mobility as equal to traditionally white struggles of economic mobility. While this kind of narrative supports the preachings of 'opportunity' and 'rewards' promised by the ideals of American citizenship, what problematizes it is the discrepancy between the means of opportunity and the validation of the reward. Quiñonez's central characters raise questions about the manifestation of these ideals regarding personal ideology and experience. Bodega, to a white audience, is a powerful drug lord who uses his socioeconomic and political capital to mobilize and support his community.

Quiñonez's representation of Bodega as analogous to Gatsby forces readers to put the characters side by side and hold both characters (as 'American' ideals) up to performative standards of 'American'. Quiñonez is effectively erasing the barrier between the two and posing them as reflections of one another, redefining the 'invisible structures' that distinguishes Latinx and 'American' literatures. While having been raised in the United States, Quiñonez identifies as a Latinx-American, which shapes the way he constructs his narrative. He writes from a position that many first generation children of immigrants can relate to; having to negotiate the family's culture and traditions in relation to the homogenous culture of the country that they now live in.

Cristina García's *Dreaming in Cuban* poses questions about the legitimacy attributed to the authority of a homogenous America and how that population regards the negotiation of Latin American identities within it. While the novel encompasses the story of three generations of Del Pino women, the relationship between Cuban-American Lourdes and her American born daughter, Pilar provides the most illustrative example of the tensions that arise through this negotiation. Lourdes renounces her mother's Cuban nationalism, pledging her allegiance to the promise of America and to her pursuit of the socioeconomic opportunity that Cuban nationalism denied. Her daughter, Pilar, having been raised American, resents the 'America' her mother has devoted herself too and longs to reconnect to her Cuban heritage in order to further develop her own identity. Pilar and Lourdes both navigate their desires to belong to some collective national identity while negotiating their experiences in order to justify their citizenship. Román describes the position of Latinxs in America as that of a 'de facto' subordinate whose citizen identity is that of the 'inferior citizen' (Román, 145), not only illustrating the discrepancy in the criteria of citizenship but also suggesting that in order to protect the citizenship of white America, citizenship for 'foreign' communities is conditionalized and restricted. García identifies as a

Cuban born American, which provides a perspective different from that of Quiñonez. Her family fled from the Castro regime, also finding refuge in New York City. Interestingly enough, despite being born in Cuba and the family's continuance of oral storytelling and speaking in their native tongue, she identifies herself by her adoptive country. Her complex relationship with her heritage, culture, and nationhood are reflected in *Dreaming in Cuban*. García's novel attempts to reconstruct the image of 'America' in posing Lourdes' and Pilar's struggle for identity in conversation with one another.

Esmeralda Santiago's *When I Was Puerto Rican* complicates the relationship between the multicultural citizen and an idealized 'America'. In her memoir, Santiago critiques not only the discrepancy in experience between white Americans and the Latinx community but also the discrepancies between their natural citizenship and their 'Americanness' within the Puerto Rican community. Keeping with the tradition delineated in the texts included in this thesis, Santiago's identity is also quite unique. She writes about her first encounters with the 'Americanization' of Puerto Rico, and how the two national identities clashed. For Santiago, Puerto Rico and the United States were two distinct places (despite technically being of one nation), and so her identity is transformed in the wake of her family's move to the mainland when she was eleven. The title's phrasing 'when I *was* Puerto Rican' denotes a departure; there is a distinction in how Santiago identifies herself as a young girl growing up in Puerto Rico, and later as a Puerto Rican immigrant in the United States and as a member of the Puerto Rican communities. The positioning of Santiago's individual self is rarely aligned with geography of selfhood as defined by national identity, yet her loyalty and participation within her culture in spite of location, serves as her most personal identifier. Santiago's negation of localized individual identity

illuminates the ambiguities that challenge a definitive national identity and citizenship in regard to the individual self.

In today's sociopolitical climate, the label of Latin-American is regarded as a political scarlet letter. Immigrants from these Latin-American communities, much like their European predecessors, cross borders to seek the opportunity and 'promise of America'. Labelling the members of the Latinx community as Latin-American suggests that they have a separate experience of 'America' that is not to be indicative of the traditionally white defined construction of American national identity (Oboler, 9). Conceptualizing 'American ideals' as experiential, allows for the analysis of the perspectives of these communities and how they engage with these ideals. The Latinx-American community in America inhabits a liminal space between nations. As immigrants who live and participate in sociocultural and economic institutions, they adopt American values and are considered 'Latinx-American', and their children who are born United States citizens, are also quantified by the same label. The sociocultural borders that define the Latinx-American experience are created by those who also created the vague language that delegates the privileges of traditional citizenship. The dilemma for the Latin-American community resides in their sense of belonging to both cultures (the United States, and a home nation), and how they then negotiate their individualized experience as a part of some form of national collective. For second generation members, this negotiation is complicated due to their experience living between two cultures. Although legal citizens, they are citizens on the margins. The lines between social and political citizenship are blurred, and yet both experiences are considered lesser than the traditional norm.

The works of Ernesto Quiñonez, Cristina García, and Esmeralda Santiago approach the tensions between these dichotomous identities as experiential, exemplifying the role in which

their characters' relation to cultural heritage interacts with the homogenous expectations of an 'American' national identity. *Bodega Dreams* and *Dreaming in Cuban* provide insight into the idea of experiential citizenship and how that differs in relation to sociocultural context, but also how the experience of this marginalized citizenship exposes the shortcomings and failures of a constructed ideal. Quiñonez's choice to re-write a 'quintessential' American text and set it in Spanish Harlem directly restructures the American narrative as one that further problematizes the societal structures that perpetuate socioeconomic struggles. In doing so, Quiñonez is challenging the exclusiveness of the issues raised in Gatsby, such as disillusionment with the 'American Dream', social mobility, and economic privilege. García's distinction of 'American' identity from citizenship presents a view of citizenship being informed by experience. This illuminates the way in which Latinx-American citizenship is hierarchal in relation to assimilation into the national collective identity of 'America'. Santiago's memoir provides an interesting counterpoint, where the recognition of experience and performance of identity is conditional. In expanding the problem of citizenship identity, legitimizing an authoritarian 'American' approach exposes the contradictions the assumed identity has. Thus, these contradictions prevent a dialogue that recognizes the voices of multicultural individuals as members of American society.

If literature exists to present portraits, share experience, illuminate, and expose issues that are troubling, how can the literature of 'America' reflect one standardized constructed narrative? The works of Quiñonez, García, and Santiago place the narrative of the Latinx within the American literary imagination, emphasizing their protagonists' relationship to multiple forms of citizenship as a counterpoint to a more monolithic model of American citizenship typical in the United States. Within this monolithic model, to be 'American' is to be the poster-child of the 'pull yourself up by the bootstraps' mentality. However, the experience of 'America' is not

universal. The socioeconomic and political disadvantages of ethnic communities expose the ways in which their citizenship is determined by their ability to live up to ‘American’ ideals. What Anzaldúa calls the ‘Borderlands’ creates the foundations for the experiences and multicultural blending that contribute to the national ‘American’ identity despite the fact that these borderlands flourish due to a lack of space in the national fabric. National identity is thereby shaped in relation to the multicultural individual, and vice versa. Latin-American literature renegotiates the boundaries between the self and the nation(s) in order to expose the nuanced sociocultural position of Latin-Americans in the United States.

CHAPTER I

This is Our Country Too:

Reclaiming the 'American' in *Bodega Dreams*

As established in the introduction, the promise of privileges that have become synonymous with the concept of 'America' often are at odds with the way 'American' identity is interpreted. Fundamentally, the interpretation of identity is dictated by precedent. The precedent of citizenship and the powers granted by it, historically excludes communities that have been othered. The stories often considered most emblematic of the 'American experience' are the stories that embody the narrative that perpetuates the notion that to be considered a part of the national collective, the individual must demonstrate the characteristics of 'the self-made man'. The works of authors such as Mark Twain and Ralph Waldo Emerson consider the relationship between the individual and labor, how one's contribution to society informs one's sense of self. One could argue that themes of identity, belonging, and socioeconomic improvement, are focal points in the literary history of the United States. Works of literature such as these raise questions about how these ideals function in relation to the world of the text.

Ernesto Quiñonez's *Bodega Dreams* explores the relationship the Latinx communities have with the ideals of 'America' through the story of Chino and his involvement with Willie Bodega. The novel's title is not a reference to the community bodega and it's cultural significance to the community, but rather to the namesake whose 'dream' is being explored. The namesake character of Willie Bodega is written much like a contemporary Nuyorican Gatsby. Quiñonez's rewriting of a book regarded as one of the monolithic American texts of the twentieth century is controversial, as it labels the Latinx struggle for sociopolitical mobility as interchangeable with traditionally white struggles of economic mobility. While this supports the

preachings of ‘opportunity’ and ‘rewards’ promised by the ideals of American citizenship, it also reveals the discrepancy between the means of opportunity and the validation of the reward.

Fitzgerald’s *The Great Gatsby* is regarded one of the great ‘American’ novels because it exposes the ways in which the ‘American’ dream is flawed. Gatsby is not a hero story, but a tragedy centered around a man who disrupts the social order. The novel complicates the readers understanding of what ‘American’ values represent by pitting these values against what plays out in actuality. The Gatsby narrative provides a model that depicts a narrative that reads like a fairytale, but instead of a happily ever after, the ending forces readers to ask questions about that which sets the protagonist on the path to his demise.

Quiñonez’s choice to re-write a ‘landmark’ American text and set it in Spanish Harlem, directly restructures the American narrative as one that further problematizes the societal structures that perpetuate socioeconomic struggles. During a lecture he gave at a department sponsored event at Cornell University, Quiñonez spoke to the ways in which stories themselves operate as a cultural currency, being recycled and rewritten in order to reach their audiences (qtd. By Aloi in “Quiñonez On Influence: Stories ‘Made To Be Stolen’). The precedent set by Fitzgerald frames the conversation in which *Bodega Dreams* suggests that the concepts of social mobility in the United State are not exclusive. At the beginning of the twentieth century, communities of color were in such a restrictive socioeconomic space that they posed no perceivable threat to affluent whites. At the time of Gatsby’s publication, the dissolution of distinct boundaries between upper and lower classes provided the greatest threat to the social order and economic structure of the country. Fitzgerald’s novel resisted the monolithic image of ‘America’ as just and infallible, reclaiming the American narrative as a narrative that challenges the institutions that create it.

By setting a table so similar to Gatsby in Spanish Harlem, Quiñonez is challenging the exclusiveness of the issues raised in Gatsby. These issues are not simply related to economic mobility. They are also issues that inform identity in the Puerto Rican community. Quiñonez's novel reminds readers that this community inhabit a particular sociocultural space within the 'American' identity. The United States extended citizenship to Puerto Ricans in 1917, but the community's relationship with their citizenship is quite complicated. Despite having legal citizenship, those who move onto the mainland are often regarded as second-class citizens. During the great wave of migration in the 1940s and 1950s, many moved to New York into impoverished boroughs.

Quiñonez's central characters raise questions about the manifestation of conventional American ideals, regarding personal ideology and experience. Four of the novel's central characters, illustrate a spectrum of the expectations and achievement of being 'American': Sapo, the prototypic Hispanic criminal, Chino, the citizen who wants to get ahead, Nazario, the 'example' of success in Spanish Harlem, and Bodega, the representation of 'the American Dream'. Yet from the beginning of the novel, Quiñonez challenges the homogenous understanding of freedom of self and equality that is idealized by American citizens. The novel's protagonist Chino navigates between classes within Spanish Harlem. He is a working college student, who then takes up jobs with Bodega.

Socioeconomic mobility is dependent on the opportunities afforded to the participants who better force themselves into abiding by the dominant form of national assimilation. The presuppositions made of the Puerto-Rican community during the first wave of migration in the forties and fifties into Harlem shifted the demographic of the then predominantly Italian neighborhood. While Italians and those of Italian descent were ostracized and discriminated

against, their ‘allopatric whiteness’ (Milian, 2) promoted their social stature from ethnic to American because their European ancestry recollects the western ideals of power associated with populations and countries with lighter skins. The territorial and political rivalry between the Italian and Puerto Rican communities of Spanish Harlem grew. As the position of the Italians improved, the more successful ‘moved up’ to more affluent neighborhoods and the suburbs, leaving behind Puerto Ricans and the less wealthy Italians. The presuppositions made of the Puerto-Rican community during the first wave of migration into Harlem in the forties and fifties, shifted the demographic of the then predominantly Italian neighborhood.

Quiñonez provides the contextual divide for the tensions resulting from the disparity of opportunity between these two communities, particularly through the way Chino describes the interactions between the two: “To the white teachers, we were all gonna end up delinquents…so, since we were almost convinced that our race had no culture, no smart people, we behaved even worse” (Quiñonez, 6). The narrator suggests that the neighborhood’s generational divide between older white immigrants and the Latin-Americans reflects the power dynamic between the two; the oppression and negation of citizenship is installed through the omission of education, and teaching that which preserves white ideals. Anzaldúa explains that the tension between white and colored communities stems from the “dualistic thinking in the individual and collective consciousness” (Anzaldúa, 80). The formation of cultural identity as wanting to be distinct, contributes to the dualism of identity, of being Hispanic and American as though each identity exists in series of binaries. Chino’s internalization of the perceptions of the white Italian students, perpetuates that dualization. But, he then goes on to note the way in which certain Hispanic students, who continued their schooling, would resist this by reclaiming their history. The new Latin-American generation (the students born to the first wave of Puerto Rican

migrants) inhabits this in-between space, where their identity, including their cultural identity, is shaped and related to the white American institutions in society, further complicated by the dominant culture not relinquishing influence even after its tenure.

Willie Bodega, the idealistic dreamer, blurs the boundaries of what is deemed ethical and unethical in regards to 'how to pursue success' by 'American' standards. Despite skirting the edge of what is defined as legal, Bodega's motivation is to, by whatever means necessary, finance the support the community is not given by the government and to help uplift the community. Bodega also raises questions about the legitimacy and paradoxical foundations of the 'American Dream', exposing the discrepancy between the expectations of 'America' and what it actually is. Bodega is thus a representative of the American and Puerto Rican communities, yet finds himself having to bridge the gap between the two: "That's what it was always about. Shedding your past. Creating yourself from nothing…it would leave a blueprint of achievement and desire for anyone in the neighborhood searching for new possibilities" (Quiñonez, 13-14). Bodega's reflection on the way Latinx people are made to feel as though to be American meant one had to erase their individual heritages, raises questions as to where the line between the individual and the collective national identities end. Bodega launched his own 'American' manifesto by giving the history of the Kennedy's as bootleggers, and the rise of Cuban mob bosses on their coattails, "I'm breaking the law, but I get no recognition because I am no Joe Kennedy" (Quiñonez, 26). This presentation of history suggests that the American narrative of 'pull yourself up by the bootstraps' operates beyond the law. Iconic American figures such as the Kennedy family, or the fictitious Gatsby, are defined not by their criminality but rather their upholding of the standards of social mobility. The relation between 'American' ideals and morality become complicated when "mobility and criminality are knotted together"

(Milian, 6). Quiñonez places Bodega and the Kennedy's in the same space; one paved the way for the other. Where Bodega is vilified, the Kennedy's are praised. However, Bodega's motivators are community based, as opposed to the desire solely for financial gain of the Kennedy's. Chino's characterization of what it means to be American does not align with Bodega's character. Chino's reverence for Bodega is at odds with his definition of 'American'. This dichotomy deliberately complicates the readers own understanding of the codification of ideals as representative of a national identity.

Nazario, lawyer friend of Bodega, is perceived by the Puerto Rican community of Spanish Harlem as the example of success, more so than Bodega because he works on the 'right' side of the law. For most of the novel, Nazario's character is presented as working in Bodega's shadow, but Nazario is the one who operates through legal channels. Nazario is the one who gives Chino career advice and logistic steps to orchestrate and operate around the 'system'. Despite working through 'straight narrow' channels, Nazario is the most corrupted by power, selfishness and greed. Nazario, as Bodega's lawyer and right-hand man, is in a unique position. While Bodega's real estate enterprises provide a legal source of cash flow, his income and status come from his work in the drug trade. Bodega entrusted Nazario with keeping his legal affairs in order and acting as the link between the legal and illegal. Nazario's betrayal of Bodega is symbolic of the notion that Latinx people must turn their back on the communities and sacrifices their cultural ideas in order to be regarded as candidates for 'American' identity. Nazario's own political philosophy resides in the way he removes the boundaries set by white power holders, turning the concept of the law and outlaw on its head. As he says to Chino, "Everyone's a thief. Crime is a matter of access. The only reason the mugger robs you is because he doesn't have access to the books…but whatever it is you have access to, that is what you will steal. What you

are already stealing, Julio" (Quiñonez, 103). Nazario is initially described as a quiet 'behind the scenes' man who helped Bodega negotiate the legitimacy of his empire. But in this moment, Nazario exposes how he differentiates his own views from the rules and how he redefines the boundaries to better suit his needs. These 'boundaries', much like the one Anzaldúa mentions, are what complicate the white readers' understanding of America, law, and justice within their society. Nazario justifies his actions by citing examples and precedent set by dominant culture, telling Chino that "The day will come when, just like the white guy we will also steal by signing the right papers" (Quiñonez, 159).

Through his portrait of Nazario, Quiñonez raises questions about criminality and its connotations, exposing the fallibility of the system as it exists. By challenging the social principle that economic gain is a virtue, Nazario's exploitation of Bodega's sociopolitical influence for financial gain, illustrates the way in which community is sacrificed for individual success. Nazario works as a lawyer, finding loopholes in the law to excuse or justify breaking it, which doesn't make him different from those who actually break the law, or the white men like 'the racketeering Kennedys'. A cycle becomes visible as first-generation Nazario looks up to the white Kennedy's, and the Chinos of the world look up to the Nazarios. Where, then, does the agency really come from? And how is it transformed or is by the Latinx community?

Bodega Dreams problematizes conventional 'American' citizenship, not just by exposing the discrepancy of the standards held for different racial groups, but by also exposing the measures of citizenship. Puerto Ricans are American citizens but are caught between two nations, their Latin American nation, and their place as a commonwealth of the United States. The question of nationhood continues to be debated amongst scholars, activists, and members of the Puerto Rican community. For Bodega and the Puerto Ricans that live and participate in the

politics, economy and society of the continental United States, being deemed ‘American’ is not a question of legal recognition but rather of contribution. As Bodega says,

> “This country is ours as much as it is theirs. Puerto Rican limbs were lost in the sands of Iwo Jima, in Korea, in Nam…Those are our names along with Jones and Johnson and Smith. But when you go to fill out a job application you get no respect…you don’t see [a box] for Puerto Rican-American, you just see one box, Hispanic.” (Quiñonez, 26)

If, as citizens of the United States, Puerto Ricans fight for and participate in American society, and are formally recognized, why is it that they are not afforded the same privileges as a Jones or Johnson? The protection of the American way of life is often utilized as a way of testing national loyalty; would the individual be willing to sacrifice himself for the collective? The homogenous white America’s failure to acknowledge the Puerto Rican contribution to the preservation of American liberties almost removes them from ‘American’ discourse. This evasion, as Morrison writes, “has fostered another, substitute language in which the issues are encoded, foreclosing open debate” (Morrison, 9). But Bodega still claims the ‘American’ for himself and the community: “this is ours as much as it is theirs”. And yet, many Latinx men returning from war, found themselves struggling to find jobs due to the discrimination against their communities.

Quiñonez’s reconstruction of a ‘classic’ American novel within the context of the Puerto Rican community exposes the way in which a normative model of citizenship fails to support experiential citizenship. Rewriting the narrative in a way that directly challenges the perception of ‘Americanness’ as understood by homogenous white America, Quiñonez is subverting that same definition as one that is subject to the individual who challenges the collective. The liminal spaces of citizenship distinguishes the expectations of Latinx Americans, positioning them in a

way in which the pathway to citizenship is paved by a community's willingness to adopt the values of the dominant culture. Jay Gatsby's legal indiscretions are left as footnotes in his story, but Quiñonez exposes the significance of Bodega's ethnic heritage and the double-standards created as a result of prejudice. The discrepancy between the ways in which laws are enacted amongst particular subjects is what makes Quiñonez's choice so important.

How does the narrative change by writing it in Spanish Harlem? One could argue that because it is set within a community that is 'othered' by the original white community, everything appears more dramatic. Because Latinx's have been vilified, Bodega being a drug lord makes him appear more menacing. Quiñonez deliberately avoids any direct references to Fitzgerald's novel until the very end, presenting Bodega as the green light of hope. Despite this connection to Gatsby, Quiñonez's novel functions as a narrative of its own. Bodega's legacy asks readers to question if their understanding of 'Americanness' is altered by the realignment the novel seeks to accomplish. In realizing that a homogenous model of citizenship has been socially and politically perpetuated, readers are forced to reconcile with the ways in which citizenship had been defined by exclusions as well as hopes and dreams.

CHAPTER II

What is Your 'America'?:

Negotiating 'Americanness' in *Dreaming in Cuban*

The dissonance between Latinx-American identity and the homogenous national identity stems from a failure to recognize the diverse characteristics, such as specific cultural contexts, which differentiate individual experiences within a collective. While *Bodega Dreams* provided a portrait of the Puerto Rican community in Spanish Harlem, the experience depicted in the novel is not representative of all Latinx-Americans, nor is it representative of the experience of all Puerto Ricans. The development of an individual's identity is influenced by the context and experiences that the individual is raised and lives by. The tendency to understand identity as homogenous, a rigid box, does little to factor in the experiential contexts of the individual. For immigrant and migrant communities, these experiences are located within specific places and spaces; their lives in their homeland contribute to their sense of self-understanding, just as the new experiences in their new homes in a foreign land do. In an era of globalization, cultural boundaries are constantly being reshaped and renegotiated, and yet within the United States there is a reluctance to openly embrace this. Gloria Anzaldúa explains the foundation of multicultural citizenship as the acceptance that the multicultural individual is not a citizen of two nations but of an individualized nationhood that is informed by a multicultural identity. She writes that this identity is forced to create it's own space because of the "fears [of] going home":

> "[where] her own culture, and white culture, are critical…[she is] alienated from her mother culture, "alien" in the dominant culture…petrified she can't respond,

> her face caught between *los intersticios*, the spaces between the different worlds she inhabits" (Anzaldúa, 20).

This description helps us understand the ways in which the boundaries of geography and experiential citizenship complicate the multicultural individual's experience of 'America'. For Latinx-American citizens, this means negotiating their relationship with their cultural heritage and homogenous white culture, in the creation of their own multicultural identity.

Cristina García's *Dreaming in Cuban* complicates Latinx American participation in the 'American' collective identity by illustrating the divide created in the debate between assimilation and acculturation within a particular family. Lourdes is a Cuban-American whose desire to acculturate creates tension in her relationship with her daughter who is trying to establish her own identity in relation to her Cuban heritage. The distinctions made between the self and national identities in Celia, Lourdes, and Pilar each personify a particular experience and understanding of what they understand 'American' to be. Again, there is a gap between the thought of 'Americanness' as understood by a national collective, and the interpretation of that identity by communities othered by the collective. The objective standards by which the national collective is constructed discounts the subjectiveness of those who interpret the national collective, which only serves to further the discord.

To provide some context for the position of the characters in the novel, it is important to understand the history of the strained relationship between Cuba and the United States. During the 1950s, the United States was in a Cold War with Russia and other communist countries in order to protect American interests and policies. Cuba had been controlled by the United States from the end of the nineteenth century, until 1902. Following their independence, the Cuban government was often unstable, with several military coups protesting occupations before

Fulgencio Batista was elected president in 1940. Batista's condemnation of communism sparked outrage in Cuban nationals who distrusted him and accused him of despotism. Fidel Castro led revolting Cuban nationals and overthrew Batista's regime. The United States claimed communism to be the greatest threat to western civilization. This history illuminates some of the many ways in which Cuban-American identities are exceedingly complex.

García's *Dreaming in Cuban* poses questions about the legitimacy of a homogenous model of American identity and how it regards the negotiation of Latinx American identities within it. As previously mentioned, the relationship between Cuba and the United States has been difficult. Considering that both countries have high regards for their respective national identities, an individual who lives between both cultures must express an incredibly nuanced expression of their citizenship with respect to the two. Such a complex and multifaceted identity would be difficult to convey in a singular character, and García's choice to center the narrative around three different characters allows for an exploration into different experiences within that designated community. Each character occupies a specific time and space, describing their relation to nationhood distinctly.

The first character, Celia, is a Cuban national (the mother and grandmother of the other central characters). Her story takes place in Cuba during the 1940s and 50s. Celia's definition of nationhood is independent of politics and is rooted in natural symbolism of self-fulfillment. and recognizing Cuba as an individual rather than political authoritarian. The language used in the chapters about Celia relies on natural imagery of Cuba as spiritual paradise. To her, Cuba is defined by its geography, and because she identifies with the symbolism and history of the island her view of Cuba is romanticized. Celia's Cuban identity is not inherently political, but because of her loyalty to the physical location, she accepts Castro and his policies. Lourdes, Celia's

daughter, identifies as a Cuban-American. She distances herself from her Cuban heritage because of the way she views Cuban identity as being inextricably political. This immediately creates a divide between Celia and Lourdes by posing two Cuban experiences. One reflects an intense devotion to the nation, the other a critical citizen who seeks asylum elsewhere. Lourdes immerses herself in 'American' customs and ideology but is still the product of someone raised in Cuba. While she devotes herself to her immersion in 'American' culture, she still carries an accent and customs that have been a part of her upbringing. García herself also identifies as a Cuban born American, which makes Lourdes' storyline quite significant. She is representative of a nexus, a turning point in the story of immigrant families, the first member to move from one space to the other. She becomes the first to actually inhabit two distinct places, but the of discontent with one pushes her to radically idolize the other. Her daughter Pilar identifies quite differently. She is an American-Cuban who like her grandmother has a romanticized view of her Cuban heritage. Let me make clear that by romanticized I am referring to the idealistic view related to viewing Cuba as a place rather than a political entity. Pilar resents her mother's lack of 'Cubanness' and longs to reconnect with her heritage and her grandmother. She views American society and culture as oppressive to the individual, which goes against her own sense of self.

While the novel encompasses the story of three generations of Pinal women, the relationship of Cuban-American Lourdes and her American-Cuban daughter Pilar provide the most illustrative example of the tensions that arise through this negotiation. While both national identities, Cuban and American, contribute to the characters sense of self, they are inverse to each other. Lourdes renounces her mother's Cuban nationalism, pledging her allegiance to the promise of America and the pursuit of socioeconomic opportunity that Cuban nationalism denied. Her daughter Pilar, having been raised American, resents the 'America' her mother has

devoted herself to and longs to reconnect to her Cuban heritage in order to further develop her own identity. Pilar and Lourdes both navigate their desires to belong to some collective national identity, while negotiating their experiences in order to justify their citizenship. Román describes the position of Latinx Americans in America as that of a 'de facto' subordinate whose citizen identity is that of the 'inferior citizen' (Román, 145), not only illustrating the discrepancy in the criteria of citizenship, but suggesting that in order to protect the citizenship of white America, citizenship for 'foreign' communities is conditionalized and restricted. García's novel attempts to reconstruct the image of 'America', in posing Lourdes' and Pilar's struggle for identity in conversation with one another.

Pilar is highly critical of her mother. The way she describes her, one could read Lourdes as an example of the 'model minority' who has adopted the characteristics that have become emblematic of what homogenous white America has perpetuated. The rift between the two is attributed to not just a generational gap, but a gap in ideology and behavior. Pilar says,

> "I feel much more connected to Abuela Celia than to my mom…this is a constant struggle around my mother, who systematically rewrites history to suit her views of the world…contesting reality…It makes her see only what she wants to see instead of what's really there" (García, 177).

For example, when discussing Cuba, rather than discussing the rise of Cuban nationalism and how its ideals were able to find support in Cuba, Lourdes dismisses it as the ego of the country. Morrison also writes about the reinforcement of a dominant cultural ego. Se describes this process as the "organizing [of] American coherence through distancing…the operative mode of a new cultural hegemony" (Morrison, 8). In dismissing the complex contexts of Cuban nationalism, the 'American' self can reassert its sociopolitical dominance as the protectors of

Western democracy in order to distinguish its brand of nationalism from that of Cuba. Once again, the hierarchal positioning of white citizenship negates its own shortcomings, while exploiting those same flaws in others. The systematic renegotiation of Lourdes' history exposes the way in which literature of America regards the stories of individuals challenging the views of dominant culture. However, what is not accounted for is that in Lourdes' rewriting of history she will renegotiate that history in respect to herself. Although she may try to divorce herself from her Cuban heritage, that familiarity and exposure is what then allows her to renegotiate her version of what it means to 'be American'.

Lourdes not only tries to assimilate into dominant white 'American' culture, but also tries to acculturate it, to make it manifest in her pursuit of the 'American Dream'. She opens up the Yankeedoodle Bakery, capitalizing on the blatant nationalism and historic pride the name imbues. Lourdes represents the ideal Latinx American citizen; one that views 'America' as the example of economic success and the establishment of the self-made businessman. Pilar is her foil, an artist who questions the fabric of American nationalism. Despite having a contentious relationship with Pilar, she tries to reach some middle ground in asking her to paint a mural for the grand opening. Pilar is touched by her mother's belief in her and her work, noting it to be one of the few times her mother has demonstrated any support or interest in her passions. She debates what she will paint:

> "I start on Liberty herself. I do a perfect replication of her a bit left of center canvas, changing only two details… I put my favorite punk rallying cry: I'M A MESS. And then, carefully, very carefully, I paint a safety pin through Liberty's nose.
>
> This, I think, sums everything up nicely." (García, 141)

Pilar transforms the very image of liberty, as personified by the Statue of Liberty. As an artist, she makes a deliberate decision in her portrayal, converting Lady Liberty into an emblem of self-aware contradictions and rebellion. The function of art as a means of creating dialogue, certainly supports García's transformation of the symbolism of American freedom. The careful attention to the placement of the statue, 'a bit left of center' is indicative of the United States' self proclaimed social progressivism. While the punk rallying cry comes off as critical, insinuating the democratic principles of America as being incoherent, the addition of the safety pin, a symbol of binding and solidarity, is Pilar's subtle nod towards her mother's gesture of good will. This is perhaps one of Lourdes' defining moments, where her conservative 'American' ideals take a back seat. Rather than fight over the image of 'America', she recognizes that Pilar's depiction is her own, just as the Yankeedoodle Bakery is Lourdes'. The repositioning of ideology creates a 'new consciousness' which Anzaldúa claims, "is a product of crossbreeding, designed for preservation, under a variety of circumstances" (Anzaldúa, 81). While Pilar criticizes her mother's 'Americanness', Pilar comes to the realization that she is a Cuban-American too. While she does not see herself as fully American, she comes to realize that she is also not fully Cuban. Lourdes, is aware that she too is not fully American, but makes the active choice to work towards establishing herself as at least a part of the collective. Both women establish their negotiated 'America' in the face of the other. Undermining a prescriptive model of American identity, they emphasize the aspects which are shared to create an inclusive image of citizenship within America.

But what is it about experiential citizenship that renders it conditional? Citizenship is often recognized not only by legal affiliations and one's sense of duty but also by the extent to which one demonstrates allegiance to the cultural norms of the nation that has granted

citizenship. Reverting to the initial explanation about the economic histories that contextualize the tension between the United States and Cuba, it is important to note that the United States capitalist economy has a profound influence over the evaluation of contribution to the nation. Art and business in American ideology occupy very different spheres. The idea of 'America' as a place of freedom ought to be embodied by the understanding of art as a place of asylum. Yet art that critiques the inequity of political, economic, or social practices had been censored in the past. Art is heralded for the power of the individual, where sociopolitical and cultural diversity is encouraged so long as it supports the narrative of the dominant culture. However, many Latinx-Americans must negotiate their cultural allegiances carefully, in order to avoid discrimination and compete in the job market. As 'the land of opportunity' success is determined by socioeconomic status. The idea of America is then equated to an economy and marketplace, emphasizing the power of the free market economy and capitalism, that promises self-made wealth yet also creates economic disparity that influences social mobility. Lourdes' Yankeedoodle Bakery is her way of embracing a national 'Americanized' identity, but also creates a space for the Cuban nationalists who live in their community. An individual's self expression of national identity and legal citizenship are at odds, similarly the tensions between business woman Lourdes and her artist daughter Pilar are then exacerbated by their views of nationhood and selfhood.

The negotiation of the Latinx-American's 'Americanness' occurs concurrently with each character's experience, but that identity is not stable. The conflict between the two cultures constantly reshapes the space the character inhabits. Experience is continuous, and tensions that are left unreconciled create a rift between identities. This constant negotiation of this rift, exemplifies the way these characters' cultural background interacts with that of an 'American'

national identity. García's understanding of 'American' illuminates the way in which Latinx American citizenship is tiered with regard to assimilation into the national collective identity of 'America'. García's novel complicates an authoritarian 'American' approach, exposing the many contradictions the assumed identity has.

CHAPTER III

I Define 'America', 'America' Does Not Define Me: Nuanced Identity and the Multicultural 'Self' in W*hen I Was Puerto Rican*

The history of the United States, as taught by most public schools, focuses on the history of the continental United States. This history perpetuates the ego-centric model of 'American Victory' over its challengers, whether they be the British, various racial and ethnic groups, amoral institutions, or more commonly, those who challenge traditions. For a significant portion of it's existence, the United States' isolationist policies, allowed the nation to shape itself as quite distinct from other countries. However, as more and more immigrants entered the United States, the national demographics changed. While there were notable migrations from Ireland and Italy at the beginning of the twentieth century, this chapter will focus on those from Puerto Rico.

The dominant understanding of American history and citizenship is defined by the way a homogenous collective has not only internalized tradition but also perpetuated it. Today, school curriculums are beginning to address the contexts of the histories taught in American classrooms. Educators are exposing the complexities and nuances of the events in the textbooks, addressing questions like: what happened between the end of the Civil War and the Civil Rights movements that perpetuated a state of second tier citizenship? How did American foreign policy of the fifties and sixties impact the cultures of Latin American countries? While these are notable improvements, there are still aspects of our nation's history that are taken for granted. Throughout this thesis, I have described a homogenous collective identity, and how national values shape the public's understanding of citizenship in relation to this 'national identity'. What

is often ignored is that there are groups of naturalized citizens who inhabit a state of second class citizenship. Puerto Rico became an incorporated territory of the United States in 1900. The United States granted Puerto Ricans citizenship seventeen years later (ironically, in time to draft men for World War I). The relationship between the United States and Puerto Rico is incredibly complex; while an incorporated territory whose inhabitants are granted citizenship, it is still not considered a state. While the legal intricacies of Puerto Rico are complex, in this chapter, my focus is to illustrate the ways Santiago's memoir illuminates this 'uncertain' positioning and thus reveals the complicated nature of citizenship for Puerto Ricans not only in their native homeland but also in the continental United States.

Esmeralda Santiago's *When I Was Puerto Rican* explores Santiago's childhood in rural Puerto Rico and her journey of selfhood, charting the development of her identity from youth to adulthood. Unlike the other works explored in this thesis, Santiago's story is written as a memoir. The genre of the memoir allows writers a different place of agency. Whereas the veil of fiction allows for distance between the reader and the work because of the understanding that fiction constructs an alternate reality, a memoir does not. The memoir allows the text to assume a definitive form of agency due to its function as a memorandum to the author's experiences. Santiago's memoir illustrates the way the Puerto Rican community straddles two kinds of identity, one that is tied to the physical island and its history and culture, and one that is attributed to legal citizenship as granted by another sovereign nation. The novel presents Puerto Rico as a place that is distinctly not America. Her recollection of her life in Puerto Rico directly comes into conflict with the ideals imposed upon them by American programs and customs. Santiago paints a portrait of 'Americanization' reminiscent of the sentimentalist logic of the abolitionists in Antebellum America, where the social/political gesture of providing 'education'

serves as a means of propagating dominant cultural values, history, and understanding. As Santiago interacted more and more with the influence of the United States, she describes herself as hesitant to embrace cultural norms, but following through because of her mother's expectations. Santiago's distinction complicates a homogenous collective's understanding of citizenship, suggesting that legal citizenship is not the sole definer of an individual's identity. Rather, she presents a model of multicultural citizenship where the expectations of legal citizenship shape the multicultural self, and the nuanced positions of those between othered communities and the national collective more accurately reflects the image of 'America' that is heralded by citizens.

The memoir's construction illustrates the movement between the two worlds, through its fluid movement between languages. Each chapter begins with a saying or excerpt from a poem, written in Spanish, followed by a translation in English. The dual expression is reflective of Santiago's own relationship with language. Spanish was her first language; she was raised speaking it. She learned English as she grew older, but interestingly enough, Santiago made the choice to write the memoir in English with the inclusion of Spanish phrases. What does the choice of language and alternation between two languages suggest? While the United States does not have an official language, it is understood to be English. The book's title denotes a departure for Santiago, where her childhood and the culture of her family inhabit a place in the past. But, she does not abandon it to better suit the archetype of the homogenous national collective. Rather, she bounces between the two, negotiating the boundaries of language and translation in order illustrate her journey in understanding her identity.

The chapter entitled "The American Invasion of Macún" is prefaced with "Lo que no mata, engorda. What doesn't kill you, makes you fat" (Santiago, 63). The translation is literal.

Santiago opts to translate the phrase word for word, rather than a translation of the thought. The failure of the English translation to accurately convey the thought behind the phrase, illustrates the disconnect Santiago refers to between her life in Puerto Rico and the understanding of Puerto Rico as a part of the United States. Gloria Anzaldúa wrote about the tendency of Latinxs to create 'anglicisms', where they "distort and reconstruct the language according to the influence of English" (Anzaldúa, 56). The English phrase, which conveys the essence of the Spanish one, is 'what doesn't kill you, makes you stronger'. Santiago deliberately challenges the assumption that Latinx people must subvert their language to suit the comforts of English speakers. Both phrases speak to the idea that that which does not harm someone, contributes to their growth and development, but it's clear that there is a nuance in the Spanish that is lost in the English literal translation. Santiago further emphasizes this disparity in later chapters, where the linguistic disconnect is more dramatically exacerbated. Towards the end of the book, one of the chapters is prefaced, "De Guatemala a guata-peor, From Guatemala to guata-worse" (Santiago, 133). This particular phrase, unlike some of the others, whose English translations capture the essence of the quote, makes very little sense after translation. In Spanish, the phrase is constructed from a play on words. The phrase plays on the word 'mala', meaning bad, being at the end of Guatemala. In English, the rough equivalence of the phrase would be 'going from bad to worse'. Santiago's literal translation mirrors the physical structure of the Spanish, but the 'mistranslation' dramatically misses the mark in this translation. Language play is Santiago's way of demonstrating the aspects of her identity she feels are lost to the domination of 'Americanness' of citizenship.

She is resentful of having to learn the English language in school and equates the language with being 'American'. The role of language in self-expression and communication is

at the core of Anzaldúa's argument about the creation of a self-negotiated Latinx identity. In the United States and in Puerto Rico, as Santiago recalls, schools used the Dick and Jane primers to teach children phonetics and simple sentence structures. In her schooling, Santiago wrote that the curriculum did not focus heavily on blatant influence from the United States. Her disdain of American influence was contained to her dislike of the language. She said to her father that she would not learn the language so as to not be 'American'. He responds, "Being American is not just a language, *Negrita,* it's a lot of other things…like the food you eat…the music you listen to…the things you believe in" (Santiago, 73). Her father's response gives voice to the argument in support of citizenship and identity being experiential, not defined solely through borders and legal recognition. The cultural experiences that an individual engages with are what constitute the essence of citizenship because language and communication enable the individual to identify themselves. However, the individual's identification of citizenship is complicated when the legal body that grants legal citizenship can also deny it regardless of this experience.

When I Was Puerto Rican is a 'coming of age' narrative that shows the 'Americanization' of Puerto Rico during the fifties and sixties, represents a corruption of cultural citizenship. The imposition of American ideals within Puerto Rico raises questions as to what rights are actually granted to citizens. In Ediberto Román's explanation of the subordinate status of Puerto Rico, he discusses the discrepancy of aid between American citizens based on location. Román writes, "As a result of their subordinate status, residents of Puerto Rico…receive less favorable treatment than the mainland citizens under a number of federal benefit programs" (Román, 105). While being entitled to the federal benefits and programs that mainland citizens are entitled to, their access is markedly different. Román likens the position of Puerto Rico to other second class citizen groups within the United States. The national identity of the Puerto Rican community is

complicated because of the distinction between their cultural heritage and history, and the imperialist policies that had been imposed by the United States government. A majority of these policies targeted public health and educational programs, focusing in 'educating' Puerto Ricans on 'American' values. Their objective was acculturation.

The imposition of acculturation creates a divide within an individual. The United States' recognition of Puerto Rico as a territory places Puerto Ricans in a unique position. As a territory, they are a part of the United States, which suggest by American logic that they would reflect 'American' ideals and culture, but as they are not fully under United States rule, they are not bound by the same expectations as the mainland homogenous model of citizenship. The culture and heritage of Puerto Ricans predates United States influence, leaving Puerto Ricans at an identity impasse. They identify themselves by the name of their homeland but have a multicultural identity, seeing as their culture has been shaped by the influence of United States dominion. The second-class citizen position that Puerto Ricans inhabit is a direct reflection of the failure of the 'letter of the law' for citizenship to enforce the equality of citizenship as protected by the Fourteenth Amendment. Anzaldúa analyzes the way in which cultural assimilation affects identity. She writes,

> "People of color suffer economically for not acculturating. This voluntary, (yet forced) alienation, makes for psychological conflict, a kind of dual identity—we don't identify with the Anglo-American cultural ideals, and we don't totally identify with the cultural values" (Anzaldúa, 63).

Santiago recalls one of her first encounters with Americans through a community nutritional program, which was funded federally. The program did little to provide assistance, but rather imposes expectations that Puerto Rico in its natural state, cannot reproduce. The expectations of

'America' are quite distinct from the cultural context of its citizens who are not a part of the homogenous collective, thus setting them up to be othered, despite having legal citizenship. Santiago tells the story of the doctors that come to teach the community about proper diets, recommending apples and other foods that happen to be easily accessible in North America. In this scene, a woman asks if mangos could be substitutions for apples, to which the doctor from the United States responds, "Then you must substitute our recommendations with your native foods" (Santiago, 66). Here, the fruit substitutions can be read as a metaphor for the behavior and experiences expected of white American citizens, and their expectations of performativity of citizenship of nonwhite citizens. The substitution of two unlike entities, on account of a generalized similarity (the only thing in common between apples and mango being that they are both fruit) erases the subjectivity of the experiences of Puerto Ricans.

What Santiago's memoir accomplishes is exposure of the intricately nuanced reality of American citizenship. The legal establishment of citizenship and its protections are only as effective as their means of enforcement and the court of public opinion. If the public is comprised of a predominantly white homogenous national collective, the preservation of their imposed and imagined 'national' ideals become the criteria by which performative citizenship is judged and recognized. *When I Was Puerto Rican* does not present a clear condemnation of American ideals, but rather a critical reflection on how those ideals shape selfhood. While Santiago calls attention to the tension between the American influence and her cultural heritage, the manipulation and development of language illustrate the nuances of identity construction that tend to be overlooked and simplified. She approaches the subject of citizenship by making the distinction clear between citizenship as identified by the individual and citizenship as judged by the state, forcing readers to rethink their understanding of how they judge citizenship and how

they have constructed it. Santiago's memoir serves as an exposition of the 'cracks' in the foundation of how citizenship is regarded by the homogenous collective. Considering that she is deemed a legal citizen of the United States, then why is it, as she notes, that she is being taught things that do not reflect her culture and heritage. For the Puerto Rican community, the relationship with identity should not have to require 'picking sides', but as is the case for other Latinx groups, it does, because not acculturating forces them into a position of lesser citizenship. They must therefore negotiate a sense of self that is shaped by culture, heritage, and history, one that can incorporate additional influences and thereby be recognized, but not be overpowered. Santiago challenges the expectations of a homogenous collective and claims an identity that does not yield its roots to the force of imperialist influence. This identity does not deny its origin or the influence of the United States.

CONCLUSION

‘This Land is Your Land, This Land is My Land’:
Reconstructing the Understanding
of Citizenship

As Anzaldúa suggested, the power of language resides in its ability to create voices that speak their truths unapologetically. The literature written within the Latinx community reconstructs the Borderland by both challenging its duality and embracing its complexities. While this thesis provides an overview of the experiences that affect Latinx citizenship, each chapter explores the particular experiences of a particular community. This is not to say that these experiences are somehow more important than others but rather that these experiences illuminate common complications. The goal is to expose and eliminate “savage stereotypes” about people of color whose multiculturalism poses a threat to a homogenous model of national identity. Knowing about the fourteenth Amendment is not enough. To truly transform our nation’s understanding, the body politic must actively engage itself with difference and cultural dissonance. This thesis is a call to action to writers, artists, educators, politicians, policy makers, and entrepreneurs from Latinx communities to vocally support their communities in the face of those who try to silence them. The works I analyze in this thesis ask those outside of their communities to mentally place themselves within them, manipulating the borders that dictate citizen stratification. Fiction allows readers to critique systems reflective of their own through the relationship and critical distance it constructs between the reader and the page. However, the conversation should not end when the back cover meets the final page.

The conversation about citizenship must be grounded in the acknowledgement of the faults that lie within foundational ideals associated with a homogenous national collective. While

Latinx citizens inhabit culturally unique positions, having the influence of familial, communal, and outsider experiences, that does not mean that they should be made to inhabit a liminal space in a legal sense. Citizenship ought to be recognized by its legal definition, as a marker that identifies individuals as beneficiaries of the government, rather than by its cultural 'badge of honor' interpretation. The sociocultural borders that shape the Latinx experiences should be defined by those whom they directly affect, rather than serve as imperialist extensions of antiquated policies.

The very concepts that laid the foundation of the United States are indeed fallible. One of these concepts is a model of homogenous citizenship. While this statement, however unpopular, is bold, it is a statement that incites remonstration or invokes a doubtful silence. The histories and traumas of communities of color are subverted in the education and indoctrination of an exclusive model of US nationalism. The difference between today and the past, is that in today's climate, it is no longer enough for dominant cultures to simply know the history of marginalized communities. As a public, it is our civic duty to ensure that knowledge be used to inform understanding, rather than taught as isolated factoids that establish a two dimensional sketch. No person or system is established without faults. Faults differ from flaws. The United States presents itself as above flaws, but upon examination of the experiences of those within its geography, it is obvious that it is not without faults. Faults are deeper psychological and/or philosophical breaks that compromise the character of the institution. There are ongoing debates that question the rights and protections guaranteed by the federal government, debates as to how relevant some rights are to the current sociopolitical climate, or whether some rights provide comprehensive protections of 'unalienable rights'. The fact of the matter is that the Constitution is not without its amendments and rulings which further raises questions about the language used

by law in regards to execution. And yet, it is that very right to call into question the authority from which legitimacy derives its protections that remains consistent (despite class and tier) in the ideation of American citizenship.

The first step to reconciliation is to admit the shortcomings of a dominant model of citizenship that adheres as much to white cultural norms as to the ideals of a citizenship, to acknowledge plainly that the phrase 'all men are created equal' never intended to be used to include people of color. Rather, double standards were methods of power maintenance used by the white men in power, in order to maintain positions of privilege where they could control labor, wealth, and patriarchal societal norms. This concession must be made by those in power as well as the general population to recognize this fault. Raymond Rocco emphasizes that in order to transform the recognition of citizenship that one "needs to understand the regulative political function of citizenship in the US as it was applied to Latinx as part of the strategy establishing the nation-state as the primary form of political community" (Rocco, 311). Rocco's observation reflects that which Morrison referred to as codifying language in order to protect a white sense of 'Americanness'. Changing this codification requires empathy. To understand is to recognize the effect of experience and perspective on individuals as well as communities. Literature pulls readers into the worlds of the characters and communities they represent, asking readers to engage from the perspectives of the characters, as well as their own.

The work of authors such as Ernesto Quiñonez, Cristina García, and Esmeralda Santiago, emphasizes the contradictory nature between ideals as imagined and the reality in which they exist and question. In each of the novels analyzed in this thesis, the writers do not create characters that elicit sympathy but also expose the uneasiness within the reader who has expectations of basic principles, only to realize that these principles do not manifest the way they

themselves would experience them. *Bodega Dreams* pulls readers into a story they have read, they have heard, and that has been revered. Yet, he changes this story in an important way. In doing so, Quiñonez makes two important points about national identity: the first, to non Latinx audiences, is that the failures of the American Dream are not unique to one community; the second, for the Latinx communities, is that they are a part of the 'American' story, albeit in a way that is unique to them. The exclusivity of 'America' has been challenged from its inception by people of different classes and races and by various groups that recognize that human experiences cannot be commodified and claimed as victories by an exclusionary national collective. Cristina García tests the boundaries of identification, challenging them with questions of identification as determined by experience. *Dreaming in Cuban* provides insight into the way in which Latinx experiences are legitimated via the fulfillment of criteria that erase individuality in favor of a collective national identity. Esmeralda Santiago's *When I Was Puerto Rican* further complicates the narrative of national citizenship as defined by identification, exposing the politics of identity at the hands of imperialist influence. Citizenship is in fact a legal privilege, but not a privilege that should be utilized as a means of sociopolitical segregation.

The United States failed to correct its mistakes when it was young. After the Civil War there was an opportunity to amend and correct, but reforms like the establishment of the Fourteenth Amendment mean nothing if they are not supported or enforced. The failure of the judicial system to establish just precedent perpetuated a judicial system that allowed citizenship to be divided. There should never have been a second class citizen, but with two hundred years of 'tradition,' the situation will require intensive intervention. To move towards the transformation necessary to extend the rights of citizenship, we need to expand our understanding of all individuals being created equal, with equal protection and recognition

before the law. This change requires exposure to the voices who have traditionally been excluded. The Latinx community is resilient and has actively challenged oppressive definitions of US citizenship. This has led to an internalized revolution in respect to the perception of the self and the self's place within a larger collective. To quote Anzaldúa, Latinx citizens are not to be spoken down to because they are "stubborn, persevering, impenetrable as stone, yet possessing a malleability that renders us unbreakable, we, the *mestizas* and *mestizos*, will remain."

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