

## “Snapshots from the Mother Road”: Travel and Motherhood in Lorraine

### López’s *The Gifted Gabaldón Sisters*

By Cristina Herrera

Everything about this woman, this Felice, amazed Cleófilas. The fact that she drove a pickup. A pickup, mind you, but when Cleófilas asked if it was her husband’s, she said she didn’t have a husband. The pickup was hers. She herself had chosen it. She herself was paying for it. I used to have a Pontiac Sunbird. But those cars are for *viejas*. Pussy cars. Now this car is a *real* car. What kind of talk was that coming from a woman? Cleófilas thought. But then again, Felice was like no woman she’d ever met. Can you imagine, when we crossed the *arroyo* she just started yelling like a crazy, she would later say to her father and brothers. Just like that. Who would’ve thought? (Cisneros “Woman Hollering Creek” 55-56)

The epigraph quoted above speaks volumes on the nature of the road trip when embarked upon by Chicanas. In Sandra Cisneros’s well-known short story, “Woman Hollering Creek,” a young Mexican woman named Cleófilas is driven to a bus station in San Antonio, Texas by a Chicana woman named Felice in order to escape a violent marriage and return to her family in Mexico. Cleófilas’s movement away from her husband’s violent home to the more protective space of her family’s home in Mexico, where she will live with a newly-empowered self gained by escaping marital abuse, is powerfully symbolized by means of how this movement is achieved. Driven by a vocal, self-assured woman who embodies the virtue of felicity, as her name would suggest, in a “*real* car,” the road trip functions for Cleófilas as a symbolic drive toward empowerment and voice represented by Felice’s enthusiastic *gritos*. Although years earlier Cleófilas crossed the same *arroyo* with her new husband when he brought her into the United States, the act of driving in a pickup now (often stereotyped as inherently masculine) with a politically-conscious, independent Chicana such as Felice, enables Cleófilas to imagine

previously unthinkable possibilities in her new life as unmarried woman and mother. As this passage demonstrates, and as this article aims to address, the Chicana road trip potentially holds political, feminist implications. However, despite the presence of road travel and cars in much literature by Chicana writers<sup>1</sup>, scholarship on these themes remains virtually non-existent.

Lorraine López's fiction has also received little critical attention, despite authoring the highly acclaimed short story collection, *Soy la Avon Lady and Other Stories* (2002) and her recent novel, *The Gifted Gabaldón Sisters* (2008). Although receiving warm praise from such renowned authors as Sandra Cisneros and Judith Ortiz Cofer, López's fiction has been seldom-addressed and studied, marking what I believe to be a critical gap in need of being filled. Thus far, only one academic article investigates López's work, although it discusses her 2002 collection of short stories. Tanya Long Bennett's reading of *Soy La Avon Lady and Other Stories* examines López's "postmodern notion of human identity as a construct in flux" (84). My discussion of the novel, thus, is an attempt to expand the limited scholarship on López's work. In this article, I offer a discussion of the novel's theme of road travel and the Chicana road trip as metaphor for the search for maternal figures, by focusing on the text's rather lengthy Chapter 11, "Snapshots from the Mother Road—The Gabaldón Sisters: 1983." I offer a close reading of this significant chapter, along with an analysis of the road trip in literature by American writers, arguing that the theme of road travel in Chicana literature, while undoubtedly demonstrating mobility and freedom, also suggests a drive toward the mother. Moreover, in equating the road trip as a search for maternity, the trip functions as the sisters' process of identity-construction, as it enables them to form an identity as daughters of their maternal figures. Driving toward their mother is simultaneously a drive toward discovering their identities, intimately connected to their maternal figures. By centering my discussion of the road trip in a novel by a Chicana writer, it is

my intent to problematize existing road literature scholarship, the majority of which blatantly overlooks the vast number of texts by women of color, especially Chicanas. The Chicana road trip, although highly visible in texts by López and Chicana writers such as Stella Pope Duarte, María Amparo Escandón, Sandra Cisneros, and others, has not been studied at length.

The novel features four sisters, Bette, Loretta, Rita, and Sophia who, even years after their mother's death during their childhood, continue to feel a deep sense of loss, longing, and emptiness. As the novel suggests, these feelings of disillusionment shared by the sisters, which manifest in a multitude of behaviors (drug and alcohol abuse and overeating, for example), stem from an overwhelming desire to learn more about their mother and the looming mystery of the "gifts" bestowed upon them by their longtime live-in caretaker and maternal figure, Fermina, who dies shortly after their mother. The novel is divided into chapters narrated by the four sisters, separated by written data notes dated from 1938 that reveal crucial, previously unknown information on Fermina that she wishes for the sisters to discover after she dies. As we learn at the end of the novel, the data reports taken during 1938 disclose that Fermina is the sisters' great-grandmother.

Chapter 11 itself is divided into narrative sections told from the perspective of each sister, who embark on a road trip from California to New Mexico to meet the woman who interviewed Fermina in 1938, which they hope will provide them with much-needed answers to their questions not only regarding their mother, but also about the strange "gifts" Fermina said they would inherit upon her death. Although the trip proves to be unsuccessful in terms of the limited information they find, what is significant about this chapter is the relationship it marks between road travel and the mother. Traveling on the "Mother Road" (Route 66), I suggest, functions as a metaphor for the daughters' strong desire to discover who Fermina really is, which in turn will

appease the endless longing they have for their mother, a major source of their Chicana identity. Traveling the road conjures memories of their maternal figures, enabling the sisters to construct and shape their Chicana identities as daughters of these women. In the novel's connection between road travel and motherhood, the road itself functions for the Gabaldón sisters as the road to identity, leading them to affirm their mother's role in their Chicana identity-construction. Significantly, it is not until the sisters embark on this road trip that they are able to come to terms with the meaning of their maternal loss, as previously this loss manifests in ways I have previously stated. The trip, besides providing them with maternal connection, enables the sisters to engage in this process of Chicana identity-construction, and as the novel suggests, the Gabaldón sisters are unable to construct this identity and negotiate their mother's loss until they drive to their destination. Ultimately, this drive leads them to uncover aspects of their maternal history which, I argue, is crucial to their self-formations.

### **Snapshots From the (Male) Road: Cars, Masculinity, and Literary Scholarship**

Scholarship on the road trip and road travel in American literature is not lacking, revealing the highly mythical status granted to the "open road" in American culture. The car has long been deemed the ideal mode of traveling the vast highways that mark the United States landscape. Thus it comes as no surprise that the automobile, road, and travel would feature so prominently in writings throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century and the first decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. However, as I have stated in the opening paragraphs of this article, and as the title of this section implies, scholarship on these themes continues to ignore the many contributions made in this field by Chicana writers. As I argue, Chicanas do, in fact, drive; yet contemporary road scholarship would suggest that they not only do not drive, but that the road or cars do not exist in

Chicana literature. Moreover, their very absence from critical inquiry on the road trip in literature hints at the historical privilege granted to white male drivers, marking the almost impossibility of women writers of color to claim the road as their own feminist space in which to drive and write.

Studies such as *Textual Vehicles*, *Romance of the Road*, and *In The Driver's Seat* trace the origins of the literary road trip as a uniquely Anglo male journey. According to Ronald Primeau's study, *Romance of the Road: The Literature of the American Highway*, by 1900 the popularity of the road trip as literary and journalistic theme was sealed (Primeau 8), yet the ability to trek cross-country by automobile was the privileged domain of "the white male—generally middle class, established, and free to embark on the kind of journeys around which road conventions would be shaped" (Primeau 107). As Primeau's statement underscores, the deceptively simple act of getting in the car, turning the ignition, and taking off on the vast road ahead, is misleading; one needs a car for a road trip and cars, after all, require money. The car, then, as a marker of privilege, is not so easily accessible for all groups of people. Thus, Roger Casey's rather blithe statement in his book, *Textual Vehicles: The Automobile in American Literature*, that the car "brings together two fundamentals of the American way: individualism and movement—automobility" (Casey 3), overlooks the very real role that racism, sexism, and classism have played in granting access to this so-called "automobility" to some groups while denying it to others. Arguing that "the car allows Americans to be on the go, to 'go West' on Whitman's open road, and it allows them to do so at their own pace with Emersonian self-reliance" (Casey 3), Casey reinforces the mythology of the road from an Anglo male genesis, further ignoring the reality that for some groups of people, especially African-Americans, for example, the road is not always a safe, liberating space in which to discover America and the self. Claiming that "the concept of mobility is deep-rooted in the American psyche" (Casey 13),

Casey overlooks differences according to social class and ethnicity/race in the United States that have historically limited the movement of people of color and subsequently their ability to take to the road on a whim. For historically marginalized ethnic groups such as African-Americans, according to Kris Lackey, “freedom on the road is not mainly a product of will and space but of privilege bestowed by race and class” (Lackey 21). That is, the notion of the road as potentially life-altering and liberating must be problematized when the space of the road is constructed and defined as white and male. Lackey continues by arguing that

[...] the experiences of African American road writers disclose the economic and social compacts, the unwritten codes of power and privilege [...].

As long as the history of persecution broods over an African American journey, characteristic postures of American highway travel are impossible. The traveler’s relations to historical landmarks, the landscape, regional peculiarities (including services), contemplative solitude, and space itself are formed and guided by the traveler’s sense of control—intellectual, economic, racial, and sometimes sexual control. (Lackey 23, 118)

Lackey’s assessment forces scholars to re-think the myth of the road as inviting for all. Driving through the Jim Crow South as an African-American woman or man could hardly be considered romantic or idyllic, as road trips are often described. Indeed, as Caren Kaplan asserts, notions of (road) travel reflect the “Euro-American...historical legacies of capitalist development and accumulation, of imperialist expansion, and of inequities of numerous kinds” (Kaplan 131). As Kaplan suggests, travel in its numerous forms, road trips included, denotes a form of privilege, particularly when “travel” has long been associated with inequality and even violence.<sup>ii</sup> The identity of the driver, including markers such as gender, race, sexuality, and

social class, cannot be separated from the route/highway/road the traveler takes on; access to the road and automobiles depends on one's relationship to the dominant power structure of the United States (Ganser 19). If the road has been constructed as a privileged, white, male space, then non-white, non-male drivers are therefore trespassers, violating the myth of the open road policy (Stout 2, Ganser 16, Smyth 116, Mason 337, De Barros 3). The very act of purchasing and owning a car denotes this tradition as a "male domain" (Casey 9), according to Roger Casey, although his statement suggests a universality of masculinity; clearly, factors such as socio-economic status and race/ethnicity must be taken into account as well. In this light, Gloria Anzaldúa's oft-cited statement from *Borderlands/La Frontera*, "Do not enter, trespassers will be raped, maimed, strangled, gassed, shot" (Anzaldúa 25), takes on additional meaning for my purposes of critiquing the invisibility of Chicana literature from road scholarship, although it refers to the United States/Mexico border region and the social, political implications raised by the two countries' close proximity to each other. Anzaldúa inherently takes Anglo, male-centric road scholarship to task by exposing the covert racism beneath the myth of American mobility. By pointing to the social boundaries that exist beneath physical borders, Anzaldúa argues that geographical dividing lines are constructed in order to keep "undesirable" people out, to prevent them from entering spaces designated for members of a dominant group: "...borders are provocative metaphors, signaling a heightened awareness of the political and economic structures that demarcate zones of inclusion and exclusion" (Kaplan 144). The myth of "automobility" in relation to the supposedly liberating openness of the road implicitly leaves out women and people of color. Although it is not my intent to dismiss existing scholarship on automobiles and the road as insignificant and irrelevant for my own argument, it must be noted not only that even benchmark studies in this field erase the contributions of women writers of

color to road literature, but also that constructing a mythos of the road from an Anglo male genesis does not adequately account for the political and feminist implications of the road trip by Chicana and women writers of color.

**Taking to the Road: Feminist Contributions to Road Scholarship and the Case of *The Gifted Gabaldón Sisters***

Not surprisingly, feminist literary scholars have critiqued the overall absence of women writers from scholarship on road travel. In particular, since at least the mid-1990's, feminist scholars have argued against the invisibility of women writers from American road novels and scholarship, shaping and constructing new modes of studying road novels by women writers that do not necessarily abide by the liberating, self-conscious myth adopted by male road writers. Moreover, feminist scholars begin by asking a central question: why are women ignored, invisible, and otherwise insignificant figures in road novels by American male writers?

If the "romance of the road" (to borrow from Primeau's title) benefits privileged Anglo male drivers/writers, feminist scholars and writers challenge the designation of road space as exclusively for men. But by questioning why women writers have been largely absent from road literature, feminist scholars point to the ways in which merely taking to the road as a woman signifies a "breaking from conventionally expected roles [and] a fracturing of authoritative and institutionally sanctioned theories of literature" that depict the traveler as always already Anglo and male (Stout 3). The invisibility of women from road novels attests to the historical reality of the misleading notion of the "open road." If the road has long been designated as a male domain, women have for the most part been relegated to the space of domesticity. Yet according to Alexandra Ganser's study, *Roads of Her Own*, the emergence of road literature written by

women during the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century began to challenge the separation of spaces according to gender, critiquing the limitations of this public/private binary: “By the very act of writing the female subject out of the home and onto the road, these narratives deterritorialize femininity and revise the discursively ‘masculinized’ road space [...]; in this context, the car itself functions as a vehicle that blurs the very distinctions between feminine/domestic/private and masculine/public spaces” (Ganser 31). My earlier discussion of Cisneros’s character Felice reinforces Ganser’s argument; that is, Felice’s adoption of a traditional marker of masculinity, the pickup truck and the claiming of it as her own, is a refusal to submit to culturally, socially-sanctioned roles that expect her to drive what she humorously refers to as “pussy cars.” Further, Felice’s act of owning a vehicle, a pickup in particular, undermines and subverts gender roles that have excluded women from even driving and embarking on the road in the first place. In novels written by women, the road functions as a symbolic claiming of that space as their own, suggesting that their identities will not be limited to the domestic setting (Ganser 48-49). By taking and claiming the road, women writers “rupture” and “break” notions of what has historically been off-limits (Stout 2).

Road novels written by women, while also thematizing the quest for freedom and self-discovery akin to the male journey, explore the meanings of road travel that do not always mirror masculinized narratives (Stout 16, Ganser 14, De Barros 93, Smyth 116). In fact, scholarship on women’s road narratives has pointed to the ways in which the road functions as a site for mother/daughter bonding in contrast to the road as solely a space for seeking and attaining individuality and self-liberation (Ganser 111, De Barros 94). By aligning the road trip with mother/daughter bonding, road texts by women writers centralize women characters, thereby subjectifying female experiences; by often omitting the presence of male figures, these writers

consciously choose to write against the male road tradition (De Barros 13). López's novel follows this feminist revision of the road trip as a space for maternal bonding through her use of the road genre (by way of one lengthy chapter) to explore the significance of female family relations, particularly bonds of sisterhood and mothers and daughters. Yet while both Ganser's and De Barros's studies theorize the maternal road text between living mothers and daughters, López's novel portrays the Chicana road trip as a daughterly search for dead maternal figures. The Gabaldón sisters embark on a road trip precisely because being immobile and caught in their daily routines prevents their long-held questions from being answered.

As Mary Pat Brady argues in her study, *Extinct Lands, Temporal Geographies*, Chicana literature has a long history of destabilizing notions of such spaces that seek to limit the movement of women and people of color. According to Brady, Chicana writing "has, from its inception, contested the terms of capitalist spatial formation, including the attempts to regulate the meanings and uses of spaces, especially the use of space to naturalize violent racial, gender, sexual, and class ideologies" (Brady 6).<sup>iii</sup> That the Gabaldón sisters so freely choose to pack up their things and hit the road, thus, would serve as an example of what Brady argues is Chicana writers' efforts to "contest such power" of seemingly normalized spaces (Brady 9). The previous passage by Anzaldúa suggests that the very notion of borders and boundaries are constructed as normative in order to, as Brady's argument affirms, maintain unequal power structures that keep certain groups in their "place." Given that "space functions in relation to identity and agency," it is all the more significant that the sisters challenge and even question why the road space should not be theirs to drive on and claim as their own (Brady 115).

For Chicana women, the road space and act of driving further challenges the gender boundaries delineated by their Chicana/o culture. As I have previously argued, Chicana literature

is ripe with examples of traveling women, who refuse to be confined by patriarchal codes of conduct that attempt to enforce static, not mobile, daily lives for Chicana women. Indeed, in her 1995 study, *Women Singing in the Snow*, Tey Diana Rebolledo states, “*Mujeres andariegas, mujeres callejeras*, women who wander and roam, who walk around, women who journey: the terms imply restlessness, wickedness. These are women who don’t stay at home tending to their husbands, children, parents” (Rebolledo 183, original italics). As Rebolledo claims, the act of leaving, fleeing, or departing suggests a breaking of rules, being a *mujer mala* (bad woman). Numerous Chicana writers, including Cherríe Moraga, Gloria Anzaldúa, Sandra Cisneros, and Denise Chávez, among others, have rigorously opposed such limiting binaries of the good/bad woman that position immobility and virginity as idealized, while movement and sexual activity is designated as “bad” or corrupt.<sup>iv</sup> As Brady adds, the construction of the public/private binary exists in order to uphold the myth of the outside, public world as “dangerous” for Chicana women, in opposition to the supposed safety the private home affords (Brady 128). Chicana women who “insist on mobility, on transgressing boundaries” are thus viewed as “prostitutes” for daring to challenge the limitations of the private space they are supposed to inhabit (Brady 130). Of course, this demarcation of the scary world outside and safe indoor space only works to obscure the real violence that occurs within the home environment (Brady 128). Thus if the binary of public/private unveils this contradiction, it is all the more significant that the Gabaldón sisters leave home to enter the supposed “dangerous” realm of the American highway. In leaving the home to enter the outside world, Chicana women expand “their enclosed and limited areas” (Rebolledo 204), challenging the private/public binary of which they are expected to abide: “The cocina is generally acknowledged to be a place of and for women. It is a haven in the house, a separate space where nourishment and creativity take place. However, there is an acknowledged

opposite space, that of the street, the cantina, and the highway, which signals a different kind of freedom, the invasion of public space” (Rebolledo 202). While writers such as Chávez have pointed to the political, feminist implications of the kitchen space,<sup>v</sup> their writings suggest that the kitchen and home need not be the only site in which to engage in socio-political, Chicana identity formation. Chicana women who take to the road in order to escape the potentially confining realm of domesticity de-stabilize and shatter Chicana/o patriarchal structures that are seemingly unshakable. Thus, we must recognize the highly politicized, feminist nature of the Chicana road trip as a symbolic “breaking in” of the public space of the road that has traditionally been closed off to women and people of color.

### *The Gifted Gabaldón Sisters*

I began this article by noting that the character Cleófilas, as a victim of domestic abuse who has succeeded in escaping marital violence, may now construct a new identity as a woman and mother, in large part due to Felice’s feminist, Chicana example symbolized by her *gritos* and choice of automobile. According to Jean Wyatt’s excellent reading of “Woman Hollering Creek,” the pickup is represented as “the outward sign of Felice’s independence, freedom of choice, and mobility—it is the vehicle, after all, of her effective action in the world, as she drives Cleófilas and her son to safety” (Wyatt 258). Noting that “Cisneros herself drives a pickup” that is “menstrual blood red,” Wyatt explains how the pickup is designed to “question not Felice’s (or Cisneros’s) womanliness, but the gendered logic that assigns objects and gestures exclusively to one side or the other of a gender divide” (Wyatt 261). Felice’s identity as a border Chicana, as a woman who embodies the blending/blurring of two cultures, according to Wyatt, enables her to challenge, resist, and question gender roles that may stunt her mobility and freedom. For Felice,

driving is seemingly the most natural thing to do, and the notion that she should not drive or yell is unfathomable to her lived reality as a politicized Chicana.

Similarly, as we read *The Gifted Gabaldón Sisters*, the act of embarking on a road trip raises a rhetorical question: Why *not* drive? For the sisters, the road trip is deemed necessary in order to gain answers to long-time questions they have had of their maternal figure, Fermina. Indeed, travel, according to James Clifford, enacts “leaving ‘home’ to go to some ‘other’ place. The displacement takes place for the purpose of gain—material, spiritual, scientific. It involves obtaining knowledge and/or having an ‘experience’ (exciting, edifying, pleasurable, estranging, broadening)” (Clifford 66). According to Clifford, travel begins with the intention of discovery, and that may be of a tangible nature, while oftentimes it is not. Taking to the road offers the sisters the opportunity to engage in not only the practical questioning of who Fermina really is, but, in a more psychic turn, who they are. As De Barros reminds us, for women writers, “the road functions not as a highway to rugged individualism and separation, but as a path toward fulfillment, community, and attachment between mothers and daughters” (De Barros 96). Further, to follow De Barros’s argument, the car they use represents family. Belonging to their father, the car enables them to seek out maternal family members: their Tía Nilda, who lives in New Mexico, Fermina, and their mother. As such, the car’s patriarchal symbolism is transfixed into a daughterly, even maternal space, given that two of the sisters, Bette and Sophia, are also mothers themselves. In addition to providing them with the basic means to travel to New Mexico, the car functions as a daughterly, familial space that enables them to talk, argue, and think of their mother, all while performing mundane and humorous activities such as changing smelly diapers, smoking, eating, and drinking alcohol.

The highway itself that the sisters use to get to New Mexico is further significant. In John Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath*, Route 66 is described as "the path of a people in flight, refugees from dust and shrinking land" (Steinbeck 151), symbolizing the promise and hope of what lays ahead for the traveling Joad family. At the beginning of their trip, Loretta and Bette explain to their sisters their decision to use Route 66, quoting Steinbeck's novel as a rationale:

"It's the Mother Road," Loretta says as she brakes for an old man shambling across Broadway with a grocery cart. He's barefoot, whiskered, and raving. He stops, midcrossing, to shake a bony fist at the sun.

"John Steinbeck," Bette reads from a guidebook in the back, the rear seat that faces backward—her window view: the receding ribbon of blacktop parting scrub, yucca, Joshua trees, and date palms—"first named this 'the mother road, the road of flight—'"

"Mother *fucking* road," Rita grumbles. (228, original italic)

While Route 66 is envisioned as potentially leading migrants to prosperity in light of their poverty and personal, emotional sacrifices, I would argue that the "Mother Road" in López's novel instead symbolizes a return to their maternal figures, whose mystery, they believe, can be solved by driving to New Mexico. To use Steinbeck's maternal metaphor, the road itself breeds hope for the Gabaldón sisters, as it does for the Joads, although for different reasons. Yet interestingly, while Bette and Loretta justify their choice to travel on Route 66 because of its romantic and maternal symbolism, Rita, however, expresses annoyance and even vulgarity at using a highway that will slow down, rather than expedite, their trip. For Bette and Loretta, Route 66's designation as the "Mother Road" symbolizes the necessity of using this route for the purposes of uncovering Fermina's origins and the mysterious gifts they were supposed to inherit.

Driving the “Mother Road” allows them to symbolically carry their mother with them, as it is this road that leads them to New Mexico, to questions that have remained unanswered for far too long. The reasons behind the road trip, combined with the significance of using Route 66, further establish the novel’s connection between road travel and the metaphorical search for maternal figures.

Throughout the early chapters of the novel, before the road trip, the sisters reveal their feelings of loneliness and loss resulting from their mother’s long absence from their lives. Sophia, for example, who was a toddler when her mother died and has no recollection of her, develops an insatiable appetite as a young woman and adult, stating, “the truth is there’s always a yawning feeling in your stomach” (82). Indeed, Sophia’s habit of speaking in the second person “you” throughout the novel, combined with her tendency to overeat, would suggest a pattern of emotional distance, perhaps to spare herself the pain of longing for a mother she never knew. The satisfaction of eating, however, is only temporarily fulfilled. What Sophia alludes to is that her hunger, which she attempts to quell by stuffing her face, will never be satiated, and this suggests that the “yawning feeling” is connected to her complex feelings surrounding a dead mother she does not remember. Loretta, the most intellectual of the sisters, who later becomes a veterinarian, also expresses a deep nostalgia for her mother during her adolescence: “What I recalled most about her was the music of her voice, lilting and inflecting like song when she spoke. Her scent also stays with me, the aroma of corn masa, fresh cilantro, and lime. Food smells, warm smells. I loved to cook, to conjure up my mother’s fragrance” (103). While Loretta is able to reconstruct a maternal memory by cooking the kinds of food her mother prepared for her daughters, Sophia’s attempts to connect with a dead mother result instead in excessive indulgence; overeating reflects a hunger for her mother that leaves her with a perpetually

“yawning feeling in [her] stomach” (82). Loretta’s memories of her mother in relation to food and cooking, combined with Sophia’s problematic relationship with food, reflect the ways in which mothers and daughters connect through the sensual act of cooking.<sup>vi</sup>

Because their mother is not present, however, cooking and (over)eating do not satisfy their need for their mother. While certainly cooking her mother’s favorite foods enables Loretta to remember and re-enact her mother’s culinary talent, it must be noted that it is only she who is able to connect with her mother in this way. The road trip they take as adult women offers the potential for uncovering the mystery surrounding their maternal figures. Driving to New Mexico is interpreted by the sisters as a necessary endeavor in order to quell their maternal longing and answer their questions. As the quotations above underscore, Loretta and Sophia attempt to connect with their dead mother through cooking and (over)eating; indeed, all four sisters yearn for a similar sensual connection. Prior to their road trip, Rita is “floored” when her older sister Bette refers to her as “Rita Panchita”:

This was her mother’s pet name for her. She’s forgotten almost about it until now. Hearing it conjures her mother—big and beaming—on a sunny morning calling her indoors. *Rita Panchita, where are you? Rita Panchita, my sweet chiquitita.* How can Bette remember what Rita’s almost forgotten? She stares after the car, wishing so hard that she’d asked her sister to take her home that it hurts as though she’s taken a blow to her chest, aching like bruised ribs and a sore heart. (217)

As the eldest sister, Bette “remembers” what the younger sisters, Rita and Sophia, “forget.” Of course, as the eldest child, this privileges Bette as the keeper of these childhood memories; however, Bette’s apparent surrogate maternity, or the calling of her sister by this pet name, is enacted in order for her sister to remember their mother, to avoid the dangers of forgetting a

mother who is so crucial in their identities as Chicana women. Essentially, Bette re-creates and re-inserts this memory for Rita, and in doing so, she instills in her younger sister the means in which to speak the longing she has for her long-dead mother. Similarly, when hugging her young daughter, Bette “remembered my mother would hold me this way, and when she spoke, I would snuggle into the hollow above her breast to feel her words buzzing through my bones” (314). For the sisters, conjuring memories of their mother is enacted through their bodies. While Loretta cooks in order to re-construct her mother’s scent, and Sophia eats in order to connect with a mother she does not remember, Rita and Bette, in a similar vein, also recall their mother through a sensory connection, describing feelings of achiness stemming from a physical, sensual desire to feel their mother’s body. As these passages reveal, maternal memories fall short of the women’s longing to physically touch their mother, to be touched by the woman who occupies their memories. Feeling their mother’s presence through the act of touching her or being touched by her, is an affirmation that she is still present, which of course her death makes impossible. Further, Rita’s desire to go home after being called an almost-forgotten pet name marks the connection she makes between home and motherhood, home being a site of safety, warmth, and memories of her mother. To be “home” is to inhabit her mother’s space, to be in close proximity to the very objects her mother once used and touched. However, as she will discover, the road trip itself functions as a symbolic drive and return to the mother.

Their strong desire to decipher the mysterious gifts bestowed upon them by Fermina is woven beneath their outward, practical reason of driving to New Mexico to visit their Tía Nilda and to speak to Heidi Marie Schultz Vigil, who interviewed their caretaker Fermina during 1938 as part of the New Mexico Work Projects Administration, in which according to Rebolledo, “participants gathered oral histories, trying to preserve the history and culture of the ‘old-

timers’,” many of whom were Native, such as Fermina (Rebolledo 13). The data notes placed in the novel between the chapters narrated by the four sisters symbolize the strong maternal themes present in the text and the emphasis placed on mother/daughter relationships.<sup>vii</sup> Functioning almost as clues, the data notes require a sort of deciphering by the reader, who discovers Fermina’s identity the same time as the sisters. Their scavenger hunt of sorts begins once they arrive to the home of Heidi Marie Schultz Vigil in an attempt to discover whether Fermina knew “magic” or practiced “brujería” because of her cryptic message that they would inherit gifts upon her death (248). What they know of Fermina is limited to the data notes, which indicate that she was a “*Pueblo woman who has lived many years in the Río Puerco Valley community*” (250, original italics). Essentially, the data notes reinforce the mystery surrounding Fermina’s life and how she came to be the sisters’ caretaker, as they reveal next to nothing about her.

The Gabaldón sisters’ Tía Nilda, however, encourages her nieces to stop a seemingly fruitless quest to discover Fermina’s origins. Scolding them, she reminds them that what they have inherited is from their mother: “*She’s the one who gave you gifts*” (254, original italics). Tía Nilda’s comment, while undoubtedly an effort to teach her nieces that it is their mother from whom they have inherited their gifts, also suggests that “digging up” seemingly forgotten knowledge is not only a waste of time, but a dangerous endeavor that will lead to unpleasant answers. However, the aunt’s reprimand does little to end her nieces’ curiosity and their suspicion that Fermina’s origins directly tie into their identities as motherless women. While Tía Nilda brushes off her nieces’ curiosity as a childhood fixation on a long-dead live-in caretaker, the sisters’ strong desire to uncover Fermina’s history reveals their own sense of unbelonging, of being identity-less. After the women drive to the University of New Mexico, Albuquerque, to study the archives housing WPA data only to come up with nothing, the road trip is described by

Loretta as an utter disappointment compared to their high expectations: “This letdown is as keen as a physical ache for me, and for my sisters. [...]. How is it possible to feel so overfull and empty at the same time? I glance at my sisters. Their faces are tense and drawn. No one makes eye contact. They also seem ready to spill at the brush of fingertips” (257-258).<sup>viii</sup> Significantly, the sisters do not return to California on the “Mother Road,” revealing the sisters’ pain in driving on the road that they had initially aligned with meaning, symbolism, and great optimism. While Bette laments upon their return that their road trip was “a setback, for all of us” and “ever since, my sisters and I have been a little...I don’t know...tentative with each other, breaking into our comfortable pairs—me and Sophia seeing each other daily, and Loretta and Rita talking every week by phone,” I would argue that the road trip, in fact, has enabled the sisters to question their identities as motherless women who wish to discover their maternal origins (263). That is, the road itself functions as a space for the sisters to reveal the ways in which their maternal loss has impacted their own personal quests for self-formation. The trip forces the sisters to admit that their mother’s death has left them in a state of confusion and loss, a crossroads of sort, especially given that they were left motherless as young children. Significantly, it is during the road trip that we glimpse the longing the sisters have for their mother; their nostalgia is most vivid in the road trip passages.

While the road trip is described as a “letdown” and “setback,” according to Loretta and Bette because they were unable to discern clear-cut answers and information on Fermina and thus themselves, its importance to the novel as a whole is the relationship that is drawn between road travel and motherhood. Undoubtedly the sisters expected to return from their trip with definitive answers to their many questions, yet I would suggest that the sisters *do*, in fact, learn something from their trip, which they later recognize. Driving away from California and their

mother's home is ironically a return to their mother, the road trip forcing the sisters to admit to themselves how much they need their mother and her role in their Chicana identity-construction. The missing link in their identity-formation is, of course, Fermina, and although the sisters embark on a frantic road trip to discover their relationship to Fermina, the irony is that her gift to them, a letter divulging her (and their) identity, has always been home in California. Ironically, this letter is discovered by the sisters upon their return to California, once again symbolizing the novel's connection between home and motherhood, travel and motherhood. In the letter to the sisters, she writes, "*This is my gift, so you will know me, and my mother. [...]. I am Nuvamsa, called Nuva by my mother. I am your great-grandmother, and this is my story, so you will know how far I have come to be with you*" (314-315, original italics). Writing of tragedy, death, and maternal loss, Fermina connects with her great-granddaughters through their shared identities as motherless women. Taking the road trip has not been a loss, as the sisters believe it to be; instead, the trip has initiated the sisters' process of identity-formation through a search of their maternal origins.

Reading the letter, Loretta "stroked my [her own] warm, clotted throat, traced my jaw, long and sharp like Fermina's, and fingered my wide cheekbones, streaked now, slick with tears. I wrapped my arms about my side as if to enfold and finally comfort that bereft and shuddering child who was Fermina, and who was also me" (316). Learning of Fermina's maternal loss affirms Loretta's desire to be a mother herself, to adopt a child with her partner Chris. It is in her discovery of her shared history and familial connection with Fermina that she may mourn her mother figures and continue her family's maternal line. Claiming a new role as mother not only seals the bonds she has with her dead mothers; but it enables her to at last construct an identity as a new mother and as her mothers' daughter. Her adoption of a Guatemalan baby girl, combined

with her new knowledge of Fermina's past that is tinged with tragedy and loss, provides Loretta (and by extension, her sisters) with the means to identify with her dead mothers, to embody the pain they experienced as mothers: "For that selfless Guatemalan birth mother, for Fermina and my own mother, for my sisters, and mostly for our baby daughter, we will have to be better than we have ever been" (316). In empathizing with her maternal figures, in acknowledging their own pain and suffering, Loretta recognizes her obligation to take up motherhood. It is only by learning of Fermina's origins and seeking knowledge of her own mother's life that Loretta may claim motherhood for herself. Significantly, Loretta decides to go through with the adoption only after her return from the road trip and her subsequent discovery of Fermina's letter. Discovering this hidden maternal history provides Loretta with the empowerment necessary to construct her new role as mother. Further, her new mothering requires the claiming of her maternal history and a responsibility to mother her daughter with the knowledge of this matriarchal lineage.

Interestingly, the sisters' names are also closely tied to their maternal lineage. A humorous yet touching anecdote holds that Esperanza Gabaldón named her daughters after the well-known, beautiful actresses Bette Davis, Loretta Young, Rita Hayworth, and Sophia Loren (their brother is named Cary Grant Gabaldón). An attempt to pass down a love of movies to her children, their naming, however, also reflects their mother's efforts to equate them with classic beauty and elegance. Like the timelessness of movies and the stars that remain beloved even years after their deaths, their names are symbolic of their mother's wish that her children will be long remembered as well. Ironically, it is by naming her children that she will also be remembered through them: because it is their mother who names them, their identities remain intimately connected to her. In addition, like the actresses themselves who take on multiple personas in the films in which they star, the Gabaldón sisters' names suggest an identity-in-

movement, a mobility of sorts. While their identities are marked by their status as Esperanza's daughters, their mother also attempts to instill in her daughters the freedom in which to adopt, claim, or even discard identities as they choose. What remains constant, however, is their claiming of themselves as daughters of their maternal figures, reaffirmed through their road trip.

The road trip, now a classic literary genre, aligns road travel with individuality, freedom, and escape from the travails of daily life. However, the traditional equation of the road trip as a means to achieve rugged freedom is visibly different when road travel is depicted in literature by women writers of color, Chicanas in particular. As the epigraph of this chapter attests, the road trip may potentially be a highly politicized act when it is embarked upon by Chicanas. In Lorraine López's novel, it is the road trip that enables the Gabaldón sisters to reclaim their identities as daughters of their dead maternal figures. The drive to New Mexico, while initially hoped to be the source of their answers to the questions they have long held of their mysterious caretaker Fermina, represents a symbolic drive toward their dead mothers, and it is while the sisters are on the road that they must acknowledge the effects of their motherlessness. The trip ultimately leads them home in a new state of awareness, back to their mother and the source of their maternal history that has been hidden and buried for decades. It is through their discovery of Fermina's origins that the sisters reconnect to their mothers and to themselves as daughters and mothers, taking up the matured and healed identities of Chicana women.

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<sup>i</sup> See the afore-mentioned "Woman Hollering Creek" by Cisneros, in addition to her 2002 novel, *Caramelo*. See also Stella Pope Duarte's *Let Their Spirits Dance* (2002) and María Amparo Escandón's *González and Daughter Trucking Co.* (2005), for example.

<sup>ii</sup> Thus, if travel has been historically linked to harmful forms of "expansion" and Eurocentric privilege, López's rather humorous accounts of the distinctly unprivileged markers of the Gabaldón sisters' road travel—a beat-up car, cheap motels, and greasy fast food—are all the more subversive in constructing the Chicana road trip as counter to this Euro-American male tradition.

<sup>iii</sup> Helena María Viramontes offers a scathing critique of the violence invoked by efforts to construct highways that uproot poor people of color from their barrios and homes in her 2008 novel, *Their Dogs Came with Them*.

<sup>iv</sup> See, for example, Moraga's *Loving in the War Years: lo que nunca pasó por sus labios* (1983, 2000); Anzaldúa's *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza* (1987, 1999); Cisneros's *Caramelo* (2002); and Chávez's *Face of an Angel* (1994) and *Loving Pedro Infante* (2001).

<sup>v</sup> For example, *Face of an Angel* (1994) and her most recent memoir, *A Taco Testimony: Meditations on Family, Food, and Culture* (2006), trace the relationship between food, cooking, and political consciousness.

<sup>vi</sup> See Meredith Abarca's fine study, *Voices in the Kitchen: Views of Food and the World from Working-Class Mexican and Mexican American Women* (2006) and Cristina Herrera's discussion of food and motherhood in Denise Chávez, "'Delfina, ¡más tacos': Food, Culture, and Motherhood in Denise Chávez's *A Taco Testimony*" (2010). Full citations under works cited.

<sup>vii</sup> Space does not permit me to speak at length of the novel's use of data/field notes separating formal chapters narrated by the sisters. I leave it to other scholars to address this theme. For a discussion of ethnographic fieldwork, see James Clifford's study, *Routes*, listed in the works cited.

<sup>viii</sup> Once again I draw attention to Loretta's use of culinary adjectives, "overfull" and "empty," to explain her sense of loss and disappointment. Indeed, these terms could also very well describe a car's tank of gas, which affirms López's use of the road genre. While my reading of López's text privileges the connection between maternity and

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the Chicana road trip, the novel opens the possibility for a discussion of food/cooking and its relationship with mother-daughter bonding. I leave it to other scholars to pursue this worthwhile inquiry.