

Mexicanized Melodrama: Sandra Cisneros' Literary Translation of the Telenovela in *Caramelo*

By Amara Graf

While some literary critics, such as Sonia Saldívar-Hull, Susan Griffin, Ana María Almería¹ and Belkys Torres² analyze the telenovela in Sandra Cisneros' *Woman Hollering Creek*, they focus exclusively on this collection of short stories and have overlooked the fact that while Cisneros' initial engagement with the telenovela is evident in her short fiction and poetry,³ she provides a more extensive and critical examination of the popular cultural form in her novel *Caramelo* (2002). Cisneros explicitly directs readers' and critics' analysis and interpretation of her fiction in relation to the telenovela by inserting a lengthy footnote in the novel in which she explains the importance and socio-historical function of the telenovela as a national medium through which mythologies about heterosexual romance are disseminated. By defining the telenovela genre and theorizing the importance of the form, within the Mexican culture specifically, Cisneros helps to shape the critical, academic conversation about the telenovela in Chicana literature. In order to appreciate Cisneros' longtime engagement with and extensive focus on the telenovela form, it is imperative to consider her novel not solely her early collection of stories, because she works up to and through her own literary translation of the popular genre in *Caramelo*. Cisneros enacts a literary border crossing moving from the telenovela to literature and back again; *Caramelo* is the culmination of her efforts to translate the telenovela into a literary genre and thereby create a Mexicanized melodrama.

When Ana Castillo published *So Far From God* in 1993, Sandra Cisneros described it as a "Chicana telenovela" on the back of the Penguin paperback edition. Presumably, Cisneros readily identifies Castillo's text as a telenovela because of her preoccupation with the form in literature. Although Castillo effectively beat Cisneros to the punch in terms of translating the telenovela into novel form, rather than discourage Cisneros, it ostensibly renews her resolve to write her own. While Cisneros' initial engagement with the telenovela is evident in her short fiction *Woman Hollering Creek* published two years prior to Castillo's novel, it is not until the publication of her novel *Caramelo* that Cisneros successfully adapts the telenovela into a literary genre and, provides an extensive and critical examination of the form.

Cisneros explicitly directs readers' and critics' analysis and interpretation of her work by identifying the characteristics of the telenovela genre upon which it draws.⁴ She enters the critical discussion surrounding her work by inserting a lengthy footnote about telenovelas, identifying the characteristics of the genre (verisimilitude, unbelievability, melodrama, exaggeration, focus on domestic sphere, romance) upon which the novel draws. The fact that Cisneros specifically chooses to use the note, a textual element characteristic of academic writing, to convey relevant socio-historical information, underscores her interest in guiding the critical dialogue surrounding the novel.⁵ In the note, Cisneros explains the socio-historical context out of which the telenovela genre emerges to help readers understand the cultural capital and popularity of the telenovela form within the Mexican culture. Cisneros interrupts the text with a footnote in the chapter "A Scene in a Hospital That Resembles a Telenovela When In Actuality It's the Telenovelas That Resemble This Scene" (402). The chapter title (in a style

similar to an episode summary) directly references the form to highlight the connection between telenovelas and life as well as Cisneros' manipulation of the genre in her text.⁶ Cisneros' rather lengthy footnote, which elucidates well the connection between real life and the telenovelas that represent it, is critical to my argument thus I include it here in its entirety:

A famous chronicler of Mexico City stated Mexicans have modeled their storytelling after the melodrama of a TV soap opera, but I would argue that the telenovela has emulated Mexican life. Only societies that have undergone the tragedy of a revolution and a near century of inept political leadership could love with such passion the telenovela, storytelling at its very best since it has the power of a true Scheherazade—it keeps you coming back for more. In my opinion, it's not the storytelling in telenovelas that's so bad, but the insufferable acting. The Mexicans and Russians love telenovelas with a passion, perhaps because their twin histories confirm *La Divina Providencia* the greatest telenovela screenwriter of all, with more plot twists and somersaults than anyone would ever think believable. However, if our lives were actually recorded as telenovelas, the stories would appear so ridiculous, so naively unbelievable, so preposterous, ill-conceived, and ludicrous that only the elderly, who have witnessed a lifetime of astonishments, would ever accept it as true. (409)

With the critical vocabulary that she provides in the footnote (melodrama, political power, unbelievability, divine providence, history) readers, are able to produce a more nuanced reading of Cisneros' text, one which calls attention to the transgressive nature of the text, via telenovelas.⁷ Cisneros' intervention in the text establishes the telenovela as a national form through which mythologies about heterosexual romance are disseminated and emphasizes the connection between the popular cultural form and literature, which are linked through storytelling and narration. In addition, Cisneros' inclusion of the lengthy footnote also underscores that *La Divina Providencia*, as the female creative power, is the ultimate storyteller, and posits that telenovelas, while considered unbelievable, also achieve a high degree of verisimilitude given that they reflect the dramatic nature of our lives. Her decision to use the scholarly footnote as a place to convey the historical and cultural context of the telenovela form not only indicates an effort to direct critical interpretations of her work, but also reveals Cisneros' attempts to work out in fiction issues surrounding the power of popular culture forms to influence gender politics on a national scale.

By making the connection between the national form and literature explicit, Cisneros compels the reader to read and interpret her fiction through the lens of the telenovela and recognize it as a Mexicanized melodrama (an incarnation of the melodrama genre that is specific to or grows out of the Mexican culture). Also Cisneros' emphasis on the telenovela's popularity and ubiquitousness within the Mexican culture reveals the power of the form within this cultural context to transmit information about such ideas as gender roles and heterosexual romance. She critically examines the mythologies along the lines of race/ethnicity, class, and gender that the telenovela promotes and revises the genre, challenging traditional female gender roles of wives and mothers which foster female dependence, servitude and sacrifice to imagine the possibility

of independent, self-sufficient, and empowered women. Cisneros grapples with the positive and negative aspects of the telenovela genre to illustrate how an escapist form of entertainment that reinforces traditional gender roles can also prompt women to reflect critically upon and resist or reject their subordinate roles within the patriarchy.⁸

Overall, my analysis of Cisneros' entire body of work reveals that her critical reflection on the telenovela begins in her earlier work and comes to the fore in *Caramelo*. Cisneros' fiction illustrates Lopez's idea that as "texts of popular culture" telenovelas operate "as possible sites of hegemonic resistance" and "a possible vehicle for cultural contestation" (Lopez 12-13). While her stories highlight that telenovelas can reinforce traditional gender roles and promote discrimination based on race, class, gender, etc., they also provides example of characters that are critical viewers who challenge the conservative ideology promoted within the telenovela form. Throughout her work, Cisneros traces the evolution of female protagonists and emphasizes the ways in which Chicanas, collectively through discursive networks,⁹ critically engage telenovelas often encouraging each other to become resistant readers¹⁰ and reject the mythical romance narrative in favor of female solidarity and a reality in which women seek help in each other more than men.¹¹

While Cisneros incorporates and reflects upon the telenovela genre in *Woman Hollering Creek*, she engages the popular cultural form even more critically in the novel *Caramelo*. Given that Cisneros builds up to *Caramelo* for quite some time, publishing the novel over ten years after initially flirting with the idea of the telenovela in *Woman Hollering Creek*, it seems suspect that she would feel compelled to add a footnote explaining and contextualizing the form. While clearly this move serves to make subtext, text, it also may hint at Cisneros' effort to bring the telenovela, and all of its attendant critical and cultural conversations, to a wider audience. So, while Cisneros follows Castillo's lead, creating a family saga every bit as melodramatic as a telenovela, she also explains her engagement with the form upfront, which Castillo sees no reason to do.

Described as "a riotous family fiesta," "crowded with the souvenirs and memories of the dramas of everyday life," *Caramelo* exhibits many of the formal characteristics of the telenovela genre (episodic, melodramatic, focus on domestic sphere, etc.).¹² Yet Cisneros simultaneously revises the genre, challenging the mythologies about race/ethnicity, class, and gender it promotes, to illustrate that love does not always overcome social conventions which prohibit the union of people from different racial or class backgrounds, or end in marriage. The novel captures and reflects the dramatic intrigue of real life thus further underscoring that art imitates life, a point Cisneros makes in the footnote. In this exaggerated family saga, the primary narrator, Celaya, known affectionately as Lala, traces the convoluted history of the Reyes family. Moving back and forth in time, she narrates different episodes from the lives of her grandparents (Narcisco and Soledad), the story of her own parents' relationship (Inocencio and Zoila), and her experiences growing up among extended family members, aunts, uncles, and cousins. For example, the first section of the novel, "Recuerdo de Acapulco," (Memory of Acapulco) begins with Lala's memory of her family's annual trip across country to visit their grandparents in Mexico City. The narrative then shifts to a time before Lala was born, in "When I was Dirt" as she narrates the story of her grandparents. In the third and final section, Lala segues to telling the stories of her own parents as the title indicates, "The Eagle and the Serpent: or My Mother and

My Father,” calling to mind the creation of Mexico and the image of the nation in the flag. The episodic nature of the text creates a sense of the passage of time similar to that in real life which allows readers to connect the world of the story with the world outside the text.¹³ This narrative technique which is characteristic of the telenovela genre blurs the line between fiction and reality to create a text with a high degree of verisimilitude. Cisneros creates narratively what telenovelas create visually.

The episodic nature of the text is particularly pronounced in the second section of the novel in which Lala converses with her grandparents as she attempts to tell their stories. The back and forth dialogue between Lala and the Awful Grandmother is visually marked as the Grandmother’s comments are interspersed throughout the section in bold face type.¹⁴ By structuring the novel as a series of conversations between Lala and her other family members, Cisneros creates the sense of a dramatic performance as if the narrator is telling the story to an audience. She mimics the logic of oral storytelling evident in most serial dramas, in which events unfold in whatever order the narrator chooses to reveal them and are not necessarily causally linked.¹⁵ The connection between storytelling and telenovelas is made explicitly clear in the footnote, as previously noted, in which Cisneros states that like Scheherazade captivating the Persian king night after night with her stories, telenovelas keep audience members tuning in night after night for the next episode.

Cisneros emphasizes the power of Lala’s storytelling skills throughout the novel. Lala’s consciousness of her role as the narrator is a rhetorical device Cisneros utilizes to call attention to the artifice of telling stories and emphasize that invention and exaggeration are integral to the process of narration as in telenovelas. In their ongoing conversation, Lala and the Awful Grandmother argue about the role of the truth in storytelling. From the outset, Lala states that she is relating the family stories “how I heard or didn’t hear them;” and presents things “how I imagine the stories happened, then” (89). She underscores the fact that a good story is not one, which faithfully represents the past, but rather one full of drama: “I have to exaggerate. It’s just for the sake of the story. I need details. And you never tell me anything” (92). Lala explains to the Awful Grandmother, “You don’t remember or you don’t want to remember the details, and for a story to be believable you have to have details” (124). In order to be considered believable, a narrative must have enough details to be life-like, to seem real, and ironically, as Lala indicates, whether or not these details are true or false is not relevant.

Cisneros wrestles with the question of whether telenovelas imitate life or life imitates telenovelas, and ultimately, she concludes that fictional narratives, like telenovelas, merely reflect and can never eclipse the drama inherent in real life. While the Awful Grandmother complains that Lala’s version of the story is “nothing but lies from beginning to end,” Lala states, “they’re not lies, they’re healthy lies. So as to fill in the gaps. You’re just going to have to trust me. It will turn out pretty in the end, I promise” (188). Lala indicates that in the context of telling stories, lies become “healthy,” a natural and perhaps even beneficial part of crafting a tale; arguably lies, exaggerations of the truth, enhance the story. Thus the ability to tell healthy lies is a form of artifice necessary to tell a good story and does not detract from the story’s believability but rather enhances it. Lala questions the Awful Grandmother, “What kind of story would this be with just facts?” to which Soledad declares, “The truth!” (156). Lala responds by stating that, “it depends on whose truth you’re talking about. The same story becomes a different story

depending on who is telling it” (156). In this dialogue, Cisneros emphasizes that truth is relative and facts change depending on the narrator. As the narrator, Lala is not concerned with seeking the truth or writing a historical account of the past, but rather with creating a narrative, telling a good story by weaving together exaggerated truths and healthy lies. Lala’s aim as a narrator reflects Cisneros’ goal as an author, namely to craft a good story, which, like a telenovela, achieves a high level of verisimilitude by blending exaggeration with truth.

Throughout the novel, Cisneros illustrates how Mexicans conceptualize the dramatic and unexpected course of their lives in terms of the telenovela. She describes characters’ direct engagement with the popular cultural form and how it informs and influences their understanding of the vicissitudes of life. For example, the Awful Grandmother envisions the story of her life unfolding in a way similar to a telenovela. As Lala begins telling her Grandmother’s story, (including her mother’s sudden death, her father’s subsequent remarriage and his decision to give her away to a cousin in Mexico City), the Awful Grandmother interrupts her to say, “So this part of the story if it were a *fotonovela* or *telenovela* could be called *Solamente Soledad* [Only Loneliness] or *Sola en el mundo* [Alone in the World], or *I’m Not to Blame*, or *What an Historia I’ve Lived*” (95). Telenovelas are the means through which the Awful Grandmother understands and interprets her life and the world around her. This is similar to Cleófilas in “Woman Hollering Creek” who as a young girl growing up in Mexico watching the telenovelas with her friend Chela thinks she will live like the heroine of a telenovela when she gets married and moves to the United States.

Cisneros further reinforces in the last chapter (“The Children and Grandchildren of Zoila and Inocencio Reyes Cordially Invite You to Celebrate Thirty Years of Marriage”) how telenovelas serve as a mirror through which viewers understand and see reflected the chaotic history of their own lives. In the midst of his anniversary party, Inocencio reflects on the unimaginable twists and turns of fate and tells Lala that life is like a telenovela:

Imagine the unimaginable, Father says, looking out into the dance floor at the bodies shaking and marching and prancing and strutting in a circus circle. —Imagine the unimaginable. Think of the most unbelievable thing that could happen and, believe me, Destiny will outdo you and come up with something even more unbelievable. Life’s like that. My Got! What a *telenovela* our lives are! (428)

Looking at the guests, family members and friends, dancing at his anniversary party, Inocencio reflects upon his life, not only his marriage, but the family he has created and realizes that “life’s never like you plan” (426). He revels in the amazing wonder of destiny— the creative power to weave a telenovela out of each life— interspersing lives with more drama and intrigue, both pain and joy, than any person could plan herself. Lala concurs with her father’s reflections:

It’s true. La Divina Providencia is the most imaginative writer. Plotlines convolute and spiral, lives intertwine, coincidences collide, seemingly random happenings are laced with knots, figure eights, and double loops, designs more intricate than the fringe of a silk *rebozo*. No, I couldn’t make this up. Nobody could make up our lives. (429)

Cisneros culminates the novel by reemphasizing that the convoluted episodes of a riveting telenovela, like the interwoven threads of a beautiful tapestry, reflect the exquisite, intricate patterns of our lives as created by La Divina Providencia.

Like a telenovela, Cisneros' novel hinges on the tension between reality/convention and fiction/desire.¹⁶ From the outset Cisneros announces that the text is an exaggeration as indicated by the subtitle "Puro Cuento" (Pure Story) and the epigraph "Cuéntame algo, aunque sea una mentira" (Tell me a story, even if it's a lie). But she creates a sense of ambiguity about the novel by describing it in contradictory terms, as a pure (authentic or true) story (fiction or tale). This is an oxymoron, a combination of opposites: truth and fiction. She implies that the narrative, while a complete fabrication, also has a genuine, life-like quality. The way Cisneros frames the story, by underscoring the narrator's ambiguous relationship with the "truth," draws the reader's attention to the exaggerated, unbelievable aspects of the text. Cisneros admits that she is a "hocicona" (bigmouth, talker) and the stories that follow in the novel "are nothing but story," but she declares that as a storyteller she is compelled to ask questions and create believable answers, not tell the truth. Cisneros blurs the line between fact and fiction indicating that with the passage of time it becomes difficult to distinguish between invented stories of the past and what really happened. The tension between the world of desire and the world of social convention is evident in the novel where invented stories, which reflect one's projected desires, overcome and outlive real life, in which people must conform to social convention and often do not get what they want.

In addition to highlighting the tension between the world of desire and the world of social convention at the core of the telenovela genre, Cisneros also exposes mythologies relating to race/ethnicity and class, disseminated through the form. Like many telenovela heroines, Lala's Aunt Light-Skin falls in love with a man who her family disapproves of for many reasons: he was previously married in a church, works as a tire salesman, is almost twenty years older than Aunt, and "much-too-much-too Indian for Mother to approve" (271). Their union is forbidden by her family because of his lower social standing due in large part to his race and class. This left the young lovers only one solution, as he explained to Aunt, "there's only one way for us to marry; that's for me to steal you" (271). And that, as Aunt concludes, is how they were finally married to which Lala responds excitedly, "—Stolen! Like kidnapped? All for love, that's too cool, Aunt. Your life would make a terrific *telenovela*. Did you ever think about that?" (271). Like her grandmother and father, Lala interprets the drama of life in relation to a telenovela further underscoring the power of this popular cultural form to influence viewers' perceptions of the world and their place in it. Romanticizing the excitement of Aunt's marriage, Lala imagines it must have been like the passionate, forbidden love affairs represented in telenovelas.

Cisneros highlights the danger of over-identifying, as Lala does, with the idealized romance narratives presented in telenovelas. Aunt's love affair does not end with a happy marriage; instead, she discovers her husband's been unfaithful, evident in the big welts and scratches on his back. She warns Lala, "You be careful with love, Lalita. To love is a terrible, wonderful thing. The pleasure reminds you—I am alive! But the pain reminds you of the same thing—!Ay! I am alive. You're too young to know what I'm talking about, but one day you'll say, 'My Aunt Light-Skin, she knew about life'" (275). Aunt's reversal of fortune, from being kidnapped for love to being cheated on by the same man, is a common device used in a telenovela narrative to increase the dramatic tension of the plot. But, in this case, there is no

requisite happy ending (a key element in the narrative formula of a telenovela). Auntie suffers the agony of lost love and subsequently enters into a relationship with her boss, but never remarries.

In describing Auntie Light-Skin's subsequent relationship with her wealthy boss, Señor Vidaurri, Cisneros further illustrates the mythologies regarding race and class promoted within telenovelas, which frequently depict differences in race, class, and social position as insurmountable obstacles for couples. Auntie's relationship with Señor Vidaurri becomes a focus of attention within the family because of its ambiguous nature, crossing the line from professional to romantic. Lala's mother Zoila, Auntie Licha and Ninfa note the elegant, expensive clothes from Carson Pirie Scott and Marshall Field's that Auntie Light-Skin wears to impress Señor Vidaurri, which she obviously cannot afford on a secretary's salary. Lala describes Señor Vidaurri as a "very important man" who wears "pearl-gray suits" and "handsome fedoras" and drives a "big black car" (32). Even as a young girl, Lala is sensitive to markers of race and class between men and women. She identifies Señor Vidaurri as "important" because he is the owner of a company and has "too much money" (32). Cisneros indicates that Señor Vidaurri is able to court Auntie Light-Skin, in spite of his dark skin, because of his high-class status, implying that Auntie Light-Skin would not waste time on a darker skinned man of a lower class.

Their racial difference calls to mind the dualistic, highly moral world of telenovelas in which, characters are depicted in black and white terms as either bad or good. Although, Cisneros complicates this, as Señor Vidaurri, although dark skinned, is a good man given that he treats Auntie Light-Skin with respect and supports her financially, and Auntie, although lighter skinned, is criticized by the women in her family for engaging in a personal relationship with her boss. Señor Vidaurri's relationship to Auntie Light-Skin is clearly more than professional, given that he takes care to chauffeur her to and from the office each day and even pays her daughter's weekly allowance. Although, Lala explains this as a result of the fact that he is Auntie's boss and has a surplus of cash, on some level she acknowledges that unlike a grandfather, or another senior male relative, who is expected to provide financially for his family, a boss has no obligation to provide for his employees' family members. Señor Vidaurri's actions indicate that he considers Auntie Light-Skin to be more important than simply an employee. However, despite their mutual affection for one another, Señor Vidaurri and Auntie Light-Skin do not end up married like the couples in telenovelas. Cisneros deviates from the typical romance narrative and presents a more realistic counter narrative in which the lovers are forced to compromise their desires in order to comply with social convention that prohibits the union of men and women from different economic/social classes and racial/ethnic groups.¹⁷

Cisneros infuses the novel with the language of excess and hyperbole and fills it with melodramatic scenes to highlight the mythology, perpetuated within telenovelas, that Mexicans have an exaggerated, obsessive view of love and romance. For example, Cisneros concludes the epigraph at the beginning of the text with a list of Mexican *piropos* (compliments) often embroidered on pillows, "*Eres Mi Vida, Sueño Contigo Mi Amor, Suspiro Por Ti, Sólo Tú*" (You Are My Life, I Dream With You My Love, I Breathe For You, Only You). But these sentiments, like the embroidery, fade. The *piropos*, which Cisneros describes as "sugary as any chuchuluco" (sweet pastry or caramel), epitomize the melodramatic tone of the text. Cisneros further explains that "there is no translation in English" for the Spanish word *piropos*, "except perhaps 'harassment' (in another age, these were called 'gallantries')." —¡Ay! *Mamacita*, if I die who will

kiss you? —How sad there isn't a *tortilla* big enough to wrap you up in, you're that *exquisite*. —Virgen de Guadalupe, here is your Juan Dieguito!" (156). Cisneros utilizes the overly sweet, exaggerated language of *piropos* to underscore the exaggerated obsessive way in which love and romance are depicted in telenovelas.

Cisneros also uses melodramatic language to reveal another mythology upon which telenovelas are based, namely that love must be torturous.¹⁸ She provides examples of the melodramatic dialogue characteristic of telenovelas: "Qué intentas ocultar? Por qué eres tan cruel conmigo? Te encanta hacerme sufrir. Por qué me mortificas?" (15).¹⁹ "Say any of the above," Cisneros explains, "or say anything twice, slower and more dramatic the second time 'round, and it will sound like the dialogue of any telenovela" (15). She acknowledges the melodramatic style, characteristic of the telenovela genre and mimics this in order to emphasize how the shows equate or associate love with pain and torture. For example, Cisneros' description of Aunt Licha's violent response to Uncle Fat-Face's infidelity²⁰ is like a scene out of a telenovela:

Once Aunty almost tried to kill herself because of Uncle Fat-Face. —My own husband! What a barbarity! A prostitute's disease from my own husband. Imagine! Ay, get him out of here! I don't ever want to see you again. *Lárgate!* [Go Away!] You disgust me, *me das asco*, you *cochino!* [You make me sick, you pig!] You're not fit to be the father of my children. I'm going to kill myself! Kill myself!!! Which sounds much more dramatic in Spanish. —*Me mato! Me maaaaaaaatoooooo!!!* [I will kill myself!] The big kitchen knife, the one Aunty dips in a glass of water to cut the boy's birthday cakes, pointed toward her own sad heart. (11)

Cisneros conveys excessive emotion by interweaving dramatic phrases in Spanish, emphasized by multiple exclamation points and the elongated enunciation of the final word that is visually and linguistically drawn out as if to symbolize Licha's slow, painful death. Cisneros illustrates the mythology disseminated in telenovelas that a woman will willingly sacrifice her life for love and thus, allow her husband's foolish choices to determine her fatal end. But in the end Licha tells Uncle Fat Face, "Lárgate!"

Cisneros further emphasizes the mythology that love involves suffering and pain in her description of fotonovelas, a popular cultural form similar to the telenovela but more sexually explicit and violent. The sensationalist magazines claim to represent true stories (evident in the title of one popular fotonovela, *¡Casos reales!*, Real Cases). While telenovelas are sanitized romance narratives with a clear moral or religious message that present lovers transcending class boundaries to be together, fotonovelas are obscene narratives that glorify violence between men and women and present no escape for the characters who are relegated to low income, working class lives. Despite the distinctions between telenovelas and fotonovelas, they are both national forms that promote the mythology that love is violent. For example, the Awful Grandmother brings out a stack of her favorite fotonovelas with titles like "Virgen Santísima, You Killed Her!" [...] 'I Killed the Love of My Life,' 'Don't Make Me Commit a Craziess'" (63). The first two titles include an accusation and admission of murder motivated by love, and the third implies that love may cause people to act irrationally. Cisneros refers to the fotonovela form in "Woman Hollering Creek" and describes how Cleófilas' ideas about love are influenced by both forms of

mass media the foto- and tele-novelas.²¹ She returns to the fotonovela again in *Caramelo* to emphasize the way the magazines serve to normalize sexual violence.

The ways in which fotonovelas promote the idea that love is violent is highlighted when Lala asks Aunt Light-Skin if loving with such passion is good and Aunt responds, “It isn’t good or bad, it just is. Look, when you don’t know how to use your emotions, your emotions use you. That’s why so many *pobres* wind up on the cover of *¡Alarma!* magazine” like that *pobrecita* “who made pozole out of her unfaithful husband’s head. *Qué coraje, ¿verdad?* Can you imagine how mad she must’ve been to make *pozole* out of his head?” (274-5). Instead of denouncing the violence depicted by the gruesome act of a wife cooking her husband’s head, Aunt is awestruck by the depth of the woman’s anger and courage. In contrast to Cleófilas in “Woman Hollering Creek,” for whom the domestic sphere is a source of violence, the woman in the fotonovela utilizes the confined space to literally cook up her revenge and liberation. Although Aunt speaks admiringly of the women who appear on the cover of *¡Alarma!*, she differentiates herself from them by explaining to Lala that she put her anger to good use, and made a life for herself and Antonieta. By describing the discursive network formed between Lala and her Aunt, Cisneros illustrates how the destructive mythologies about romance, such as love is obsessive and potentially violent, which are disseminated through popular culture forms like telenovelas and fotonovelas become normalized and accepted.

Cisneros also reexamines how the national myth of Prince Popocatepetl and Princess Iztaccíhuatl further emphasizes the assumption that love is based in dominance and violence (a theme she also explores in the story “Bien Pretty”).²² Like the telenovela, Cisneros revisits the twin volcano myth in her fiction because of what it reinforces about heterosexual romance; it teaches women the value of self-sacrifice and suffering. Grandfather describes the myth of Popo and Ixta as “a Mexican love story” thereby establishing the national icon as a telenovela narrative. He tells Lala that “once, under the sky and on the earth there was a prince and a princess” and they loved each other (57). However, like most couples in telenovelas there are obstacles that separate the two lovers, as Grandfather explains:

But because the families of Ixta and Popo hated each other, they had to keep their love a secret. But then something happened, I forget what, except I know he killed her. And then as he watched her die, he was so overcome with her beauty he knelt down and wept. And then they both turned into volcanoes. (57)

In response to Grandfather’s insufficient explanation for Ixta’s tragic demise, Lala questions why Popo violently killed the woman he loved. She questions the male dominance and aggression depicted in traditional images of and myths surrounding the story of Popo and Ixta; she demands to know the source of such violence against women. Lala asks, “But if he loved her so much, Abuelito, why did he kill her?” to which Grandfather replies, “Well, I don’t know. I don’t know. That’s a good question. I don’t know. I suppose that’s how Mexicans love, I suppose” (57). While Grandfather interprets the national myth surrounding the volcanoes as an act of male aggression and violence against women, in the original version of the myth, Popo goes off to war and delays in returning thereby leading Ixta to conclude that he died in battle and thus succumb to her own death due to grief.

Even when Lala presses him for more information, Grandfather admits he does not know why Popo killed Ixta but never questions his assumption that Ixta's death was the result of an act of male violence. Grandfather's comments reveal the fact that he does not consider an unprovoked act of violence against a woman a surprising event within the context of a romantic relationship. His only explanation for male violence in this context is that such violence is characteristic of the way Mexicans love implying that there is something inherently violent about Mexican men or the way that they demonstrate their love to Mexican women. In this scene, Cisneros shows that the men as well as the women in the Reyes family believe the mythology that love involves suffering, violence, and even death, which is promoted within national forms like the telenovela and upheld by iconic national images, like Popo and Ixta. This idea leads young women like Lala to conclude, as Cleófilas does, that to suffer for love is good.

The way Grandfather describes Popo's reaction to his supposed murder of Ixta follows a pattern similar to the cycle of domestic violence in which the man is overcome with grief and regret after physically abusing his female partner. Yet perhaps it is even worse in this case because Grandfather explains that Popo is moved to tears by Ixta's beauty and not by the fact that he killed her. It is still the same pattern of the man, in this case Popo, depicted in the active role, gazing at the woman with a combination of admiration for her beauty and sadness at the recognition of the violence he has wrecked upon her body. This image echoes the scene in "Woman Hollering Creek," when Juan Pedro is crying with his head in Cleófilas' lap after beating her.

Cisneros examines how popular romance narratives collude with national icons and mythology to promote the assumption that love and pleasure are linked to suffering and violence. This is particularly evident in Lala's description of the picture, "El rpto" from a 1965 Mexican calendar in which she questions the etymological and linguistic associations in Spanish of the words rapture and rape: "A white horse, a handsome *charro*, and in his rapturous arms, a swooning beauty, her silk *rebozo* and blouse sliding off one sexy shoulder. The horse raising one hoof in the air, proud as any bronze statue. *El rpto*. I wonder if that means "The Rape." And I wonder if "rapture" and "rape" come from the same word" (312-3). Cisneros implies that like Lala, young women are often seduced by the romantic image of the handsome *charro* (traditional Mexican cowboy) with a suit like the one mariachis wear and the beautiful woman wearing a *rebozo* (Mexican shawl) and overlook the potential danger to which one is exposed in intimacy as the title of the piece suggests.

Lala gazes at the image of the "*charro* carrying off his true love, a woman as limp as if she's sleeping" and fantasizes that it might be "The moment before a kiss or just after, his face hovering above hers. *El rpto*. The Rapture. And for a moment, I'm carried out of here on the back of that horse, in the arms of that *charro*" (363). Lala envisions love as an escape and imagines riding off in the *charro*'s arms. There is a sacred aura about the image, the *charro*'s head glows with light like a holy man, while he holds his true love, a woman draped in a light-blue shawl reminiscent of the Virgin Mary. This suggests the sacred and naturalness of the image of man as savior. Yet a sinister element remains. The light glows behind the *charro*'s head "as if" he were holy, implying that it is an illusion of holiness that does not actually exist. And the woman in his arms is limp, as if sleeping, or perhaps dead. Furthermore, they are running away from, perhaps evading the troubling past, of a dark town. Despite these dark details or hints of

distress, Lala, like Cleófilas and Lupe, initially clings to the romanticized depictions of love reinforced in popular culture and national mythology.

Believing in the mythology of the idealized romance narrative, Lala decides to run off to Mexico City with Ernesto Calderón, one of her brothers' friends. Like the love sick heroine of a telenovela, Lala believes destiny purposely put Ernesto in her life, as she explains, "Just like that picture on the Mexican calendar, *El rapto*, Ernesto arrives in my life to rescue me" (368). Cisneros shows explicitly how national iconography in calendar art influences Lala's expectations and understanding of romance in her own life. Not long after they start dating, Lala convinces Ernesto to "steal" her (just like Aunty Light-Skin was stolen by her lover). As a naïve young girl, Lala believes in the mythologies of heterosexual romance promoted in popular cultural forms, like movies and telenovelas. She fantasizes about being carried off by her handsome prince like the woman in the Mexican Calendar and is shocked when Ernesto shatters this dream. After spending a rapturous night making love to him, Lala wakes up alone. Hours later Ernesto returns to explain that in a fit of religious zealotry and excessive guilt he realized he cannot marry her and abandons Lala with a broken heart in a hotel in Mexico City. Lala cries all day and night, but just like Aunty Light-Skin said, "sometimes that's the only way you know you're alive" (389).

In describing Lala's process of disillusionment (which echoes that of Cleófilas), Cisneros underscores the danger of living one's life-like a telenovela. Although Aunty Light-Skin tried to warn her about the dangers of love, Lala had to experience it for herself. After her "abduction," Lala realizes that "the square on the kitchen door where that old Mexican calendar once stood" is empty; "someone tore it down before I got back. But that rectangle, a paler shade than the rest of the door, just shouts, *What's missing here?*" (399). The picture has been taken away, along with her virginity and her idealized visions of love. She is as empty and vacant as the pale rectangle on the kitchen door. And later when she discovers Ernesto "knocked up some little católica" and got married, Lala thinks, "it's just like the story of the volcanoes my Little Grandfather told me when I was a kid. That's just the way Mexicans love. They're not happy till they kill you" (399). Based on her experience, Lala, like Cleófilas and Lupe, learns that romantic relationships do not always end with the marriage of the happy couple.

Cisneros provides an alternative version of the romance narrative as she shows the painful process by which a young naïve woman matures to realize the fallacy of her romantic fantasies. Lala also learns that she cannot alter the plan divine providence has destined for her. She explains, "You're the author of the *telenovela* of your life right. Comedy or tragedy? Choose. Ernesto. He was my destiny, but not my destination. That's what I'm thinking" (399). After her painful breakup with Ernesto, Lala realizes that her friend Viva's concept of being the author of the telenovela of her life does not mean that she can alter its course, but rather that she can decide how she will respond to what happens. Like Cleófilas who decides to leave her abusive husband instead of resigning herself to a life of suffering, Lala also decides that although the heartbreak may have been tragic, she will not allow one event to determine the rest of her life. She may have been destined to run away with Ernesto, but she does not have to let that be the end of the story. Cisneros also revises the telenovela genre by depicting empowered women, who although initially convinced by the mythology of the romance narrative, end up taking action to avoid making the same mistakes in the future.

Cisneros further revises the telenovela genre by presenting an example of a young female protagonist, Lala's friend Viva Ozuna, who rejects the traditional romance narrative outright, purposely choosing not to get married to pursue her education instead. Lala meets Viva, another one of the poor girls at Immaculate Conception, during work after-school while straightening desks in the study hall (327). Fittingly, Viva, whose name translated literally in English means alive, exhibits a level of independence and confidence that surprises and inspires Lala. With her make-up (layers of mascara, sparkling blush, gobs of lip gloss) and her provocative clothing (uniform blouse knotted at the midriff and skirt rolled up high), Viva commands attention, particularly that of Mr. Zoran Darko, the new algebra teacher. As his name suggests, Mr. Darko ultimately proves to be a shadow hanging over Viva's life. Lala is impressed with Viva's bold behavior, from hanging on the door of Mr. Darko's red Corvette convertible to stealing gold lamé gloves from the *Vogue*, a ritzy store in downtown San Antonio. But when Viva shows up in the school lunchroom to announce that she's engaged to "Zorro" (her nickname for Mr. Darko), Lala's shock is only paralleled by her anger at being abandoned by her friend. After listening to Lala complain that their plan of moving to San Francisco together after graduation is ruined, Viva explains,

Listen, sweets, it's simple. You're the author of the *telenovela* of your life. You want a comedy or a tragedy? If the episode's a tearjerker, you can hang yourself or hang in there. Choose. I believe in destiny as much as you do, but sometimes you've gotta help your destiny along. (345)

Viva neither feels bound to her fate nor allows herself to become a victim of circumstance. Through their conversations, Viva teaches Lala not to accept a life of suffering, which illustrates how through discursive networks women can encourage and empower each other to reject traditional gender roles.

Like Lupe and Cleófilas, Viva realizes that she is the agent of her own life. Ironically although she describes her life as a telenovela, she acts unlike the typical telenovela heroine, by taking control of her life and making decisions about how it will unfold instead of letting things happen to her. Viva acknowledges that sometimes parts of life, like episodes in a telenovela, are painful, but one still has the power to decide how to react— with resigned despair or renewed conviction to endure. She tells Lala that while she believes in destiny, she also believes in *echando una mano* (giving a hand) to urge or influence a particular outcome. For example, although Viva initially agrees to get engaged to Mr. Darko, in the end she decides not to marry him. As Lala states, "Viva's smart. Broke up with Darko after she started college. She finally figured out she didn't want to *marry* Darko, she wanted to *be* him. Isn't that funny?" (399). Viva exemplifies a woman who takes responsibility for and exercises agency over the course of her life and refuses to conform to traditional gender roles. Cisneros rejects the mythologies regarding gender and romance reinforced within telenovelas and presents a female protagonist who instead of wanting to marry a man, wants to be a man and live with the same level of freedom and autonomy that a man enjoys.

Instead of concluding the narrative with Lala's marriage to Ernesto or another young man, Cisneros emphasizes the importance of female solidarity and concludes the novel with the Awful Grandmother encouraging Lala to prioritize her needs and allow herself time to mature

before getting married and starting a family. The Awful Grandmother returns after her death, to counsel Lala about love: “There’s no sin in falling in love with your heart and with your body, but wait till you’re old enough to love yourself first [...] Ay, Celaya, don’t wind up like me, settling with the first man who paid me a compliment” (407). The Awful Grandmother emphasizes the need for Lala to learn to love herself and become a whole person, as an individual, instead of seeking completion in someone else, or running off with the first man who gives her attention. Cisneros critiques the telenovela format through the lives of her characters to show that in reality not all romantic encounters end in marriage, marriage is not always blissful, and is not the only goal in a young woman’s life. Cisneros’ choice to deviate from the genre convention of ending the narrative with the marriage of the happy couple reveals her strong critique of the mythologies regarding gender and heterosexual romance promoted within the telenovela form.

But, at the same time that Cisneros critiques the romance narrative, she simultaneously incorporates aspects of the popular cultural form in the novel. She adheres to certain conventions of the telenovela genre, utilizing melodramatic devices, such as returns from the past, to create a compelling narrative for the reader. Like Lala, Cisneros herself wants to tell a good story and in the process she emphasizes that entertainment and/or escapism does not mean a lack of critical reflection. For example, Cisneros reveals hidden information towards the end of the novel to heighten the dramatic tension before resolving the conflict and concluding the story. She uses this narrative device to reveal the source of the problems in the relationship between Inocencio and Zoila and the tension between Zoila and her mother-in-law. While waiting to visit her father in the Intensive Care unit, Lala finds out from her Mother that Candelaria, the washerwoman’s daughter, whom she played with as a child in Mexico, is actually her half-sister. Zoila explains, “before me and him got married . . . he already had a kid. Out of wedlock I mean. I didn’t know about this before I married, and even after, nobody told me nothing. For the longest. His family kept it quiet. I didn’t find out till after I had all you kids” (403). She tells Lala that it was during their family vacation in Acapulco that the Awful Grandmother revealed the truth. Upon hearing her mother’s news, Lala recalls their vacation in Acapulco, “I think about Candelaria bobbing in the sea at Acapulco. The sun sparkling in the gold flecks all around her. Her face squinting that squint that I make, that Father makes. Her face suddenly Father’s face” (404). In this passage, Cisneros artfully crafts a scene right out of a telenovela, full of dramatic irony and intrigue. Lala suddenly understands the cause of the terrible fight between her mother and the Awful Grandmother on the way home from Acapulco. This episode also explains the grandmother’s nickname and confirms that she can indeed be awful. Now that Lala knows that she and Candelaria share the same father, the resemblance between their faces is obvious. In response to this information, Lala contemplates hiring a detective or placing an ad in the paper to discover Candelaria’s current whereabouts. She imagines, “how maybe a thousand washerwomen’s daughters would appear, a long line of daughters claiming to be my sister, telling stories more melodramatic than any *telenovela*” (427). The irony is that, the real life events in the Reyes’ family are as melodramatic as a telenovela, full of hidden identities, a child out of wedlock, and a long lost half-sister.

Not only is Candelaria’s true identity revealed to Lala at the end of the novel, but she also learns that the Awful Grandmother got pregnant before she was married. Inocencio explains to Lala, “when my father found out she was expecting, he wanted to run away, but it was great-

grandfather who reminded him we are Reyes, we are not dogs [...] thank God your great-grandfather had the wisdom of years to remind his son of his obligation” (427). Just like the Awful Grandmother does not confess this part of her past to Lala, neither does her father admit to having Candelaria out of wedlock. While he emphasizes that the Reyes men conduct themselves with respect and fulfill their obligations, Inocencio does not admit that he himself failed to do so. Although his name translates in English as innocent, Inocencio is not entirely without fault or flaws. However, his cryptic comments to Lala about avoiding mistakes and reckless things that may lead to bitter sadness later in life do suggest a sense of remorse or regret about his previous wrongdoing. Although he confides in Lala in hopes of preventing her from making the same mistakes, Inocencio also counsels her not to shamelessly reveal these dirty family secrets. As he says, “Promise your papa you won’t talk these things, Lalita. Ever. Promise” (430). Inocencio pleads with Lala to keep the past a secret, perhaps thinking this will prevent him from having to face the truth. Ultimately, Cisneros creates a telenovela narrative that provokes readers with the narration of dramatic events (infidelity, illegitimate children, loss of love), while pacifying readers by divulging the hidden details behind these family stories.

Although Cisneros does not provide a perfectly tidy ending typical of most telenovelas in which good and evil characters are rewarded and punished accordingly, she does show complex characters with positive and negative traits, like Inocencio and the Awful Grandmother, who allude to and on some level acknowledge their past mistakes. Cisneros utilizes a characteristic of the telenovela genre, the revelation of hidden information, to reveal the source of and resolve the conflict between Inocencio, the Awful Grandmother and Zoila. She incorporates aspects of the telenovela genre, while also critiquing the mythologies about race/ethnicity, class, and gender promoted within the popular cultural form. Cisneros addresses issues, like infidelity, in a real and honest way, showing the destruction it can cause in the family unit, while at the same time satisfying readers with a happy resolution by showing how one couple overcomes marital difficulties to celebrate their thirtieth wedding anniversary.

Cisneros engages the telenovela and fotonovela genres, as well as the twin volcano myth about Popo and Ixta, repeatedly throughout her fiction, to draw attention to the fact that these popular culture forms and national icons are mediums through which mythologies about heterosexual romance are disseminated. Her level of engagement evolves from a focus on obsessive love in poetry, to direct references to the telenovela in short fiction, and a more substantive and critical analysis of the genre in *Caramelo*. Cisneros incorporates key formal, stylistic, and thematic characteristics of the telenovela (from episodic narrative development to a focus on love and the domestic sphere, a melodramatic tone, and tension between the world of desire and the world of social convention) into the novel. She saturates *Caramelo* with references to the form and emphasizes how life is like a telenovela, only to reject its conventions in the end. However, she does not reject the form out right, but rather the mythologies disseminated within it. She succeeds in writing a literary translation of the telenovela, while simultaneously critiquing the popular culture form and guiding readers to see its oppressive aspects, thus showing that entertainment does not mean a lack of critical reflection.

She interrupts the narrative to guide readers’ attention to the oppressive aspects of the stories, such as domestic violence, told through the telenovela genre. While theorists, such as Saldívar-Hull, argue that telenovelas reinscribe traditional gender roles, Cisneros illustrates how

female viewers read the popular cultural form resistively and challenge mythologies about gender and romance, such as those that indicate women are inherently unstable and obsessive in relationships and that love involves suffering and violence. For example, the female protagonists Lupe, Cleófilas, and Lala, exemplify resistant readers who realize the myth of traditional romance and refuse to comply with strict female gender roles. Lupe literally redraws and reconceptualizes the national cultural myth of Popo/Ixta, placing the woman in a more active role, while Cleófilas rejects the traditional role of a silent, suffering woman and removes herself from an abusive relationship. Lala also realizes the illusion of love and romance promoted in popular cultural forms, such as the telenovela, fotonovela, and national icons (Popo/Ixta). She acknowledges and comes to accept the inherent tension between one's desires and reality; which requires one to face uncomfortable truths and accept that life, like love, is not always sweet somehow in the end. Although, as Lala learns from her friend Viva, one can determine how one will respond to life's unexpected twists instead of blindly accepting one's fate. Cisneros succeeds in translating the telenovela and creating a Mexicanized melodrama, which rejects the traditional romance narrative in favor of female independence and solidarity. Yet, she also surpasses Castillo, who wrote a Chicana telenovela first, by engaging in a meta-conversation in the paratext (the extensive footnote) about the telenovela and directing the critical discussion surrounding the popular cultural form, specifically in relation to Chicana literature. Cisneros outlines the specific cultural work the telenovela does, disseminating mythologies along the lines of race/ethnicity, class, gender, and sexuality, and explains how the form serves as a lens through which Mexicans understand and interpret the world. Thus, Cisneros' ultimate achievement is that she establishes the telenovela as a culturally derived critical form through which to interpret Chicana literature.

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¹ See Sonia Saldívar-Hull *Feminism on the Border* (2000), Susan Griffin "Resistance and Reinvention in Sandra Cisneros' *Woman Hollering Creek*" (1997) and Ana María Almería "Male and Female Roles in Mexican-American Society: Issues of Domestic Violence in "Woman Hollering Creek"" (2010). In these articles Saldívar-Hull, Griffin, and Almería focus solely on how Cisneros' stories underscore the negative aspects of the telenovela, namely the ways it can reinforce traditional gender roles and reify heterosexual romance, while failing to consider that some characters are also critical of telenovelas.

² While in her article, "Hybridity in Popular Culture: The Influence of Telenovelas on Chicana Literature" (2011), Belkys Torres provides a more nuanced reading of Cisneros' engagement with the telenovela than Saldívar-Hull, Griffin and Almería, she fails to extend her argument beyond Cisneros' collection of short stories *Woman Hollering Creek* to consider Cisneros' novel *Caramelo*. Furthermore, although Torres refers to Cisneros' *Woman Hollering Creek*, as a "teleNOVELa," visually denoting the interconnectedness between literature and serialized melodrama, she does not analyze or explain the literary roots of the telenovela. For more information about the interconnections between telenovelas and literature, see the introduction to my dissertation, *Literary Translations: Telenovelas in Contemporary Chicana Literature* (2008), in which I explain the evolution of the telenovela that, as Jesus Martín-Barbero notes, has its origins in the serialized melodrama of nineteenth-century European literature (like Dickens and Balzac). See Martín-Barbero *Communication, Culture and Hegemony: From the Media to Mediations* (1993) and "Memory and Form in the Latin American Soap Opera," *To Be Continued ... Soap operas around the world* Ed. Robert C. Allen (1995) in which he provides a detailed history of the melodrama genre in Latin America, going back to Europe in the 1800s, and evolving from newspaper serials and fotonovelas to radio and ultimately telenovelas.

³ For example, the poems in Cisneros' collection *Loose Woman* (1994) focus primarily on romantic love with melodramatic titles such as "I am so in Love I Grow a New Hymen," "I am so Depressed I Feel Like Jumping in the River Behind my House but Won't Because I am Thirty-Eight and not Eighteen" and "I am on My Way to Oklahoma to Bury the Man I Nearly Left My Husband For."

⁴ While Cisneros directs readers' attention to the importance of the telenovela in the novel, other critics examine *Caramelo* in relation to language: Lisa Wagner, "Ni aquí, ni allá: Lenguaje e

identidad en *Caramelo*”(2007), Gabriella Gutiérrez y Muhs, “Sandra Cisneros and Her Trade of the Free Word”(2006), and Bill Johnson González, “The Politics of Translation in Sandra Cisneros's *Caramelo*” (2006); gender: Traci Jo Roberts, “Representations of the Female Body: Four Contemporary Mexican and Chicana Women Novelists: Elena Garro, Cristina Rivera Garza, Elena Poniatowska, and Sandra Cisneros” (2005); and memory: Esra Satiyanci Öztarhan, “Rememory and the Challenge of Histories in Cisneros' *Caramelo*”(2004).

⁵ For more on the function of the note as a paratextual element see Gerard Genette's *Paratexts: Thresholds of Interpretation* (1997). As Genette explains one of the advantages of notes is to disrupt the linearity of the text and such moments of interruption allow authors to engage readers on a second level of discourse, by providing supplementary information or commentary that often deepens their understanding of the text. Cisneros' liberal use of footnotes throughout *Caramelo* exemplifies Genette's theories, as she uses the notes to provide relevant historical, cultural, and linguistic information that arguably, engages readers on a second level of discourse and deepens their understanding of the novel.

⁶ Like Ana Castillo in *So Far From God*, Cisneros also uses long chapter titles that summarize the action contained therein, a hallmark of the telenovela genre, which includes synopses of *capítulos* or chapters.

⁷ While Cisneros uses adjectives (ridiculous, unbelievable, preposterous, ludicrous) to describe the telenovela form that are often associated with magic realism, she does not include the specific words fantastical or marvelous, which more explicitly invoke the literary genre *lo real maravilloso*. Instead, Cisneros frames the discussion of her novel in relation to the telenovela. Although scholars discuss Chicana literature (specifically Cisneros' *Caramelo* and Castillo's *So Far From God*) in relation to postmodernism and magic realism (see Ellen McCracken, “Postmodern Ethnicity in Sandra Cisneros' *Caramelo*: Hybridity, Spectacle, and Memory in the Nomadic Text” and Frederick Luis Aldama “Ana Castillo's (En)gendered Magicrealism”), I interpret their work within the framework of the telenovela to show how Chicana authors translate the popular form into a literary genre in order to critique the misogynistic attitude and mythologies about gender and sexuality promoted within the shows. For a more detailed analysis of the telenovela in relation to Castillo's novel, see chapter 3, “The Making of a Chicana Literary Tradition, Ana Castillo's *So Far From God*,” of my dissertation.

⁸ While Almería, referencing the work of Ana Lopez, acknowledges that popular culture forms such as the telenovela are not always manipulative and may not represent attempts at social control, ultimately she points to the ways in which the conservative ideology of the shows serves to legitimize social and domestic abuse as depicted in Cisneros' fiction (72).

⁹ See Mary Ellen Brown's description of the discursive network that forms among telenovela viewers in her book *Soap Opera and Women's Talk: The Pleasure of Resistance* (1994). See also the field research of Diana Ríos and Vicki Mayers for more information on audience reception of telenovelas and the formation of discursive networks among Latina/o viewers. Ríos' studies show that telenovelas serve dual functions: assimilation to mainstream values/norms and preservation of ethnicity and culture (105-6). Mayers' studies show that telenovelas facilitate

socialization by allowing viewers in the U.S. to maintain contact with family and friends in Latin America (484).

¹⁰ According to Brown it is within discursive networks that viewers can encourage each other to become resistant readers who critically engage with telenovelas and debate and resist the conservative values and traditions promoted within the shows.

¹¹ While Torres analyzes how the female characters (Cleófilas, Chayo, and Lupe) in *Woman Hollering Creek* ultimately challenge the traditional gender roles reinforced in telenovelas, she does not examine how Cisneros further develops her critical engagement with the telenovela and successfully translates the form in her novel.

¹² The first quotation, from *The Washington Post*, is on the front cover of the paperback edition of *Caramelo* (New York: Vintage, 2002) and the second quotation, from *The Philadelphia Inquirer*, is on the back cover of this same edition.

¹³ As Martín-Barbero explains, the serial drama “involves the mechanisms of *recognition*,” which allows readers to associate the world of the story with their own and thereby enter into the narrative and identify themselves with the action (138).

¹⁴ The character of the Awful Grandmother makes her initial appearance in “Mericans” one of the stories in the *Woman Hollering Creek* collection. Cisneros revisits characters and names from previous work just as she revisits the telenovela genre. Interestingly, the return of characters in fiction also reflects the way in which actors and actresses reappear in new telenovelas. For example, Sebastián Rulli, the Argentine-Mexican actor who played Héctor in *Rubí* (2004), also played Sebastián in *Contra viento y marea* (2005), Juan in *Mundo de Fieras* (2006), Santiago in *Pasión* and most recently Mauricio in *Un Gancho el Corazon* (2008).

¹⁵ As Martín-Barbero explains, the oral narrative on which the serial drama is based, “is a story telling constructed on the basis of the ‘and then’ instead of the ‘in consequence’ based logical continuity,” meaning that the scenes are not causally linked. One does not necessarily logically lead to the next in the sequence (138).

¹⁶ In their article, “Hacia Una Definición Del Género Telenovela,” Gustavo Aprea and Rolando C. Martínez Mendoza refer to this as a game of tensions between the logic of the “mundo del deseo” [world of desire] and the “mundo de las convenciones sociales” [world of social conventions] (29). This translation of Aprea and Mendoza is my own.

¹⁷ This social convention is reflected in telenovelas, which perpetuate the myth of social mobility by depicting happy couples that overcome differences of race and class to be together, but the shows’ resolutions only temporarily pacify viewers with wished-for solutions that are often not possible in the real world where racial and class divisions are deeply entrenched. Ultimately, within the morally ordered universe of telenovelas existing social classes and divisions are cemented. For more see Martín Barbero, Adriana Estill, “The Mexican Telenovela and Its Foundational Fictions” (2001), and Laura Podalsky “Los Globalizados También Lloran Mexican

Telenovelas and the Geographical Imagination” (2003).

¹⁸ This is a theme she literally addresses in the story “Woman Hollering Creek” in which she describes how Cleofilas suffers physical abuse at the hands of her husband Juan Pedro.

¹⁹ The English translation of these lines is: What do you intend to hide? Why are you so cruel to me? You enjoy making me suffer. Why do you mortify me?

²⁰ The description of a woman’s violent response to her husband’s infidelity is an allusion to the legend of La Llorona, the weeping woman who commits infanticide to avenge her husband’s infidelity. Although, in Cisneros’ text Aunt Licha threatens to take her own life not those of her children in response to Uncle Fat-Face’s infidelity. For more information about the Mexican female archetype, La Llorona see Domino Renee Perez’s *There Was a Woman* and José Limón’s “La Llorona, the Third Legend of Greater Mexico: Cultural Symbols, Women, and the Political Unconscious.”

²¹ See Saldívar-Hull’s analysis of how the fotonovela genre is used to normalize sexual violence in Cisneros’ “Woman Hollering Creek” (109-114). See also Jean Franco’s analysis of fotonovelas, which she refers to as “comic strip novels” in “The Incorporation of Women: A Comparison of North American and Mexican Popular Culture” (1986).

²² At the beginning of the story Lupe has her boyfriend Flavio pose for a painting of Popo and Ixta and after he reveals that he is leaving her to return to his wife and kids in Mexico, she decides to revise the painting. She subverts the gender hierarchy by placing Popo in the submissive, supine position, traditionally occupied by the female, and puts Ixta in the dominant position gazing down at Popo, thus taking on the conventionally male role of the voyeur. In this scene, Cisneros shows that Lupe is not a passive receptor of culturally produced values and images, but rather an active viewer who feels empowered to revise dominant cultural narratives to reflect her own particular, changing reality. She returns to this in *Caramelo* to show how Lala, like Lupe, questions the stereotypical gender roles reinforced in the national mythology surrounding the twin volcanoes.