

Confronting the Shadow-Beast: A Young Chicana's Development of *La Facultad* Consciousness in Kelly Parra's YA Novel *Graffiti Girl*

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I am the daughter of a working-class Chicana mother. As an adolescent, I witnessed my single parent mother come home with aching feet from her minimum wage job as a nurse aide and worry over bills that could not be paid. Growing up, I listened to the lessons of what I should or should not do: “put that book down and pick up a broom”; “don’t have sex and don’t get pregnant.” Ours was a battle of wills and words throughout my adolescence and teenage years. Nevertheless, my mother’s example and lessons taught this Chicana daughter survival skills and honed what Chicana borderland theorist Gloria Anzaldúa calls “*la facultad*” consciousness, a deeply sensitive awareness that allows one to “see the deep structure below the surface” (*Borderlands*, 38), to maneuver in a world that often silences and preys on the intersectional identity of young, brown, poor and female. I contend that a close analysis of Chicana Young Adult (YA) fiction illustrates this pattern of a contentious relationship between working-class Chicana mother and daughter, its effect on a young Chicana’s sense of agency and efficacy, and a *facultad* consciousness development. Drawing from Anzaldúa’s theories on *facultad* and consciousness development, I examine this thematic relationship in Kelly Parra’s *Graffiti Girl*, a YA novel portraying the life of sixteen-year-old, Chicana artist Angel Rodriguez who feels like an outsider in her family and school.¹

Angel is the only daughter of a working-class, single Chicana mother, with whom she has a highly contentious and alienating relationship. The lack of a deep and authentic connection with her mother mirrors Angel’s disconnection from her own self and the vision she has as a respected artist. Angel also feels disconnected from her peers at school. Her fellow art class students (males) garner more attention from the art teacher, Mr. Chun, and this makes her feel inadequate and an imposter. Alienation on the home front and at school cause Angel to question her self-worth and creates immense self-doubt in her abilities as an artist. The external and internal struggles to construct an artist identity compel her to join a graffiti crew for acceptance. While short-lived, this membership causes further problems, and ultimately, she must face the legal consequences of her choices. A close examination of several key points in the text shows that the alienating and sometimes hostile experiences of Angel’s character contribute to the development of *la facultad* consciousness, which influences the way Angel navigates through the experiences in her young adult world. Moreover, this process involves confrontations with the negative or “shadow” aspects of the self, causing her to enter a “Coatlicue state,” Anzaldúa’s term for the state of mental paralysis, depression, and resistance that comes with uncovering the truth about the ugliness in the world. According to Anzaldúa, the Coatlicue state is also a space of potential identity reconstruction. By the end of the novel, Angel arrives at the threshold of consciousness as a *nepantlera* as she begins to reconceptualize herself in relation to *familia*, *cultura*, and *comunidad*.

Training Ground for *la facultad*: La Familia Chicanx

Chicana writers of both fiction and autoethnography attest to home as a contentious space for females, one involving the opposing forces of loyalty and rebellion, belonging and exclusion, and perseverance and oppression. Chicana writers, particularly from the 1980s and 1990s, have

long critiqued the Chicana family dynamics and norms that constrain women, which stem from deeply-entrenched patriarchal cultural structures. Now that decades have passed since these feminist challenges emerged, some may label these critiques as outdated. However, examination of gender in the family and culture needs continual revisiting for newer generations of Chicana and Latinx. How do these patterns persist and get perpetuated for Chicana Millennials to Zoomers, the generations that came after the literature of Chicana feminist writers like Gloria Anzaldúa, Ana Castillo, and Sandra Cisneros first drew attention to them? Contemporary Chicana YA literature is a fertile ground to examine these cultural norms and the transmission of gendered beliefs within the Chicana family. Moreover, this genre is an untapped source of scholarly inquiry for examining representations of Latinx culture, intersectionality, and young adulthood.² While Latinx YA publications are increasing (albeit not at the pace of the U.S. Latinx population), the recently published *Nerds, Goths, Geeks, and Freaks: Outsiders in Chicana and Latinx Young Adult Literature*, edited by Trevor Boffone and Cristina Herrera, contends that the Latinx YA genre has been “systematically excluded from scholarship on Latinx literature” (6). This essay aligns with the book’s purpose in addressing this gap in the scholarly discourse of Latinx literature and seeks to respond to one of its key questions: “What does it mean to be an outsider within an already marginalized community?” (Boffone and Herrera 8). Sonia Alejandra Rodriguez has also recently contributed to the growing body of literary scholarship on Latinx YA with her essay “Conocimiento Narratives: Creative Acts and Healing in Latinx Children’s and Young Adult Literature.” Rodriguez applies Anzaldúa’s *conocimiento* theory to several Latinx YA fiction novels that exemplify *conocimiento* as a “knowledge for healing.” While Rodriguez and I draw from the same body of theoretical work, particularly Anzaldúa’s “Now let us shift ... the path of *conocimiento* ... inner work, public act,” my analysis focuses exclusively on working-class Chicana literary representation and primarily on *la facultad* (not one of the seven stages of *conocimiento*) in addition to the protagonist’s confrontations with the shadow-beast and the Coatlicue state in the seven-stage *conocimiento* process.

Graffiti Girl is set in a small, agricultural, predominantly Chicana community, twenty minutes from the California coastline. Angel lives in an all-female household with her widowed grandmother and single mother. Angel’s mother became pregnant at sixteen after a summer fling with a vacationing, white college student. She dropped out of high school and now makes her living as a waitress. Although Angel’s character is biracial, she identifies exclusively with her Mexican heritage, calling herself a “third-generation Mexican-American” and young woman of skin color darker than her mother’s tone (Parra 46). The family lives in the grandmother’s two-bedroom house in a lower income neighborhood replete with distinctly overgrown lawns, older chipped-paint houses, and a municipally-neglected neighborhood park. Angel has no room of her own in this house. She sleeps on a sofa in the living room.

Angel’s mother is portrayed as a neglectful and a promiscuous Chicana who divides her time between working long shifts and dating a series of working-class men, whom Angel refers to as “lowlifes” (Parra 43). *Graffiti Girl* represents Chicana motherhood as negligent similar to what Maria González, in her essay “Love and Conflict: Mexican American Writers as Daughters,” observes in Chicana literature from Sandra Cisneros and Helena Maria Viramontes. Moreover, Gonzalez notes this negligent mother figure is also usually promiscuous, making a symbolic connection to the prominent Mexican cultural icon *La Malinche* (156). Angel’s mother fits in the binary of the virgin/whore dichotomy discussed in Cristina Herrera’s *Contemporary Chicana Literature: (Re)Writing the Maternal Script*, which insists on “reading the mother-daughter relationship as crucial to the study of contemporary Chicana literature” (6). Similar to Herrera’s

analysis of pre-millennial Chicana writers like Cisneros, Castillo, and Trujillo, Angel's critique of her mother's lifestyle and gender expression arguably attempts to rewrite these patriarchal scripts for herself. Other Chicana YA lit presents neglectful, suffering-type mothers, such as Sandra López's YA novel *Esperanza: A Latina Story*, in which the protagonist's working-class, single-parent mother does not have the social support network of a grandmother figure and who retreats to her bedroom after an exhaustive workday. Fortunately, Angel's abuela fills the gap when she needs nurturing, a pattern that resonates with the social science research on the role of grandparents—especially abuelas—in the Latinx family network as well as other racial-ethnic groups in the United States (Greenfield 137).

In relation to her views of gender expression and womanhood, Angel has vastly different views than her mother's beliefs and practices. Her mother embodies the sexy Latina stereotype with thick makeup and body-revealing clothes for the purpose of attracting male attention, and she encourages these practices in her daughter. Angel rejects the social expectations of this type of dress for young Latinas, declaring "I definitely wasn't one of those glam girls [...] who sported halter tops, gobs of makeup, and a matching purse," instead opting for "kick-back, frayed jeans" and "tees with cartoon characters," which only attracted male friendships rather than boyfriends (Parra 5). Unlike her mother, Angel wishes to avoid the male gaze. Angel's oppositional stance to the provocative, hyper-feminine expectations encouraged by her working-class mother is similar to the title character in *Esperanza: A Latina Story*. Both Angel and Esperanza are depicted as fully cognizant of gender social norms, and they purposefully resist their mother's viewpoints, thus breaking the cycle that "condemns the daughter to reenact her mother's experience" (González 158). Angel creates her own gender norms as a defense to her mother's views.³

One scene in the text explicitly establishes Angel's oppositional gender stance when fellow art classmate and Chicano graffiti crew leader, Miguel Badalin, questions her failure to conform to what other "*chicas*" wear:

[Miguel] looked down at my Oscar the Grouch T-shirt. "Why don't you wear tops that fit tighter?"

I frowned, glancing down at my loose top. "What for?"

"*Chicas* look hot in those little tops."

I rolled my eyes. "Hello, *Jack*. I'm not like other girls." (Parra 136)

Angel clearly rejects the socio-cultural pressures placed on a young Chicana to dress provocatively. She is not even willing to dress this way to capture the attention of her school crush Nathan. Parra has created a protagonist that models gender non-conformity to its YA readers. Additionally, we have a Chicana YA character that is obsessed with her art and creativity rather than with boys and male attraction. Angel desires a place to express herself artistically and to be recognized and accepted as an artist by those whom she loves and admires, especially her mother, her teachers, and other respected artists (Nathan and Miguel). The lack of affirmation at this deeper-level significantly impacts her self-esteem, self-confidence, and self-development.

Graffiti Crew Familia: The Shadow-Beast Appears

At one point in the story, Angel reaches a particularly vulnerable and emotional state that drives her to join an all-Chicano-male graffiti crew *Reyes del Norte*, led by Miguel Badalin. The conflict with her mother has escalated and the school announces that her artwork fails to place in

the school-wide art competition. The day of the announcement, Angel overhears Mr. Chun, the art teacher, call her entry “whimsical,” which she interprets as “cartoonish” (i.e., not serious art). She exits the classroom to hide her emotions in the girls’ bathroom, and even in this space she refuses to breakdown: “A lump burned my throat, but no way in hell would I cry here, in the smelly girls’ bathroom where anyone could see the evidence of humiliation on my face. That’s not how I worked. I held in my pain like a dirty secret, swallowing past the thickness” (Parra 57). Angel berates herself on perceived shortcomings as an artist in comparison to Nathan and Miguel. Anzaldúa contends that bordered people internalize rage and contempt: “As a person, I, as a people, we, Chicanos, blame ourselves, hate ourselves, [and] terrorize ourselves. Most of this goes on unconsciously; we only know that we are hurting, [and] we suspect that there is something ‘wrong’ with us, something fundamentally ‘wrong’” (*Borderlands*, 45). The escalated-level of bottled emotions, coupled with the self-doubt and berating, awaken Angel’s “Shadow-Beast,” the inner part of the psyche that distorts how [people] see reality (Anzaldúa, “Now let us,” 541). Angel can no longer envision her creative self or her agency at this point, and she falls under the influence of Miguel to join the graffiti crew.

Through his invitation to join his graffiti crew, Miguel appears to offer Angel a more liberating place for her artist expression and a place of acceptance. He convinces Angel that graffiti can help her “stand out” and be “somebody.” Angel envies the confidence and pride that Miguel exhibits during graffiti competitions. She perceives this space as accepting and free from criticism, one that will allow her to “stretch [her] creative wings with [her]culture” (Parra 114). Earlier they had discovered a common appreciation for Chicano symbolic art, a fact that makes Angel realize that art “crossed boundaries and connected people who normally wouldn’t hang out together” (Parra 38). Yet, the plot later reveals that Miguel’s character embodies the Chicano nationalist and generational patriarchy that still exists in the culture. The key here is that Angel is viewing Miguel and his graffiti crew through the lens of her shadow-side, the side that distorts reality and, as Anzaldúa reveals, “inhibits the full use of [one’s] faculties” (“Now Let Us,” 541), in this case for seeing through the surface to accurately view Miguel’s motives.

During Angel’s early practice sessions with the graffiti crew, a clogged spray paint can acts as a trope for the continued suppression of her artistic expression and what would turn out to be a short-lived experience with the graffiti crew: “that was kind of how I felt with my art, a spray can full of color and ideas ready to paint, but stuck—clogged—with no place to create. No place for my art” (Parra 157). Angel’s discussion of art here is also a statement representing her self-identity. “No place for her art” also signifies no place for Angel. Anzaldúa describes the double-edged sword for the creative artist: “A lack of belief in my creative self is a lack of belief in my total self and vice versa” (*Borderlands*, 73). If Angel’s artistic expression is clogged, her sense of agency is also stifled and limited. Angel feels powerless and unable to become that which she desires to be.

A few weeks after joining the crew, Angel discovers that this graffiti *familia* comes with a substantial price: she must deface school and community property as well as submit to Miguel’s sexual advances. Because she refuses his sexual advances, Miguel feels threatened in his patriarchal leadership among the other members. He verbally and physically attacks Angel on the day she resigns, but other crew members stop him from violently beating her. These experiences deepen her consciousness even further.

Angel's *la facultad* Consciousness

In Parra's *Graffiti Girl* and other Chicana YA fiction with protagonists of working-class backgrounds (such as Lopez's *Esperanza*), a close reading analysis reveals the representation of young Chicanas developing and exercising *la facultad* consciousness. Anzaldúa's seminal work *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza Consciousness* introduces the concept of *la facultad* in the chapter entitled "Entering into the Serpent." Although it constitutes a brief section in the book, the discussion presents an insightful lens on the internal mechanisms that develop in the disenfranchised. Anzaldúa characterizes *la facultad* in multiple similar terms in her brief discussion; she calls it a "capacity," an "instant sensing," an "acute awareness," a "sensitivity," and "a survival tactic." In later works, Anzaldúa refers to *la facultad* as "intuitive knowledge" ("Now let us," 542), and while it is not one of the named seven stages of *conocimiento*, *la facultad* is mentioned as an ability that occurs within the first stage, "el arrebató."

Anzaldúa's *Borderlands* text delineates two key aspects of *la facultad*: first, it arises out of fear, oppositionality, and self-protection in oppressed people; second, it causes an important "shift in perception" in the person who develops this sensitivity. People excluded, violated, and otherwise oppressed in their communities for their differences "become more sensitized" (Anzaldúa 38). Thus, *la facultad* originates from a negative place—born out of psychological and physical struggle, oppression, and fear of attack to the body, mind, and spirit. "We are forced to develop this faculty so that we'll know when the next person is going to slap us or lock us away. [...] Pain makes us acutely anxious to avoid more of it, so we hone that radar. It's a kind of survival tactic that people, caught between the worlds, unknowingly cultivate" (Anzaldúa 38-39). In her groundbreaking essay "U.S. Third World Feminism: The Theory and Method of Oppositional Consciousness in the Postmodern World," Chela Sandoval characterizes *la facultad* as a "learned emotional and intellectual skill which is developed amidst hegemonic powers" (23). While *la facultad* emerges out of negative experiences as a survival or oppositional tactic, it also represents a positive force for a person's character precisely because of the shift in perception it entails. A change in our "everyday mode" of consciousness takes place, and thus, we become a changed person, deeply sensitive and "excruciatingly alive to the world" (Anzaldúa, *Borderlands*, 38).

In *Graffiti Girl*, an emergent *facultad* consciousness is a skill that assists Angel's character in crisis situations. The "arrebató" or rupture that critically changes Angel's relationship to the world and makes her "aware of [her] vulnerability, [be] wary of men, and no longer trust the universe" (Anzaldúa, "Now let us," 546) occurs during a traumatic childhood encounter with a teenage male predator at the age of seven. This memory is triggered during her first visit to Miguel Badalin's house, where he has invited Angel and her best friend Beth to hang out in the garage with his crew. Miguel wants to show Angel his sketchbook, so he invites her inside the house. The empty house causes Angel to hesitate and Miguel teases her that she is "so cautious." Angel dismisses his teasing because she knows "there [are] things in life you [can't] always trust" (Parra 36). (As discussed earlier, Angel later discovers that Miguel has malicious ulterior motives so that her *facultad*-based caution in this scene was indeed an accurate reading of the situation.) Miguel's invitation to an empty house triggers a flashback memory of a sexual assault experience she had in 2nd grade in which a friend's middle-school aged brother cornered her in his room, held her head, and forced his tongue inside her mouth. The fear and vulnerability that she experienced being overpowered by this larger young male is ingrained in her memory and nearly ten years later causes goosebumps. This is the "rupture" that frightens the "soul out of the body," as Anzaldúa characterizes the first stage of *conocimiento*, the shift towards consciousness ("Now Let Us," 544).

Now, Angel approaches situations with caution and uses her sensitivity as a guide: “I went with what felt right and skipped what felt wrong. *Call it following my instincts*” (Parra 37, italics added). At a young age, Angel loses her naïveté and develops mistrust of males who could potentially turn into predators.

Angel also distrusts her mother’s boyfriends. Her mother’s most recent ex-boyfriend arrives to the house in a drunken state and interrogates Angel on her mother’s failure to return his phone calls. He becomes physically aggressive with Angel, grabbing onto her arm, which makes her heart pulsate faster and gives her “a funny prickling [...] on the back of [her] head” (Parra 43). He releases his digging fingers from Angel’s arm when her grandmother comes out to the porch. In an essential connection to the art that grounds her, Angel states, “When my breath settled, I realized I was holding onto my portfolio case as if it were a lifeline [...]” (Parra 43). These experiences with her mother’s boyfriends compel her to not trust adult males.

We witness another incident of Angel’s heightened sensitivity to dangerous situations while she is out for a night of graffiti practice. Since they usually practice at Miguel’s house, when he drives the crew in the opposite direction, Angel gets a nervous stomach, her inner sensitivity already engaging. Angel’s *facultades* continue to warn her as they arrive at an old warehouse. Inside the building, two young Chicanos are drinking beers on an old couch, and three older Chicanos are playing cards inside a smoke-filled office. Angel narrates on her instincts to react: “Right then, I wanted to turn and walk away. I didn’t trust men. Growing up with my mom’s endless line of boyfriends, I’d met and seen all kinds. Some not so friendly, some way too friendly. Men were not to be trusted. Men drinking alcohol, even more” (Parra 170). Angel finds herself in a precarious situation and aptly feels highly threatened by this overpowering environment. She wants to make herself invisible, but the *jefe* keeps staring at her. When he approaches, her pulse speeds up, but he walks past her to a large cabinet of spray paint cans; Angel feels an immediate relief but it also makes her nauseous. As they retrieve the paint cans, Angel feels “like a zombie” (Parra 171). Anzaldúa describes this kind of fear when a Chicana does not feel safe in her own culture, and when “the males of all races hunt her as prey”:

Blocked, immobilized, we can’t move forward, can’t move backwards. That writhing serpent movement, the very movement of life, swifter than lightning, frozen. We do not engage fully. We do not make full use of our faculties. We abnegate. And there in front of us is the crossroads and choice: to feel a victim where someone else is in control and therefore responsible and to blame [...], or to feel strong, and, for the most part, in control. (*Borderlands*, 21)

Anzaldúa states that the Chicano and colonizing cultures take the ability to act away from girls, even when their *facultades* enable them to sense precarious situations. Chicanas struggle with disabling inner self-doubts that undercut *la facultad* and impede effective action. Nevertheless, the pathway that leads to the potential transformation in our *conscienza* starts with *la facultad* as we descend to the depths of reality and opposition heightens our awareness.

Confronting the Shadow-Beast

In “now let us shift...the path of conocimiento...inner work, public acts,” Anzaldúa states that the path to self-awareness or the awakening of consciousness “requires that [we] encounter [our] shadow side and confront [...] what we have been programmed by our cultures” and life

experiences (540). Confronting the “unwanted aspects of the self” or “the Shadow-Beast” occurs in all seven phases in the pathway to *conocimiento* (Anzaldúa, “Now let us,” 545). In “Gloria Anzaldúa’s Seven Stages of *Conocimiento* in Redefining Latino Masculinity: Jose’s Story,” Aida Hurtado reiterates that the *conocimiento* process is a “spiral process without a start or end point, moving forward continually and non-chronologically” (65).

As Angel endeavors to construct an identity as an authentic artist throughout the novel, we also witness her struggles with the unwanted aspects of the cultural programming that she has acquired growing up as a working-class, dark-skinned Chicana in the United States. For example, early in the novel, Angel makes a statement of self-perception and efficacy with regard to social class differences between her and her school crush, Nathan, when she remarks that he “came from money and was likely going places” (Parra 7). About herself, Angel declares, “I didn’t. I wasn’t. Enough said.” We can observe here that Angel’s beliefs about social class contribute to her diminished sense of self-worth and self-defeating thoughts. The Shadow-Beast guards the threshold, says Anzaldúa, “that part of you holding your failures and inadequacies, the negativities you’ve internalized, and those aspects of gender and class you want to disown” (“Now let us,” 557).

Throughout the novel, Angel battles these “deepest insecurities,” the Coatlicue serpents—the self-defeating, self-abnegating thoughts—that hold her back from feeling “completa” (Anzaldúa, *Borderlands*, 51). Achieving completeness involves moving past this blocked state; taking ownership over our own body, mind, and spirit; and reclaiming it from *familia*, *cultura*, western institutions, and nations. Third space feminist writers call this process the “decolonizing” of these technologies of power (Levins Morales; Pérez). This reclaiming of a unified Self propels us toward achieving what Anzaldúa calls a “new mestiza” consciousness.

To gain strength and break through the frozen state of Coatlicue resulting from living “life in the borderlands,” Anzaldúa grounded her Chicana identity in the mestiza’s history of resistance: the rite of wailing as protest. She reminds us that wailing and mourning have historically been the only means of protest for Indian, Mexican, and Chicana women, having “no other recourse [...] in a society which glorified the warrior and war” (*Borderlands*, 33). Thus, through her writing and speaking, Anzaldúa always felt “perfectly free to rebel and to rail against [her] culture” (33), feeling that in this manner she was conquering the Shadow-Beast and “learning to live with *la Coatlicue* that transforms living in the Borderlands from a nightmare into a numinous experience” (51). Interestingly, Angel’s character is represented as having immense difficulty with crying or showing emotional vulnerability throughout the novel. Angel resists crying when she feels pain, dismissing it as a sign of weakness. Readers witness this emotional resistance on several occasions—the day of the art competition results, the night of the warehouse supply run, and near the end of the novel, when she explains the reason for withholding her tears: “I’d always been a quiet crier. As if I was afraid of people knowing I was crying. As if I was afraid to show people I could be hurt or be sad. It hurt more to cry quietly. Tears didn’t fall often from me, so when I did cry, it was like a spilled bucket of paint, pouring and pouring out, then the rest seeping out until every last drop was gone” (Parra 212). This revelation occurs just as Angel reaches a breaking point in the story. Everything in her life up to that point has “gone wrong”: falling out with Miguel and the crew, participating in vandalism against her better judgment, getting betrayed by her best friend Beth, fighting with her mother, disappointing Nathan, and then getting removed from the art committee. When she arrives home after the art committee expulsion, and her grandmother probes, the flood gates open. Angel can no longer hold back the tears, and she “bawls like a baby” in her grandmother’s arms (212). She experiences a breakthrough in the Coatlicue state and a

spiritual cleansing by participating in this ancient mestiza rite, in the presence of and facilitated by an elder mestiza, her Mexican grandmother. Her mother arrives during this breakthrough, and the two speak candidly about the significance of art for Angel and the need for her mother to feel “special” on dates. This deep conversation marks a turning point in their mother-daughter relationship. Thus, Angel’s participation in the ancient mestiza rite of wailing, a cleansing of her spiritual pain, and the reconciliation with her mother signifies “a crossing” that helps this young Chicana dismantle Shadow-Beast negativity and positions her transition out of a Coatlicue state. One more pivotal event in the story completes the crossing over.

Before *Graffiti Girl* closes, Angel must fulfill a challenge to participate in a graffiti competition against a rival graffiti crew. Although Angel quit the *Reyes del Norte* two weeks prior to the night of the competition, she risks a gang beating if she fails to show. Thus, she continues to practice her graffiti skills in preparation for this battle. The graffiti battle takes place in front of an audience of crew members, supporters and friends. Angel competes against a girl from the rival crew, while Miguel competes against another Chicano from that crew in a paired, side-by-side competition. The competitors are given spray paint cans, blank plywood boards, and two hours to create a winning design. This battle scene of graffiti skill and nerve is the turning point in which Angel’s character also confronts and dismantles her own self-defeating thoughts to pave the way for the creation of a new vision of her artistic abilities, self-worth, and agency.

As the graffiti competition begins, Angel’s mind starts to distract her with the negative, self-defeating thoughts echoed throughout the novel: “*Your wack style. Whimsical, cartoon style. Art’s not going to get you anywhere. You’re nothing*” (Parra 226). These thoughts make her hands sweat and shake while holding the spray paint cans. “*What a poser,*” Angel continues (Parra 226). Again, the Shadow-Beast distorts reality and “inhibits the full use of [Angel’s] faculties” (Anzaldúa, “Now Let Us,” 541). Her thoughts keep her momentarily *embrujada*, in a frozen state of uncertainty; her hand hesitates to start the design, causing Miguel to approach and tease her with “Damn, why don’t you just forfeit now” (227). Angel tells him to “get off [her] back,” and then the cross-over commences; her mind enters a hyper-focused zone: “[E]verything else was blocked out, pushed out of my mind” (227). She envisions her art piece clearly *y completamente*. Reminiscent of Anzaldúa when she speaks of carving and chiseling her own face (soul) through the art of writing, Angel continues with self-declarations on her art, ability, and efficacy: “I could do this. I could create my piece. [...] I’d finally mastered the spray can. [...] I was at ease with my medium. Knowing how to wield a can meant I could work my style on my own. I didn’t need Miguel or anyone to help further my skill. [...] My hard work had paid off. I could succeed in any type of art I set my mind to” (Parra 227-228). This is the first time in the novel that Angel has stated anything positive about herself. She comes to the self-realization that “maybe pleasing myself was good enough,” and then adds that “the only person who had to respect my art was me” (Parra 228). At the end of the two hours, Angel has confronted her Shadow-Beasts and re-constructed her identity in the Coatlicue state—merging the identities of young Chicana with authentic artist—so much that she no longer worries about the outcome of the competition: “I felt so good about my work, I could have walked away right then without knowing—without caring—who came out the winner. Because in my own mind, I had won” (Parra 230). By the end of this graffiti competition, Angel’s character has gone through a process of identity transformation, similar to the one that Anzaldúa describes in *Borderlands/La Frontera*:

And in descending to the depths I realize that down is up, and I rise up from and into the deep. And once again I recognize that the internal tension of oppositions

can propel (if it doesn't tear apart) the mestiza writer out of the *metate* where she is being ground with corn and water, eject her out as *nahual*, an agent of transformation, able to modify and shape primordial energy and there be able to change herself and others [...]. (74-75).

Through the graffiti competition, Parra constructs a pivotal scene in which this young Chicana becomes momentarily frozen in Coatlicue self-abnegation, and comes face to face with her own inner Shadow-Beast. At this "crossroads," Angel must decide under the pressures of a public performance whether to give in to the negative aspects of her inner Shadow-Beast or rebel against these debilitating thoughts, and use the force of her independent, creative spirit to move beyond them. Anzaldúa believes that "conocimiento is reached via creative acts—writing, art-making, dancing, healing, teaching, meditation, and spiritual activism [...]" ("Now let us" 542). After this crossing-over moment during the graffiti competition, when Angel is forced to battle the distorted thoughts of her shadow side to creatively fill a blank canvas, she gets a glimpse of her full capabilities, facultades, and she experiences an expansion of the vision of herself as a respected artist.

At the Threshold of a Chicana Artist Identity and a Nepantlera

By the end of the novel, Angel's character has experienced a significant identity transformation, a change from how she viewed herself throughout most of the novel. This identity transformation, arriving at the threshold of a new consciousness, began with the training ground of *la facultad* in her working-class, female-headed *familia*, where she experiences parental neglect and alienation, but also exposure to working-class Chicanos. Consequently, Angel confronts gender oppression and betrayal by males in her community, including her mother's boyfriends, her friend's brothers, and her classmate Miguel. These difficult and traumatic experiences cause immense self-doubt in her artistic ability. We witness her plunge into the Coatlicue state that includes "moments of fear and inability to move but also moments of creativity and transformation, of crossing and acquiring a new identity" (Ortega 27). After the full embracing of herself as an authentic artist, Angel expresses the desire to transform her community through activism, expanding its awareness of the value of graffiti art.⁴ Angel declares "a new personal goal, to do [her] best to prove to [this] community that graffiti art isn't just about illegal vandalism. It is about artistic freedom that can be expressed through public murals and even graffiti clubs" (Parra 247). This goal, to expand her own community's notion of socially-acceptable art, positions Angel's character as that of a "nepantlera." Nepantleras have a "state of mind that question old ideas and beliefs, acquire new perspectives, change worldviews, and shift from one world to another" (Anzaldúa, *Gloria*, 284). As further explained in Anzaldúa's "Speaking across the Divide," nepantleras serve as "agents of awakening, inspir[ing] and challeng[ing] others to deepen awareness, [and] greater conocimiento" (*Gloria*, 282). Before the reader's eyes, Angel has gone from an alienated, self-deprecating young Chicana outsider-artist to a young nepantlera determined to use her consciousness, experience, self-knowledge, and efficacy to improve her Chicana, working-class community and to raise their *conocimiento*.

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¹ This work has been revised and updated from my dissertation entitled *Confronting Predators and Shadow-Beasts: Representations of Working-Poor Chicanas in Contemporary Young Adult Literature* (2012). I would like to thank the special editors of this edition, Trevor Boffone and Cristina Herrera, for valuable feedback in revising this essay.

² The term "Latinx" is used in the essay when the author refers to the umbrella term that includes people of Chicana, Puerto Rican, Dominican, Cuban, Central and South American heritage. The term "Chicana" is predominantly referenced in the essay due to the primary focus on people of Chicana or Mexican American heritage.

³ Interestingly, there is only one event in the story in which Angel "puts on" traditional female garb in the form of heavy makeup and tight-fitting clothes: a scene in which she participates in a graffiti competition with an opposing graffiti crew. Apparently, Angel determines this competition necessitates the stereotypical Chicana chola adornment as a kind of battle dress.

⁴ Angel comes to this realization after paying the realistic consequences of joining the graffiti crew when the police arrest her, and she is sentenced to two years of community service.