Transnational Feminisms and Latina Interpretation of the Sanctuary Movement

By Leigh C. Johnson

"Back then, when 'fishing trip' meant transporting refugees north, a white man was an asset. Millions of years of genetic coding culminated in a kind of liturgy each time a Border Patrol agent waved him past the checkpoint outside El Paso."

---Demetria Martínez, *Mother Tongue* 59

"We take this action [declaring the church a sanctuary] because we believe the current policy and practice of the US government with regard to Central American refugees is illegal and immoral. We believe our government is in violation of the 1980 Refugee Act and international law by continuing to arrest, detain, and forcibly return refugees to terror, persecution, and murder in El Salvador and Guatemala."

---Reverend John Fife, Southside Presbyterian Church, Tucson Arizona, 1982

The slaughter of thousands of Salvadorans, Guatemalans, and Nicaraguans in the 1980s by their own "democratic" governments caused citizens of these countries to seek political refuge in the United States or Canada. However, because the US government covertly supported the dictatorships, the resistance and asylum movement known as Sanctuary was forced underground. Part of a network, often with ties to liberation theology, individual activists in the Sanctuary Movement had to work together, despite their differences, to bring people to safety. Activists experienced the transnational nature of Sanctuary in ways that forced them to consider their positionality and complicity in the US neoliberal narrative that denied Central American refugees a unique Latino/a identity separate from the already established Chicano/a and Native American identities; in other words, sisterhood is powerful but needs to come with a renewed awareness that grouping people based on assumed identities and concerns will gloss over the significant contributions people can make to a cause when they are really seen by their allies. The poets covered here remark candidly on developing Salví and Guate identities in California cities where others around them assumed them to be Chicanas. Perhaps too simply, perspectives on the Sanctuary movement depend on who is writing. The writers discussed here see themselves as activists as they draw on theory and practice of motherwork to reveal the ways in which an ethics of care determines survival in communities, even if occasionally, that motherwork turns nightmarish when care and love cannot overcome systemic violence. When women writers tell stories about Sanctuary, motherwork is a powerful motivator for the activists and characters as they attempt to heal the effects of hemispheric violence on Latinx communities.

The degree to which authors and activists imagine a transnational collaboration that is not a Western-centered First World feminist narrative has evolved as Guatemalan and Salvadoran American voices have emerged to tell their own stories. Demetria Martínez's *Mother Tongue* (1994) and Helena María Viramontes's "The Cariboo Cafe" (1995) are among the most well-known Chicana feminist narratives of political refugees, whereas Barbara Kingsolver's *The Bean Trees* (1988) has had multiple publication runs and regularly appears on high school and college reading lists. This essay brings these widely-known contemporary perspectives into conversation with a young adult novel, *Journey of the Sparrows* (1991) co-authored by Fran Leeper Buss and Daisy Cubias. I then turn to newer poetry collections by 1.5+ generation writers Leticia

Hernández-Linares (*Mucha Muchacha—Too Much Girl*, 2015) and Maya Chinchilla (*The Cha Cha Files*, 2014) to explain how the narrative of saving and resistance changes with the introduction of the refugee's voice. Finally, in attempting to neatly tie up my argument, but in recognizing the limitations of that effort when refugees continue to seek asylum, I offer an analysis of Valeria Luiselli's *Tell Me How It Ends: An Essay in Forty Questions* (2017). Luiselli offers a strong analysis of US and Mexican complicity in the violence done to Central American refugees. By centering Central American perspectives on refuge, immigration, and asylum, it becomes clear how the legacy of hemispheric ties and violence continues to manifest in the continuing refugee crisis at the border.

For Chicanas, the pressure to mother is intense. As Gloria Anzaldúa explains, "Educated or not, the onus is still on woman to be a wife/mother—only the nun can escape motherhood" (39). While I don't want in any way to imply that women (especially Chicanas) have to be mothers to define themselves or achieve feminist credibility, the characters and speakers in these texts see their work with refugees as maternal care for the Other's child who is also one's own; furthermore, their feminist reactions to hemispheric violence depend on their identities as mothers (but also in some ways as daughters, sisters, and friends). Patricia Hill Collins coined the term motherwork to explain how in the United States, white children may be assured of their value, but in systems of racism "racial ethnic women have no such guarantees for their children; their children must first be taught to survive in systems that oppress them" (Collins 57). Teaching children (not limited to one's biological children) to survive in the face of oppression is motherwork. Using motherwork as a motivating force for activism, the texts make plain how literature reflects the ways in which people who are trying to "help" refugees may inadvertently replicate systems of oppression. When this happens, motherwork becomes nightmarish in its inability to compensate for long entrenched systems of capitalist, anti-democratic exploitation.

As a movement, Sanctuary has been classified as a religiously motivated immigrant advocacy project (Van Ham), a liberal resistance to conservative policies (Perla and Coutin), and a transnational Pan Latina feminist counter narrative to the patriarchal political and economic dominant culture (Rodríguez). Each of these interpretations depends, however, on a US perspective of those in the movement. This essay seeks to expand the discussion of literature about the Sanctuary movement to explore how writers and activists in the second generation have grappled with representing the refugee's voice. These works do not necessarily correct the interpretations above; rather they enrich the palimpsest that the diversity of the Sanctuary movement already attests to. As the opening quotations indicate, white men, Chicanas, Quakers, Catholic priests and nuns, liberal white women, and refugees themselves, among others, participated in assisting asylum seekers from El Salvador, and later Guatemala and Nicaragua, to safety in the United States and Canada. Advocates worked on immigration reform laws, immediate relief to refugees, and direct action in the countries involved.

Sanctuary shifted the conversation about the status of political asylum. Van Ham argues that "On the surface, Sanctuary conservatively left intact the designation between worthy political refugees and unworthy economic refugees and merely asserted that the rule be applied more evenly. But Sanctuary work also destabilized that dichotomy by spurring many participants to link human rights violations and disparities in wealth" (Van Ham 636). In other words, when Regan-Bush era policies denied immigration status for Central Americans, the policymakers argued that the immigrants were not in danger but were seeking US jobs and opportunities. However, the work of the Sanctuary movement revealed the irony that Ana Patricia Rodríguez argues is apparent when a refugee "leaves her homeland precisely because larger economic and political forces over which

she has no control have destroyed her home, family, and community" but she goes to the US "the center of world power and capital" where instead of being recognized as politically displaced, she "will join the ranks of migrant laborers" (*Refugees* 397). In other words, it is a great irony that she is forced to leave her country because of US covert interference, and, following this emigration, the place she is most likely to find safety and prosperity is in the very country that has rendered her home unrecognizable. Because the US does not validate claims of economic asylum, many refugees have little recourse. However, not recognizing that their dire economic circumstances play a role in safety and survival is a US centric view of migration flows in general.

By accepting that both economic and political crisis motivate migration, we gain the ability to distinguish how Latina narratives of Sanctuary's effects offer compelling possibilities for a transnational approach to identity formation within and against the first generation of Sanctuary's legacy. For instance, Luiselli shows how sustained analysis of the refugee crisis by political scientists can help frame a global perspective that would allow policy makers to see "the drug war as a hemispheric war, at least—one that begins in the Great Lakes of the northern United States and ends in the mountains of Celaque in southern Honduras" (Luiselli 86). Embracing the complexity of Sanctuary is a hallmark of these texts, as they encourage activism in the audience. When the patterns of capital and contraband moving between and among countries seems overwhelming in its scope, these literary works empower characters to show how human contact disrupts oppressive systems, for better or worse.

Of course, the white-authored texts run the risk of perpetuating a white savior myth by bringing in the white agents in the Sanctuary Movement. However, this question of positionality also allows an understanding of how assuming a pan-Latino identity can, rather than empower refugees, instead result in a power imbalance by relying on cultural privilege for Chicanos and inadvertently establishing a First World savior myth. For instance, several popular films, such as *Born in East L.A., Mi Familia, Bread & Roses,* and *Salvador* "solve" the problem of Central American refugees by coupling women migrants with Chicanos. Some of these films are written and directed by whites, some by Chicanos, and all by men. None of them privilege the refugee's viewpoint. Falling in love with the refugee is an expected place to start in these narratives; after all, the films mentioned previously solve the problem of political asylum by having the male protagonist marry the refugee for convenience. Patricia Stuelke argues that "These dramatizations of US imperialist violence offered a vehicle for redeeming the guilty US nation and its citizens, instantiating a reparative vision of the nation's future as a neoliberal multicultural family" (Stuelke 768). These marriages represent a necessary mestizaje, and for Chicanos a way to reaffirm *la raza cosmica*. But, the power imbalance is already present in a situation where the person needing asylum is female, Spanish speaking, and poor.

The narratives written by women (Anglo, Chicana, and Latina) alter the film narrative (and a masculine gaze) by offering multiple voices for the refugees and for the activists involved in the Movement. In thinking about how to approach a reading of texts that can both interrogate and appreciate the literary activism inherent in them, it's useful to keep Marissa López's comments about othering and difference in mind:

> In reading for difference, we see ourselves in our constructions of otherness and must recognize the privilege that allows us to create others in our own image. Reading for difference makes us see how our modes of analysis are always excluding and including, always drawing and redrawing the boundaries between good and bad, high and low.

> We must see these things when we read for difference, even if we are not particularly interested in doing anything about them" (López 118).

She asks the reader to be savvy about how to judge literary constructions of the other (or another), because distance is unavoidable, even when the purpose of writing is to evoke empathy. By repositioning the refugee and the activist in a liminal feminist space, the authors complicate narratives of saving and resistance; however, each of these complications is further implicated in the protective cocoon of the ability to help with varying awareness of the privilege afforded to the activist. However, reading the Chicana and Latina writers included here against Barbara Kingsolver's widely read *The Bean Trees* disrupts white savior myths and marriage savior myths.

Taylor, the young white woman who drives from rural Kentucky to Tucson, Arizona in *The Bean Trees*, is naïve in the ways of 1980s global politics, even as she is wise to the sexual politics of the United States. She knows she wants more than young motherhood and poverty, all that is on offer in small town Kentucky; however, she is unprepared to face the myriad sufferings she encounters in Arizona. On her way across the country, she finds herself given a Cherokee child. Turtle, the name Taylor gives the child, has been severely malnourished and abused. Upon arrival in Arizona, Taylor discovers a community of Guatemalan refugees living above "Jesus is Lord Used Tires." As Esteban and Esperanza share their horrific story with her, she begins to fall in love with Esteban, despite the fact that he is already married to the suicidal Esperanza. When Taylor needs full adoption paperwork for Turtle, she hatches a plan to save Esteban, Esperanza, and Turtle in one fell swoop. Smuggling the two refugees to the Cherokee Nation, Taylor passes them off as a Cherokee couple giving up Turtle to her for adoption. Her act does save Esteban and Esperanza from the gaze of US Immigration but hiding them on Cherokee land banks on understanding the reservation as beneath the notice of the government, while simultaneously suggesting the Cherokee would be unable to distinguish the Central American couple from themselves. The novel, despite some of its thematic problems, affords an opportunity to observe the power of motherwork as a spark for activism.

In *The Bean Trees*, Taylor's choice to be a mother occurs after she has already become one. Accidental motherhood forces Taylor to grow and discover what is important to her. Taylor initially denies that she is a mother to the child, until she must actually scheme to adopt Turtle. She shows Turtle the adoption paper and explains, "That means you're my kid […] and I'm your mother, and nobody can say it isn't so […] it's yours. So you'll always know who you are" (Kingsolver 232). Taylor also seems to be convincing herself that this is what *she* is as well—a mother. Taylor's change from passively accepting Turtle into her car to actively pursuing Turtle as part of her life marks a change in the way she views motherhood.

Directly alongside her path to motherhood, the novel charts Taylor's awakening social consciousness. As she becomes more aware of the situation in Central America, and the United States' role in the violence, she becomes determined to assist Mattie (the owner of the tire store) in driving Esteban and Esperanza to safety. While she's not the white man on a fishing trip of the opening quotation, Taylor is relatively above suspicion in the eyes of the border control agents who are looking for refugees. Her phenotype is not enough for Mattie, however, who insists that Taylor drive a Cadillac with a Reagan/Bush bumper sticker affixed to it. Aware of the possible dangers of smuggling refugees, Taylor dismisses Mattie's warnings as overly protective, saying, "She told me if I got caught I could get five years in prison and a $2,000 fine for each illegal person I was assisting, which in this case would be two. To tell the truth, I couldn't even let these things enter my head" (Kingsolver 193). Her stubborn attitude is indicative of her racial (not class)

privilege. While Taylor grew up and remains poor, she nevertheless knows that her white skin provides cover for the brown people she has come to love. Her choice to ignore the risks associated with assisting refugees marks her as personally connected to these individual refugees, but not necessarily to the larger Sanctuary movement. Mattie and the Priest, on the other hand, have to be more careful in their actions because they have to sustain a continuous stream of immigrants seeking political asylum in a time and place where from 1983-1990, "not more than 3 percent of Salvadoran and Guatemalan asylum applications were successful" (García 113).

Taylor's character reflects Kingsolver's personal political stance, and the novel does have power to persuade others to her point of view. Kingsolver claimed in a letter to her mother that the novel was an attempt to put everything she cared about into the only book she might write "human rights, Central American refugees, the Problem That Has No Name, abuse of the powerless, racism, poetry, freedom, childhood, motherhood, Sisterhood is Powerful" (*Small Wonder* 170). Like Taylor, Kingsolver's rationale is personal before it's political. Taylor's actions don't cost her anything, except giving up a man who is already married. Instead, the brunt of the sacrifice falls on Esteban and Esparanza. In their assimilation (a kind of disappearance) in the Cherokee Nation, their "desire must be to ritualize their sacrifice of their home, their daughter, and their dignity in the name of US family reunification and sympathetic revival" (Stuelke 786). In this configuration, political action without personal cost shines tellingly on the ways in which white and first world privilege protect activists who think of themselves as risking it all. The refugee is risking (and giving up) a great deal more. In this case, Taylor's sacrifice is at the expense of those she is helping, even as she is able to do some good. None of this is to diminish Kingsolver's commitment to activism and social justice. Later, after the Cherokee Nation pointed out the problems with the way that Taylor adopts Turtle, Kingsolver wrote the follow up novel, *Animal Dreams* to try to make amends. Furthermore, Demetria Martínez cites *The Bean Trees* as a novel that opened her mind to activism in the Sanctuary movement: "My spirit moved from New Mexico to Arizona years before the rest of me followed; to be precise, I took up residence in the upper room of Jesus Is Lord Used Tires in Tucson […] I lived there with Mattie, a big-hearted character who shelters political refugees from Guatemala" (*Confessions* 109).

Martínez, whose novel *Mother Tongue* also imagines sanctuary through romance, quickly became sympathetic to the movement. She was arrested for an article she wrote about interviewing women at the border, since it seemed to imply that she was assisting refugees enter the US illegally. Her poem, "A Nativity for Two Salvadoran Women," defends her position on First Amendment grounds, even as it romanticizes the possibility of a savior born of the pregnant refugees. At the end of the poem, the speaker closes her notebook and bids the women good-bye, envisioning "babies turning in your wombs, / summoned to Belén to be born" (lines 49-50). Belén is both a town in New Mexico south of Albuquerque and the Spanish translation of Bethlehem. Likening herself to the refugees in their shared womanhood, the speaker agonizes that her North American journalist voice is not powerful enough to overcome covert arms sales and geopolitical games. The pregnant women magnify the shame of first world privilege. Martinez continues to explore this theme in her novel, *Mother Tongue.* Mary/María, the young Chicana protagonist, falls in love with the refugee in her care, but she cannot solve his problems by marrying him. The novel is actually María's journal which she is writing for her son, so that her speaking position to the audience stems from her identity as a mother.

Emotionally adrift after her mother's death, María develops a political consciousness around the sexual politics of falling in love. As a self-aware narrator looking back at her nineteen-year-old self, she remarks, "To love a man more than one's self was a socially acceptable way for

a woman to be insane" (Martínez 27). She romanticizes her role in ensuring José Luis's safety and fantasizes that they will get married as a solution to his visa problem. Their intimacy culminates in an incident of domestic violence that spurs him to move to Canada and leaves her pregnant with his son. María's commitment to José Luis is personal and in spite of the warnings Soledad (her godmother and activist in the Sanctuary Movement) has given her about falling in love with the refugee. As a rallying point for Chicana feminists, the sanctuary movement in the United States worked to provide shelter for Salvadorans who were in danger. However, as Debra Castillo points out, "Many Latino supporters felt both empowered by their ability to assist Central American refugees, and disempowered by a largely white leadership" (Castillo 10). Certainly, this is reflected in the religious organizations that led the movement. Sanctuary, while male-dominated in some ways, included left-leaning white women as well as Chicanas.

Martínez's novel adumbrates feminist resistance to white knight adoration. When José Luis speaks at the Quaker Meeting House, it validates his experience as man and as a refugee. As María says, "In those days, when a refugee told his or her story, it was not psychoanalysis, it was testimonio, story as prophecy, facts assembled not to change the self but the times" (Martínez 32). This comment shows the power of José Luis's story even though the published newspaper account of it distorts his words in ways that María finds predictable. Yet, he has an audience, including María, who believes him and continues to send money and resources to El Salvador.

It is significant then that José Luis's story is powerful enough to try to change the times, whereas María is unable to voice her traumatic testimony to anyone. As a young girl, she was unable to tell her mother about the neighbor who molested her because she "has no words for what happened, no words for evil" (Martínez 167). The trauma enacted on Mary as a child continues to silence her as an adult. It remains bottled up, even though it too is a story of violation and war that needs to be told in order to change the times that tacitly condone violation of women and girls as a right during war time. As a woman, she occupies a denigrated speaking position.

In discussing the effects that "modernization" has had on Latin American peoples and economies, Rosaura Sánchez and Beatrice Pita remark, "The testimonial can in fact serve as a useful way for considering different spheres encompassed by 'postmodernism,' and of examining its position within literary spaces, while at the same time noting its relation to the market and links to various social movements" (Sánchez and Pita 495). Both María and José Luis have testimonials to give that are part of social movements, yet his words are deemed more valuable because they play out on a large political stage, whereas hers seem to only affect a single individual on a very private scale. In some ways, Martínez seems to suggest that the US public is more capable and compassionate at understanding the refugee's story than they are at understanding women's (especially Chicana's) trauma and healing. Even the novels discussed so far seem to resist that narrative, even as they reinscribe it. The male refugees are the ones who build sympathy for the movement and persuade others to participate. Yet, subtly, their stories are filtered through and read as part of the coming of age of the young female protagonists who are forever changed by their interactions with the refugee community.

María's later social activism (her motherwork) stems from her mothering role model—not her own mother, but her godmother Soledad. As an activist deeply involved in the Sanctuary movement, Soledad advises Mary not to fall in love with the refugee; she also gives seemingly mundane instructions regarding his clothing, legal needs, as well as sending along original recipes, and notes on household care. The connection María forges with Soledad reminds her that political activism can be an appropriate channel for motherwork. Soledad stands by her in the hospital when baby José Luis is born three months premature. Moreover, Soledad continues to encourage María

to learn Spanish and to use her political consciousness to actively pursue justice for communities of color as well as resistance to US imperial objectives. While it may seem that she is using her goddaughter for her own political purposes, the task brings María back to herself after the death of her own mother, mooring her to a woman-identified history. María writes as she becomes more in tune with her politics, "I reminded myself I am the descendant of women who did something useful with their hands, who knew what really mattered was to help shape something that would outlast their lives and their loves" (Martínez 24). The focus on building with her hands means that María has already realized that while her voice may be devalued, she can write and writing creates a visible record of radical motherwork.

Finally, through her son, María's efforts at motherwork blossom. His father could not internalize the need to reproduce positive work for the survival of a community, but through María, the young José Luis finds his own potential to reproduce motherwork goals in a community. Originally, he had planned to work with community sustainability and environmental protection in China or Brazil, but after the trip to El Salvador, José Luis refocuses his ambition, learns Spanish, and plans to work with groups reclaiming land that was seized from the poor in the 1970s. Radical motherwork engenders this kind of change. The novel comes full circle by moving from El Salvador to the US to Canada and back again as the young man finds that he can reproduce a different kind of benefit to his community of ancestry. He eclipses the violence in his past and creates potential for a different kind of activism—one that is centered on land, sustainability, and community. Resistance to the racist modern nation-state is what sparks and reproduces motherwork, even when men are doing it. Furthermore, resistance to environmental contamination and assertion of land rights evokes a long history of Chicana/o activism. María Herrera-Sobek contends, "Environmental contamination becomes linked to the oppression of the Chicano people. Thus the search for social justice and concern for the environment become one and the same" (Herrera-Sobek 129). When José Luis, Jr. puts his privileged hemispheric identity to use for land rights in El Salvador, he is not being paternalistic, rather he is fulfilling a legacy of Chicana motherwork.

While motherwork can be a way of understanding the ethics of care, the existing need for this kind of work shows the nightmarish violence enacted on vulnerable communities. Helena María Viramontes' "The Cariboo Café" uses the La Llorona archetype to describe a washerwoman who loses her child to the dictatorship in an unnamed Central American country. Anonymous and alone in the United States, she, in a moment of confusion, kidnaps a girl and a boy the same age as her son. Described as the washerwoman, she is a refugee unlike the refugees in the previous texts. She does not have sympathetic church members to tell her story to nor does she have a ride and new identity to disguise her and help her move north. Instead, she wanders a border town in a state of delusional dreams of her lost son. In the story, she finds two children, locked out of their own home. She takes them to the café when the boy uses his only English word to order a Coke. The café owner, a damaged and grief-stricken man whose son died in Vietnam, recognizes that the children are not hers and calls immigration police. Frantic with fear of the police, the woman tries to escape with the children, and is likely killed in the altercation. The Sanctuary movement does not function as a safe place for this woman who has already lost that which was most important to her.

If the other texts briefly indulge a savoir myth romanticizing Central American refugees on their way to socially engaged activism, "The Cariboo Cafe" dispenses with any such idealized notions. Motherwork is no answer to the crisis any of the characters face, because it cannot overcome the systemic and destructive violence the characters encounter daily. For instance, the

two children, Sonya and Macky, have to watch themselves after school because both parents are working to save money so the family can move further north. The absence of their parents suggests the presence of need for money, safety, and freedom. The rules Popi has given them, don't talk to strangers, avoid the police "polie," and keep your key with you, are insufficient for their survival. Because the family is undocumented, imagery of shadows and dark alleys pervade the descriptions of the children's lives (Viramontes 65-68). Brutal economic conditions in the children's home country has forced the family north, and preteen Sonya is not able yet to protect herself and her younger brother in the new place where "The polie are men in black who get kids and send them to Tijuana" (Viramontes 67) and where the "metallic taste of fear" is always in her mouth (Viramontes 68). The washerwoman wanted to mother her son in Guatemala, but he was captured by a militia while on an errand for his mother. She emigrates north with the comment, "Without Geraldo, this is not my home; the earth beneath it not my country" (Viramontes 75). Unable to resist the violence of her country, she leaves. Traditionally La Llorona is searching for her children that she murdered to get revenge on the husband who abandoned her.

With regard to "The Cariboo Café," Ana María Carbonell suggests that the trope of lover's abandonment in La Llorona tales manifests here via the washerwoman who has been abandoned first by her own government and subsequently by anti-immigrant attitudes in the US. After the guerrillas take her son, she sees no hope for the future and despite having left Central America, her trauma follows her. Roberta Fernández argues that the text engages the reader in signification and the appearance of La Llorona works to produce "political collective memory" (Fernández 80). This collective memory links Chicanas in the United States to women in Central America as they engage mythic cultural symbols of destruction. Yet, Ana Patricia Rodríguez responds to Carbonell's discussion by arguing that as part of a larger study of the transformative power of feminism across hemispheric borders, Viramontes and other Chicana writers have lost some of the figures of Central American resistance, which are necessary to understanding stories of political refugees. These omissions or glosses then inadvertently silence the power of the Salvi American or Guatemalan American narrative. In order to reclaim the power of speaking about a specific cultural experience and trauma, I turn to emergent writers telling stories of their families and countries of recent origin.

Journey of the Sparrows, a young adult novel by Fran Leeper Buss and Daisy Cubias, follows fifteen-year-old María, her older sister Julia (who is pregnant), and their younger brother Oscar as they escape El Salvador and begin new lives in Chicago. They leave behind their mother and younger sister, Teresa, who is too sick to make the journey. The novel describes their efforts to survive in the cold, harsh Chicago winter, even as they have help from the Sanctuary community and fear discovery by immigration officials. Much of the work for survival depends on the efforts of María and her sister, but gradually her sister becomes too pregnant to work. They have a community, but the efforts to keep the family together are tenuous at best. At the end of the novel, María travels to Mexico in an attempt to bring her sister over the border by herself. She is successful, but she mourns the realization that she cannot help those she has depended on and who have helped her in turn. María comes of age as she realizes, "My saving Teresa wouldn't bring Papá back…It would have nothing to do with determining when we'd be together with Mamá" (Buss and Cubias 154). She resumes life in Chicago, in her makeshift family of friends and siblings, where she accepts that she and her sister are responsible for the work, the motherwork of their family's survival.

Using juvenile fiction to tell the story may seem odd, especially in light of the difficult literariness of Viramontes's "Café." However, the genre serves several purposes. It makes the story

accessible to the children of the refuges in the 1980s by telling a story that doesn't flinch from the harsh realities of the migration north. Motherwork can offer a refuge, but it cannot surmount the oppressive patriarchal policies of the neo-liberal interference in Central American regimes. While safety and subversive activism work on one side, they are severely limited by entrenched power structures. As second generation voices emerge to tell the stories of legacies of Sanctuary's successes and failures, complex transnational identities are negotiated as counternarratives to the political and economic apparatus that would subsume their complexity under a pan Latino blanket. Their testimonio is necessary to gleaning an understanding of the legacy the Sanctuary movement has had on Central American immigrant lives and on the imagination of it through literary and cultural production.

Ultimately, the problem with the different approaches to an ethic of care for the refugees is that the enactment here is one of motherwork. Initially posited as an alternative to saving refugees through marriage, motherwork assumes a nightmarish quality. In "The Cariboo Café," the mother who has lost her child seeks to find him in another (invisible) mother's child. By taking him as her own, she cannot heal. Instead, her loss serves to revive the repressed in the café owner as he struggles with calling the police on her. Taylor takes Turtle away from the reservation to save her, and symbolically takes her again from Esperanza. In a move that is supposed to allow Esperanza to allow her bad memories to go, the transfer is again a power structure that privileges the First World savior over the refugee community she is trying to help. Motherwork can offer a refuge, but it cannot surmount the oppressive patriarchal policies of the neo-liberal interference in Central American regimes. These stories caution a reliance on motherwork to solve problems that result from systemic governmental violence. While safety and subversive activism work on one side, they are severely limited by entrenched power structures.

Feminist narratives of the Sanctuary movement cast refugees as to-be-helped by those with hemispheric privilege, whether they are Chicana or Anglo. This one-sided focus denies agency to the network of Salvadoran and Guatemalan activists in Sanctuary. Hector Perla and Susan Bibler Coutin describe multiple instances of Central American participation in their own liberation in the United States to show how the movement in some ways created a misperception in which "Central Americans were publicly recognized as inspirations and examples to follow, but were not openly treated as political organizers of sanctuary activities within the United States […and] furthered the notion that Central Americans were beneficiaries rather than protagonists in the movement" (Perla and Coutin 16). Narratives by Salvadoran Americans and Guatemalan Americans further correct the idea by providing evidence of participation.

Maya Chinchilla's poem, "Solidarity Baby" speaks to the awakening of consciousness in the second generation of refugees, but tempers direct politicization by claiming voice for Central American Americans. The speaker recounts a childhood in which mami and papi are activists and her inheritance includes "second-hand clothes given third-hand with first-rate love" which is also a play on the relationships between the First World and the Third. She positions herself as part of a Second World that builds a link between them and speaks in and against both. While we might be tempted to read this as evidence of hybridity and developing mestiza consciousness ("Mistaken identity: undercover gringa-chapina-alemana-mestiza"), we should resist that mistake in favor of uncovering the more complex resistance to US capitalism, assimilation into Chicano communities, and stories told about her.

Chinchilla's poem "Solidarity Baby" reveals the power of motherwork through the legacy of her mother's commitment to justice passed down by example:

> I remember hiding under literature tables
> listening to proud Maya woman
> mujer de maíz
> using the conquerors language to testify
> while Mami interprets. (Chinchilla 4)

The mother's listening and writing provides a place for women's testimonios of political violence that the refugee is escaping. The speaker is doing a different kind of listening, yet still a powerful feminist hearing of the ways that women tell stories to each other. As her mother translates, layered colonial language (presumably erased Maya language, which becomes testimony in Spanish translated into English) becomes part of a feminist story of asylum, hope, and the potential to make change in their communities. The sentiment resonates later in the poem as the speaker claims that her own project is to "observe what is not obvious" and to complain for the silent (Chinchilla 5). Through exercising her powers of speech, she becomes revolutionary and answers the question she sets for herself at the beginning of the poem: how will she continue the legacy of rebellion and activism that her parents have instilled as her herencia? By connecting the traces of the mothers, her own and her grandmother (father's mother), Chinchilla sets forward a kind of motherwork based in love of all sorts. In "Nuestras Utopias," she articulates her vision clearly: "I wish lovemaking gave birth to the earth's breath, evenly distributing health, sustenance and star shine to those who are hungry in the love vacuum" (Chinchilla 94). The vision charted by the poetry collection brings her from the Baby of the first poem to the lovemaking dancer of the last. These celebrations of love in the face of racism and homophobia serve to bolster her efforts to create community and cement her participation in what I call transvisionaria poetix: writing to imagine and propose ways of being that are not dependent on white- and Western-dominated feminisms. The trans implies movement and calls up transnational theory, while visionaria draws on a vision for inclusive, non-monolingual futures, and poetix uses the x both to challenge the eye and to gesture toward the ways using Latinx has challenged definitions of gender and feminism. Chinchilla's poetry collection, *The Cha Cha Files* goes deeper on many of these questions, exploring the divergent aspects of her family's past to point to future of her own making. These threads of identity weaving together allow her to tell a different kind of narrative of refuge and immigration—one that focuses on the family as the originary point of safety, not the ones in need of saving. The family, in all its pieces becomes a way to find the self.

Using her concept of the unicorn as a symbol of transvisionaria poetix, her poem, "CentralAmericanAmerican," clearly stakes out refugee identity. The positionality of the speaker is to tell stories that dispute narratives told about the refugee group: "they tell us the American dream is the truth/ but that our stories of escape from horror are not" (Chinchilla lines 30-31). For the speaker in Chinchilla's poem, the direct testimonio of the refugee is what makes it possible to protest the violence in both the US and in Central America. Ana Patricia Rodríguez reads this poem as "The poet assumes her lineage as one in the long line of resilient women bearing the weight of the world and the 'ancestral knowledge' bequeathed to her by her parents and the Maya woman giving testimony to the world yet denied the word by those who would question the power of testimonio" (Rodríguez xv). Like María in *Mother Tongue*, the speaker then has to find the ability to make testimonio matter to those who she wants to hear it. Therefore, motherwork functions as an ethic of care for the Other and for the Self that opens up to vulnerability and pain. For instance, Chinchilla's "Walking Wounded" describes the desire to "fix" someone, but the poem employs blank gaps in the line structure (see quotation) to show the wound cannot be filled

in with words: "i will be your savior / your hero your smart girl the one who has it all" (Chinchilla 62). The speaker know though, already before the poem begins, that the wound is past tense and that the only fix is not one—to walk wounded through the world. To return to Collins, motherwork then, is about finding a way to survive and nurture even in adverse circumstances. The poems in *The Cha Cha Files* explore how one loves—caring for others and herself, in a world that is perilous at best.

The crux of recent poetry as rooted in motherwork appear clearly in Leticia Hernández-Lineres's spoken word, songs, and print poems. Her work resists genre classification and helps highlight how adherence to traditional forms of literary production may blind critics to the emergent voice of the Central American diaspora. She makes the point that while defining an identity separate from the Chicana and Anglo of the US is necessary, it's not the main point of her writing. As she describes in *This Bridge We Call Home*, she is a Salvadoran who grew up Chicana, yet realized "By silencing myself, I was complicit in my own alienation […] It's important for Central Americans to excavate our specific histories as we are beginning to do now with the first Central American studies program under way in Los Angeles" (Hernández-Lineres 112). She ascribes part of this project to the work that she contributes outside of it. Her poem "Pluma" is an indication of the way that motherwork transforms political and social spaces. It offers the lines:

> Anchor to the history so many hands concealing.
> A brown skinned woman from Santa Ana, El Salvador had the audacity to fly without wings, run for president, demand a vote.
> No feathers, no tinta, she spit the words out until a puddle showed reflection. Ancestors tied their hair, painted their words on walls and skin, considered birth a battle to celebrate. (lines 30-34)

The poem comes out of a project she did with young mothers as a form of empowerment and creating voice. The project is partly inspired by her own experience of motherwork and of the work of her mother, when getting her diploma, she added her mother's last name so she would get credit too. Motherwork is more than mothering one's own children but entails a kind of radical activism that can lead to "loss of individual autonomy" and "submersion of individual growth for the benefit of the group" (Collins 50). These additional burdens placed on women contrast with the view that motherwork is simply a celebration and valuation of women's traditional roles. The reference to the woman who ran for president notes toward Prudencia Ayala and "her in-your-face resistance and instances on gender equality [that] was almost erased from Salvadoran history" (Alvarado 99). This recovery of her life and work in the poem contributes to what Alvarado calls "diasporic cultural memory" and shows how U.S. Central American writers "are actively recuperating and resignifying the signs, symbols, and narratives of Central America to draw connections and find meaning to Central American gendered lives with the U.S. diaspora" (Alvarado 99). By evoking these multiple images, and by engaging in such a project with youth, Hernández-Linares works to make sure U.S. Central American voices get to tell their own stories, complete with symbols familiar and suggestive of their cultural memory. In contrast to patriarchal lines of descent, war, and stories of conquest, this kind of inheritance is a matriarchal commitment to family stories and the loss of self that is then regained through the story and potential for the future. Motherwork here is nation building—both an effort to confront violence within the family to ensure the survival of children, as well as an impetus to confront violent racism from government, business, and religious institutions to advance the concerns of women, children, and men.

Hernández-Linares, along with Rubén Martínez and Héctor Tobar, has made a major contribution to the study of contemporary Central American American literature with their collection, *The Wandering Song: Central American Writing in the United States*. From Lorena Duarte's "*San Nicolás*, Patron Saint of Children" to Claudia Castro Luna's "The Stars Remain," and many others, the collection abounds with work that dissects how motherwork and family legacies of survival have intersected with dominant narratives of war, violence, corruption, and immigration. Many of the works would fit into this framework of analysis as the authors give voice to experiences and trauma from their homelands that manifest in divergent ways upon analysis and interpretation of their poems and short fiction.

Both Hernández-Linares and Chinchilla resist easy categorizations of their art. It would be tempting to read their work as an intersectional application of feminist, working class, Latinx wave of contemporary literature, but as T. Jackie Cuevas cautions in the fascinating and provocative *Post-Borderlandia: Chicana Literature and Gender Variant Critique*, "The many reductive takes on intersectionality [… reveal] how disciplining social systems under racial capitalism seek to simplify the categorizing of subjects for the state's ease and for the sake of maintaining hegemony" (Cuevas 132). In other words, identities do not travel on separate axes, but move in trajectories simultaneously and complexly. Both poets use their work to engage social justice critiques and projects with allies that might affect the material conditions of those they hope to reach. In some ways, this manifests like Sanctuary's best motivations, to inspire others to give aid, yet here, the poetic voice is closer and more intimate as the call for change and hope is also part of the self.

Concrete efforts to work with refugees help raise the profile of the humanitarian crisis the literature responds to. Valeria Luiselli's *Tell Me How it Ends: An Essay in Forty Questions* leads the audience through her thought process as she began to volunteer with refugee children. She points out that the refugee crisis of the 2010s is a product of the US and international response to the refugee crisis of the 1980s. Luiselli, a Mexican citizen, commits herself to working with immigrant children while she awaits her own green card. On a family road trip through the US Southwest, she hears radio reports of unaccompanied children arriving at the border, and she wonders about her own children, if they would survive "in the hands of coyotes and what would happen to them if they were deposited at the U.S. border" (Luiselli 18). Contrasting the refugee children with her own, she recruits her niece to volunteer with her, interviewing children so their lawyers can have a clear picture of their circumstances before they appear before a judge requesting asylum. She reflects, "Telling stories doesn't solve anything, doesn't reassemble broken lives. But perhaps it is a way of understanding the unthinkable" (Luiselli 69). The stories she hears from the children are devastating, but if she can help the child tell the story, it may be the key to the child's survival.

Creating or participating in a community of activists allows the writer to see her work differently. Luiselli's commitment to the children is rooted in her feeling of responsibility, of motherwork. She unflinchingly confronts the transnational causes of the children's need for asylum, holding Mexico complicit in Central American's suffering as well. Her attention to geopolitical ramifications contrasts with the intimate conversations she has with children. The seventh, of forty, questions she asks each child is "Did anything happen on your trip to the U.S. that scared you or hurt you?" This question elicits responses almost too painful to bear, but she reminds herself to "swallow the rage, grief, and shame […] in case a child does happen to reveal a particular detail that can end up being the key to his or her defense against deportation" (Luiselli 28). The question is particularly excruciating for her because each time she asks it, she's forced to

confront what happened to the child as she traveled through Mexico, the liminal space of the journey, neither home nor destination, yet where some horrific violence lurked.

Throughout the text, there is the sense that Luiselli is desperate for a way to do something. The moral imperative to act is also present in Kingsolver and Martínez's novels, yet the question remains of how to act without doing harm? Luiselli finds an answer to her imperative in her own work but discovers a larger impact in her teaching. A class of students took the lesson on "how to transform emotional capital—the rage, sadness, and frustration produced by certain social circumstances—into political capital" (Luiselli 94). Ten visionary students create Teenage Immigrant Integration Association (TIIA) and convince the university to give space to activities designed to strengthen refugees' ability to integrate into their new communities. These activities geared toward teens include English classes and soccer matches and provide an outlet for a network of survival and motherwork that enriches children's lives even as they find themselves at the threshold of reinventing themselves in a new place. Luiselli, like the other writers, uses her platform as a stance for social change through attention to the interconnectedness of the refugee crisis.

Sanctuary united a generation of activists, but the need for activism is not gone. Part of the power of activism is the ability to remember and tell a story; to empathize and portray many points of view. It's poignant and horrifying that public attention today gazes at children and parents as they seek safety, refuge, and the ability to be together. Literature and images can tell stories, and the public will hear and see. I find it hard to say what will happen or what these new stories mean when the horror is still unfolding, but we can know that literature can make us more compassionate and more radical in our actions in the world.

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